

**FILM, HISTORY AND CULTURAL MEMORY:
CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF
VIETNAM-ERA AMERICA DURING THE
CULTURE WARS, 1987-1995**

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Abstract

My thesis is intended as an intellectual opportunity to take what, I argue, are the “dead ends” of work on the history film in a new direction. I examine cinematic representations of the Vietnam War-era America (1964-1974) produced during the “hot” culture wars (1987-1995). I argue that disagreements among historians and commentators concerning the (mis)representation of history on screen are stymied by either an over-emphasis on factual infidelity, or by dismissal of such concerns as irrelevant. In contradistinction to such approaches, I analyse this group of films in the context of a fluid and negotiated cultural memory. I argue that the consumption of popular films becomes part of a vast intertextual mosaic of remembering and forgetting that is constantly redefining, and reimagining, the past. Representations of history in popular film affect the industrial construction of cultural memory, but Hollywood’s intertextual relay of promotion and accompanying wider media discourses also contributes to a climate in which film impacts upon collective memory. I analyse the films firmly within the discursive moment of their production (the culture wars), the circulating promotional discourses that accompany them, and the always already circulating notions of their subjects.

The introduction outlines my methodological approach and provides an overview of the relationship between the twinned discursive moments. Subsequent chapters focus on representations of returning veterans; representations of the counterculture and the anti-war protest movement; and the subjects foregrounded in the biopics of the period. The fourth chapter examines *Forrest Gump* as a meta-sixties film and as the fulcrum of my thesis. The final chapter posits that an uplifting version of the sixties has begun to dominate as the most successful type of production in the post-*Gump* marketplace.

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Introduction

American cinema has long been fascinated with recreating American history on film. From D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to the plethora of filmic interpretations of the war in Iraq due for release in the later months of 2007, filmmakers have sought to express their translations of the past on screen. Within this thesis I focus on cinematic representations of Vietnam War-era America (1964-1974) produced during the particularly heated period of the culture wars (1987-1995) because this discursive period is characterised by the right's concerted attacks on the social, political, and cultural legacies of the "sixties."¹ During this time, filmmakers produced a significant number of historical films that consciously engaged in these debates about the sixties and which offer striking examples of the impact of cinema on cultural memory. These films are striking examples for the ways in which they have been explicitly used and appropriated, both positively and negatively, by politicians, media personnel, as well as by the general public in order to advance particular ideologically-loaded arguments about the present. They are striking in that they are connected through their serious attempts to represent

¹ Although the culture wars can be traced at least from the electoral strategies of George Wallace and Richard Nixon's conception and utilisation of the "silent majority" and are certainly still being fought, I choose to focus on a particularly heated period from 1987 to 1995. 1987 saw the surprising popularity of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* that contextualised declining standards in liberal education within the changes to the university wrought by the upheavals of the 1960s. The resulting explosion of rhetoric that, for many on the right, saw the very foundations of the "western tradition" as under attack from the social forces unleashed by the new social movements of the 1960s, created a climate in which the meaning and reforms of that era were very much "up for grabs." This politics of values set the tide for the Gingrich Republicans capture of Congress in 1994 on a platform that was reliant on notions of tradition under threat, but by the end of 1995 their "counterrevolution" was spent as the Bob Dole-led Senate voted against many of their proposed reforms.

the sixties in relation to pre-existing, politically charged conceptions of what that period of American history means. They are striking for their self-conscious participation in the processes of intertextual relay and their influence on collective cultural memory. They are striking in that they have been insufficiently analysed in terms of the multifarious influences manifest within them and surrounding their making.

There have been many generic cycles and trends in the course of film history that have engaged with specific ideological and social preoccupations, and, as Richard Maltby has noted, studio heads have always recognized that an “overtly ‘concerned’ cinema could lend prestige to its producers” and the industry as a whole through underlining cinema’s importance in national dialogues.² This social engagement has taken many forms: the social problem films of the 1930s and 1940s interrogated a wide range of contemporary problems from Depression-era inequalities and suffering to organised crime and race relations; science fiction films of the 1950s cast an allegorical eye upon the nuclear anxieties of the Cold War and the domestic “red scare”; and Robert B. Ray has identified the left and right cycles of production that emerged in response to the social and industrial turmoil of the 1960s.³ In addition to these relatively direct responses to contemporary social and political questions, historical films have frequently excavated the American past. As Robert Brent Toplin observes, such films often reference the present to draw attention to the contemporary resonances of their interpretations by

² Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 293.

³ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 298-325.

incorporating “subtle hints about their stories’ connections to current issues.”⁴ Alternatively, the historical film can be seen to engage and reflect evolving historiographical trends. It is possible, for example, to read silent films of the 1910s and 1920s about the Civil War as cultural representations of that era’s predominant reconciliationist historiography, to read *Gone With the Wind* (1939) as a cinematic exemplar of the “Moonlight and Magnolias” view of the conflict, and to read more recent texts such as *Roots* (1977) and *Glory* (1989) as reflecting the reassertion of slavery as a central reason for the war.⁵ What makes the films under discussion in this thesis distinctive in relation to the political and sociological discourse inherent in other eras of Hollywood history is not only that they represent concentration on a particular historical period across an unusually large number of films, but that they historiographically engage with popular dialogues at a time when the very *meaning* of the 1960s is under debate and “up for grabs” within the larger culture. Essentially, these films collectively engage with *both* contemporary socio-political discourses *and* a legacy of the historical period that runs counter to the preferred version of the predominant voices in the culture wars.

This period, then, offers particularly fertile ground for examining the status of the Hollywood history film and its engagement with popular discourses of history. The response of historians to filmic representations of the past is often to condemn them for an absence of factual fidelity and depth

⁴ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 42.

⁵ Alicia R. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr., “The Civil War and Reconstruction,” in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 58-68.

of analysis. Those historians who comprehend that filmic representations cannot follow the rules of written history and are, in fact, a different “genre” of historical interpretation are frequently stymied by conclusions that emphasise the need to police the liberties taken by filmmakers or descend into a labyrinth of relativism. In this thesis I argue that a more effective way of comprehending the impact of the historical film is through the principles of intertextual relay and of memory studies. I emphasise the usefulness of Marita Sturken’s notion of cultural memory in particular. Sturken conceives of cultural memory as a “field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.”⁶ Therefore, I argue that an analysis of the cumulative affect of a number of films within an intertextual mosaic of existing representations of and notions about the period – manifested in the prefigurative materials of studio publicity, the discourses generated and exacerbated by documented film promotion, and the popularity of the films themselves – can provide a more complete assessment of how films impact on collective memory, on popular understandings of history, and the history film. The overarching concerns of this thesis – the place and affect on audiences of the historical film, the interplay between film, society and politics, and the contestation of a particular era of the American past in the present – all intersect and become mutually enlightening.

In the first section of this introduction, I expand on the above to indicate my methodological point of departure. In the second section I outline

⁶ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.

the multifarious debates of the culture wars to provide an overview of these debates and their relation to the sixties. I then interrogate the debates surrounding the arts, popular culture and history in such detail as is necessary to comprehend their impact upon how the films analysed in this thesis were made, received, and understood.

I: Historians, Film, Memory Studies, and Intertextual Relay.

Historical films help to shape the thinking of millions. Often the depictions seen on the screen influence the public's view of historical subjects much more than books do.

Robert Brent Toplin.⁷

How are we to respond if, as certainly seems likely, more and more people in the future learn their history from films and television rather than from the written work of historical scholars?

John E. O'Connor.⁸

If, in telling a story, we find it impossible to adhere to historical accuracy in order to the necessary dramatic effect, we do change it and we do feel it is the right thing to do.

Irving Thalberg.⁹

The scepticism that many historians feel towards the presentation of history in narrative films is an understandable consequence of the medium's persuasive power and its potential audience. A certain professional anxiety exists among historians that their social role as gatekeepers of the past has been usurped in the popular sphere by visual media whose productions are outside the realm of their control and, as Irving Thalberg's unrepentant remark indicates, have never been subject to (or to an extent concerned themselves with) the same checks and balances of peer review as the work of the historian.¹⁰ As a rule

⁷ Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), vii.

⁸ John E. O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1207.

⁹ Quoted in Daniel Leab, "The Moving Image as Interpreter of History: Telling the Dancer from the Dance," in *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*, ed. John E. O'Connor (Malabar, FL.: Robert E. Krieger, 1990), 83.

¹⁰ A study of a cross-section of Americans carried out in 2000 found that over forty percent of those interviewed cited films and television programs among their primary means of connecting with history. Paul B. Weinstein, "Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project," *The History Teacher* 35, no. 1 (2001): 27.

historians do not invent people, places or events and subsequently view with dismay the “dramatic liberties” that filmmakers take with evidence, even though the temporal (and other) constrictions of the feature film narrative often make such inventions necessary. The self-consciousness of historians with regard to the interpretive nature of their work with facts and the limits of traditional historiography to present a true picture of the past is often overlooked by those working in other disciplines, but one need only glance at the film review sections in the *American Historical Review* or the *Journal of American History* to see that the evaluation of narrative films is still often characterised by a reductive emphasis on fidelity.¹¹ In addition, the anxiety that the general public receives “a muddy blur of fantasy and fact... bad history, trivialized history, history distorted and sensationalized” from films rather than history books is also extant in the popular press, as Richard Bernstein echoed historian Eric Foner’s dismissal of audiences’ intelligence with “moviegoers don’t go to a film thinking how... they basically think whatever they see is true.”¹²

In 1988 the *American Historical Review* published a special forum focusing on the necessity for historians to take seriously the representation of

¹¹ Robert A. Rosenstone observes this tendency towards “the blind traditionalism of historians and historically-minded journalists” in the *American Historical Review* and *Journal of American History* review sections in the bibliographical survey at the end of his most recent book, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 169; As an example see Joan Hoff’s review of *Nixon* (1995) in the *American Historical Review* in which she brings her own far-from-objective perspective on the man to denounce the film as “a pornographic representation of an American president,” and a “rape of U.S. history in front of a mesmerized audience.” Joan Hoff, review of *Nixon*, *American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (1996): 1173-74.

¹² Richard Bernstein, “Can Movies Teach History?” *New York Times*, November 26, 1989, B1; “A Conversation between Eric Foner and John Sayles,” in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 23.

history on film for, as John O'Connor noted, "visual literacy is an essential tool for citizenship in contemporary America."¹³ This forum presents a fair balance of approaches to filmed history. Hayden White summarised his long-held perspective on the textuality of history to warn that "every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation."¹⁴ Conversely, David Herlihy encouraged students to adopt the perspective of the critical historian for although "film can effectively present the visual aspects of history," it cannot show "the whole of history. Nor can it really show the methods of history."¹⁵ The forum included articles by the two scholars who have become the central proponents of narrative film's potential for examining the past and who have sought to heal divisions between the historian and the filmmaker: Robert A. Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin.¹⁶ Although they differ in methodological approach, both argue that because the written word and film are different mediums, historians are mistaken in expecting the same level of erudition from the historical film as would be expected from a written text. They both ascribe this tendency on the historian's part to focus on factual errors to a lack of appreciation of the

¹³ O'Connor, "History in Images," 1208. O'Connor went on to compile an edited collection of possible pedagogical approaches to teaching the history film in the classroom, *Image as Artifact* (see note 5).

¹⁴ Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1194.

¹⁵ David Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1192.

¹⁶ Both have published many articles and several books on the subject. See Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood*; ed., *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*; Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995); *History on Film/Film on History*.

necessity of fictionalisation on the filmmaker's part that are the result of commercial (and other) imperatives and the need to "condense" the particular past under examination into the length of a narrative feature film.

Toplin believes that it is difficult for historians to become filmmakers, or to stop filmmakers from engaging in fictionalisation, so as professional historians they need to create their own set of criteria to keep historical films under greater scrutiny. He proposes applying a case-study approach to the production and reception of a single film, to step "behind and around movies," in order to understand the ideas and motivations of the filmmakers, thereby enabling a clearer insight into the necessity of and decisions leading to any artistic licence taken.¹⁷ This approach, Toplin believes, would enable the historian as critic to evaluate the liberties with fact taken by the filmmaker – inventions he sees as "fundamental to the genre" of historical films – without resorting to the "most exacting standards of scholarship regarding the presentation of evidence," but instead use a metaphorical rope to "rein in the slack" if a film presents a badly distorted representation of the past.¹⁸ Despite Toplin's attempt to allow for a critical tolerance for the necessity of artistic licence in the work of the filmmaker, Toplin's rhetoric is "more in the language of gatekeeping and censure, if not censorship, than of critical analysis and assessment."¹⁹ Instead of the comparative leniency of the metaphor of the rope, Robert Sklar sees Toplin as a "historian-cop," an

¹⁷ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, xi, 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2; Robert Brent Toplin, "Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (2003): 89.

¹⁹ Robert Sklar, "Historical Films: Scofflaws and the Historian-Cop," *Reviews in American History* 25, no. 2 (1997): 348.

upholder of the scholarly laws, hands ready on the siren to halt the filmmaker speeding on the road of artistic licence, regardless of his awareness of the need for understanding with regard to the liberties of the historical film.²⁰

Robert A. Rosenstone acknowledges the difficulties that the academic or, as he refers to them, “Dragnet historian” (“Just the facts, ma’am”) may have in judging visual history, finding a solution to the artistic licence conundrum in the postmodern dissolution of “History” into a multitude of competing “histories.”²¹ Rather than dismissing the historical film because of its inability to meet the standards of written scholarship, Rosenstone, echoing Hayden White, notes that historical narratives are constructed by historians in order to make sense of the past and, therefore, like film, “written history is a representation of the past, not the past itself.”²² Rosenstone proposes that the standard of evaluation for the contribution of the history film be shifted from the “specific details that they present” to the “overall sense of the past that they convey.”²³ As he concludes his appraisal of Oliver Stone as a cinematic historian, the criteria for evaluation is simply that he “makes films that enter into, engage, comment upon, and contest the existing body of data and arguments on recent America that we professionals call the discourse of history.”²⁴ Toplin sees a danger in pursuing this type of logic to the extreme “to the hazard of claiming that since all truths are contestable, we can

²⁰ Ibid., 347.

²¹ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 7.

²² Ibid., 34-36.

²³ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 133.

privilege none.”²⁵ However, in raising the spectre of David Irving and Holocaust denial he takes the issue of invention to a rhetorical dead end. Rosenstone’s position avoids questions concerning the acceptable limits of invention in Hollywood film in championing the “imaginative ways of dealing with historical material” in what he terms the *avant-garde*, particularly Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1982) and Alex Cox’s *Walker* (1987), thereby abdicating concerns about popular filmed representations of history.²⁶

The debate among historians over the historical film is symptomatic of the wider debate between traditional historians and those postmodernists they see as demeaning the pursuit of History through recourse to textualism.²⁷ Toplin’s position, through its emphasis on the necessity of the historian critic to police the filmmakers’ adherence to the accepted facts of history, ignores the multiplicity of perspectives on the past that coexist and contest any given era, and therefore denies that history is a multivocal discipline. Rosenstone’s position recognises the need to privilege histories over *History*, but in his vague evaluative preference for films that engage with existing historical discourse and his recourse to praising *avant-garde* forms over the conventional Hollywood style, he ostensibly rejects the popular and, therefore, the primary impact that the history film has on popular perceptions of history. Ultimately, these debates ignore the cinema’s shaping of conceptions of

²⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, 167.

²⁶ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 37-42, 132-166. Rosenstone does note that *JFK* (1991) is one of the few Hollywood productions that satisfy his criteria.

²⁷ Keith Jenkins, *On ‘What is History?’ From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London: Routledge, 1995), 15-41. Jenkins provides an excellent overview of a debate too complex to tackle in detail here. For a broader discussion of this debate see also Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997).

national identity based on a shared past that an analysis of a specific group of films, and the reception of those films, can provide.

It is possible to reconcile the necessarily fictive elements of the history film with the reductive emphasis on factual fidelity of some professional historians, as well as the intractable positions of Rosenstone and Toplin, through a consideration of approaches offered by memory studies and facilitated by intertextual relay. While both memory and history are areas of discursive struggle, memory “suggests a more dialogic relationship between the temporal constituencies of ‘now’ and ‘then.’”²⁸ Such a past-present dialogue of memory makes the past more fluid and rewritable – in both positive and dangerous ways – and, therefore, eminently suitable for the analysis of the narrative history film with its tendencies towards invention and condensation, and its twin temporal focus on the past event and its relevance to the present moment. For Paul Grainge, memory studies “draws attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present.”²⁹ Therefore, the utilisation of memory studies offers a particularly cogent method of analysis with which to evaluate the representations of the 1960s on film given that era’s upheavals and the ways that they are characterised in the debates of the culture wars.

It is important that I state that I am not privileging the use of memory over the study of history. I do not claim that history as a discipline is redundant or, as many others who favour the study of memory over history,

²⁸ Paul Grainge, “Introduction: memory and popular film,” in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1.

²⁹ Ibid.

that historians make claims of access to an absolute truth about the past. It is simply that the fluidity and changeability of memory's approach to the past offers the most useable framework upon which to map the affect of historical films upon collective memory. Susannah Radstone has effectively outlined the way that "memory has become both a central and an organising concept within research in the humanities and in certain branches of the social sciences."³⁰ The renewed interest in the study of memory has been influenced by the works of Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin and Halbwachs, as well as the decline of belief in grand narratives and the realisation of the multivocal nature of the past.³¹ The plethora of memory work that has taken place across different academic fields has led many to feel that the area has been exhausted before it has been able refine the multifarious approaches taken, or, as Alan Confino dismissively argues, "memory has a label more than content" and, therefore, "in itself memory does not offer any true explanatory power."³² I will now examine several different approaches in memory studies that have been applied to film as represented by the work of Michel Foucault, George Lipsitz, Alison Landsberg, and Marita Sturken. Surveying the work of all these critics is necessary to establish why I find Sturken's concept of "cultural memory" most useful. Though all of these critics analyse texts in terms of memory studies it is important to distinguish between each of them. The first

³⁰ Susannah Radstone, "Working with Memory: An Introduction," in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1-22; Marcia Landy, introduction to *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 1-22.

³² Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3; Alan Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1388.

three critics enforce belief in a misleading dichotomy between memory and history whereas Sturken transcends the dichotomous arguments presented by the others and her work is, therefore, more potentially influential upon my own.

An ur-text in the study of memory and film, Michel Foucault's "Film and Popular Memory," discusses the impact on the French memory of the Resistance to the Nazi occupation during the Second World War that is questioned in several films in the late 1960s and early 1970s: *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), and *The Night Porter* (1974). Foucault argues that films that reassert the collaboration of the majority with the Nazi-controlled Vichy regime erase the political notion of "popular struggle" from the "popular memory." He defines popular memory as the realm of remembering the past for "those who are barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from drawing up their own historical accounts."³³ For Foucault, then, popular memory operates in opposition to and as an area of struggle against official histories, and he declares an Orwellian warning that "if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles."³⁴ However, he disregards the fact that the films that he is critiquing actually revision the myth of the Resistance established to counter the Vichy Syndrome – Henry Rousso's phrase for the repression of the memory of

³³ Michel Foucault, "Film and Popular Memory," in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 123.

³⁴ Ibid., 124.

collaboration.³⁵ He is thereby making a problematic conceptual leap that privileges a romantic, and somewhat nostalgic, notion of popular struggle over an historical “truth,” thereby imposing a false, mutually-excluding binary between “official” history and “popular” memory.

George Lipsitz takes a similar conceptual position to Foucault, refining and extending his notion of opposition into the realm of popular culture. Lipsitz notes that while the dominant ideology is generally reflected in cultural products, “all cultural expressions speak to both residual memories of the past and emergent hopes for the future [because] no cultural moment exists within a hermetically sealed cultural present.”³⁶ While sure to differentiate his approach to “counter-memory” from Foucault’s, his view that “counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past” reinforces an opposition between history and memory.³⁷ He does, however, observe positive opportunities in the electronic mass media’s ability to “transcend time and space” that liberates people from their (narrow) traditions by making possible the exposure to other traditions, albeit through the creation of a rupture from the past of their own group.

These liberational opportunities that mass media provides find an echo in Alison Landsberg’s conception of “prosthetic memory.” Building on the idea that the technologies of mass culture enable a transcending of time and space, Landsberg identifies a “suturing” of an individual into a larger history

³⁵ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 99-131.

³⁶ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

in the interaction of that person at “an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum,” with the obtained prosthetic memory having the “ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics.”³⁸ Landsberg acknowledges the artificiality of such memories that are not natural, and are interchangeable and exchangeable (i.e. not permanent), but argues that the consequent empathetic possibilities offered by such a prosthetic memory could enable “political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender... [and] mediated collective identification and the production of potentially counterhegemonic public spheres.”³⁹ The utopian aspect of prosthetic memory is certainly attractive and assumes an active audience, but it contains echoes of the Frankfurt School mass culture theory that presumed a passive audience easily manipulated by a text’s preferred or dominant ideology.⁴⁰ Just as one can never be certain of the way in which a text is received by an audience, it would be impossible to confirm the reading or prosthesis that is taken by the viewer. Robert Burgoyne’s utilisation of prosthetic memory in his negative appraisal of *Forrest Gump* (1994), and what he perceives to be its elision of marginalised peoples in order to reinforce dominant ideology, illustrates that prosthetic memory can ultimately be used to reinforce an author’s textual reading of a film’s affect on the viewer in place of a survey of the film’s reception environment.⁴¹

³⁸ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Harlow, UK: Prentice Hall, 2001), 94

⁴¹ Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 104-119.

The problem that I have with these particular approaches is not only that they set up oppositional dichotomies between history and memory (and subsequently between hegemony and resistance, between artificiality and authenticity), but such dichotomies suggest that memory and history are static and unchanging. Kerwin Lee Klein has noted that the “declaration that history and memory are not really opposites has become one of the clichés of the new memory discourse” where the majority of authors then proceed to use the terms in antithetical ways.⁴² I find that Marita Sturken’s conception of “cultural memory” transcends these limiting binaries and is, therefore, more useful to the concerns of this thesis. Sturken conceives of cultural memory as “a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.”⁴³ Cultural memory allows for the existence of multiple pasts that interact and intersect as products of and within popular culture and the media. It is an “inventive social practice” that is constantly revising and renewing versions of the past, but always within the context of existing notions of history.⁴⁴ Sturken, therefore, avoids the oppositional binaries inherent in other approaches to memory studies, through an approach in which “memories and histories are often entangled, conflictual and co-constitutive” and an emphasis on negotiation that enables the contestation of the past within existing accounts of an event or period.⁴⁵ The camera image is central to Sturken’s conception of cultural memory and its re-interpretation of the past. Memory is

⁴² Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69 (2000): 128.

⁴³ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

often considered as an image, “it is also produced by and through images,” so that “cinematic representations of the past have the capacity to entangle with personal and cultural memory.”⁴⁶

As cultural memory is a fluid area that can accept and absorb different trends and perspectives simultaneously, it is my contention that as a product of the culture industry, the history film becomes part of a vast intertextual mosaic of remembering and forgetting that is constantly redefining, or reimagining, the narrative of the American past in the popular consciousness. In a conception of cultural memory in which versions of the past exist and struggle for meaning amongst other representations it is futile to examine an historical film in isolation against the historiography on its subject. Representations of history in popular film affect the industrial construction of cultural memory, but, since audiences do not come to the cinema as a “blank slate” ready to be filled with a film’s version of the past, it is necessary to evaluate the content of the film in relation to previously circulating versions of the history they are presenting.

In addition to pre-existing notions of the given subject of the historical film encountered by the audience, Hollywood’s intertextual relay of promotion and accompanying wider media discourses also contributes to a climate in which film impacts on collective memory.⁴⁷ The reading of a given text by the members of the audience is notoriously slippery to ascertain. The use of textual, formally-focused analysis to form conclusions about what films

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2-3, 39-40.

mean to audiences rests, as Janet Staiger points out, on the assumption that audiences bring the same level of rigour to their reading as the critic.⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that film style is unimportant to the concerns of this thesis. The interplay between cinematic techniques, politics and society has long been discussed in terms of the ideological function of the Classical Hollywood style that is characterised by an aesthetic of formal harmony that “naturalises” and makes the on-screen constructions recognisably “invisible” for audiences. Such “classic realism” or seamless realism necessitates that the technologies of film production remain hidden from the audience or at least be minimised: editing should appear linear by orienting the viewer through adhering to “rules” of continuity; *mise-en-scène* should adhere to conventions of representing human lives as much as possible; and camerawork should present a clearly dominant, singular perspective at “pace with the movement of the spectator’s eyes.”⁴⁹ The fact that the majority of the films under discussion in this study conform to classical paradigms presents interesting questions about their *challenges* to the dominant prevailing view of the sixties in the wider cultural discourse. The surprise at the stylistic and narrative adherence to the conventions of the biopic genre of Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992) represents a clear example. However, elsewhere in this thesis where aspects of film style are discussed and emphasised I am more concerned with representational strategies that disrupt the viewer’s suturing into the film text. Examples of such strategic disruptions include: the foregrounded reassertion of historical

⁴⁸ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 12.

⁴⁹ Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), 179-80.

elements in the *mise-en-scène* of *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) that are occluded in other representations of the era; the coalescence of camerawork and editing through the slow zoom-in on a character's eye and the subsequent dissolve into the past that problematises and questions the mediated representation of memory in *Hoffa* (1992); the patently “unreal” digital insertion of Forrest Gump into previously existing media representations of the past; and, ultimately, the complex and complicating visual and aural strategies of *Nixon* (1995) that position the film as a historical and psychological investigation rather than a straightforward representation of historical reality. My contention is that such instances in which the illusory nature of cinematic representation is ruptured the spectators' expectations are broken and, therefore, their comprehension of what they are seeing on screen is altered, although such realisations unquestionably occur within a broader context of expectation established by their pre-existing knowledge of the text and its social and industrial contexts.

In his study of Hollywood genres, Steve Neale emphasises the importance of moving beyond the film text itself and the importance of intertextual relay in shaping audience expectations, identification, and, therefore, experience of generic forms. For Neale, the “narrative image” of each individual film is predicated by the circulation of industrially imposed frameworks of meaning offered through advertising campaigns, posters, stills, trailers and other areas of distribution and exhibition that collide and collude with relays of commentary put forth in the institutionalized public discourse

of the “publishing industry and other sectors of media.”⁵⁰ The viewer’s cinematic experience is therefore affected by a constellation of factors that influence the reading of a particular film so any attempt to ascertain the cultural affect of a historical film *must* take into account the broader social factors and specific aspects that affect its reception. Theories of reception posit that to overcome this false conception of audience response based on textual analysis it is necessary to contextualise the intrinsic characteristics of the film text within the socio-political moment of release. While this thesis is not an ethnographic study of an audience it does represent an attempt to reconstruct through the use of reception theory as broad and complete a context of influences as possible within which the texts may have been read by audiences within the context of cultural memory. Barbara Klinger proposes that while such an *histoire totale* of film reception cannot in general provide responses of specific individuals to films, it can offer “a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings available within that moment.”⁵¹

I propose that an examination of the intertextual relay surrounding a film’s release is essential when considering the meaning that it will negotiate within cultural memory. In addition to the specific formal and narrative features of the specific text, audiences’ responses to historical films are dependent on the prior exposure to publicity materials (the ways in which the film has been marketed by the distributors); television or print stories about

⁵⁰ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 39-40.

⁵¹ Barbara Klinger, “Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies,” *Screen* 38, no. 2 (1997): 114.

the film and its production; intertextual memories that may be triggered from previous film/s that they have seen or prior roles played by actors; wider media discourses concerning the subject of the film and its importance in the culture at that time; and, of course, previous representations of the historical period through other media that is the focus of the film. Essentially, as Martin Barker advises, “we need to study how all the circulating prior information, talk, images and debates generate and shape expectations which will influence how we watch a movie.”⁵² Therefore, in order to (re)construct as effectively as possible the conditions in which audiences were first exposed to the films under examination in this thesis and subsequently effectively ascertain the impact of this groups of films on the cultural memory of the sixties, I have systematically accumulated as many examples of the materials that constitute the intertextual relay in each case, including studio press kits, contemporary reviews, popular newspaper and magazine articles and interviews, televised promotional interviews and debates, and theatrical trailers and poster advertising.

While this survey of the individual contexts for each film examined herein is important for reconstructing particular contexts of audience exposure and response to each particular text, it is equally important to consider the overarching social and political context for the intertextual relay of each of the

⁵² Martin Barker, “News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials – A Critique and Research Proposal,” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, February 2004, <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=feb2004&id=246§ion=article> (accessed December 10, 2005).

films with which I am primarily concerned. In the second half of this introduction I succinctly summarise aspects of the American cultural landscape during the culture wars period under examination that can be seen to influence audiences' responses to this group of films.

II: The Sixties, the Culture Wars, and Hollywood.

Everyone who debates the 1960s, here or elsewhere, agrees on one thing: Its controversies directly engaged fundamental American ideals of freedom and equality with a vigor and a depth rarely matched before and not matched since. The question, all agree, is whether the changes associated with that notable decade represent a fuller realization of American ideals or their betrayal. Since the legacy of the 1960s poses so vital a question, it is no surprise that the ensuing debate... is fraught with controversy and division.

Stephen Macedo.⁵³

In the subtitle of his 1991 work, James Davison Hunter posits that the culture wars represent nothing less than “the struggle to define America.” The range of issues that fuel the cultural conflicts are multifarious yet are all traceable to a notion of moral authority and influence over the cornerstones of national identity and ideology. The battles over abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, family values, education standards, arts funding, and multiculturalism (among other issues), are repeatedly polarising issues between what Hunter terms opposing impulses of orthodoxy and progressivism.⁵⁴ The orthodox impulses of moral traditionalists and cultural conservatives stem from a “commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority” that provides a consistent and unchanging sense of individual and collective goodness, values, and purpose.⁵⁵ Conversely, culturally progressive impulses, alternately termed liberal impulses, are shaped by a notion of morality that is at once subjective and based on present day realities. Of course, these terms

⁵³ Stephen Macedo, introduction to *Reassessing the Sixties: Debating the Political and Cultural Legacy*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 16.

⁵⁴ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

are nebulous and hide a complex set of coalitions on either side, but are necessary to navigate the terrain efficiently. In the case of Hunter's orthodoxy, the Christian Right (whose power and influence increased during the 1980s), the Republican party, and neo-conservatives are associated with notions of "tradition" or "traditional values," and are united not by what they believe in but in terms of what they oppose – sexual mores, the welfare state, and the associated perceived attacks on a retrospectively constructed notion of "the family." From the new social movements it engendered (feminism, civil rights, gay rights), to the sexual revolution's "relaxing" of standards of public morality, the influence of the 1960s is key to navigating the contested terrain of the culture wars for the battle is concisely over, as Stephen Macedo observes, "whether the changes associated with that notable decade represent a fuller realization of American ideals or their betrayal."⁵⁶

In this section of my introduction I examine the textual practices and strategies of the right and how they influence several key areas of the debate. In my necessarily selective survey, I focus on areas of the culture wars that most directly impact cinema and history – arts funding, education, multiculturalism, and the teaching of history – rather than family, abortion, gay rights, and the law. Many of these debates are a battle over the meaning of the 1960s and its legacies in terms of cultural attitudes and political policy. Ultimately, this period signals a shift in the pluralist nature of American politics and culture that affects the centre of American public debate, shifting it more to the right by 1995.

⁵⁶ Macedo, introduction, 16.

The notion of a culture war suggests a sense of equivalency between two opposing sides, yet, when interrogated, these debates reveal an overwhelming “loudness” on the part of the right that the liberal-left was unable to counter. In 1993, Hunter noted that there was an initial inclination on the part of the liberal-left to put aside cultural issues as a “politics of distraction” but warned that “we are truly in the midst of a culture war of great social and historical consequence.”⁵⁷ Michael Bérubé, reviewing the detritus of the culture wars clashes, concluded that those on the left were not prepared for the monologic “all-out textual assault” of the right in the print media or for the meanness and liberal use of fact that came to characterise the strategies of Lynne Cheney and Dinesh D’Souza, amongst others, for whom “‘debate’ is conducted by rules that most academics – and most responsible citizens – don’t recognize.”⁵⁸ Conservatives often used signifiers against progressive ideas with little to no substance, yet their bromides were powerful because they tapped in to a generalised populist apprehensiveness regarding “elites” and were repeated so frequently that they became legitimised. This helps to explain how “the otherwise bizarre right-wing axiom of the nineties that civil liberties and multiculturalism are Stalinist attacks on freedom” became popularly accepted.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ James Davison Hunter, “Covering the Culture War,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 32, no. 2 (1993): 29.

⁵⁸ Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), 6, 15. Bérubé offers an elegant deconstruction of the imperviousness of the “D’Souza-Cheney axis” to factual restrictions in the introduction to *Public Access*, 1-40.

⁵⁹ Christopher Newfield, “What Was ‘Political Correctness’? Race, the Right, and Managerial Democracy in the Humanities,” in *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy*, ed. Jeffrey Williams (London: Routledge, 1995), 133.

The fire of the conservative “all-out textual assault” is analogous to Macedo’s analysis of the tenor of the debate over the 1960s in which he saw that “while conservatives issue their fulsome attacks on the sixties, liberal reformers seem to muster no more than qualified defenses... [and are] willing to concede at least some of its shortcomings.”⁶⁰ The strength of the right’s voice during the culture wars, then, stems from a canny approach that combines a silencing rhetorical strategy, an oxymoronic yet effective, monologic debating technique, and a certainty of purpose. In addition, they were highly organised. This is not to suggest that there was a conservative conspiracy afoot, but there was certainly a highly structured and, crucially, well-funded framework of foundations and publications created specifically to advance conservative causes. Organisations such as the Smith-Richardson, Olin, and Earhart Foundations, supported and funded publications such as *Commentary* and the *New Criterion*, and the writing of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, and Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals*.⁶¹ The exposure gained (or purchased?) by this private funding quickly spread these ideas to the wider media and into the mouths of politicians such as then-Vice President Bush who found it necessary to state on the campaign trail that “the Reagan Administration had turned around ‘the permissive philosophy’ of the 1960s and 1970s.”⁶² As for the response of the left to these developments, Todd Gitlin lamented that the

⁶⁰ Macedo, introduction, 17.

⁶¹ James Nielsen, “The Great PC Scare: Tyrannies of the Left, Rhetoric of the Right,” in *PC Wars* (see note 53), 70-71.

⁶² Maureen Dowd, “Bush Boasts of Turnaround From ‘Easy Rider’ Society,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1988, B7.

post-sixties break up of the left meant that “it speaks for no movement [and] it fails to generate an emotional tide,” which are two things that the conservative voices certainly do.⁶³ Bérubé simply conceded that “the academic left has been so socially marginal for so long that it no longer considers persuasion important.”⁶⁴

The brouhaha over projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) demonstrated the power and cultural influence of other conservative organisations that emerged around religious issues. The NEA was established in 1965 in order to facilitate the material conditions to “create a climate encouraging... the fullest attention to freedom of artistic and human expression” in the arts through grants overseen by a panel of experts.⁶⁵ By the late eighties the NEA funded hundreds of projects annually from its \$150 million budget.⁶⁶ In 1989 two closely occurring exhibitions of the works of Andres Serrano, in particular a photograph of a crucifix immersed in his own urine titled “Piss Christ,” and the explicit sadomasochistic and homoerotic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, both partially funded by the NEA, tested the moral boundaries of this freedom of expression. Serrano’s work was quickly decried by Reverend Donald Wildman, head of the American Family Association, followed by a piece by Pat Buchanan in the *Washington Times* using “Piss Christ” as evidence that “America’s art and culture are, more and

⁶³ Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 103.

⁶⁴ Bérubé, *Public Access*, 36.

⁶⁵ Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, “Chronology,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 332. Bolton’s anthology provides a collection of documents and a comprehensive introduction that exhaustively maps the debate over the NEA.

⁶⁶ Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 231.

more, openly anti-Christian, anti-American, nihilistic.”⁶⁷ A week after Buchanan’s column, Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato tore up a reproduction of Serrano’s piece on the Senate floor and joined thirty-five other Senators in signing a letter to the NEA demanding changes to its grant-making procedures.⁶⁸

The controversy over NEA funding, based primarily (it must be remembered) on two grants out of hundreds, was kept alive by well-organised religious groups. The American Family Association and Pat Robertson’s 700 Club, as well as Senator Jesse Helms’ National Congressional Club, continued to promote the issue through their extensive mailing lists and public proclamations.⁶⁹ At the heart of their argument was the accusation that an elite of artists were using public funds to advance a progressive “agenda based upon multiculturalism, gay and lesbian rights, feminism, and sexual liberation,” all of which were represented as legacies of the sixties.⁷⁰ The issue of funding was a key aspect of their strategy as it enabled them to couch their objections to the values expressed in “elite art” in a populist language of taxing low-income families to fund the *avant-garde* art of the cultural elite. Such objections and the volume and rhetorical accuracy of the targeting of the issues brought about concrete changes to the NEA. In 1990 Congress added a stipulation to the NEA’s funding appropriations that works receiving grants

⁶⁷ Rev. Donald Wildmon, letter concerning Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, in *Culture Wars* (see note 59), 27; Patrick Buchanan, “Losing the War for America’s Culture,” in *Culture Wars* (see note 59), 32.

⁶⁸ Margaret Carlson, “Whose Art Is It, Anyway?,” *Time*, July 3, 1989, 21.

⁶⁹ Robert Hughes, “Whose Art Is It, Anyway?,” *Time*, June 4, 1990, 46.

⁷⁰ Richard Bolton, introduction to *Culture Wars* (see note 59), 5.

may not involve obscenity “including, but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.”⁷¹ This not only achieved many of the right’s goals, but also caused many arts organisations to reject NEA funding in protest of the censorship they perceived in this stipulation, thereby further expanding the success of the right in silencing the perspectives to which it objected.⁷² The appointment of the right-approved Anne-Imelda Radice to head the NEA in 1992 effectively ended the possibility of controversial work receiving funding and, as such, the culture wars furore over the NEA. However, the populist strategies so effectively directed at cultural products extended into the realm of popular culture (as I will further examine below).

The impact of the culture wars over education was even more ferocious than it was on the arts. Initially stemming from an emphasis on the influence of the “tenured radicals” in the universities, to use Roger Kimball’s classification, this ultimately invoked the very survival of an “American past” through a focus on the teaching of history in schools. It became fashionable during the late 1980s to lament a crisis of liberal education and falling standards in the university which were frequently blamed on the changes in the university caused by the 1960s. In a double criticism of “the campus rebellions of the 1960s,” Diane Ravitch contended that protests intended against the war in Vietnam often turned into, and therefore were nothing more

⁷¹ William A. Henry III, ‘You can take this grant...’ *Time*, July 16, 1990, 85.

⁷² Ibid.

than, “protests against the standards in higher education.”⁷³ For Allan Bloom the capitulation of university administrators and professors to the demands for reform of student protestors marked the beginning of a fall in standards after which “the very distinction between [the] educated and the uneducated in America had been leveled,” and a paradoxical restriction on academic freedom had resulted.⁷⁴ Bloom’s book became a surprise bestseller, selling 800,000 copies of the hardback edition, and prompted polarising reactions. Interviewed in *Time* magazine on the occasion of the publication of the paperback, Bloom ascribed the “violence and passion” of the reaction of “intellectuals” against him as proof that the comments he made in the book were true, and warned of a “very intense period in the American university today... in many ways more profound and revolutionary than the campus upheavals of the 1960s.”⁷⁵ Bloom’s warnings were taken up with relish by the others on the right who saw the very foundations of the “western tradition” as under attack. Where Roger Kimball warned of the “tenured radicals,” Dinesh D’Souza excoriated “Visigoths in tweed” who practiced “brainwashing that deprecates Western learning and exalts a neo-Marxist ideology promoted in the name of multiculturalism.”⁷⁶ In making the focus of their attacks and their “evidence” of falling standards the social legacies of the 1960s in education –

⁷³ Diane Ravitch, “The War on Standards,” *Partisan Review* 60, no. 4 (1993): 685.

⁷⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 319.

⁷⁵ William McWhirter, “A Most Uncommon Scold,” *Time*, October 17, 1988, 74. With his claims of truth based on the spirited reaction against him, Bloom is here demonstrating another of the right’s textual strategies during the culture wars – basing “truth” on opposition.

⁷⁶ Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); Dinesh D’Souza, “The Visigoths in Tweed,” *Forbes*, April 1, 1991, 85.

womens studies, black studies, gay studies, multiculturalism – these critics were again able to couch their attacks in the language of populism (against elites), to obfuscate the realities of the new social movements of the sixties, and create an environment in which George Will could criticise affirmative action admissions policies as “prejudice against excellence.”⁷⁷

The ultimate and most effective result of this perspective on higher education was the way in which political correctness (PC) spread the diversity debate into the wider public sphere. The essential basis of the PC accusations was that leftists influenced by postmodern theory came to view Western culture, and that of the United States in particular, as oppressive of difference as exemplified in a humanities curriculum that privileged the perspectives of “dead white males.” In response, they proposed a multiculturalism that championed a more balanced curriculum favouring an inclusiveness for previously marginalised groups – women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities – and an awareness of difference that reflects the basis of cultural memory as constitutive of a variety of histories and perspectives. However, the inclusiveness of multiculturalism was portrayed as being about a politics of difference, of privileging group identity over a common culture. Critics of multiculturalism emphasised Afrocentrism, moral relativism, and a tendency “toward nihilism, erasing any distinction between truth and falsity and between quality and lack of quality in art” – “quality” standing for “objective” notions of the beauty of the western tradition – which not only threatened to

⁷⁷ George F. Will, “Prejudice Against Excellence,” *The Washington Post*, April 16, 1989, B7.

fracture the “common culture,” but also the very foundations of the United States and the whole of western civilisation.⁷⁸

The label “political correctness” invokes the toeing of the party line in Soviet society. PC became a reflex sneer of the right implying that the “speech codes” that originated in a plea for mutual respect were nothing more than a New McCarthyism silencing free speech and freedom in general on campuses. For Jeffrey Williams the PC scare was “a savvy ideological power play that negates any opposition or critique from the outset, a highly successful public relations campaign” acting as justification for the attack on the inclusiveness that multicultural curricula offer.⁷⁹ The PC furore quickly spread from the monographs to the opinion-editorial pages of the *New York Times* – including one piece entitled “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct” – and onto the talk shows and news programmes, via a fear-inspiring *Newsweek* cover headed “Watch What You Say” above the words “Thought Police” carved in stone, with a subtitle that contained a clear implication: “There’s a ‘Politically Correct’ Way to Talk About Race, Sex and Ideas. Is This the New Enlightenment – Or the New McCarthyism?”⁸⁰ As the PC claims gained, and grew, through their popular expressions in mainstream media, they were given further credence as many liberals and leftists added their views. Marxist historian Eugene Genovese opined that this “New McCarthyism” had created

⁷⁸ Paul Berman, “Introduction: The Debate and Its Origins,” in *Debating P.C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New York: Laurel, 1992), 2. Berman’s collection is an excellent introduction to the PC debate.

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Williams, introduction to *PC Wars* (see note 53), 5.

⁸⁰ Richard Bernstein, “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1990, D1; *Newsweek*, December 24, 1990.

a climate where education had been replaced by indoctrination and in which “good scholars are intimidated into silence, and the only diversity that obtains is a diversity of radical positions”; the implied meaning being that poor scholars are ascendant and diversity is a veil for an undefined, yet intimidating sounding, “radicalism.”⁸¹ One need only look at the titles of three liberal responses to the debate to see that they legitimise the right’s critique of the ultimate ends of multiculturalism and PC as the end of a common culture: Todd Gitlin’s *The Twilight of Common Dreams*; Robert Hughes’s *The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*; and Arthur Schlesinger’s *The Disuniting of America*.⁸² Schlesinger demeaned the goals of multiculturalism by stating that “the eruption of ethnicity is, I believe, a rather superficial enthusiasm stirred by romantic ideologues on the one hand and by unscrupulous con men on the other.”⁸³

In the midst of his lament for the “fraying of America,” Robert Hughes pointed out that the right has its own brand of PC, Patriotic Correctness, “equally designed to veil unwelcome truths.”⁸⁴ This patriotic consensus was exemplified in the call for “traditional” notions of the American past during the “history wars” over the History Standards for Schools project of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). In

⁸¹ Quoted in D’Souza, “The Visigoths in Tweed,” 85. In addition, Genovese endorsed many of D’Souza’s conclusions in an extremely positive review of *Illiberal Education* in *The New Republic*. Eugene Genovese, “Illiberal Education,” *The New Republic*, April 15, 1991, 30-35.

⁸² Todd Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*; Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Warner Books, 1993); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

⁸³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Cult of Ethnicity, Good and Bad,” *Time*, July 8, 1991, 21.

⁸⁴ Hughes, *Culture of Complaint*, 33.

1990, in response to notions of dropping standards, the Bush administration proposed the establishment of a series of national education goals and an agenda for school reform that had to receive financial support from Congress which required the creation of a bipartisan commission. Key figures in advancing the need to counter diminishing standards were Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch (whose views are illustrated above) and Lynne Cheney, the chairman of the NEH, who was well known for her opposition to the “politicisation” of higher education.⁸⁵ Cheney’s perspectives were so valued by the right in their battle against PC that George Will had called her the “secretary of domestic defence.” The forces that she battled were, in Will’s opinion, more dangerous than the forces that her husband, Dick, was fighting as Secretary of Defense because “those forces are fighting against the conservation of the common culture that is the nation’s social cement.”⁸⁶

When they were published in 1994, the final National Standards for United States History horrified conservatives. They argued that the Standards reflected the tendency towards political correctness and the denigration of Western tradition in higher education. The two volumes of outlines for the teaching of history for grades five to twelve contained nineteen references to McCarthyism, six to Harriet Tubman, and failed to mention Robert E. Lee, Thomas Edison, or the Wright Brothers.⁸⁷ Cheney judged that the original

⁸⁵ For a full account of the process of creating the National Education Standards see Gary B. Nash, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teachings of the Past* (Westminster, MD: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 149-187.

⁸⁶ George F. Will, “Literary Politics,” *Newsweek*, April 22, 1991, 72.

⁸⁷ Charles Krauthammer, “History Hijacked,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1994, A25.

goals of the project were derailed because “historical revisionists took heart from the 1992 election of Bill Clinton and ‘iced out’ those with more traditional views,” leading to what Charles Krauthammer called “a classic of political correctness.”⁸⁸ The outcry that greeted the Standards in all media resulted in the Senate voting 99-1 to reject the Standards. Reflecting on the furore that greeted the Standards, co-director Gary B. Nash concluded that:

The argument is in fact between two visions of patriotic history. On one side are those who believe that young people will love and defend the United States if they see it as superior to other nations and regard its occasional falls from grace as short pauses or detours in the continuous flowering of freedom, capitalism, and opportunity. Thus, the Right sees no need to examine blemishes that in any case have been historically removed. On the other side are most historians, who believe that *amor patriae* is nurtured by looking squarely at the past, warts and all. Only this clear-sightedness will obviate the cynicism that sugar-coated history produces when youngsters get older and recognize “the lies my teacher told me.”⁸⁹

For the conservatives, then, what was desired was a traditional “patriotically correct” history that privileged uncomplicated notions of exceptionalism and was methodologically old-fashioned. Simultaneous to the attacks on the Standards was the controversy over the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibit which was couched in the same objections as to how to represent the dropping of the first atomic bomb at the time of its fiftieth anniversary. Intended to offer an objective understanding of the Enola Gay’s mission and its consequences, the proposed text was quickly labelled anti-American by veterans’ groups, politicians and the usual commentators, and the exhibition

⁸⁸ Walter A. McDougall, “Whose History? Whose Standards?” *Commentary*, May 1995, 36; Krauthammer, “History Hijacked,” A25.

⁸⁹ Nash, *History on Trial*, 15.

was scrapped in favour of a “display permitting the Enola Gay and its crew to speak for themselves.”⁹⁰

The Enola Gay controversy only served to underline the limitations on public history that resulted from the evolution of the right’s control of the terms of the cultural debate. This shift was also apparent in the sphere of electoral politics where invocations of tradition and an opposition to “difference” became standard practices for Republican candidates (as well as a number of Democrats), although this opposition was often treated as a form of defence. As early as 1990, the campaign manager for Senator Jesse Helms, whose public opposition to NEA-funded obscenity is outlined above, publicly stated that “what you have opposing Helms is a coalition of homosexuals and artists and pacifists and every other left-wing group.”⁹¹ However, the “values” strategy impeded President Bush’s re-election campaign in 1992 when, in addition to his mistaken “no new taxes” pledge, inflammatory speeches by Pat Buchanan and Pat Robertson at the Republican National Convention engaged in a rhetorical overkill surprising in its invective and exhibiting a lack of the gentleness and tolerance that had characterised the Clinton campaign. Having failed in his attempt to take the nomination from Bush, Buchanan used his platform at the convention to warn of a coming “cultural war,” a struggle for America’s soul against what the Clintons would impose – “abortion on

⁹⁰ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 284. Wallace provides a comprehensive account of “The Battle of the Enola Gay” in this book (270-315).

⁹¹ Quoted in Steven V. Roberts and Dorian R. Friedman, “The Culture Wars of 1990,” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 25, 1990, 22.

demand, a litmus test for the supreme court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat.”⁹²

It was symptomatic of the gradual shift in the tenor of public debate to the right in this period that although the “values” strategy had failed (among other reasons) in 1992, raising culture wars issues later proved to be resoundingly successful in 1994 as the “counterrevolution” of the Gingrich Republicans took control of the House and Senate. Indicative of the success of the Republican strategy was Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe’s claim that he won on “God, gays and guns.”⁹³ Ostensibly based on pledges to cut taxes and positioned as a referendum on big government, the heart of the “Contract with America” was based on traditional values and correcting the social ills that Gingrich traced to the 1960s. The Contract promised welfare reform to reverse the social programs of the Great Society. According to the Contract these programs had resulted in the opposite of the helping hand to those in need and had “instead bred illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy, and more poverty.”⁹⁴ Positioning himself in opposition to the Clintons, whom he consistently referred to in perhaps the most blatant sixties put-down as “counterculture McGoverniks,” Gingrich boasted that now “you have the most ideologically committed House Republican Party in modern history” dealing with the

⁹² Patrick J. Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech” (speech, Houston, TX, August 17, 1992), <http://www.buchanan.org/pa-92-0817-rnc.html> (accessed January 18, 2006).

⁹³ Quoted in Doug Ireland, “It’s Newt’s Day in Congress,” *The Nation*, December 5, 1994, 681.

⁹⁴ Ed Gillespie and Bob Schellhas, eds., *Contract with America: The Bold New Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey and the House Republicans to Change the Nation* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 65.

question of “whether or not our civilization will survive.”⁹⁵ Ultimately, the bluster of the Gingrich Republicans resounded more loudly than its law-making prowess as the Senate, under the leadership of future presidential candidate Bob Dole, blocked the majority of their proposed reforms. Despite this legislative failure, the conservatives’ monopoly on the language of values had significantly shifted the centre of American politics and culture to the right by 1995. This is more than suggested in Michael Bérubé’s conclusions about effect of the PC debate:

What’s most important about the term “political correctness” in the long run, however, is that its use gives American conservatives a monopoly over the discussion of cultural values – by casting liberalism as doubly *void* of values, at once relativist and totalitarian... In other words, liberals and leftists don’t have “values”; instead of values, we have PC. The right has values. The consequences of this rhetorical sleight of hand can be quite serious insofar as they help shape the terrain of public deliberation and public policy.⁹⁶

Hollywood’s industrial and representational hegemony made it inevitable that its products would be the focus of intense conflict during the culture wars. Its power and influence over the visions of life that appear on America’s radios and screens (both large and small) elicited an anxiety that mirrors the concerns over the content of education’s ability to affect the morality of the nation’s youth. This is nothing new, of course, for since the birth of cinema purveyors of public morality have warned of the “power of movies to break down ‘normal resistance’ to pernicious ideas in the minds of

⁹⁵ Ibid., 182.

⁹⁶ Bérubé, *Public Access*, x.

young people.”⁹⁷ However, during the period that is the focus of this thesis Hollywood attracted controversy about the content of its products at a level rarely seen since that which led to the institution of the Production Code in 1934. By 1995, the antipathy towards Hollywood and its perceived threat to the social fabric had reached such a level that Republican Presidential candidate Bob Dole chose to use an attack on Hollywood as an attempt to tap into and attract popular resentment to his campaign, as well as to seek support from the rest of the GOP who, as shown previously, had come to represent this position in the preceding years. “We have reached a point where our popular culture threatens to undermine our character as a nation,” said Dole, adding that (imagined) citizens “feel surrounded by forces assaulting their children and their code of values.”⁹⁸ Dole’s comments reinvigorated the debate across the media, epitomised by a *Time* magazine cover that asked, with a telling subtitle, “Are Music and Movies Killing America’s Soul? ... Free speech vs. family values.”⁹⁹

As I move towards the end of this introduction my concern is to break down notions that Hollywood is a single monolithic entity that represents the dominant ideology of the nation (according to the left) or, for the right, a “cultural elite” isolated on the West coast and out of touch with the values of the majority of Americans. The industrial realities of the entertainment

⁹⁷ Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 153.

⁹⁸ Bernard Weinraub, “Senator Moves to Control Party’s Moral Agenda,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1995, A1; Ellen Goodman, “A New Cast, Same Script,” *The Boston Globe*, June 8, 1995, 15.

⁹⁹ *Time*, July 12, 1995.

industry are far more complicated than such beliefs allow and I will show how specific industrial developments have affected Hollywood's susceptibility for blame for the values crisis. I suggest that Hollywood's products became the focus of contention for both the left and the right and end this introduction by connecting such contention with the principal focus of this thesis on representations of history on film through the well-publicised criticisms of Michael Medved.

The entertainment industry began the period 1987-1995 very much in a state of flux. As falling box office revenues had continued to affect Hollywood's financial stability, the boom in the video industry had offered a lifeline but had also led to an increase in the number of films being made by companies independent of the big studios that threatened their dominance of the market. The number of independent productions increased from 206 in 1983 to 316 in 1988 due to the "conviction that if the budget was right, almost any film could make a profit because of the booming video market."¹⁰⁰ This explosion in the marketplace, although it led to a certain number of poor and derivative products, created an artistic environment in which filmmakers were less restricted by the constraints of studio production and freer to pursue personal projects. A number of the films produced by independent companies are discussed in the opening chapters – *Running on Empty* (1988), *1969* (1989), *The Doors* (1991), and the majority of Vietnam films. Also the career

¹⁰⁰ Justin Wyatt, "Independents, Packaging, and Inflationary Pressure in 1980s Hollywood," in Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 149; Vincent Canby, "A Revolution Reshapes Movies," *New York Times*, January 7, 1990, B1.

of Oliver Stone, the filmmaker whose films feature most prominently herein, began with two films funded by the British company Hemdale eager to break into the video market, *Salvador* (1986) and *Platoon* (1986).

By 1989 the number of independent productions had dropped sixty percent due to an increasing hold on the video market by the majors and the independents having overextended themselves.¹⁰¹ The strategies that the independents had used did leave an impact on the studio's production practices and, as a result, their financial organisation. Carolco, an independent run by Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna, had attempted to buy their way into becoming an instant major through offering inflated salaries to stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, as well as screenwriters such as Joe Eszterhas who received \$3 million for his script for *Basic Instinct* (1991). This had resulted in a rise in production costs across the industry as other stars demanded higher pay cheques and costs in other areas of production rose in parallel. By 1990 the average cost of a film including prints and advertising for the majors had risen to \$38.4 million from \$13.7 million in 1980, and continued to rise to \$59 million by 1995.¹⁰² The impact of the independents was to shift "Hollywood filmmaking toward even more fiscally conservative, pre-sold forms of production," along with the move towards

¹⁰¹ David Ansen, "One Eye on Art, One on Profits," *Newsweek*, April 3, 1989, 66-7.

¹⁰² Richard Maltby, "'Nobody knows everything': Post-classical historiographies and consolidated entertainment," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 37.

consolidation and merger in order to nullify the encroachment of the independents on their markets.¹⁰³

The consequences of rising budgets and the growth of the conglomerates had an effect on both the content of movies and the susceptibility of “Hollywood” to attack over its values. Justin Wyatt identifies an increase in the production and importance of blockbusters that conform to his model of the “high concept” film at the expense of the most auteurist forms that, for many, characterise the last golden age of American filmmaking in the 1970s.¹⁰⁴ For Wyatt few directors retained creative freedom over their films and were forced to work “within the system,” with Oliver Stone being the exception because his films were commercially and critically successful and their controversial nature made them marketable.¹⁰⁵ Through the purchasing of or merging with television networks and music companies, the Hollywood majors became responsible for the majority of the cultural products in the marketplace and, therefore, responsible for the values expressed in those products.¹⁰⁶ The process of consolidation inadvertently made “Hollywood” into a label that could be invoked by those levelling generalising accusations against the nefarious influence of popular culture. For example, in 1992 alone, “Hollywood” could be blamed in the brouhahas

¹⁰³ Wyatt, “Independents,” 142.

¹⁰⁴ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁰⁶ For a chronicle of the expansion of the major studios into international media conglomerates controlling the majority of popular culture see Edward Jay Epstein, *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 2005), 27-84.

over Stone's *JFK* (1991), Ice T's "Cop Killer," and the illegitimate child of Murphy Brown.

The concerns of this thesis with cinematic representations of history in a context where traditional notions of history are favoured by those on the right make the concerns of many on the left over popular representations of gender, ethnicity and sexuality seem negligible. However, such concerns are important to note because they present part of a context in which Hollywood occupies a middle ground, a place where it is constantly under attack for its morality from both the right and the left. Charles Lyons' examination of censorship and protests against Hollywood's products reflects this context in which the content of films was objected to by those on the right and the left.¹⁰⁷ However, Lyons reaches an interesting conclusion about the effectiveness of such objections. He observes that protests from feminist groups about depictions of violence towards women (specifically in *Dressed to Kill* [1980]), from Asian Americans over racial stereotyping galvanised around *Year of the Dragon* (1985), and from gay and lesbian groups over the depiction of murderous homosexuals in *Basic Instinct* (1991), all ultimately failed to have any impact on these films' distribution or, indeed, their success. For Lyons it was the "New Christian Right [who] achieved the most blatant censorship" with their hugely-orchestrated campaign against *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).¹⁰⁸ The size of the opposition that the Christian Right mounted and maintained (the project was originally set to be made in 1983) surprised

¹⁰⁷ Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 187.

many as protestors picketed theatres throughout the country, three cinema chains refused to show it, and the right wielded its economic power and influence to effectively kill the film.¹⁰⁹ Lyons' conclusion then suggests that, although many groups called for restrictions on the content of Hollywood productions, it was only the economic strength and well-honed organisation of the right that enabled success.

The producers of popular culture were far from passive observers of the culture wars. Hollywood certainly embraced multiculturalism as more gay and lesbian characters were incorporated into narratives and more female and black filmmakers, notably Spike Lee, entered the industry. Many Hollywood films, and those starring Michael Douglas especially, tapped into a crisis of white masculinity within the "politicised discourses of identity."¹¹⁰ Perhaps the most explicit response came from the producers of the CBS sitcom *Murphy Brown*. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Vice President Dan Quayle held up the eponymous character's giving birth to an illegitimate child as an example of the way in which popular culture was threatening "family values," a central plank in Quayle's election strategy. When the show returned to the air in September 1992 the producers used the fact that Brown was a news anchor to turn the tables on Quayle, incorporating his attacks into the program's storyline, by having Brown address the camera and audience to

¹⁰⁹ The film barely made its money back – grossing \$8.5 million from a \$6.5 million budget – and the focus of the right's campaign toward cinema owners meant that the widest release that the film achieved was a very limited 123 screens. *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lasttemptationofchrist.htm> (accessed January 3, 2007).

¹¹⁰ Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), 18.

ask: “In searching for the causes of our social ills, we could blame the media, or the Congress, or an administration that has been in power for twelve years. Or, we could blame me.”¹¹¹

The debate around Hollywood and their perceived influence found its most concise expression in Michael Medved’s *Hollywood vs. America* with its provocative and knowing subtitle, “Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values.”¹¹² In his book, Medved wastes no time in getting to the point he wishes to make. He concludes the opening paragraph of the first chapter, “A sickness in the soul,” by declaring that “the dream factory has become the poison factory,” and proceeds to outline popular culture’s attacks on religion, “the assault on the family,” and the “glorification of ugliness.”¹¹³ The book is an exhaustive account that ties popular culture to almost every aspect of the culture wars debates, but it is Medved’s perspectives on American history as represented by Hollywood that is of most importance. Medved reflects the paradigmatic desire of those on the right for uncomplicated notions of American exceptionalism that characterised the reaction to the History Standards. He laments that

the days when Hollywood captured the imagination of the entire world with stirring accounts of *our* heroic history have given way to an era of self-flagellation and *irresponsible revisionism* – with a series of preachy, *politically correct*, *propagandistic* presentations of our country’s many crimes and misdemeanors.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Reproducing Reality: Murphy Brown and Illegitimate Politics,” in *Media Spectacles*, eds. Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (London: Routledge, 1993), 51.

¹¹² Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 224-5 (my emphasis).

As with many on the right he expresses a nostalgia for the heroic simplicity of cinematic representations of history that he saw during his childhood in the 1950s as personified in the era's westerns and war films. While he acknowledges the "historical shortcomings" and "jingoistic simplicity" of films such as *The Buccaneer* (1958) and *The Alamo* (1960), he asserts that "whatever their flaws, such stories served to fire my imagination with visions of a glorious past that I somehow shared with classmates and neighbors."¹¹⁵ Medved, then, is explicitly showing a preference for a "glorious past" unencumbered by historical accuracy, that is for myth rather than the "gloomy guilt-inducers" of the present time. Unfortunately for Medved and others on the right, as Robert Sklar points out, Hollywood had long since dispensed with the rhetoric of myths and dreams and shifted to questions of memory.¹¹⁶

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on veterans of the Vietnam War on film. I argue that representations of the Vietnam veteran on film, from 1987 onwards, attempted to revise the stereotypes of the violent and unpredictable veteran that Hollywood had helped to create, offering a more sympathetic view in line with changes in broader cultural attitudes as the 1980s progressed. However, these sympathetic representations often neutralised any political perspectives that they may have held. *Born on the Fourth of July* occupies the centre of the chapter as a film that sought to reinforce the sense of injustice felt by many veterans over their treatment and

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 232-3.

¹¹⁶ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 358.

to make earlier Hollywood versions of masculinity complicit in soldiers going to war in the first place. Chapter two explores films that deal with the anti-Vietnam War protest movement and the counterculture. It analyses the way in which a sub-genre of films sought to set up a retrospective consensus view of “the sixties” in the face of the right’s attacks on the decade and its legacies. Chapter three examines the (revisionist) biopics of the period and their construction of cults of personality. The figures privileged by these films – Jim Morrison, Jim Garrison, Malcolm X, and Jimmy Hoffa – are very much outside the mould of heroes traditionally favoured by the biopic. These films thus attempt to provide counter-myths to those which the right would prefer were about the glorious heroes of a common culture.

The fourth chapter forms the fulcrum of my thesis in its examination of *Forrest Gump* as the meta-sixties film into which the films of the previous chapters – veterans, counterculture/anti-war movement, biopics – feed and are self-consciously recycled. *Forrest Gump* forms the centrepiece of my thesis as the point into which the trends identified in the previous chapters coalesce (or not as the case may be) and then as the point from which the final concluding chapter springs. The chapter outlines how the commandeering of *Forrest Gump* by the right has coloured readings of the film by (left-leaning) critics, and how a careful analysis of the film with regard to audiences aware of other cinematic representations of the era (as examined in the previous three chapters) can offer a different reading. The fifth chapter looks at the post-*Forrest Gump* moment as exemplified by *Nixon* and the more (financially)

successful *Apollo 13* (1995). It examines how the positive reaction to *Forrest Gump* amongst conservatives can be seen to influence the positive re-establishment of images of national unity and (quasi-)military representations in *Apollo 13*, a film very much of the post-culture wars moment. While *Nixon*, a film which director Oliver Stone saw very much as a corrective to the amnesia that he saw in the nostalgic impulses of *Forrest Gump*, offers a prime example of the way in which the historical film can self-consciously acknowledge its blurring of history and collective memory and, as such, will offer a succinct conclusion to the themes of historical representation that are central to this thesis.

Chapter One

Making Amends and Emphasising Redemption: Rehabilitating the Vietnam Veteran.

Viet Nam represents a great jagged gash in the fabric of American history, an ugly tear in a tapestry that people once believed had been woven out of high ideals and simple decency. A few years ago, when it became obvious that it was time to repair that rent, our popular culture took on something of the air of a vast quilting bee, with writers, filmmakers and TV producers bending over their restorative needlework.

Richard Corliss.¹

The Vietnam War stands as one of the most traumatic events in American history, and, in cultural representations at least, the Vietnam veteran stands as the physical embodiment of that national trauma, damaged and unpredictable. However, of the over four-hundred films that have been made that take aspects of the Vietnam War as their subject, surprisingly few have been set “in country.”² The image of the Vietnam veteran has required the most, in Richard Corliss’s words, “restorative needlework” from a popular culture that is, to a great extent, responsible for his negative stereotype. As Michael Lanning concluded in his intended corrective to the “propaganda and falsehood” of Hollywood’s representation of the war:

Despite the overwhelming volume of positive information about the real veterans of Vietnam, Hollywood continues to propagate the myth of the divorced, jobless, field-jacket-wearing, loser Vietnam veteran

¹ Richard Corliss, “A Stitch in Time,” *Time*, October 2, 1989, 90.

² Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films about the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). Other surveys place the number at over six-hundred. See Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams, eds. *Vietnam War Films: Over 600 Feature, Made-for-TV, Pilot and Short Movies, 1939-92, from the United States, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Australia, Hong Kong, South Africa, Great Britain and Other Countries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1993).

who is mentally ill and/or criminally inclined. There is no indication that Hollywood has any intention of ceasing its mythmaking about the war in Vietnam and the warriors who fought there.³

A Vietnam veteran himself, Lanning wrote these distressingly accurate words in 1994, but his assessment overlooks several significant films that sought to engage in the kind of rehabilitation of the veteran that Corliss observed, although economic imperatives and political reticence on the part of some filmmakers prevented a comprehensive reappraisal. In contradistinction to the absence of “positive information” that Lanning describes, Michael Klein has noted the silent erasure of the opposition to the war that many veterans engaged in on their return as part of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), as well as those soldiers who mutinied or participated in the coffee house movement before shipping out.⁴ Tellingly, such details remained absent from those films intent on engaging in the “healing” of their veterans.

This chapter argues that representations of the veteran did change during the culture war period, albeit within the limits of a discourse of “cultural healing.” Beginning with a survey of the cycles of Vietnam productions related to a developing cultural discourse about the War and its veterans, the chapter then chronologically examines the few Vietnam veteran films made between 1987 and 1995. The second section analyses the very similar collective “healing” strategies of a trio of films set in the 1980s that focus on compassion towards veterans stemming from the construction and

³ Michael Lanning, *Vietnam at the Movies* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 157.

⁴ Michael Klein, “Cultural Narrative and the Process of Re-collection: Film, History and the Vietnam Era,” in *The Vietnam Era: Media and Popular Culture in the US and Vietnam*, ed. Michael L. Klein (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 16-17.

dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The third section focuses on the most financially successful veteran film, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and the furore that it provoked for its challenging of the consensus view of the war that appeared to have been reached during the 1980s. The final section of this chapter examines veterans on film in the early 1990s when impulses toward broadening the ostensibly white focus of veteran films to include black veterans and the Vietnamese, were tempered by a return to stereotypical veterans and to genre.

I: The Cyclical Evolution of Vietnam on Film.

Looking Away, Julian Smith's 1975 book on Hollywood and Vietnam, is aptly titled given that, aside from John Wayne's notoriously hawkish *The Green Berets* (1968) – the only film set in Vietnam made during the war – it was not until the mid-1980s that American films set in Vietnam were produced by the studios.⁵ Several cycles of production characterise the presentation of the war on screen.⁶ The majority of related productions of the 1970s present the damaged and haunted violent veteran. The second cycle of films dates from the release of *First Blood* in 1982 and concludes around 1988, and can be usefully characterised as the "Supervet" series whose narratives revolve around prisoners of war or those missing in action. The third cycle of films released in 1986 and 1987 focuses on the soldier's experience "in country," following which a series of films intentionally more compassionate to the returned veteran were produced with particular emphasis on their post-war lives.

⁵ Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Schribner, 1975). During the war many films dealt with the war metaphorically such as the revisionist westerns *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970). Of course, there were exceptions produced during the late-1970s such as *The Boys in Company C* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), but given that all of these films were, as Steve Neale notes, independently financed they do not signal a shift in studio policy to Vietnam War movies. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 132.

⁶ Different critics offer different periodisations, but the teleology outlined is broadly agreed upon by, among others, Pat Aufderheide, "Good Soldiers," in *Seeing Through Movies*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 81-111; Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*; J. Hoberman, "Vietnam: The Remake," in *Remaking History*, eds. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (New York: The New Press, 1989), 175-96; Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 329-35.

The negative stereotype of the psychotic, violent, criminal Vietnam veteran has been a culture staple at least since the end of the war. A certain anxiety always exists in society over the volatile nature of any returning soldier, although most research shows such perceptions to be groundless.⁷ However, newspapers and magazines consistently noted the veteran status of a criminal for, as William Palmer observes, “the Vietnam veteran burglar or rapist or mass murderer is much bigger news than the garden variety burglar, rapist, or mass-murderer.”⁸ Although not solely to blame for this “dangerous” image, film and television narratives were quick to exploit the narrative potential inherent in such social anxieties and make the villainous veteran an archetypal character. A 1975 survey found that twenty television episodes over an eleven month period featured a Vietnam veteran as “a dangerous, drug-abusing, psychopathic criminal,” while films such as *Open Season* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977) (among others) perpetuated the image through the 1970s until it became a “mass-culture cliché.”⁹ It is important to note that the representation of the violent or damaged veteran is not limited to the Vietnam War. Even after the “good” and just Second World War many of the troubled protagonists of *films noir* were returning veterans, most notably in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946). However, unlike representations of the Second World War, the lack of balancing

⁷ Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner, “The Myth of the Violent Veteran,” *Psychology Today*, December 1976, 94-6.

⁸ William J. Palmer, *The Film of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 65.

⁹ Archer and Gartner, “The Myth of the Violent Veteran,” 96; J. Hoberman, “America Dearest,” *American Film*, May 1988, 42.

representations epitomised by *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) is what makes the image of the Vietnam veteran as the embodiment of the violent eruptions of the 1960s so one-dimensional.

The second major cycle of Vietnam films was inexorably tied to the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the rhetoric of “Morning in America.” Speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (a group notoriously reluctant to admit Vietnam veterans) during the 1980 Presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan asserted that, “It is time we recognized that [in Vietnam] ours, in truth, was a noble cause. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt.”¹⁰ The rhetorical coupling of guilt with dishonouring the (American) dead in Vietnam ostensibly operated to restore a righteousness to the war and obfuscate its negative domestic consequences in line with the neoconservative demonisation of the sixties. The collision of ideology and fantasy that characterises the Reagan administration¹¹ finds no more appropriate embodiment than the Rambo series of films, the first of which, *First Blood* (1982), inaugurates the conservative “Supervet” cycle characterised if not by a refusal to admit defeat in Vietnam, then certainly by a desire to re-fight the war.

Universally identified as conservative, films such as *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and the *Missing in Action* series

¹⁰ Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 15.

¹¹ See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

(1984, 1985 and 1988), seek to reverse the humiliation of Vietnam by returning to the scene of the “crime,” thereby redeeming not only the national project in Vietnam, but also rescuing (along with the imagined POWs) from crisis the masculinity that the Vietnam syndrome was perceived to represent.¹² This cycle reached its peak in 1985, a year before the release of *Platoon* (1986), when the “comic strip patriotism” of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was the second-highest grossing film of the year at the American box office.¹³ As if extratextually answering Rambo’s question to his former commanding officer when asked to return to Vietnam to rescue prisoners of war – “Sir, do we get to win this time?” – Reagan stated, “After seeing Rambo last night, I know what to do next time it happens.”¹⁴ This extratextual exchange reverses the policy position of the “political elites,” not uncoincidentally a neoconservative culture war term analogous to “liberal elites,” that many Americans and Vietnam veterans (real and fictional) believed had prevented the winning of the war. Defending his description of these films as “fascist” in *New York* magazine, film critic David Denby noted the parallels between such attempts to exorcise the defeat in Vietnam and the strategy of “Hitler after Germany’s defeat in World War I, with theories of betrayal, the ‘stab in the

¹² See, for the most often cited example, Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹³ Pauline Kael, “The Current Cinema,” *New Yorker*, June 17, 1985, 112. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* grossed over \$150 million. The third highest-grossing film of 1985 also starred Stallone and had a clear Reaganite cold war message, *Rocky IV*. *Box Office Mojo*, www.boxofficemojo.com (accessed October 13, 2005). Hereafter, all box office figures are taken from *Box Office Mojo* unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ George J. Church, “At last, the Agony is Over,” *Time*, July 8, 1985, 16. Although Reagan made this comment into an open microphone before a press conference following the release of thirty-nine American hostages of TWA Flight 847 from Beirut, the resonance of this comment to his foreign policy and that of his successor, George Bush, is clear.

back.”¹⁵ The majority of critics shared, if not as vociferously, Denby’s objections to a cycle of films that can be read as provoking the huge critical success of *Platoon* (1986) as an antidote to such revisionism; for many audiences *Platoon* was the first film to present the “real” war.¹⁶

Platoon ushered in the beginning of the third major cycle of Vietnam films that focused on the soldiers’ experience in Vietnam. The “grunt ensemble” or “noble-grunt” films emerge from different cultural processes than the “Supervet” films.¹⁷ Rather than a Reaganite reclamation of the nobility of the cause in Vietnam, these films reflect the reclamation of the soldier’s integrity as evidenced in expressions of public sympathy towards veterans on the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1982.¹⁸ The Memorial quickly became the most visited site on the Mall despite many right-wing objections to the perceived negativity and defeatism of the design, and despite the avoidance of debates around the

¹⁵ Quoted in J. Hoberman, “The Fascist Guns in the West: Hollywood’s ‘Rambo’ Coalition,” *Radical America* 19, no. 6 (1985): 54. Denby’s objectionable films included *Red Dawn* (1984) in which American teenagers paradoxically become ersatz Vietcong-like guerrilla fighters after the United States is invaded and occupied by communist forces. The writer-director of *Red Dawn*, John Milius, also wrote *Uncommon Valor* and directed *Flight of the Intruder* (1991) which portrays the bombing of a missile site in Hanoi against the orders of their commanding officers heroically. The release of *Flight of the Intruder* coincided with the first Gulf War and reiterated the (Hollywood embellished) reports of returning soldiers being spat upon at a time when President Bush was using similar arguments to bolster support for military action in the Gulf. See Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 144-182.

¹⁶ Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 128.

¹⁷ Hoberman, “America Dearest,” 40; Aufderheide, “Good Soldiers,” 82.

¹⁸ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s role in “healing” of the wounds of Vietnam has been widely discussed. See especially Marita Struken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 44-84.

meaning of the war by the memorial committee.¹⁹ Similarly, in presenting an experiential approximation of what fighting in the war was “really like,” – in the words of a *Time* magazine cover, “*Platoon: Viet Nam As It Really Was*”²⁰ – films such as *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill* (1987), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), as well as countless straight-to-video and television movies and series such as *Tour of Duty* and *China Beach*, enabled audiences to feel the sense of omnipresent danger and brutal absurdity that shaped the consciousness of the hitherto misrepresented veteran.

Therefore, in ways analogous to the Memorial’s effect, these movies helped to facilitate a “healing” of the wounds of Vietnam experientially, but they also invited criticism from both the right and the left. The right’s criticisms were mostly muted given that the *esprit de corps* of troops and their loyalty to one another is rarely questioned. The right generally objected to the depiction of atrocities committed by troops; the representation of which was taken to suggest a universality of experience and was, therefore, seen as an insult to the majority of American troops who did not commit atrocities.²¹ The microscopic focus on the fighting troop provided the basis of the left’s criticism of, if not individual films, certainly the cycle. In presenting the war

¹⁹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 51-53. The difficult process of the Memorial’s construction history is presented in the aptly titled television movie *To Heal a Nation* (1988), whose protagonist (Jan Scruggs) was central in the building of the Memorial and wrote a monograph entitled *The Wall That Heals*. Jan Scruggs, *The Wall That Heals* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

²⁰ *Time*, January 26, 1987.

²¹ Peter C. Rollins, “The Vietnam War,” in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 99. Michael Medved labelled Vietnam “Hollywood’s favorite war” since it “provides filmmakers with an especially inviting opportunity to portray America at its worst.” Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 227.

from the point of view of the infantry soldier, and detailing the daily grind of their tour (their heroism and the soldier brotherhood), these films eulogise the American presence in Vietnam and, through an “essentialist notion of combat... preclude discussion of causes and goals, context and consequences, ideals and practices,”²² or any sense of the politico-economic origins or causes of the war.

It is important to note that the majority of Vietnam films made before *Platoon* were independent productions and that a perceived public antipathy towards remembering the war had discouraged studios from investing in an uncertain sub-genre, especially when military fantasies of the *Top Gun*-mould (1986) were so successful. However, through striking a chord with the public and mainstream critics, the success of these films – most notably *Platoon*’s box office and four Oscars including Best Picture and Best Director – made Vietnam a bankable topic in Hollywood.²³ Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe have read the compassion towards the veteran in the 1980s as “a mere gesture to assuage our collective guilt” about the war.²⁴ Arguably, the first wave of films to treat the veteran compassionately emerged from a similar position, though such films were also about making recompense for previous screen treatments of the veteran.

²² Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, “America’s Vietnam War Films: Marching toward Denial,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 8.

²³ In addition to *Platoon*’s success, *Full Metal Jacket*’s box office take of \$46.4 million was the 23rd top-grossing film of 1987 and extended the perceived “bankability” of Vietnam themed-films.

²⁴ Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe, “Introduction: The Vietnam War and American Memory,” in *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, eds. Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 11.

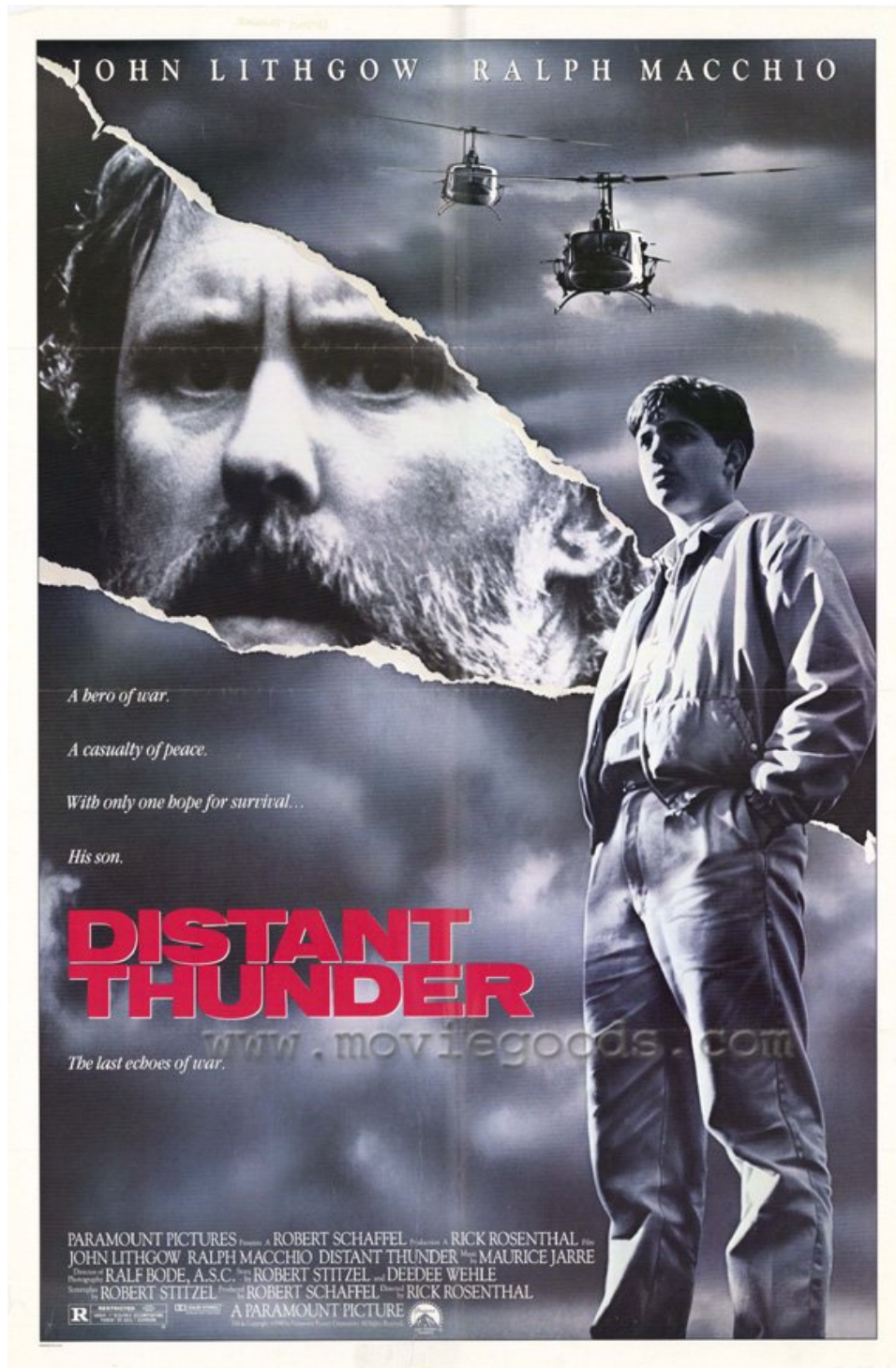


Figure 1.

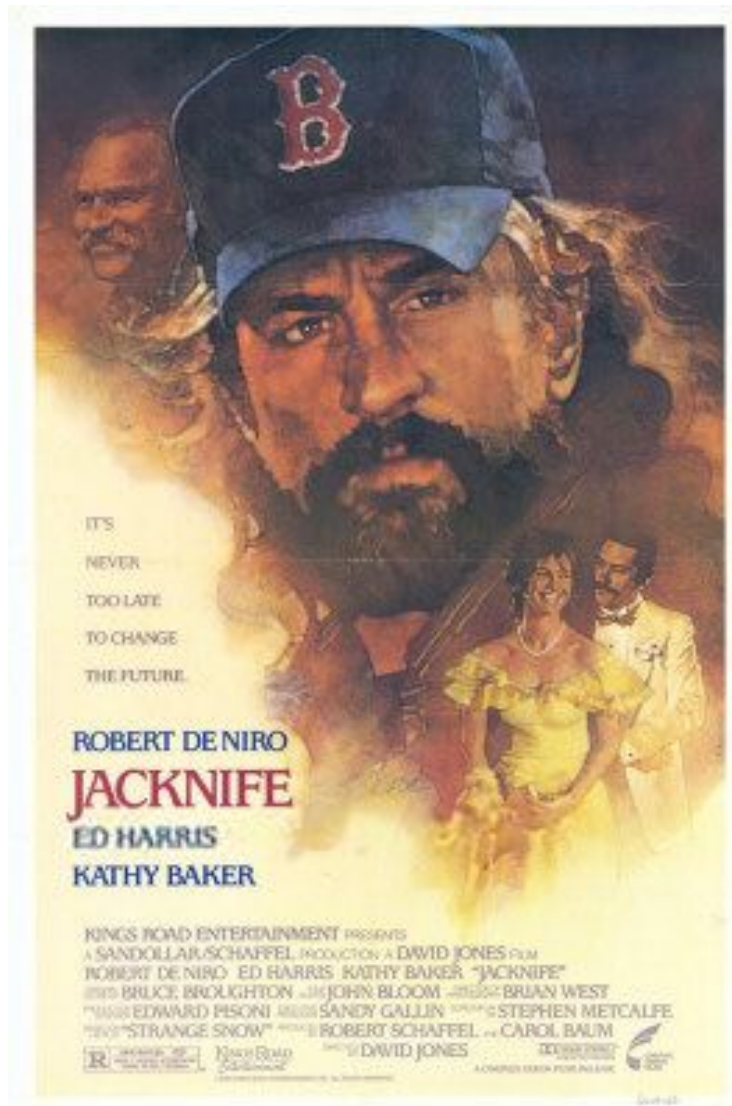


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

II: Compassion and Healing in the Present: Vietnam Veteran Films of the Late 1980s.

Before the great Viet Nam movie explosion of the mid-1980s (*Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Gardens of Stone*), Viet vets returning to civilian life had one primary, on-screen task: to crack under psychological pressure and go gloriously, murderously berserk. No more. Sensitivity is now the byword, and compassion the prescribed emotion.

Henry Mietkiewicz.²⁵

In 1987 the HBO broadcast *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1987) was so well received that it was given a small yet successful theatrical release. The documentary featured a number of well-established actors' readings of troops' letters from Vietnam, which, along with canonical sixties songs, are heard over chronologically-arranged television footage from the Vietnam War. The film culminates with a mother's letter to her dead son read over images of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Despite the acclaim, *Dear America* is a representation of the "grunt's" point of view that occludes political critique and presents the home front as a paradise in the idealised fantasies of letters home. Yet the presence of the voices of Robert De Niro, Harvey Kietel, and Robin Williams (as well as rising stars such as Sean Penn, Robert Downey, Jr., and Michael J. Fox), indicates the willingness of stars to appear as Vietnam veterans in the late 1980s and of the subsequent move away from the "grunt ensemble" films toward more intimate studies that

²⁵ Henry Mietkiewicz, "Jackknife cuts opens 'Nam war wounds without guns 'n' guts," *The Toronto Star*, March 23, 1989, D6.

characterise the next phase of Vietnam-related films.²⁶ As Henry Mietkiewicz observes, the post-“grunt” films examined in this section continue the sympathetic treatment of those who served in Vietnam, albeit with occasional recourse to the established cliché of the violent veteran. However, by displacing the temporal focus on the returned veteran to the (1980s) present and generically subsuming their experiences in familial melodrama, they also present a version of the veteran that is far from “born again.”²⁷

The three films that are the focus of this section, *Distant Thunder* (1988), *Jacknife* (1989), and *In Country* (1989), are united in their revisionist, compassionate presentation of Vietnam veterans. They share many narrative similarities and structural devices that invite examination as a collective project because they all express the cultural need for the healing of the veteran that the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial revealed. There may be several reasons for setting the stories in the present. Most obviously, a compassionate presentation of the Vietnam veteran is more possible in a present moment by which time a certain amount of healing and reconciliation has taken place. In the immediate aftermath of the veterans’ return, the general attitude of the population was starkly different, and the immediacy of the war

²⁶ Indeed, the willingness of Robert De Niro (*Jacknife*) and Bruce Willis (*In Country*) to work for far below their usual salaries indicates that taking these roles was a duty. De Niro reversed his usual policy of not giving interviews to support his films by discussing *Jacknife* extensively in an interview with *Playboy* magazine in January 1989. Bruce Willis told a *New York Times* reporter that he worked for far less than his usual \$5 million salary because, “it’s a story I wanted to be part of. It’s a story that hasn’t been told yet. It’s a lot more about what the Vietnam War is and what it means right now in 1988 than a movie about soldiers killing other soldiers. It’s about the recovery of this nation from the Vietnam War.” Quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, “In Middle America, a Movie Finds Its Milieu,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1988, A37.

²⁷ Having titled the chapter of *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second* on Vietnam films of 1986-7 “The Grunts,” Jeremy Devine labels the films of 1988-9 “Born Again” productions.

would have required an arguably more complex depiction of the veteran (although the simmering of time has done little to assuage this predicament). The temporal shift in narrative from the immediate “coming home” moment to the present enables the films to avoid those political realities of the 1970s that were antithetical to the agenda of healing associated with their moment of production. Another rationale for the shift could be about reflecting Hollywood’s belated intervention in the cultural recuperation of both the veteran and the war, but it is more likely that another rationale offers the best answer. *Distant Thunder*, *Jackknife*, and *In Country* represent one of Robert B. Ray’s “certain tendencies” of Hollywood cinema – “the conversion of all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas,” – but they update this strategy to the 1980s trend to narrate national problems as familial melodramas.²⁸ The central point of audience identification in these films is not the veteran but the son or daughter who acts as a metonym for a generation with little understanding of the war, of the war’s effects on their parent-veteran’s generation, or of the veterans’ preference to find solace in the company of other veterans (an alternative “family”) over the family or women in general. This structuring conceit allows the High School a central resonance in all three films with graduations forming the opening sections of *Distant Thunder* and *In Country*, while *Jackknife* stages the catharsis of the film’s most troubled veteran at a prom at the high school where he was an athletic star.

²⁸ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 57; Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 130-132.

Distant Thunder takes place on the remote, wooded Olympic Peninsula of Washington State in a small community of “bush vets” or “trip wire vets” living in isolation in the woodland outside a logging town. The central character, Mark (John Lithgow), deserted his wife and child when he returned from the war, although the film provides little context or timeline. Following the suicide of a fellow bush vet, he chooses to make contact with his son Jack (Ralph Macchio) who has just graduated from high school as valedictorian.²⁹ An early exchange between Jack and the school’s football coach illustrates the film’s project: as Jack complains of his father’s absence from his life because of Vietnam by stressing that the war is long over, to which the coach replies, “for us maybe.” *Distant Thunder* is primarily concerned with Mark’s overcoming his Post-Traumatic Stress and his (possible) reintegration into society, along with Jack’s (possible) understanding of the fallout caused by Vietnam, as a representative of the post-Vietnam generation, and by forgiving his father for deserting him. The final catharsis of the film, however hackneyed, resolves the characters’ issues in a forest when a crazed fellow bush vet takes on the role of the Viet Cong and attacks Mark, Jack and the rest of the group. This forces Mark to take on a protective father role towards his son, as well as to exorcise his post-Vietnam

²⁹ According to the film’s production notes, Mark has spent sixteen years living in the wilderness. Therefore, given that the film has Jack turning eighteen, Mark has only spent a very few years in “the world” before retreating to the forest. *Distant Thunder: Production Information* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures Corporation, 1988), 1. While not exactly a star excepting the minor success of *Harry and the Hendersons* (1987), John Lithgow had been twice nominated for Oscars (in 1983 and 1984) and brought a solid acting prowess to the project. Conversely, this was a first serious acting role for Macchio following the teen idol-making successes of *The Karate Kid* (1984) and *The Karate Kid, Part II* (1986) which both finished in the top-five at the yearly box office.

guilt for not saving the life of a fellow soldier. Simultaneously, Jack vicariously experiences a version of the combat hell that affected his father so strongly.

The choice by the producers of *Distant Thunder* to focus on the bush vet phenomenon provides the film with a dramatic visual and metaphorical illustration of the alienated veteran, but inadvertently presents such alienation in the most extreme possible form that (especially given the negligible quality of the film) only serves to reinforce conventionally negative stereotypes. According to a 1985 estimate, the Olympic Peninsula, where the film is set, was home to 2,700 combat veterans living in self-imposed isolation to escape from society, with other communities of bush vets in other areas (most notably Hawaii).³⁰ This extreme form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder leads even sympathetic voices to suggest that these veterans are beyond help. As Michael Cowan of the Hawaii post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars observed: “I hate to say this, but the authorities need to go in, drop nets over them, confiscate their weapons and put them in straightjackets.”³¹ Robert Schaffel, the film’s producer and a veteran of the U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam, became interested in the lives of bush vets following several news stories and was “haunted” by their situation after making contact with them. Similarly,

³⁰ Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, 292. Paramount had planned to distribute a fact sheet at screenings of the film, either to legitimise or aggrandise their film’s worthiness, which claimed that 35,000-45,000 had retreated into the wilderness following their return from Vietnam, but stopped when contacted by the Veterans Administration who challenged these figures. See Nina J. Easton, “Still Shuddering at ‘Distant Thunder,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1988, F8.

³¹ Paul A. Witteman, “Lost in America,” *Time*, February 11, 1991, 76. Witteman’s article provides a useful summary of the attitudes of the veterans themselves, as well as information on their difficulties in gaining help from the Veterans Administration and the general difficulties associated with PTSD and its diagnosis.

after meeting a group of bush vets, screenwriter Robert Stitzel stated (in the film's press notes), "I couldn't get over the quiet dignity of these men in spite of the incredible scars they were left with as a result of their time in combat."³² That *Distant Thunder* was shaped by meetings with bush vets themselves, arguably the most extreme example of the alienated veteran and their "quiet dignity," speaks ironically to the exaggerated nature of the film's representation of these veterans. One of the film's advisers, veteran counsellor Bruce Webster, stated that his patients "weren't as extreme as the characters in the film."³³ This problem essentially derives from the melodramatic resolution of the father-son conflict that the film achieves only through the threat of one of the other bush vets, which also suggests that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder cannot be too serious a problem if it can be overcome through a simple and quick, albeit traumatic, resolution. The makers of *Distant Thunder* had noble intentions in bringing the bush vets' story to the screen, but through a devotion to the melodramatic mode of the father-son "buddy movie" and its action-oriented climax, they ultimately trivialise their subjects.

Perhaps the most successful aspect of *Distant Thunder* is its presentation of the bond between veterans, most clearly in the relationships between the isolated men (with the notable exception of Brown's madness that acts as a catalyst for the third act). The importance of such relationships is emphasised immediately in the pain felt by Mark when one of his friends commits suicide during the film's opening scene. The fellowship of veterans

³² *Distant Thunder: Production Information*, 3.

³³ Easton, "Still Shuddering," F8.

forms the core theme of the second Robert Schaffel-produced veteran film, *Jackknife*.³⁴ However, where *Distant Thunder* portrays its bush vets as mutually resigned to their isolation, *Jackknife* focuses on the attempt by one veteran, Megs (Robert De Niro), to cajole a fellow veteran Dave (Ed Harris) out of his post-war *ennui*. Dave was the high-school quarterback, like Mark in *Distant Thunder*, who volunteered for Vietnam because of his father's "gung-ho vet shit." In Vietnam he lost his close friend Bobby (with whom Megs formed the trio), and returned to live with his unmarried sister Martha (Kathy Baker), after which he retreated into alcoholism and his hermetic silence about Vietnam. As Dave says early in the film, "I was never there. It never happened." In contrast to Dave, Megs talks about Vietnam all the time, as he tells Martha, even to himself "when there's no one around to listen." While the film provides little reference to Dave's coming home experience, intentionally reflecting his own introversion, Megs is forthright with Martha – who he begins to date – about his past. Dave tells Martha that Megs was crazy before he was drafted "and Nam made him crazier," and Megs admits that returning meant drug abuse, bar fights, spending time in jail for assault and contemplating suicide.³⁵ Megs' evolution is specifically aligned with general social changes in attitudes toward the Vietnam veteran in that he reveals much of his past to Martha on a trip to the local Vietnam Veterans Memorial,

³⁴ *Distant Thunder* was released on Veteran's Day (11 November) 1989 and *Jackknife* on 10 March, 1989. Schaffel provided De Niro with videotapes of the "bush vets" in order to convince him to take the role. See *Jackknife: Production Information* (Los Angeles: Cineplex Odeon Films, 1989), 5.

³⁵ Both Dave and Megs are/were truck drivers, firmly proposing their blue-collar credentials, and the film's title, *Jackknife*, is Megs' nickname stemming from his propensity to crash trucks.

concluding that he overcame his suicidal impulse by praying and realising that, “what was done was done. I couldn’t change it.”³⁶

Mark Walker is correct to observe that *Jackknife*’s point seems to be “you have to face up to what you did over there, and to who you are, before you can start to readjust, to reintegrate,” although the film’s execution is not as facile as this comment suggests.³⁷ Certainly it is schematic and deliberate in its characters’ trajectories, arguably reflecting its “chamber piece” quality and its roots in Stephen Metcalfe’s play *Strange Snow*, but it does move beyond cliché. *Jackknife* succeeds beyond Walker’s undermining criticism by making it clear that Megs is dependent on the support of fellow veterans at a Vietnam “rap group,” and, in particular, the group’s leader Jake, a wheelchair-bound African American veteran. Veterans’ “rap groups,” a term applied despite clear evidence of a “group therapy” situation to avoid implying that veterans were patients needing treatment, were originally organised by the VVAW although the film does not acknowledge this. They provided a safe forum in which veterans could (un)comfortably discuss their experiences and their place in society. The origins of these groups came from a feeling among veterans that traditional therapy’s focus on the individual’s suffering “abetted a national tendency to deny the collective nature of the war that had injured” veterans.³⁸ Ironically, this mirrors the cinematic convention for examining the war and its effects on the individual, rather than the collective, so *Jackknife*

³⁶ *Jackknife*’s producers used the image of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in early advertisements for the film, although not to the same extent as *In Country*. See *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 10, 1988, 32-33.

³⁷ Mark Walker, *Vietnam Veteran Films* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991), 127.

³⁸ Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 123-4.

expands the boundaries through giving the “rap group” a supporting role in the film just as the “rap group” provides support in Megs’s life.

The structure of the veterans’ meetings became the model for therapeutic communities throughout the country so it is little wonder that some have criticised the film for this perspective.³⁹ Eben J. Muse suggests that the “rap group” operates like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and, therefore, that the film presents the war’s effects as “an incurable disease; like alcoholism, it is a weakness from which the ex-soldier never fully recovers.”⁴⁰ There is a sense that Megs is acting as a quasi-AA sponsor to Dave (Dave is an alcoholic as well as a veteran in denial), but to imply, as Muse does, that the echo of the war’s effects in *Jackknife* is presented simply as a “weakness” to be faced is unfair. Dave has his moment of catharsis, his breakthrough, following his destruction of the high-school trophy cabinet which contains a picture of his “innocent” younger self (in the wider pre-Vietnam sense). He also begins to talk about his war experiences, but, unlike *Distant Thunder*, *Jackknife* refuses to present a facile catharsis. Dave ends the film at the same veterans’ rap group from which he had earlier run away, suggesting that his personal “healing” is only just beginning.

Inherent in “rap group” meetings, no matter how sympathetically the film presents them or the extent to which they help the veteran, is the most troubling aspect of *Jackknife* and the wider discourse surrounding the veteran. Implicit in the forum in which veterans feel comfortable expressing their

³⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁰ Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 133.

feelings to other veterans is the assumption that the wider population either does not want to listen or, ultimately, cannot understand their problems because they “weren’t there.” Immediately before his moment of emotional breakthrough, Dave apologises to Martha who silently turns away, which prompts Megs – who is tending a wound on Dave’s forehead – to say “How can she understand? She don’t know; she wasn’t there.” Immediately after unburdening himself it is Megs who Bobby hugs while Martha walks away. This scene seems unfair to Martha given that she has consistently attempted to engage with Dave – she is essentially unaware of Dave’s problems primarily through his silence which makes it impossible for her to empathise – and for much of film she has also listened to Megs talk over his own past. Martha is, consequently, positioned as the audience surrogate and, in this way, *Jackknife* asks viewers to attempt to understand. In presenting insights into the “rap groups” (many of the participants are real veterans), the film – indeed, arguably the entire corpus of “compassionate” Vietnam films – makes it possible for the non-veteran viewer to begin to empathise. In his review of *Jackknife*, for example, Brian Johnson notes that “movies about healing the psychological scars of the Vietnam War bear a frustrating message: you *had* to be there, but if you *were* there, now that you are back you are not really here.”⁴¹ *Jackknife* works well in solving the second part of Johnson’s paradox, but ultimately, despite its best intentions, reinforces the first.

In Country continues *Jackknife*’s focus on a mutually-supporting community of vets, although not in organised meetings. Veteran characters

⁴¹ Brian D. Johnson, “Battle fatigue,” *MacLean’s*, April 10, 1989, 41.

continually reiterate the sentiment that “you have to go there to know there” (to borrow Zora Neale Hurston’s phrasing), and as Emmett (Bruce Willis) puts it, “you don’t want to.” However, the film’s central character, Emmett’s teenage niece Sam (Emily Lloyd) who lives with Emmett, attempts to do just that (as does the film); Sam desires more than anything to understand the experiences of her father who died in Vietnam before she was born. More than *Distant Thunder*, which provides Jack with a limited, artificial experiential approximation of combat through the hackneyed finale, *In Country* presents Sam as a detective piecing together the past through awkwardly invasive conversations with veterans and by reading her father’s diary and his letters home. The film’s intentions and perspective, as well as its approach, are foregrounded in its poster tagline: “In the heartland of a nation... In the mind of young girl... In the memory of a soldier... In the soul of America... The healing has begun: The story of a family.”⁴² The poster’s image of Bruce Willis touching a name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial explicitly places the film within the discourse of healing that the Memorial engendered. Norman Jewison, the film’s director, referred to the Memorial as America’s Wailing Wall and said that he wanted to “make sure that people understand the momentous effect this war had on the American family... but *In Country*

⁴² My emphasis. The taglines for these three films are indicative of their content. Where *Jackknife*’s poster hopefully proclaimed that “It’s never to late to change the future” (although the poster for the video release was more cautionary in intoning “Three buddies in Vietnam. Two survived. Only one is really alive”), the copy for *Distant Thunder* was more final, reading “A hero of war. A casualty of peace. With only one hope for survival... his son,” followed below the title by “The last echoes of war.” See figures 1, 2 and 3.

is – and this is where it differs from other Vietnam films – also about the healing process; it’s time to move on.”⁴³

In a lengthy *New York Times* article on the making of the film, Dr. R. Gordon Williams, a veteran and psychologist working with veterans in Kentucky where the film is set and who acted as an unofficial adviser to the film, expressed a feeling of excitement when discovering the film would be shot there. However, he also confided having

an underlying suspicion, which all Vietnam veterans carry, because of the way they’ve been treated. But this movie seems to be a very nice continuation of something that has been happening all around the country. Vietnam veterans are now feeling that people in this country are finally taking a hard, close look at what happened to all of us when we were in Vietnam, and what’s happened to us on our return... My own friends, sometimes my own relatives, they say, seemed indifferent at best and sometimes even critical. That’s what really pushed a lot of these guys over the edge as far as despair and distrust, and that’s what this film deals with in the character of Emmett.⁴⁴

I argue that for all its proclamations about “healing,” *In Country* does very little to provide a voice for the veterans in a way that Williams suggests. It is clear that the character of Emmett, and therefore the film, does very little to provide a new perspective on the veteran’s experiences. Certainly, as Roger Ebert noted in his review, Emmett is not “the kind of stereotyped Viet vet who has become a staple in action movies: the crazed nut case who runs amuck with a machinegun.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there is a sense that, like Mark in *Distant Thunder* and Dave in *Jackknife*, he is a new stereotype of the veteran in this

⁴³ Jay Scott, “Mirror, Mirror...” *Film Comment* 25, no. 5 (1989): 12.

⁴⁴ Rothstein, “In Middle America,” A37.

⁴⁵ Roger Ebert, review of *In Country*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 29, 1989, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1989/09/375010.html (accessed May 21, 2004).

new compassionate cycle of films: introverted, passive and unemployed. Emmett is not the kind of representative that veterans groups appreciated and, as Caryn James argues, it is “the ultimate irony in a story supposedly about embracing and healing Vietnam veterans... [that] Emmett, who links Sam’s search to the war, is allowed to drift in and out of the film like an unwelcome ghost.”⁴⁶ Emmett’s silence – “you can’t understand” appears to be his mantra – is especially troubling given his Post-Traumatic episode during a thunderstorm, after having read some of Sam’s father’s letters home, leaving Sam (and the audience) without explanation. In addition, he suffers from exposure to Agent Orange – he has headaches and skin rashes – but never explains how he feels about this. Of course, this could be read as the film’s comment on the denial of the effects of Agent Orange given that his VA doctor fails to diagnose his symptoms. However, Bobbie Ann Mason’s source novel explicitly and frequently refers to Agent Orange’s effects and television movies, such as *Unnatural Causes* (1986) and *My Father, My Son* (1988), had recently focused on the Agent Orange debate. Such precedents make *In Country*’s avoidance of the subject even more troubling.⁴⁷

In addition to the troubling silence of Emmett, the film’s other veterans provide little that is helpful to Sam’s quest. It is indicative of the film’s structural failings that Michael Lanning is correct to complain that

⁴⁶ Caryn James, “‘In Country,’ Coping with Vietnam,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1989, C6.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that Agent Orange is often mentioned in the film but is rarely discussed. One character, Pete, even says that Agent Orange “wasn’t no big deal.”

“every Vietnam veteran in the film is screwed up in one form or another.”⁴⁸

One of the veterans, Pete, talks of violent altercations with his wife and constantly complains that she sold his beloved corvette while he was in Vietnam. Another, Tom, is unable to perform sexually when Sam goes back to his house after veterans’ dance and subsequently avoids her affections. The veterans’ dance is referred to as the “first recognition the town ever gave” in lieu of a parade and the organiser complains to Sam that so few of the townsfolk turn out because “they don’t care I guess.” This scene is in stark contrast to Mason’s novel in which it is the veterans who fail to attend the dance. Therefore, the film’s representation of the attitudes of the town is clearly anachronistic to the changed attitudes toward the veteran in the 1980s. The fight at the dance between two veterans with opposing perspectives about politicians’ failure to give troops the means to win the war not only evokes memories of the “Supervet” cycle of films, but is simply settled by Emmett who makes them shake hands to a round of applause, thereby making the origins of the war unimportant to the present “healing.” The silence of the veterans has the effect of making comments made by the women characters more prominent. One of the wives tells Sam, by way of a clumsy segue from admiring her earrings, that “they” (the veterans) would cut the ears off the Vietcong “they” killed and bring them home in jars. More problematic, however, is Sam’s mother’s reply when she asks if her father killed women and children in Vietnam. Her mother replies, “I don’t know, but it wouldn’t be unusual if he did. That’s what they were sent there to do.” So, the effect of the

⁴⁸ Lanning, *Vietnam at the Movies*, 249.

veteran's silence is that clichés about warfare are all the film offers Sam and the audience. The scene also provides Michael Medved with a key example through which to attack Hollywood's treatment of the veteran.⁴⁹

Ultimately, mostly due to the silence of Emmett and his fellow veterans, Sam experiences the war through the same primary documents – letters home and diaries – that present solely the soldier's view of the war as had the previous cycle of “noble grunt” films. Therefore, in the end, Sam appears no closer to an understanding of what happened than young consumers of Vietnam War films.⁵⁰ In the novel Sam looks to history books and teachers for information and finds them wanting, but at no point in the film does Sam venture into a library or look into the origins of the war – it is simply taken for granted that her father was serving his country. This makes it impossible for the film to achieve the goal to heal that screenwriter Frank Pierson saw as focal: “first we must *really* remember [the war], the good and the bad... then we can forgive ourselves and face the future with some hope of not repeating the tragedy.”⁵¹ The contradiction between the aims of the filmmakers and the film itself is revealing of the occlusion of politics and history and one can only agree with David Ansen's conclusion that “while one can respect its lofty intentions, [*In Country*] doesn't seem to have any better sense than its high-school heroine of just what it's looking for.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 218.

⁵⁰ The extent of knowledge available to Sam is further problematised since the film is set in 1984, prior to “grunt” cycle of films.

⁵¹ In *Country: Production Information* (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1989), 4.

⁵² David Ansen, “Up Against the Wall, Again,” *Newsweek*, October 2, 1989, 70.

The end of *In Country* in which Emmett, Sam and her grandmother visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the moment that these films, *Distant Thunder*, *Jackknife* and *In Country*, have all been pointing towards – the Memorial’s power almost drowns out what has already occurred. However, the film’s final words spoken by Emmett as they walk away from the Memorial and the music soars are, “Y’all wanna get some barbecue?” This suggests a simple cure for “healing” the cultural wounds of Vietnam; life goes on.

Pat Aufderheide has criticised *Distant Thunder*, *Jackknife*, and *In Country*, for providing veterans who symbolise

an America scrambling for its moral and psychic footing... [whose] heroism lies in their choosing to forgive *themselves*, improvise a future, weather hostility from a few unfeeling civilians, and accept the acceptance of others. We are on our way, in the movies, to forgiving ourselves not for anything the U.S. government and forces did in Vietnam but simply for having felt so bad about it for so long.⁵³

The temporal positioning of the three films in the present of the 1980s clearly speaks to the cultural need for healing as is reflected in the national discourse following the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, but they proffer that “healing” out of time and in politically neutral ways (hence both the right and left attack them). Indicative of this political “neutrality” is an alternative ending to *In Country* that Jewison filmed but jettisoned. The scene was to have Emmett look up to the sky and see a Hercules transport plane of the sort used in Vietnam and then in Central America in the 1980s. Jewison wanted to

⁵³ Aufderheide, “Good Soldiers,” 111 (my emphasis).

prompt the audience to think, “where is that plane going, Nicaragua?”⁵⁴

However, having cut the scene, Jewison told a different reporter that the scene was “too cynical and caustic and political” to use.⁵⁵ It is hard to imagine Oliver Stone making such a decision. Indeed it is hard to imagine him doing anything other than making the opposite decision.

Distant Thunder, *Jacknife*, and *In Country* were not critically acclaimed or discussed in the wider media. All three performed badly at the box office bringing this small cycle of “compassionate” veteran films to a swift end. *In Country* had been intended by Warner Bros. to be an “Oscar film” but received no nominations. It was a more political, confrontational film, one interrogative of the immediate return of the veteran that would be the highest grossing of the veteran films, as well as the most rewarded in terms of awards: *Born on the Fourth of July*.

⁵⁴ Scott, “Mirror, Mirror...” 13.

⁵⁵ Jay Carr, “Jewison faces the conflicts of Vietnam,” *The Boston Globe*, September 28, 1989, 85.

III: Reopening the Wounds of Vietnam: *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Young kids can sit in the same theatres we sat in 30 years ago with their popcorn and watch the movie the way we watched John Wayne, and they're going to see Tom Cruise, and it's going to change the way they think about war. And maybe they won't have to be hurt like I was. I feel like I have turned a terrible tragedy into a triumph.

Ron Kovic.⁵⁶

There had been no realistic Vietnam movies, and I felt it was important to remember the way it was, before we all got too old. I wanted to fix it in *memory* for those who were there, and to remind young people that it happened, so they wouldn't let it happen again.

Oliver Stone.⁵⁷

Stone's film is, at best, consumer fraud, at worst a pack of lies written to deceive the young who have no memory of what America was like during Vietnam... [*Born on the Fourth of July*] turns out to be authentic as the Hitler diaries... The spirit of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andreas Serrano lives. This nation's artistic elite is engaged in a war of subversion against the popular culture; and Stone and [Michael] Moore are its propagandists.

Pat Buchanan.⁵⁸

Ron Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), quickly became a sensation and led to his being invited to address the 1976 Democratic Convention. A front page review in the *New York Times* book review

⁵⁶ Robert Scheer, "Born on the Third of July," *Premiere*, February 1990, 56.

⁵⁷ Glenn Collins, "Oliver Stone Is Ready to Move On From Vietnam," *New York Times*, January 2, 1990, C14 (my emphasis).

⁵⁸ Patrick J. Buchanan, "Oliver twists the facts in his propaganda film," *New York Post*, February 28, 1990, *Born on the Fourth of July* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA. This was a syndicated column whose outreach it is not possible to measure. It is of interest that Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) opened theatrically at the same time as *Born on the Fourth of July*, in the closing weeks of the 1980s. It is equally troubling that Buchanan should label Moore, along with Stone, as a propagandist for the "artistic elite." Although Moore has come to thrive as a Stone-style culture warrior, in 1989 he insisted on emphasising his working-class origins in Flint, Michigan, a town economically ravaged by the policies of General Motors which forms the subject of *Roger and Me* as it skewers the "Morning in America" rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, for whom, not coincidentally, Buchanan was a director of communications.

followed, the movie rights were purchased and Oliver Stone, who was then trying in vain to get his script *Platoon* onto the screen, was hired to write the screenplay with Al Pacino set to star as Kovic.⁵⁹ However, four days before filming was to begin, the financing for the project fell through. In an anecdote oft-repeated by Kovic during the promotion of the film, Stone promised, “If I’m ever able to break through as a director, I’ll come back for you Ronnie,” and following the success of *Platoon* he returned to the project.⁶⁰

The stated purpose of Kovic and Stone to teach the young about the effects of Vietnam is clear from the film and underlined in press interviews surrounding the film’s release. Kovic had long been concerned about the allure of war for the young; as Dierdre English summarised in a feature article in *Mother Jones* in 1983: Kovic worried “how to reach out to gung-ho working-class kids such as he once was, before they make the mistake of their lives.”⁶¹ Stone makes it clear that it is the “memory” of Vietnam that he hopes to affect, “to remember the way it was,” and to re-envision the way Vietnam was presented on film. In this aim Kovic and Stone effectively proffer the insight that Sam searches for in *In Country*. However, the picture that they make is very different from the fractured, quasi-experiential past that *Distant Thunder* and *In Country* present to their young characters. *Born on the Fourth of July* sets itself apart from previous Vietnam films because Stone and Kovic

⁵⁹ James Riordan, *Stone: The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (London: Aurum Press, 1996), 275; Gregg Kilday, “Petrie to direct ‘Fourth of July,’” *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1978, *Born on the Fourth of July* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Robert Seidenberg, “To Hell and Back,” *American Film*, January 1990, 56.

⁶¹ Dierdre English, “Why Are We Still In Vietnam?” *Mother Jones*, November 1983, 5.

illustrate how the roots of the so-called “Vietnam Syndrome” lay in the American culture of anti-communism and the patriotism of the 1950s, as well as Hollywood war films. They address “the challenge that the Vietnam War poses to our abiding cultural myths of America and Americans” that Berg and Rowe argue 1980s notions of healing have obfuscated.⁶² It is perhaps this aim that prompted Pat Buchanan’s vituperative criticisms, given that the 1950s are often seen as the halcyon days of America’s past by the new right. I will return to the attacks on the film below. Suffice to say, at this juncture, Buchanan’s condemnation pinpoints fabrications and dramatic licence and displays an incomprehension of the narrative necessities of historical filmmaking. When presented alongside the association of the film with the previously successful cultural battles over the artworks of Mapplethorpe and Serrano, his accusations are clearly designed to discredit or dismantle the relevance of the film’s contrary point of view.⁶³ Buchanan’s use of the phrase “a war of subversion against popular culture,” explicitly aligns Kovic and Stone (both decorated veterans) with a previously reviled “artistic elite” of “propagandists.” The position Buchanan takes against Stone is that the director engages in what Jack Davis identifies as revisionist “New Left” history, offering a “bottom up” perspective on the period that was scorned by

⁶² Berg and Rowe, “Introduction,” 15-16.

⁶³ The culture wars controversies over Mapplethorpe and Serrano are detailed in the introduction to this thesis. See also James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, Basic, 1991), 231.

those on the right who preferred a more heroic history of the U.S. in a “history wars” context.⁶⁴

Buchanan’s labelling of Stone as a member of the “artistic elite” requires analysis. Despite huge returns and the Academy Awards that *Platoon* generated, as well as the profits and Best Actor Oscar (for Michael Douglas) that his follow-up film *Wall Street* earned, Stone was not given a blank cheque by the studios.⁶⁵ In fact, Universal agreed to a limiting budget of \$17 million. This may sound sizable but when one considers that *In Country*, a film of far smaller scale, had a budget of \$14 million it is clear that Stone’s financial status with the studios was far from what the term “elite” would imply. However, the limited budget became a positive part of the film’s promotion. Stone and Tom Cruise, then arguably the biggest star in the world, had to agree to defer their salaries until the film went into profit. This anecdote was repeated across the media spectrum in the pages of *Premiere* and *Time* magazines and the *New York Times*, lending an *a priori* degree of importance to the project.⁶⁶ In addition to his financial compromise, Cruise’s dedication to the film was reiterated in almost every interview he gave. He spoke of

⁶⁴ Jack E. Davis, “New Left, Revisionist, In-Your-Face History: Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* Experience,” in *Oliver Stone’s USA: Film, History, and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 135-148.

⁶⁵ *Wall Street* was produced on a budget of \$14 million for Fox and earned the studio \$20.2 million in theatrical rentals from a gross \$43,848,069. This represents a healthy, if not spectacular, profit before foreign sales and video business is taken into account. The Internet Movie Database, “Box office / business for *Wall Street*,” <http://imdb.com/title/tt0094291/business> (accessed December 1, 2006). I do not mention *Talk Radio*, Stone’s 1988 release, here not because it was a small scale film that had limited theatrical release (although it did make a profit), but because it was shot quickly while Stone was waiting to make *Born* it had no bearing on Universal’s decision.

⁶⁶ Paul Chutkow, “The Private War of Tom Cruise,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1989, H28-29; Richard Corliss, “Tom terrific,” *Time*, December 25, 1989, 74-79; Scheer, “Born on the Third of July,” 50-56.

spending time with Ron Kovic, learning to use a wheelchair, visiting veterans' hospitals, as well as agreeing to be injected with a solution that would have left him paralysed for two days if the insurance company had not vetoed its use.⁶⁷

Christopher Sharrett sees the "real progressiveness" of *Born on the Fourth of July* in the casting of Cruise who "has, of course, been associated with some of the most adolescent and reactionary cinema of the Reagan era."⁶⁸ The star presence of Cruise opened the film up to audiences that may otherwise have not chosen to see it – Cruise was used predominately in the film's marketing materials under the attractive yet neutral tagline "A true story of innocence lost and courage found." Casting Cruise also served to undercut his previous association with Hollywood militarism which Kovic especially sought to skewer. Cruise had appeared in non-Reaganite films such as *The Color of Money* (1986) and *Rain Man* (1988), but he was primarily known for the all-American smile and swagger of *Top Gun*. Whereas the majority of films dealing with military matters are refused Defense Department assistance, *Top Gun* was made with the full support of the Navy. Indeed, the film presents such a highly fetishised and attractive picture of Navy pilots that the Navy set up recruiting posts outside cinemas where the film was first playing.⁶⁹ In his memoir, Kovic continually mentions the military movie fantasies of John Wayne and Audie Murphy, especially his

⁶⁷ Jean Seligmann, "Heroes with Handicaps," *Newsweek*, January 15, 1990, 59.

⁶⁸ Christopher Sharrett, review of *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Cineaste* 17, no. 4 (1990): 50. Sharrett also notes the additional subversive intertext of composer John Williams, who "has written martial music for the *Star Wars* movies."

⁶⁹ Jacob V. Lamar, Jr., "The Pentagon Goes Hollywood," *Time*, November 24, 1986, 30.

being moved by Wayne's glorious death in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), which he and his childhood friends would replay in war games in the woods outside Massapequa.⁷⁰ Kovic writes of being spurred on through boot camp by memories of Wayne's films before concluding, following his paralysis in Vietnam, that "I gave my dead dick for John Wayne."⁷¹ Stone showed the war games in the woods, although he opted to remove a scene showing young Ron caught up in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Instead, Stone shows Kovic having returned from the war, recounting to his childhood friend Timmy how, after he was shot the first time, he "just got up running around, like I was back in the woods again, like I was John fucking Wayne or something." Stone's film thus lays the blame for Kovic's paralysing second wound on a movie-inspired idea of heroism.⁷² In an interview in support of the film, Kovic reiterated this theme by noting bitterly that "I remember crying when [Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*] was killed, with the Marine Corps hymn playing in the background. I never heard the Marine Corps hymn playing when I was wounded."⁷³ *Born on the Fourth of July*, then, sets out to use the residual star persona of Tom Cruise and the cultural capital bestowed by the veteran status of Kovic and Stone in order to critique the depiction of war, the military, and masculinity in both contemporary and historical Hollywood war films.

⁷⁰ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (London: Corgi, 1990), 42. Audie Murphy was the most decorated American soldier of World War II who went to Hollywood and starred in many films including *To Hell and Back* (1955) which was billed as "The Exciting True Life Story of America's Most Decorated Hero." Both *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *To Hell and Back* were considerable box office successes.

⁷¹ Kovic, *Born*, 67, 86.

⁷² Peter Biskind, "Cutter's Way," *Premiere*, February 1990, 63.

⁷³ Seidenberg, "To Hell and Back," *American Film*, January 1990, 56.

Born on the Fourth of July is structured into roughly five acts. The opening twenty-five minutes or so take place in the Massapequa of Kovic's childhood, before he leaves for Vietnam in the second act where he accidentally shoots one of his own men (given the name Private Wilson), participates in the accidental killing of a village of women and children, and is finally wounded.⁷⁴ The third act shows Kovic's return to the U.S., his time in a filthy rat-infested Bronx Veterans' Administration hospital, his return to Massapequa, a visit to his old girlfriend at university, followed by his descent into drunkenness and his expulsion from the family home. In the fourth act he goes to an unofficial community of disabled veterans in Mexico which represents his personal nadir of drunkenness. In the fifth act return to the U.S. to confess to the parents of Private Wilson, joins the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and protests against Richard Nixon at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. The film concludes with his address to the 1976 Democrat National Convention.

The hyperreality of *Born on the Fourth of July*'s opening childhood sequence is presented, as Robert Burgoyne usefully observes, "in an overtly nostalgic manner that is strikingly reminiscent of the 'Morning in America' theme of Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign."⁷⁵ The sense of falseness

⁷⁴ Given this chapter's focus on the veteran's experience in the United States, this section of the film is not of great consequence to my argument. However, it is of note that in the twenty minutes or so of its running time that is spent in Vietnam manages to present a very different picture of the conflict than the verisimilitude of most Vietnam films. It eschews the standard "in country" jungle setting for a rust-hewn beach area in conjunction with a shooting style of close-ups and relatively few long shots. The result is an almost hallucinatory sequence with the appearance of a dream or nightmare.

⁷⁵ Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63.

and inauthenticity that Burgoyne notes in the Rockwellesque confection is perfectly in keeping with the film's project of locating the roots of Vietnam in the consensual dominant culture of the 1950s exemplified in quintessential small town life. However, as Janet Maslin has observed, there are certain parallels between the world Stone presents through the film's subsequent nightmare and that of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986).⁷⁶ Rather than engaging in a reconstruction of masculinity that Susan Jeffords has observed in Vietnam films, Stone *deconstructs* aspects of the social and cultural influences of 1950s/early 1960s America.⁷⁷ Stone presents American culture's (unconscious) construction of masculinity: in the competitiveness of little league baseball; "playing war" and high school wrestling; anti-communist rhetoric; Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you" inaugural address; and the Second World War nostalgia of marching veterans on the Fourth of July parade. Through such details of cumulative impact, Stone makes it unsurprising that Kovic should be convinced that it is "better to be dead than red." The rhetorical justification for the war is summed up by Kovic's mother – the portrayal of whom was highly criticised for its almost demonic incarnation of "momism." When his father questions his going to Vietnam, his mother supports her son's decision with, "You're doing the right thing. Communism's got to be stopped. It's God's will you go." *Born on the Fourth of July* commences from this grounding in cold war rhetoric to survey

⁷⁶ Janet Maslin, "Oliver Stone Takes Aim At the Viewer's Viscera," *New York Times*, December 31, 1989, B9.

⁷⁷ Robert Burgoyne has argued that the film does engage in remasculinization to an extent. Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, 58.

the collapse of any “consensual” view of American society during the upheavals of the 1960s as figured in Ron Kovic. Set up in this opening section as a strong believer in cold war ideology, his eyes are opened by the events he witnesses and in which he participates.

A central criticism made by film critics in the popular press, despite general enthusiasm for the film, was that the narrative provides no clear understanding of Kovic’s transformation from naïve patriotic innocent into radical protestor.⁷⁸ Criticism is understandable given that Kovic’s conversion cannot be pinned to a single line of dialogue or a moment in the film, unlike in Kovic’s memoir where he clearly states several such epiphanies.⁷⁹ However, through the film’s narrative structure, especially the scene progression after Kovic’s return from Vietnam, his transformation is presented as a natural outgrowth of experiences subsequent to the war. Immediately following Kovic’s wounding and the delivery of last rights by a priest, Stone cuts to a pan across a dirty floor strewn with empty whisky bottles and discarded marijuana joints, revealing a wheelchair occupied by a disabled veteran while water drips on the soundtrack. A caption reads, “Bronx Veterans Hospital,

⁷⁸ See, for example, David Ansen, “Bringing It All Back Home,” *Newsweek*, December 25, 1989, 74; Vincent Canby, “How an All-American Boy Went to War and Lost His Faith,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1989, C15; David Denby, “Days of Rage,” *New York*, December 18, 1989, 101-04.

⁷⁹ Kovic writes that his VA hospital experience reversed his negative view of protestor (103); that “I was never going to be the same” having witnessed an attack by police on protestors in Washington, D.C. (107); and that, after seeing a picture of veterans throwing away their medal in Washington, D.C. on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*, “Suddenly I knew my easy life was not enough for me. The war had not ended. It was time for me to join forces with the other vets.” (111). Kovic later added another moment to his “slow process of awakening” which ties to his Hollywood-infused patriotism. As he told Robert Scheer, the first film he saw upon his return from Vietnam was *The Green Berets* which “made me sick to my stomach. When I left the theater, I told my friend that this is *not* the way it was. I had *been* there. That was the beginning of a slow process of awakening.” Scheer, “Born on the Third of July,” 52.

1968.” Subsequently a tracking shot follows an African American nurse, ironically named Washington, as she walks through the filthy, poorly lit hospital observing rats on the floor before reaching Kovic (when his call button is broken Kovic calls “Washington, where are you?”). Stone cuts to a montage consisting of the cleaning of rancid bed pans, shots of the veterans’ sores, and the hosing down of bed ridden patients. In three minutes of screen time illustrating the dreadful conditions that the returning wounded were met with, Stone undercuts any societal pieties about the “healing” of veterans.

Yet having experienced such Grand-Guignol deprivation, Kovic’s patriotism and his belief in American foreign policy remain unquestioned. The next scene presents news reports of the riots and burning flags at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Kovic reacts by saying “Love it or leave it you fucking bastards... they’re burning the American flag man.” Subsequent scenes in which the mostly African American hospital orderlies voice different viewpoints on the war rarely presented in veteran films – “Why we fight for rights overseas when we ain’t got no rights at home?” and “You ain’t part of the solution, you’re part of the problem” – do little to affect Kovic’s belief. Although his ideological beliefs remain strong, his mental condition does worsen when a shortage of medical equipment threatens to necessitate the amputation of his leg. A doctor tells him that due to spending in Vietnam “the government’s just not giving us the money to take care of you guys,” a clear statement about the repercussions of political neglect of those who fought that fuels Kovic’s anguish and frustration. The VA Hospital

section was not criticised, even by the film's opponents for, as Marc Leeden of the Vietnam Veterans of America told the press: "The veterans' hospital in the film was right out of reality. The message may have been bluntly put, but it was a good one."⁸⁰

Kovic's support of the war remains firm on his return home to Massapequa. He visits an old school friend who is profiting from a fast food business he opened while Kovic was at war. Kovic tells him that he feels people look at him differently when they know he's been to Vietnam to which his friend responds, "People here, they don't give a shit about the war... it's all bullshit anyway... you bought that communist bullshit... bullshit lies." He argues with his brother who disagrees with the war, again using the "love it or leave it" mantra and the image of the burning of the flag, but as the section at home progresses it becomes clear Kovic is changing. He participates in a Fourth of July parade – obviously paralleling the one in the film's opening section – where he flinches at firecrackers and protestors who shout at him or make peace signs. Even those sympathetic to his situation shake their heads. Kovic is unable to complete his speech about the troops in Vietnam doing their best and morale being high because the sound of a baby crying in the crowd causes him to flashback to his involvement in the accidental killing of women and children as represented in the film's Vietnam section. This strongly suggests a realisation that what he is saying is empty rhetoric (though ideologically loaded) rather than straightforward truth.

⁸⁰ John Cassidy, "Into battle on political lines," *The Sunday Times*, March 4, 1990, E1.

Kovic goes to visit his high-school sweetheart who is a student and an anti-war protestor. Their viewpoints are as contrasted as their clothes – Kovic’s shirt and tie and her hippie garb. She talks piously, at great length, to him about how the war is wrong and she likens the killings at Kent State to the My Lai atrocities: Kovic looks incredulous. The following day he attends a protest at the university and looks on uncomfortably as Abbie Hoffman speaks the standard protest rhetoric, but as a black veteran throws away his medals – paraphrasing a moment of realisation from Kovic’s memoir – something changes on his face that is underlined by John Williams’ musical cue. Kovic’s reaction to the subsequent violent quashing of the demonstration by police further enhances this sense of something having changed within his system of belief. Once home again Kovic descends into alcohol abuse, confronting Second World War veterans at the local bar before enduring a confrontation with his mother, the film’s incarnation of anti-communist, pro-war ideology. This scene signals an end to Kovic’s belief in his mother’s ideology. He does not believe in God anymore, refers to himself as a “fucking dummy” for “believing everything they told us,” confesses to shooting women and children, and calls the war “a lie.” The middle section of the film is effectively constructed to show Kovic’s political development, as well as the poor reception that returning veterans were given (personally, medically and economically) despite the continuation of political pro-war rhetoric.

A second, central criticism of the film from otherwise positive mainstream film critics concerned Stone’s style. *Newsweek*’s reviewer David

Ansen praised what he saw as “a primal scream of a movie,” in which it is “impossible not to be shaken by the onslaught,” but warns that it is “equally hard not to feel that you’re being mishandled by a cinematic bully”; Vincent Canby argued that Stone’s “penchant for busy, jittery camera movements and cutting” obscures the character of Kovic and his changing political consciousness.⁸¹ The “bludgeoning” style of *Born on the Fourth of July* reflects the rage felt by the film’s protagonist, as well as its director, and immediately marks it as different from the three comparatively quiet films examined in the first section of this chapter.⁸² The “in your face” mode of address that the film uses is more in keeping with the “winning the war” movies, but also with the general tone of culture war rhetoric. Notably Richard Corliss in *Time* called the film a “jeremiad,” a term more often associated with right-wing position pieces, and Robin Wood was the most direct in associating Stone’s voice with the general tone of cultural debate, arguing Stone’s sensibility is “a direct consequence of the conditions: the sense that, amid the general cacophony of conservative, reactionary voices, the only way a dissident can make himself heard is to shout at the top of his lungs.”⁸³ There is no doubt that with *Born on the Fourth of July* Oliver Stone became a culture warrior. Although he was not as prominent in the media as he would later become on the release of *JFK*, and was quietly thoughtful in

⁸¹ Ansen, “Bringing It All Back Home,” 74; Canby, “How an All-American Boy,” C15.

⁸² As Jay Carr noted, “because Stone’s moral outrage is the real thing, it can sustain his extravagant gestures.” Jay Carr, “‘Born on the Fourth’ resounds with pain and truth,” *The Boston Globe*, January 5, 1990, 67.

⁸³ Robin Wood, “Radicalism and Popular Cinema: The Films of Oliver Stone,” *Cineaction!* 23 (1990-1991): 62.

television interviews, it is clear that the unrelenting power of his film, and its revisioning of the cultural neutralisation of the Vietnam War and the veteran experience, made it out of step with the broader cultural consensus that was developing around Vietnam. It is no surprise that the film was condemned by the right.

Antipathy towards the film was obviously politically motivated. When it became apparent that Kovic was considering running for Congress against Republican incumbent Robert Dornan, nicknamed “B-1 Bob” as one of the most hawkish members of Congress, the avowedly right-wing newspaper *The Washington Times* began a campaign against Kovic and the film.⁸⁴ Dornan sent 60,000 letters to supporters asking for donations to assist him in “fighting Ron Kovic and the Hollywood Left,” telling reporters “If he thinks he’s going to recruit Oliver Stone and Top-Gun-turned-top-malcontent Tom Cruise, and bring the whole Jane Fonda team down here to Orange County, I welcome it. Let’s go.” The reference to Fonda clearly aligns Kovic with the anti-Vietnam protest movement in cold culture war rhetoric and invokes the film as propaganda for his campaign. Building on an editorial in *The Washington Post* by Vietnam veteran Richard Eilert which dismissed the film as “propaganda” and “disinformation” because it was supposedly “saturated with hateful negativism,” *The Washington Times* printed a long (4,000 word) article in its

⁸⁴ Christopher Matthews, “Against ‘B-1 Bob,’ Forget the Dignity,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1990, M5.

Life section taking *Born on the Fourth of July* to task for instances of dramatic licence.⁸⁵

Stone's film was subsequently attacked by George Will, William Buckley, Jr., and Pat Buchanan, central right-wing figures in the culture wars.⁸⁶ In his syndicated column in the *New York Post*, Buchanan omitted mention of Dornan and Kovic's candidacy, thereby moving the battle from the political sphere into the cultural. He dismissed the film as (cultural) history, as consumer fraud intended "to deceive the young who have no memory of what America was like during Vietnam," and he culturally aligned it with "the spirit of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andreas Serrano." Most problematically, he alleged, "almost every incident critical to the drama, with the exception of the wounding, is fabrication, falsehood, or cinematic fakery."⁸⁷ Buchanan's language is important. "Fabrication, falsehood," and "fakery" imply a fictional element that has always been the yardstick to beat representations of history on film, but his absolute dismissal of everything in the film as lies (apart from Kovic's wounding) is itself a wilful falsehood. Discussing the violent demonstration at Syracuse University that the film depicts but which did not occur, Robert A. Rosenstone raises a number of important points:

⁸⁵ Richard Eilert, "'Born on the Fourth': It's a Lie," February 6, 1990, A25; Diane West, "Does *Born on the Fourth of July* lie?" *The Washington Times*, February 23, 1990, E1. The "fictions" identified by West are as follows: Kovic's wrestling coach did not exhort his students to kill as the film shows; Kovic's mother is upset by her portrayal; no one in the Massapequa bar accused Ron of losing the war; students were not attacked by police at Syracuse University during protests over Kent State; Kovic did not visit in Venus, Georgia, the parents of the American soldier he killed in Vietnam, and the town does not exist; Kovic's commanding officer in Vietnam found it unlikely that he killed this man after investigating; Kovic was not assaulted by police outside the 1972 convention. Stone answers many of these criticisms in "Stone Responds," in *Oliver Stone's USA* (see note 64), 236-238.

⁸⁶ Riordan, *Stone*, 306.

⁸⁷ Buchanan, "Oliver twists the facts."

We 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 1960s; the truth of chaos, confusion, and violence of many such encounters between students and police; the truth of the historical questions the sequence forces us 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 1960s? Of recent America? Of the United States today?⁸⁸

Rosenstone's final points are pertinent: it is useful to redirect them to ask what is at stake if, as Buchanan claims, everything on the screen is dismissed as lies and thereby potentially deleted from a true cultural understanding of the 1960s. An interesting correlative to Rosenstone's permissiveness and Buchanan's condemnation of dramatic licence emerges in John Simon's review of *Born on the Fourth of July* in the conservative *National Review*. Stone invents a scene in which Kovic goes to Venus, Georgia to tell the parents of a man in his unit that he killed their son in Vietnam. Kovic never made such a visit (Stone invented the town as well), but he did publicly confess to the killing of a fellow marine in his memoir. So, Stone created the scene, rather than including a dramatically uninteresting moment of Kovic writing. Although criticised and dismissed by West, Buchanan et al, Simon reads the scene as the dramatic highpoint of the film, as "one of those scenes in which a forgiveness that passes understanding breaks your heart: all that goodness in people going unrewarded, with no medals for the most self-lacerating candor, the almost superhuman gift of pardon."⁸⁹ Simon, then,

⁸⁸ Robert A. Rosenstone, "Oliver Stone as Historian," in *Oliver Stone's USA* (see note 64), 26-27.

⁸⁹ John Simon, "Wild Life," *National Review*, February 5, 1990, 59.

positively recognises a moment that acknowledges the dignity and the sacrifice of an “ordinary” rural American family, probably members of Nixon’s “silent majority.”

Kovic’s confession leads directly to his participation in a VVAW march against the renomination of Richard Nixon at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. The film gives little attention to the VVAW as a movement: although the group’s significance is implicit in Kovic’s rediscovery of purpose, the film fails to overtly demonstrate that the political activism of veterans who joined VVAW helped them to deal with their own psychological trauma relating to the war.⁹⁰ Notwithstanding this omission, the final section of *Born on the Fourth of July* posits that patriotism and anti-war protest were not as mutually exclusive as the cultural memory of the anti-war movement that has since developed. The section opens with a long crane shot of veterans marching to the tune of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.” The Civil War anthem reasserts the patriotism of the returning soldiers despite, or because of, their protest and reflects the second civil war state that many believed the country was locked in over Vietnam. The songs lyrics – “When Johnny comes marching home again, Hurrah! Hurrah! We’ll give him a hearty welcome then, Hurrah! Hurrah!” – comment ironically on the lack of welcome that Vietnam veterans received. (It was not until the Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Parade in New York in 1985 that Vietnam veterans received a public welcome home). The sequence also uses the American flag

⁹⁰ Christian Appy, “Vietnam According to Oliver Stone,” *Commonweal*, March 23, 1990, 188.

to legitimise the VVAW and Kovic in particular. As Don Kunz observes, the flagstaff that rests in Kovic's crotch as he chants "One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war," establishes Kovic's and his fellow Vietnam veterans' political activism as "regained potency."⁹¹ In contradistinction to the reassertion of masculinity practiced in the "supervet" cycle, the "regained potency" here has historical foundation.

The following scene in which Kovic and two other disabled veterans get onto the convention floor delivers the conclusion of Kovic's personal and political development and a suitable conclusion for the film's argument – although several scenes follow, this is the rhetorical finale.⁹² The speech that Kovic makes to a television reporter on the convention floor summarises and refines the cultural shift represented in the film. It is the most radical speech given in any Vietnam film and effectively summarises the film's rage.⁹³ Kovic states that America was lied to and soldiers deceived into "going 13,000 miles to fight a war against a poor peasant people... who have been struggling for

⁹¹ Don Kunz, "Oliver Stone's Film Adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July*: Redefining Masculine Heroism," in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 174.

⁹² Ironically, Kovic was let onto the convention floor by Robert Dornan, his future nemesis in his proposed Congressional run, who was at that time a television presenter.

⁹³ This is Kovic's speech in full: "I'm here tonight to say that this war is wrong. That this society lied to me, it lied to my brothers. It deceived the people of this country. Tricked them into going 13,000 miles to fight a war against a poor peasant people who have a proud history of resistance; who have been struggling for their own independence for 1,000 years, the Vietnamese people. I can't find the words to express how the leadership of this government sickens me. Now people say if you don't love America, then get the hell out; well, I love America, we love the people of America very much, but when it comes to the government it stops right there. The government is a bunch of corrupt bunch of thieves, they are rapists and robbers, and we are here to say that we don't have to take it anymore. We are here to say, we are here to tell the truth. They are killing our brothers in Vietnam and we are here to tell the truth. [A delegate spits in Kovic's face] Is this what we get sir? A spit in the face? We're never going to let the people of the United States forget that war. You're not going to sweep it under the carpet because you didn't like the ratings like some television show. This wheelchair, our wheelchairs, this steel, our steel, is your Memorial Day on wheels. We are your Yankee Doodle Dandy come home."

their own independence for 1,000 years.” He returns to the “love it or leave it” mantra that he repeated in the first half of the film, but reshapes it as protest: “Now people say if you don’t love America, then get the hell out; well, I love America, we love the people of America very much, but when it comes to the government it stops right there... [because] they are killing our brothers in Vietnam.” Along with the quasi-battle that follows between veterans and police outside the convention centre, Kovic’s final sentence serves to show that Veterans Against the War retained their military camaraderie, fighting together and for their “brothers in Vietnam” to end the war. The film makes fighting to end the war in 1972 as patriotic as fighting the war in earlier days.

In addition to positive critical notices, audience response to *Born on the Fourth of July* was strong. The film topped the American box office in its first three weeks of wide release and stayed in the top ten for the next nine weeks until the Academy Awards, where the film was nominated for eight awards and won two, including Best Director for Stone. The film’s \$70 million box office gross and outstanding video rentals meant not only profits for Universal and that Cruise and Stone were paid for their work, but that millions of Americans saw the film including the younger generation who Stone and Kovic had hoped to reach.⁹⁴ Reporters sent to interview patrons leaving cinemas found the audience to be “surprisingly youthful” and estimates placed the number of audience members under twenty-five at

⁹⁴ Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, 315.

between thirty-five and fifty percent.⁹⁵ These reports indicate that many people recommended the film to friends and that some veterans were seeing the film twice. There were also several reports of people requiring treatment from paramedics after fainting during screenings.⁹⁶ It is possible that the attacks on the film's lack of veracity to historical fact prevented it from winning the Oscar for Best Picture – Buchanan had explicitly addressed his column to members of the Academy – but not all of *The Washington Times*' readers had bought into that newspaper's demolition of the film. One reader wrote to the letters page of how his twenty-year-old sister, who had never previously shown interest in the war, had sparked a heated debate at the dinner table after seeing the film. The reader concluded: "Manipulating truth to present an individual's political views didn't begin in Hollywood and will not end with this movie. But in telling us this story, Mr. Kovic and Mr. Stone have got us talking again. Isn't that what America is all about?"⁹⁷ Indeed, one might ask is that not what cultural memory is all about?

Born on the Fourth of July ruptured complacent pieties about healing and was an antidote to the war's reshaping as a "noble cause" in the 1980s. Jay Carr began his review by hopefully proclaiming that "if you've been looking for the film that's going to usher in the kind of post-Reagan rage that

⁹⁵ Tom Green, "Film that 'had to be made,'" *USA Today*, January 12, 1990, A1. The figure of thirty-five percent comes from Cinema-score, a Hollywood audience research company. The fifty percent figure comes from Universal's own research (both quoted in Green).

⁹⁶ Ibid.; Elizabeth Kastor, "Faintings Reported at 'Born on the Fourth,'" *The Washington Post*, January 10, 1990, D1; "Fainting Spells Reported During 'July' screenings," *Daily Variety*, January 11, 1990, *Born on the Fourth of July* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁹⁷ Christopher Frank, "'Born on the Fourth' revives Vietnam debate," *The Washington Times*, March 7, 1990, F2.

will turn the '90s into a replay of the '60s, you need look no further.”⁹⁸

Although the film in and of itself was insufficient to fulfil Carr’s radical hopes, *Born on the Fourth of July* does reinsert into the circulating cultural memory of Vietnam a version of the war that is not merely an aberrant error in American history. Instead, the film posits that the Vietnam War was a direct result of the abiding cultural myths of America. It also counters popular assumptions that protests against the war were restricted to the hippie sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie suffering middle-class guilt, but were also the prerogative of those who believed in the dominant ideology and fought for it, yet who still recognised that ending the war was their patriotic responsibility.

⁹⁸ Carr, ““Born on the Fourth,”” 67.

IV: The Return of the Stereotyped Veteran in the Post-Vietnam “Market.”

Hello, Kuwait. Goodbye, Vietnam... [The pain of] Vietnam memories – the dead children of My Lai, the shock of Tet ‘68, the coups and countercoups, the fraggings, the drugs, the invasion of Cambodia, the killing of American students at Kent State – somehow only increased as the years passed. When the U.S.-led forces raced across Kuwait and Iraq last week, however, they may have defeated not just the Iraqi army but also the more virulent of the ghosts from the Vietnam era: self-doubt, fear of power, divisiveness, a fundamental uncertainty about America’s purpose in the world.

Stanley W. Cloud, March 1991.⁹⁹

With *Born on the Fourth of July* Oliver Stone and Ron Kovic had attempted to reinsert the errors of the Vietnam War and the divisiveness that it had caused into film history as a direct counter to the reconciliatory 1980s during which widespread comprehension of such errors had been neutralised. Their film, however, would prove to be the last major release to engage with what Stone had described somewhat cynically to Larry King as the “Vietnam market.”¹⁰⁰ The success of *Born on the Fourth of July* can be seen as a consequence of the star power of Stone and Cruise and it is likely that the studios saw it in a similar light given that the compassionate veteran films discussed in this chapter and *Casualties of War* (1989), the last major “in country” film, had failed to attract enough of an audience to turn a profit.¹⁰¹ The heightening of consciousness about the war that *Born on the Fourth of July* had attempted

⁹⁹ Stanley W. Cloud, “Exorcising an Old Demon,” *Time*, March 11, 1991, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Appy, “Vietnam According to Oliver Stone,” 188.

¹⁰¹ With its gross of \$18.6 million, *Casualties of War* would have returned to the studio in rentals less than half its estimated \$22.5 million budget. The Internet Movie Database, “*Casualties of War*: Box office/business,” <http://imdb.com/title/tt0097027/business> (accessed December 12, 2005).

and achieved, in terms of box office and audience reception, began to fade too. A year after the debate around the film died down, the success of the war in the Gulf to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait prompted President George Bush to proclaim that “by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”¹⁰² Indeed, Marita Sturken argues that the Gulf War was choreographed to do just that.¹⁰³ Stanley W. Cloud’s assessment that U.S.-led forces had defeated the ghosts of the Vietnam era as well as Iraqi forces is representative of the general consensus of the popular media at the time.¹⁰⁴ John Storey has even argued that Hollywood’s rearticulation of the Vietnam War enabled President Bush’s claim, although he self-consciously notes that his textual analysis omits the possibility of audience agency in their consumption of Hollywood’s products.¹⁰⁵

Victory in the Gulf and the general collapse of the “Vietnam market” did not lay to rest the ghosts of Vietnam, as this section will show, although to a great extent representation of the Vietnam veteran on film returned to the realm of stereotype and to genre films. In the year of *Born on the Fourth of July*’s Oscar success, *Air America* (1990) made a comic caper out of the CIA’s clandestine air operations in Laos, widely held to have included drug smuggling, utilising the persona of Mel Gibson’s crazed-veteran cop in the *Lethal Weapon* movies. In *Wild at Heart* (1990) David Lynch plays on

¹⁰² Cloud, “Exorcising,” 53.

¹⁰³ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 123-4.

¹⁰⁴ See Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinowitz, eds., *Seeing Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁵ John Storey, “The rearticulation of memory and desire: from Vietnam to the war in the Persian Gulf,” in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 99-119.

Willem Dafoe's intertextual association with the Vietnam films *Platoon*, *Off Limits* (1988) and *Born on the Fourth of July* by casting him as the surreally-vicious rapist and murderer, veteran Bobby Peru. The thriller *Desperate Hours* (1990), directed by Michael Cimino who had made *The Deer Hunter* (1978), shows Anthony Hopkins' Vietnam veteran win a good fight (this time) by saving his family when his home is invaded by escaped criminals.

Sean Penn, who had played the (ring)leader of a squad of soldiers who kidnap, rape and then murder a Vietnamese peasant girl in *Casualties of War*, tangentially returned to the topic of Vietnam with his directorial debut. Set in rural Nebraska in the 1960s, *The Indian Runner* (1991), focuses on two brothers, policeman Joe and Frank, a returning veteran full of violence. The film sets up some simplistic dichotomies – Joe as good cop and family man; Frank as criminal and violent – and as Emmett Early observed “in spite of his best intentions, Penn cannot escape the message that the Franks of the United States went off to Vietnam, while the Joes stayed at home and were righteous.”¹⁰⁶ Early's assessment overlooks what the film clearly states: Frank was always in trouble before he went to Vietnam and *The Indian Runner* does not at any point blame, or allow Frank to blame, his war experiences for his crimes. The most explicit reference to Vietnam occurs when Joe visits his father, played by Charles Bronson; the casting is a neat reference to previous cinematic notions of masculinity. Bronson tells Joe that “they say some of the boys coming back are coming back real confused,” to which Joe, immediately removing the war from blame, replies “Frank left confused.” In denying Frank

¹⁰⁶ Emmett Early, *The War Veteran in Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 201.

a moment of emotional catharsis over his war experiences, the film avoids a clichéd moment of confession of his (war) crimes and underlines the fact that many veterans could not (or would not) be understood by their families on their return. When discussing the film in the press notes, Penn did not mention Vietnam as a reason for making the film, the idea for which came from the Bruce Springsteen song “Highway Patrolman.” He speaks of a catharsis in his screenwriting, but in terms of “masculinity, morality, family and violence.”¹⁰⁷

Where Penn used Vietnam almost silently to give weight to his quasi-mythic, small-scale family drama, *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) cannibalised the corpus of Vietnam films and all their iconography.¹⁰⁸ A psychological horror film, *Jacob's Ladder* opens with the massacre of a squadron of American troops in the Mekong Delta in 1971 whose drug use appears to have triggered convulsions and hallucinations. At the end of the sequence Jacob Singer is stabbed in the chest and a cut shows him awoken on a subway train. Unlike Michael J. Fox's character at the end of *Casualties of War*, he wakes into a nightmare rather than from one as he begins to see visions of demons. Ultimately it transpires that he and his platoon have taken a super-hallucinogen called BZ, a variant of LSD, administered by the government in an experiment designed to make the soldiers more aggressive, and that the entire film is Singer's hallucination from his death bed. The film concludes

¹⁰⁷ The Indian Runner: *Production Notes* (Los Angeles: MGM, 1991), 3.

¹⁰⁸ The film's producer Alan Marshall explicitly commented that “Vietnam was really a means to an end. It was a plot device rather than something we were trying to make a huge issue of.” Screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin's published fifty-page essay on the process of the making of the film mentions Vietnam only twice and then only as background. Tim Golden, “Up ‘Jacob's Ladder’ And Into the Hell Of a Veteran's Psyche,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1990, B15; Bruce Joel Rubin, *Jacob's Ladder* (New York: Applause, 1990), 149-98.

with a title card which tells the audience that it was “reported” that experiments with BZ were carried out on soldiers and notes that the Pentagon denied these reports. Other than this endnote the film provides no evidence that the experiments had existed, although *60 Minutes* and other journalist work had made allegations through the years.¹⁰⁹ However, most importantly, government deceptions about the war and the military’s treatment of soldiers as circulated in cultural texts makes the claim for such experiments credible to audiences.

The premise of the film is also made credible by the film’s adherence to many of the signifiers of the Vietnam and the veterans’ film, and it also works to reinforce many preconceptions about the veteran. This play on established signifiers make the film interesting as a study of popular beliefs. Fundamentally, *Jacob’s Ladder* is about the alienation of the returning veteran. As Singer says early in the film, “after Vietnam I didn’t want to think anymore” and he has thus given up teaching for a menial post office job. He discovers that his very existence is denied by the Veterans Administration when he tries to visit his psychologist in the Veterans’ Outpatient Program – this is (finally) understandable because he is dead, but it also flags the perceived lack of help for returning veterans, many of whom felt invisible. When Singer is eventually forcibly taken into a hospital, the shocking VA

¹⁰⁹ Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, 330; Director Adrian Lyne cited Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain’s book *Acid Dreams* as an inspiration. John Hartl, “Adrian Lynne Met a Metaphysical Challenge,” *The Seattle Times*, November 1, 1990, G5; Lee and Shlain makes no suggestion that BZ was used in Vietnam, although they do note that it was tested at Edgewood Arsenal, a military chemical facility in Maryland, on an estimated 2,800 Army personnel between 1959 and 1975. Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 42.

hospital scenes in *Born on the Fourth of July* are taken to an expressionistic extreme as he suffers horrific visions of Francis Baconesque distorted figures and demons. Singer's visions are also a demonstration of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and it is significant that he only begins to understand what is happening to him when he meets with survivors from his platoon whose experiences echo his own. The film is clear in its evocation of the belief that fellow veterans are the only ones who can understand and make sense of the Vietnam experience, as circulated in many cultural texts. The film's most salient commentary on the Vietnam corpus occurs when Singer discovers that what appeared to be an enemy attack in the opening scenes was an internecine slaughter triggered by a government-administered mind-altering substance. The metaphor of the government's manipulation is foregrounded, but the conclusion can be read as an ironic manifestation of the tendency, in both Vietnam films and the broader culture, to view Americans as the victims of Vietnam (and its associated massacres).

Jacob's Ladder had originally been set for production at Paramount Pictures. Director Adrian Lyne had made large profits for the studio with previous films, *Flashdance* (1983) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), but when management at Paramount changed, new executives expressed doubts about the film's Vietnam content and the deal fell through.¹¹⁰ An independent production company (Carolco) took over production, although, when the film was released, no mention was made of Vietnam in the marketing of the film and its poster concentrated on the horror elements of the film. A similar

¹¹⁰ Hartl, "Adrian Lyne," G5.

strategy was followed by Hollywood Pictures when they distributed the first big-budget film to deal with the overlooked experiences of the returning black veteran: *Dead Presidents* (1995). Directors Allen and Albert Hughes had come to prominence with *Menace II Society* (1993), one of the cycle of urban black gang films of early 1990s, and concluded *Dead Presidents* with a stylishly violent bank robbery so it is understandable that this would be the preferred marketing angle. However, in contrast to the use of the Vietnam veteran to facilitate generic conventions in *Jacob's Ladder*, *Dead Presidents* utilises genre to excavate the social history of the returning black veteran, significantly using one of the few histories to deal with black veterans – Wallace Terry's oral history *Bloods* – as its source.¹¹¹

Unfortunately, the film tries to do too much in terms appealing to its genre audience and through following its protagonist Anthony from high school graduation, to Vietnam, to his eventual sentencing for the failed heist of an armoured treasury vehicle: little room is left for social critique. Following his return from Vietnam – a tour in the Marines of which his socially-aspirational mother disapproves, in contrast to *Born on the Fourth of July* – the film effectively shows the economic problems faced by veterans so often absent from other films. Unlike most cinematic veterans, Anthony

¹¹¹ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Presidio Press, 1985). A parallel exists between the obfuscation of the theme of the film through its marketing and the trouble that Terry had had in selling his manuscript which led him to conclude that “he had a story no one in America wanted to hear.” Terry had originally written a book about the political radicalisation of black veterans upon their return to the U.S., but which was rejected because he was “talking about black men with guns.” Ironically, the Hughes Brothers were able to make their social history because they had made a film about black men with guns – albeit about blacks shooting blacks. Katherine Kinney, “Cold Wars: Black Soldiers in Liberal Hollywood,” *War, Literature and the Arts* 12, no. 1 (2000): 117.

comes back from Vietnam clean and ready to work for a living, despite suffering from nightmares. He finds work in a butcher's shop but is continually badgered by his pregnant girlfriend – who was financially well supported by a pimp while he was at war – to better provide for her and their daughter. She also complains of his increasing tendency to drink and, when he loses his job despite being “a good man” (in his employer's words), he feels his only option is to engage in the robbery. The trajectory from good man to criminal was a deliberate strategy on the filmmakers' part: at the film's conclusion when Anthony's lawyer asks the court to take his military service into account when sentencing him, the audience is not supposed to feel sympathy *because* of his service (as Roger Ebert misreads in his review) but to feel due empathy for the limited economic opportunities afforded to returning veterans.¹¹²

Richard Corliss, in a relatively neutral review in *Time* magazine, incorrectly claimed that “nothing much is added to earlier work in these fields by Francis Coppola and Oliver Stone.”¹¹³ *Dead Presidents* is important, however, because it is the first to deal with predominantly black urban neighbourhoods in the Vietnam era. Alongside the economic problems faced by the returning black veteran, *Dead Presidents* also touches on radical politics through the character of Delilah, the younger sister of Anthony's girlfriend. However, the filmmakers miss an opportunity to give voice to the

¹¹² Peter Stack, “Bringing the War Back Home,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 1, 1995, 25; Roger Ebert, “Hughes Brothers Bury the Point In Well-Made ‘Dead Presidents,’” *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 4, 1995, 48.

¹¹³ Richard Corliss, “The Doom Generation,” *Time*, November 6, 1995, 77.

radicalisation of black soldiers, especially given that Ari Sesu Merretazon (then known as Hayward Kirkland), on whom Anthony is based, told the press on the film's release that his decision to participate in the robbery was "born of political rage."¹¹⁴ With the exception of several reports of violence at cinemas where the film was playing, a common anxiety about violent black film in the early 1990s, the film generated surprisingly little press attention other than Kim Masters' feature on Merratazon and the political possibilities missed by the filmmakers.¹¹⁵

Where *Dead Presidents* reinserts the experience of the returning black veteran into the cultural memory of Vietnam, Oliver Stone's third Vietnam film, *Heaven and Earth* (1993), sought to address the most commonly criticised absence of the Vietnam corpus, the Vietnamese themselves. Writing in 1990, Michael Klein took to task the belief that existing Vietnam narratives could reconcile divisions over U.S. involvement, arguing that "the spirit of true reconciliation and of healing, not only of the American psyche, but between the people of the US and of Vietnam, [can only] be aided by truthful, conscious artistic work about the era of the Vietnam war."¹¹⁶ By working with Le Ly Hayslip, whose autobiographies are the film's basis, Stone attempted to address this possibility and was given credit accordingly, even by the critics

¹¹⁴ Kim Masters, "'Dead Presidents' Precedent," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1995, G1.

¹¹⁵ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "Shot reported inside theater," October 7, 1995, B2; *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "Shots exchanged outside theater," October 8, 1995, 5; Marilyn Robinson, "Warrant sought for suspect: Movie's role examined in incident at mall," *The Denver Post*, October 21, 1995, B1.

¹¹⁶ Klein, "Cultural Narrative and the Process of Re-collection," 28.

who ultimately wrote negative assessments of *Heaven and Earth*.¹¹⁷ Again, Stone contextualised his third version of the war in terms of countering the “mindless revisionism of the Vietnam War” of the 1980s in which “Vietnamese are blithely and casually shot, stabbed, and blown to smithereens, utterly without the benefit of human consideration.”¹¹⁸

Structurally, *Heaven and Earth* repeats *Born on the Fourth of July*’s focus on one individual’s headlong rush from idyllic pre-war life to eventual peace through a series of personal nightmares that reflect larger historical forces. However, unlike the earlier film, *Heaven and Earth* does not allow agency to its central character, Le Ly, and as a result she, and by extrapolation the Vietnamese, become victims of larger historical forces rather than protagonists; the characters do not represent a “peasant people struggling who have a proud history of resistance” as Ron Kovic characterises the Vietnamese at the end of *Born on the Fourth of July*. The film opens with an idealised, almost ethnographic, sequence detailing village life before “the soldier’s came.” The film follows Le Ly as she is raped by the Vietcong, tortured as a collaborator by the South Vietnamese (overseen by American “advisers”), ostracised by her village, seduced and abandoned when pregnant by her employer in Saigon, and prostituted against her will by American servicemen. This section of the film suggests the impact of the war on the population and

¹¹⁷ Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1993). For examples of critics who praised Stone’s intentions see David Ansen, “Tis Not a Jolly Season,” *Newsweek*, December 27, 1993, 47; David Baron, “Fresh Look Through Viet Eyes Not Enough to Save Heaven,” *Times-Picayune*, January 21, 1994, L21; Pat Dowell, review of *Heaven and Earth*, *Cineaste* 20, no. 3 (1994): 56-57.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Randy Roberts and David Welky, “A Scared Mission: Oliver Stone and Vietnam,” in *Oliver Stone’s USA* (see note 64), 82.

on women in particular, and there is an admirable equity between the Americans and the North and South Vietnamese as perpetrators of patriarchal violence which might not have been expected from the supposedly “anti-American” Stone. There is a sense, however, that Le Ly’s life is reduced to a compendium of suffering and, when combined with Stone’s bombastic style, the effect “distances us from the material, not drawing us into it,” as the usually pro-Stone critic Jay Carr noted.¹¹⁹

The film’s purported focus on Le Ly is further offset when she meets and marries Steve Butler, a charming and benevolent soldier during the scenes set in Vietnam who becomes disturbed and psychotic upon their return to the U.S. Butler’s descent into drunkenness and despair overpowers the film as the genre memory of the veteran experience unintentionally replaces what new areas the film is trying to open up. It is odd that Stone, who had done so much to rehabilitate the clichéd veteran, creates a composite character from Le Ly’s two husbands and various boyfriends who is “saddled with the entire catalog of Vietvet hang-ups.”¹²⁰ It becomes apparent that this oddly sweet soldier whom she has married was involved in “black ops” assassination duties in Vietnam and, once his Pentagon-promised post-war job selling arms fails to transpire (an ironic comment on the government’s failure to live up to its promises to returning veterans), he abuses Le Ly and, after she leaves him, kidnaps their children before committing suicide naked in a truck. The final comment on the war’s veterans by the leading “veteran *auteur*” ultimately

¹¹⁹ Jay Carr, “Stone’s ‘Heaven’ hits relentlessly hard,” *The Boston Globe*, December 24, 1993, 19.

¹²⁰ Dowell, review, 57.

suggests that, despite all that had been done to correct past clichés, popular representations of the veteran on screen had changed little.

Heaven and Earth only grossed a disappointing six million dollars. Even though its first week of wide release coincided with President Clinton's lifting of the U.S. trade embargo towards Vietnam, the film failed to generate the kind of cultural resonance that *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *JFK* (1991) had. This could be due to an absence of studio-created hype or to the lack of a marketable star that consigned the film to a less popular, more middlebrow market where it competed with several weighty dramas whose topics, arguably, seemed more pertinent in 1993: the first major film dealing with AIDS in the case of *Philadelphia* (1993); Irish terrorism in *In the Name of the Father* (1993); and, perhaps most decisively, the Holocaust and the Second World War in *Schindler's List* (1993), a film whose near-unanimous critical praise could not be matched in the reception of *Heaven and Earth*.¹²¹ Perhaps George Bush had been right and the carefully propagandised victory in the Gulf and the subsequent orchestrated victory parades for returning soldiers had laid to rest the Vietnam Syndrome as well as debates over the treatment of Vietnam veterans. Certainly Hollywood turned its attention – or what little attention the major studios had given – away from Vietnam after *Heaven and Earth*'s failure and back to the “good fight” of the Second World War that *Schindler's List* (no matter how problematically) proffered as subject

¹²¹ All three were nominated for the Best Picture Oscar that year, whereas *Heaven and Earth* was the first of Stone's historical films to not receive any nominations.

matter and that *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) consolidated. The Vietnam market was over.

Following the public displays of sympathy for the Vietnam veteran in the wake of the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the success of independently-produced combat films, American film sought to redress the maligned image of the cinematic veteran. However, once the political economy of these films proved unsustainable and the issue of the Vietnam syndrome had apparently been satisfied by the victory in the Gulf, positive representations of the Vietnam veteran in film receded. *Distant Thunder*, *Jacknife*, and *In Country* addressed the issues pertinent to the lives of veterans, engendering compassion for their social plight, reflecting the discourse of “healing” that permeated the social dialogue of the 1980s. However, they rarely interrogate the veteran’s political judgment in part due to their location in the 1980s context. Indeed, with the notable exception of *Born on the Fourth of July*, the corpus of Vietnam veteran films rarely engages with the political involvement of many veterans.

In 1990 Michael Klein pointed up many absences that cinematic representations of veterans occlude. These were not discussed in cinemas until the release of the documentary *Sir, No Sir* (2005). For Klein, films relating to Vietnam and the veteran silently erased the active opposition to the war of those soldiers who mutinied, deserted (half a million in addition to those who evaded the draft), and protested the war as part of VVAW and the coffee

house movement, actions which led the army towards “a state approaching collapse.”¹²² While *Born on the Fourth of July* does address the VVAW and veteran protest and presents the most radical cinematic denunciation of American involvement in Vietnam, it does so as a minor facet of its epic focus and gives little sense of the scale of veteran opposition movements that Klein outlines.

In opposition to Klein’s leftist perspective, those on the other side of the veterans’ debate note that films rarely present a veteran who is well-adjusted and who returns unproblematically to take up a place in society as many Vietnam veterans did. Therefore, the Vietnam veteran on film occupies a middle ground between protest and integration; he is integral to the “healing” discourse of the 1980s but set outside the realities of America during the Vietnam era. In this sense, with the exception of *Born on the Fourth of July*, the cultural memory of the Vietnam era is rephrased during the culture war period by film in a way that reflects a broader, cultural, documented consensus on Vietnam.

¹²² Klein, “Cultural Narrative,” 16-17.

Chapter Two

Defending the Legacy of the Sixties: Reasserting the Idealism of the Era during the Culture Wars.

Hollywood is no less confused about how to deal with the '60s than anybody else.

David Ansen.¹

The history of Hollywood productions made about the 1960s follows a course that is the opposite of its engagement with the Vietnam War. With the exception of *The Green Berets* (1968), no films were made about the war while it was being fought but this changed as the number of productions focusing on returning veterans and the war itself steadily increased until over four-hundred films dealing with the war had been produced by 1995.² By contrast, films dealing with the counterculture were produced in large numbers during the late 1960s and early 1970s as the studios sought to appeal to the youth market that it had lost.³ With the success of *American Graffiti* (1973), Hollywood turned its attention away from the 1960s and towards the 1950s where, as Abbie Hoffman notes, “kids only wanted the right to drink and drive, not burn their draft cards.”⁴ Implicit in Hoffman’s observation is the fact that the 1960s were too controversial and too political, whereas the 1950s provided a lighter nostalgic setting. This provides some explanation as

¹ David Ansen, “The Crazy, Impudent '60s,” *Newsweek*, October 3, 1988, 57.

² Jeremy Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films about the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

³ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *Hollywood Films of the Seventies: Sex, Drugs, Violence, Rock 'n' Roll & Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 75-143.

⁴ Quoted in James Greenberg, “Bringing It All Back Home,” *American Film*, September 1988, 55.

to why only four films were produced that focused on the period between the end of the era and the period of production that is the concern of this thesis – *Return of the Secaucus 7* (1980), *A Small Circle of Friends* (1980), *Four Friends* (1981), and *The Big Chill* (1983) – only one of which, *The Big Chill*, was a studio production and was successful.

Michael Klein views this situation as a “structured absence,” because there is little sense of the counterculture or the movement against the war rendered in fictional accounts.⁵ This revision through occlusion is, for Klein, tantamount to “cultural genocide.”⁶ However, as the culture wars period began to warm, a number of films were released that dealt with the anti-war movement, although they lacked the kind of interrogative depth of representation that Klein would have hoped. Contrary to David Ansen’s suggestion that Hollywood was as confused as anyone else with how to deal with the sixties, the films that are the focus of this chapter *do* work in very similar ways to reach a retrospective consensus on the era, to reassert its idealism into the circulating texts of cultural memory.⁷ Despite working through a variety of genres – family drama, courtroom drama, comedy-thriller, the biopic – they present an amorphous consensus that makes the era palatable to audiences, often through eschewing complexity. Truth is not the ultimate issue in these films. Rather, like the veteran films of the late 1980s – *Distant Thunder*, *Jackknife* and *In Country* – a version of the era is presented

⁵ Michael L. Klein, “Cultural Narrative and the Process of Re-collection: Film, History and the Vietnam Era,” in *The Vietnam Era: Media and Popular Culture in the US and Vietnam*, ed. Michael L. Klein (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ Ansen, “The Crazy, Impudent ’60s,” 57.

that attempts to heal still open wounds. In addition, many of these films exhibit a shift in emphasis from explorations of individualism to explorations of family and community in the 1980s similar to that identified in the familial melodramas in which the “healing” of Vietnam veterans was represented in the previous chapter. This is apparent in several of the films in this chapter, most notably *1969* (1988), creating a cross generational “we” in which the family stands in for the (American) community as the terrain upon which national and generational conflicts are staged and resolved. In the era of the right’s “family values” rhetoric this tendency has intriguing resonance when applied to the 1960s.

Even though most “Hollywood types,” especially the “artistic” writers and directors, were liberal in their outlook, it is doubtful that these films were made as a direct result of the emerging attacks on that most liberal of decades. In the same way that films set in 1950s seemed more likely be attractive to audiences, the financial and critical success of Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) – especially given that film’s creation of a microcosm of America’s domestic strife within a single platoon – suggested to producers that, contrary to conventional wisdom about the box-office poison of political films, a “hard-edged examination of the recent past may be good for business.”⁸ This impression enabled directors who had projects about the sixties in mind to

⁸ Don Gillmor makes this suggestion while noting, significantly, that several of the films described in this chapter had been percolating in the minds of directors (for whom the sixties were their formative years) for several years before obtaining funding in the post-*Platoon* moment. Don Gillmor, “Acetate Flash,” *Rolling Stone*, September 22, 1988, 37.

bring them to fruition, so that by the end of 1988 it was reported that all of the major studios had a sixties project in development.⁹

Through this chapter I argue that there are telling similarities between very different films in their treatment of the anti-war movement and the counterculture. In the first section, I examine the representation of the violent, underground turn taken by the anti-war movement, arguing that the legitimisation of protest is achieved through the refutation of violence and the assertion of “family values” in *Running on Empty* (1988). In the second section, I argue that filmmakers utilised the fame of the “Brat Pack” of young actors in order to present the idealism of the sixties to (young) audiences in contradistinction to the greed that characterised their time of production, the 1980s. In the final section of this chapter I argue that *Born on the Fourth of July* provides a counter-example (as it does with Vietnam veteran films), through its period setting and its rejection of the politics of “healing,” to those films retrospectively asserting the values of the 1960s-era from the 1980s present.

⁹ Greenberg, “Bringing It All Back Home,” 54. It must be noted that not all of the projects made it through the development process, although it is intriguing to speculate as to what type of film *Rip Van Hippy* would have been (a potential project mentioned by Greenberg).

I: Retrospective Interrogations of the Violent Sixties.

The disintegration of the New Left, most specifically SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in 1969, led to the splintering of the student protest movement – and by association the anti-war movement – into more-or-less diametrically opposed peaceful and radical camps. In March 1970, three members of the Weather Underground blew themselves up while constructing a bomb to plant at a non-commissioned officers' dance at Fort Dix. According to Todd Gitlin, the Greenwich Village townhouse explosion was “the flashpoint for an implosion still greater and more horrendous. The Weathermen heightened the general self-hatred, darkened the darkness that already spilled over the left.”¹⁰ Two independently produced films released within two weeks of each other in September 1988 took as their focus the divergent violent strand of the movement, although it should be noted that their wider impact on cultural memory was limited by the intensely loud furore that was generated by *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) which was in release at the same time.¹¹ *Patty Hearst* (1988) and *Running on Empty* are very different films in terms of structure, their narrative strategies, and in their representation of those who went underground.

¹⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 403.

¹¹ *Running on Empty* was produced by Lorimar but released by Warner Bros., who had purchased the production company while the film was in production, on September 9. *Patty Hearst* was produced by Atlantic and released on September 23, the week that the release of *Running on Empty* widened. For an account of the controversy that surrounded *The Last Temptation of Christ* see Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 146-82.

The kidnapping of Patty Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974 and her subsequent conversion from heiress to Tania, the armed revolutionary, was one of the more bizarre footnotes to the radicalism of the 1960s. Over the course of two years the details of her kidnap, her participation in a series of bank robberies, the televised gun battle that left six of the SLA dead, and her subsequent arrest and sentencing became the “media event of its decade.”¹² These events fuelled hundreds of articles, at least nine books, and a TV movie, and yet Patricia Campbell Hearst (or Tania) remained a blank canvas whose actions were attributed in equal measure to her personal complicity (for which she was convicted) or to “Stockholm Syndrome,” the “brainwashing” defence that was used at her trial and which she subsequently maintained.¹³ That Paul Schrader’s film version of Hearst’s story maintains this enigmatic quality in its central character is due to its being based on Hearst’s own account of her story, with its unintentionally ironic title, *Every Secret Thing*.¹⁴

The film’s opening establishes Hearst’s lack of political awareness and her susceptibility to influence. A long overhead shot follows Hearst walking across the Berkeley campus oblivious to the (anachronistic in 1974) SDS stalls and those of other campus groups, while in a voiceover she confesses that she “is not really a thinker,” but that she is “adaptable to circumstance.” Schrader chose to shoot the film so as to present a “strange subjective tunnel

¹² Duncan Webster, “‘Nobody’s Patsy’: versions of Patty Hearst,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (1990): 3.

¹³ Phoebe Hoban, “Citizen Patty,” *New York*, August 8, 1988, 32.

¹⁴ Patricia Campbell Hearst with Alvin Moscow, *Every Secret Thing* (London: Arrow, 1982).

of first-hand experience” in order to show events through the experiences of Hearst.¹⁵ The section of the film that follows its opening, approximately the next thirty minutes, provides the perfect illustration of his intention. As Hearst is blindfolded and imprisoned in a wardrobe for the first fifty-seven days of her kidnapping, Schrader keeps the colours muted and the members of the SLA are frequently shown in silhouette. These images are accompanied on the soundtrack by snippets of sloganeering by the group’s members characteristic of stereotypes of the “radical” speech of the sixties – “The revolution is happening now bitch in good old fascist Amerikka.” The sequence works to extremely, effectively place the viewer in events from Hearst’s perspective so that when she is told that the SLA intend to educate their prisoners of “worldwide revolution,” it is easy to comprehend how her supposed brainwashing could have occurred.

Through its structured subjectivity *Patty Hearst* is a rare example of the biopic in that it resists the desire to know, but this has problematic consequences for its representation of the SLA. While the film’s disorientating structural strategy serves to elicit audience sympathy for Hearst, it also has the effect of reducing the members of the SLA to cartoonish caricatures, or, as one reviewer put it, “a pathetic, jargon-spouting gaggle of nincompoops.”¹⁶ The SLA was a small, little-known organisation, compromising of only eight members, who had kidnapped Hearst to obtain

¹⁵ Quoted in *Patty Hearst: Production Information* (Los Angeles: Atlantic Releasing Corporation, 1988), 4.

¹⁶ Ansen, “The Crazy, Impudent ’60s,” 57. Schrader defended portraying the SLA in this way because Hearst remembered them as “terrifying buffoons.” Glenn Rechler, “*Patty Hearst*: An Interview with Paul Schrader,” *Cineaste* 17, no. 1 (1989): 31.

publicity for their international brand of Marxism. They were certainly successful in their aim, becoming famous and earning the applause of the Weather Underground and other violent factions.¹⁷ However, as Duncan Webster has noted, the kidnap and “turning” of Hearst gave the SLA the access to the media that it desired but limited that attention “to one narrative, her story rather than their analysis.”¹⁸ The fidelity of the film’s screenplay to Hearst’s own account, as well as her involvement with the film and the “notes” that she provided to Schrader (“mostly suggestions about the SLA’s demeanour and rhetoric”), has the same effect on the film as Webster observes happened in reality.¹⁹

Commensurate with Hearst’s perceptions of them, the members of the SLA in the film are shallow. The intriguing rhetoric that characterised the communiqués of the group – “death to the fascist insect that prays upon the life of the people” – is reduced to empty sloganeering that is extremely close to satire, especially when placed alongside issues such as (supposed) sexual freedom. “Sex is a revolutionary act,” one of the female members tells Patty, “if anyone asks, it’s only comradely to say yes.” But Schrader goes further in presenting these characters as absurd. The group propose raising money by robbing beauty shops but are told by Cinque, the leader and only black member of the organisation, that this idea is bourgeois and that they must rob banks. Bill Harris, wearing the spectacles and beard of the archetypal sixties

¹⁷ William L. O’Neill, *The New Left: A History* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2001), 61.

¹⁸ Webster, “‘Nobody’s Patsy,’” 14.

¹⁹ Hoban, “Citizen Patty,” 35.

radical, echoes Cinque as he responds, “we’re all so fucking bourgeois. I wish I was black. I mean I just wish I was fucking black.” As if this preposterous outburst were not enough, a subsequent scene depicts Harris in blackface and a Shaft-style leather jacket, pointing a gun at himself in the mirror and shouting “motherfucker” several times. This presents as farcical the very real kinship that many middle-class activists felt with those engaged in post-colonial struggles around the world and with the Black Panther Party in America. The film’s representation of race is also problematised through its characterisation of Cinque that reduces “black rage” to a series of threats and menacing close-ups which, for Richard Porton, amounted to an “implicit mockery of the very idea of black power.”²⁰

In her account of her trial, Hearst noted that the events that led to her notoriety were not the primary focus. Rather, it was the “media image of me on trial. I was portrayed as the ultimate symbol of the rebellious, radical youth movement of the sixties – the *ultimate* child of the sixties.”²¹ This notion of Hearst as representing the final symbol of sixties rebellion is extended in the film as an extremely small fringe group, within which radicalism is presented as buffoonery and childish playacting, comes to stand as representative of 1960s radicalism. The film, despite its box office failure, led to a renewed fascination with Hearst across the media. She was repeatedly interviewed in newspapers and on television and the radio, ostensibly to promote the film, and the paperback of her story required a second printing in addition to its

²⁰ Richard Porton, review of *Patty Hearst*, *Cineaste* 17, no. 1 (1989): 30.

²¹ Hearst with Moscow, *Every Secret Thing*, 401 (my emphasis).

125,000 copy initial run.²² The impact of the film in the circulating cultural memory, then, was to reassert Hearst's celebrity and her own version of events in the context of an extremely negative version of sixties radicalism that reinforced so many of the violent and dogmatic stereotypes that the movement evokes.

Five months after the Greenwich Village townhouse explosion, the New Year's Gang blew up the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin, which had been a focal point of demonstrations for several years. Unbeknownst to the bombers who had thought the building empty, a young research student (also a father) was working late and his death all but ended mass-protests at the University, in addition to its broader negative effect on public perceptions of anti-war protestors. In 1988, one of the perpetrators was still living underground. This information is not included in the press notes for Sidney Lumet's *Running on Empty* (1988), but is mentioned in a review of the film in *The Hollywood Reporter*, suggesting that such events were still pertinent to those outside the political media at the time of the film's release.²³ *Running on Empty* echoes these events through its story of the family of Annie and Arthur Pope, forced underground after their group's bombing of a government-funded Napalm laboratory unintentionally

²² Paula Span, "Patty Hearst, Choosing the Glare," *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1988, C1; Edwin McDowell, "Book Notes," *New York Times*, October 12, 1988, C22.

²³ Duane Byrge, review of *Running on Empty*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 26, 1988, 7. The bombing took place on August 19, 1970. Peter Kramer has suggested that distributors' press material is worthy of attention because "its statements find their way into a wide range of publications, thus shaping the expectations of prospective film audiences." Peter Kramer, "Would you take your children to see this film? The cultural and social work of the family-adventure movie," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 308-309.

paralyses a janitor. The slight change in nuance – from Math research centre to napalm lab, and from the death of a father to the “unintentional” injuring of an anonymous janitor – was intentional on the part of the film’s writer to make the Popes more sympathetic to audiences, while the bombing’s effect on the anti-war protests at Wisconsin is internalised through the Popes’ subsequent rejection of political violence. Screenwriter Naomi Foner says she went out of her way

not to make these people from the Weather Underground. I wanted to make them more like Daniel Berrigan, whom the general audience would not dismiss as a radical fringe. I wanted them to embody the spirit of what *we were all* trying to do in the Sixties: stop the war, work on the Civil Rights movement, make the world a better place.²⁴

While writing the script Foner was reunited with her oldest friend, Eleanor Stein, who went underground with the Weathermen in 1969.²⁵ Through Stein and her contacts with other former radicals who opted for the underground existence, Foner was able to gain an insight into the minutiae of life underground. This familiarity with the intricacies of the pressures of underground living enabled Foner and Lumet to create an extremely interesting sequence early in the film – almost a filmic “how-to” manual – that shows the convoluted lengths that Arthur must go to in order to create new

²⁴ Anne Thompson, “Naomi Foner: Radical on the Write,” *Film Comment* 24, no. 4 (1988): 42 (my emphasis). Foner’s use of the collective “we” is indicative of the retrospective consensus on the sixties that I see these films attempting to create. Father Daniel Berrigan was a leading anti-war protestor who visited North Vietnam during the war and was a member of the Catonsville Nine wanted by the FBI for breaking into a draft board office and burning files in a moral protest. Foner’s reference to Berrigan is significant in light of an episode late in the film in which Annie Pope makes contact with her father through a movement-sympathetic dentist. This scene echoes an anecdote relayed by Howard Zinn in which Zinn’s dentist provided assistance to Berrigan while he was a fugitive. Howard Zinn, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 134-137.

²⁵ Todd Gitlin, “The Blunder Years,” *American Film*, September 1988, 51. Gitlin suggests that Foner named her protagonists Annie and Arthur after Stein’s parents as a kind of tribute.

identities for the family after their previous cover has been blown. Foner peppers her screenplay with a series of authenticating signifiers that may be missed by the general audience: early in the film the Popes' son Danny tells his parents "we got shoes," shoes being the Weathermen's code for the FBI, a reference to the brown brogues agents favoured; the Popes have named their dog Jomo after one of the movement's anti-colonialist pin-ups Jomo Kenyatta; Arthur Pope is able to get work in restaurants in much the same way as Bill Ayers was able to use his training as a gourmet chef to find work easily while underground; and, perhaps most overtly, Arthur's description of classical music as "white-skin privileged crap" is a term synonymous with the in-fighting that characterised the last days of SDS.²⁶

Foner's claims make it clear that the Popes are intended to be representative of the "good sixties." *Running on Empty* shows Annie and Arthur Pope (Judd Hirsch and Christine Lahti) to be decent people. Contrary to the misreadings of reviewers, the Popes have not given up all political activity as a result of their crime.²⁷ As an example of their continuing activism, early in the film Arthur leaves a local Greenpeace meeting after coaching the locals on how to present their case effectively to the authorities. Later it is revealed that he has also been organising food co-ops and

²⁶ Bill Ayers was one of the leaders of the Weather Underground and, for a time, partner of Eleanor Stein. He has also published a memoir recounting the details of his time underground and reasserts that he continues to believe that much of what they did was right despite expressing a sense of regret. Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

²⁷ Roger Ebert, review of *Running on Empty*, *Chicago Sun Times*, September 23, 1989, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1988/09/315675.html (accessed August 11, 2004).

unionising a restaurant; that “the revolution is over” does not mean that the Popes have given up trying to organise collectively.

Running on Empty’s project of differentiating the Popes from the violent fringe is exemplified when Gus, a figure from their radical past, surfaces to insist on their help in a planned robbery, or a “political action” to fund the “Liberation Army” as Arthur mockingly refers to Gus’s scheme. The scene that follows makes it abundantly clear to the audience where the Popes stand on violent action. Having stepped outside to talk to Gus, Arthur returns to the house furious, calls his children out of bed, and asks Gus, “what do [the Liberation Army] want my kids to do? Knock off the fucking President?” When the children emerge Arthur takes them outside and, angrily pulling a bag of guns from the trunk of Gus’s car, tells the incredulous boys, “I want you to know, guns are not what we’re about,” before sending them off to bed again. He leaves informing Annie and Gus that when he comes back, “I don’t want to see these things within ten miles of my kids.” Once Arthur has left, Gus tells Annie that the reason for the “action” is that the movement is dead precisely because the media ignore the group action unless “something or somebody gets blown away.”²⁸ Annie responds that the movement was over the moment the Vietnam War ended and that Gus, and by extension “the movement,” is delusional and self-obsessed: “You’re not a revolutionary. No, that requires more than playing with guns or yourself, that requires

²⁸ Gus’s comment echoes the SLA’s kidnapping of Patty Hearst in order to obtain publicity for their cause.

compassion, discipline...” and she dismisses him as a forty-six-year-old infant.

Indeed the character of Gus seems to be from a different world, let alone a different film, and his presence in *Running on Empty* reinforces the Popes’ liberal-humanist decency through the film’s comparison of them with him. As the scene shows “guns is not what [the Popes are] about.” Although there is an element of pathos in the characterisation of Gus – his refusal to accept that the “revolutionary war” is over can be compared to the Japanese soldiers found on isolated Pacific islands long after the end of the Second World War – his caricatured and immature presence is too obvious to be anything other than a legitimising contrast for Annie and Arthur.²⁹ This is especially evident in the juxtaposition of Arthur’s monogamous devotion to the family with Gus’s overt sleaziness (which offers itself to be read as an indictment of the misogyny inherent in many New Left males), a sordidness most evident when Gus accuses the Popes of being a bourgeois “Norman Rockwell family” in order to guilt-trip Annie into bed.

The Popes’ non-violent present is shaped through reflection and guilt about their violent past and is clear in the jagged pain that exudes from the depictions of everyday life underground. However, *Running on Empty* moves

²⁹ The ultimate fate of Gus is another example of how the film is tied to the history of the movement once underground. Late in the film, after he has been involved in the robbery for which he tried to recruit Arthur, he is killed. The “action,” carried out on behalf of the “Liberation Army,” echoes the 1981 robbery of an armoured car near Nyack, New York, in which several former members of the Weather Underground were arrested acting as getaway drivers for the “Black Liberation Army.” The ensuing investigation unearthed a trail of clues incriminating their former comrades, just as Gus’s actions force the Popes to move on in the film. See Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 68-69, 118.

forward, positing a distinction between non-violent and violent protestors, most apparently in the staging of the scene between Annie and Gus. What is left painfully unclear in the film is made unambiguous in the film's extratextual materials. In an attempt to provide an air of authenticity for the film's focus on the protest movement, the production notes stress that L.M. Kit Carson, who plays Gus in the film, was "himself a political activist during the 1960s", and that Christine Lahti was "involved in *nonviolent* antiwar protests" at Ann Arbor.³⁰ As if to extratextually reinforce the non-violent nature of her character, Lahti told an interviewer that "as soon as the rocks were thrown and the bank windows smashed I left."³¹

Gavin Smith claims, somewhat optimistically, that "*Running on Empty*'s ideological project is a rehabilitation of Sixties values and objectives."³² However, Warner's marketing campaign and published interviews with the film's cast and crew emphasise that this film is principally about family. This is an effort to engender sympathy for the Popes from as broad an audience as possible, for at a time when concerns about the

³⁰ *Running on Empty: Production Information*, (Los Angeles: Warner Bros. 1988), 3, 6 (my emphasis). The creating of an aura of authenticity for a film in its accompanying production information, (information often referred to as "press notes" and circulated to the press on a film's release), is a common marketing strategy for many of the films discussed in this thesis. The notes for *1969* indicate that the film's director, Ernest Thompson, was a college freshman in 1969 and witness to the upheavals of the period. The presence on the production of Abbie Hoffman for the campus protest in *Born on the Fourth of July* and ex-marine Colonel Dale Dye, as well, of course, as Ron Kovic are trumpeted to the press. Perhaps most hyperbolically the notes for *Flashback* quote the film's production designer, Vincent Cresciman, attesting that the commune in the film "was an amalgamation of a half-dozen communes that I visited and lived on in the '60s... The set decorator and I would become very nostalgic and would often stop working and give each other big hugs while remembering what it was like back then." *Flashback: Production Information*, (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1990), 5-6.

³¹ Gitlin, "The Blunder Years," 51.

³² Gavin Smith, "Sidney Lumet: Lion on the Left," *Film Comment* 24, no. 4 (1988): 34.

disintegration of the nuclear family were widespread, the Popes have struggled to keep the family together (notwithstanding their radical past).³³ Indeed, the production information notes distributed by Warner Brothers intimate that in knowing they would have to give up custody of their son if they surrendered to the authorities, “the Popes became fugitives, living underground *in order* to keep the family together.”³⁴ This strategy was observed in reviews of the film. Richard Corliss began his review in *Time* by stating that “You don’t have to listen to presidential candidates to realize that the American family is the national religion,” and noted that although they have a radical past, at heart “the Popes share the passionate conservatism of any family.”³⁵

The Popes’ decision to go underground is not political but personal. By extension, the film is not political but personal, focusing on the long term effects that sixties protest has on the lives of activists’ families: most especially, in this case, effects on the Popes’ musically talented son Danny (River Phoenix). The focus on family to make the film more audience-friendly in the era of “family values” rhetoric, has the odd effect of neutralising, or at least obfuscating, the very politics of the period that set the plot in motion.³⁶

³³ Stuart Klawans, “Films,” *The Nation*, October 31, 1988, 434.

³⁴ *Running on Empty: Production Information*, 2 (my emphasis).

³⁵ Richard Corliss, review of *Running on Empty*, *Time*, September 12, 1988, 76.

³⁶ Tellingly, Lumet directed a similarly political decontextualisation in *Daniel* (1983), an adaptation of E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971). In his book *Making Movies*, Lumet gives one sentence responses to the standard interviewer’s question “What is the movie about?” He gives the same answer for both *Daniel* and *Running on Empty*: “Who pays for the passions and commitments of the parents? They do, but so do the children, who never chose the passions or commitments,” thereby indicating the same approach to both films. Where Doctorow’s novel focuses on Daniel’s growth and development through coming to terms with his past, and as a result offers insight into the New Left/old left tension, Lumet’s focus on

In an interview concurrent with the film's release, producers Griffin Dunne and Amy Robinson stated that they had originally intended to make a film about the life of Fay Stender, an (in)famous counterculture lawyer who defended Huey Newton amongst others.³⁷ They noted that this idea had met with obvious studio disinterest and originally studios had rejected *Running on Empty* for the same reason, a failure to envisage who would want to see a film about sixties radicals. This reaction suggests a reason for prioritising family over politics in the film, although studio pressure to make *Running on Empty* more appealing to a politically-apathetic audience was resisted when Foner was pressured to change the story to that of a boy who runs away from his "terrible radical family" into the arms of "middle America".³⁸ Indeed, this studio rejection of the film's political nature extended to Warner's marketing campaign that, much to Lumet's disgust, used the "magical River Phoenix" as its focal point.³⁹ This focus is clear in the tagline of the film's theatrical poster that reads: "In 1971, Annie and Arthur Pope blew up a napalm lab to protest the war. Ever since they have been on the run from the FBI. They chose their lives. *Now their son must choose his*" (see figure 4; my emphasis).

Patty Hearst and *Running on Empty*, then, present divergent versions of the violent turn taken by the anti-war movement. Through its fidelity to

"who pays for the passions and commitments of the parents" almost dispenses with the social-historical aspect of the novel. Instead of an interrogation of political realities, this perspective is transformed into mere backdrop for the "family" story. Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 14.

³⁷ Gitlin, "The Blunder Years," 49.

³⁸ Thompson, "Naomi Foner," 42.

³⁹ Lumet, *Making Movies*, 203. Lumet lamented that the "head of production decided on an entire audience of adolescents, because the star was the magical River Phoenix, a teenage idol... so in his wisdom, that meant a teen audience."

Hearst's version of her story and the limiting subjective, first-person stylistic strategy of presenting events from her perspective, *Patty Hearst* portrays the members of the SLA and, by extension, anti-war activists as cartoonish cliché-spouting stereotypes, thereby reinforcing notions of the "bad sixties." *Running on Empty*, despite being more sympathetic to sixties idealism, similarly presents this violent, quasi-psychotic splinter of the movement. However, through its presentation of the Popes and their "family values," it works hard to underline that not all sixties radicals followed such a path. Furthermore, through its illustration of the Popes' continuing activism on environmental and union matters, the film emphasises that the idealism of the era has not vanished but has been redirected into more localised issues since the war ended.



Figure 4.

II: The Spirit of the Sixties Versus the Mores of the Eighties: Revitalisation Through Counterculture.

The decision by Warner's marketing department to make *Running on Empty*'s teen-idol star, River Phoenix, the focal point of its marketing is unsurprising in the context of the proven commercial attraction of the "Brat Pack" of young stars in the late 1980s. The label was first applied to a group of young actors – including Matthew Broderick, Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson, Molly Ringwald, and Ally Sheedy – who made their names in the hugely successful, adolescent-themed productions of John Hughes, such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986).⁴⁰ The group quickly expanded to include actors such as Robert Downey Jr., Charlie Sheen, and Kiefer Sutherland. "High concept" films such as *The Lost Boys* (1987), the Brat Pack vampire film, and *Young Guns* (1988), the Brat Pack western, continued to consolidate the Brat Pack's commercial viability. In the same way that Oliver Stone had used the star quality of Tom Cruise to help attract a broad audience to *Born on the Fourth of July*, the bankability of the Brat Pack led filmmakers to cast them in roles in productions about the 1960s in order to draw young audiences. Young audiences have traditionally been seen as the majority of filmgoers and, therefore, appealing to them is essential to persuade producers of the possibility of commercial success necessary to obtain financing.

⁴⁰ Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Scribner's, 2000), 211-3.

Ernest Thompson, the writer and director of *1969* (1988), intended his film as a “tribute to the time” and described Scott, the film’s central character played by Kiefer Sutherland, in autobiographical terms: like Scott, he was “young and idealistic and dealing with the world from that perspective.”⁴¹ The films analysed in this section use the actors of the Brat Pack to reassert, for a young audience, the “idealism” and rebelliousness of the sixties in contrast to the cynical conservative materialism that characterised the 1980s. For Haynes Johnson, articulating the generally-held consensus, America in the 1980s was typified by individualist self-indulgence as “deal makers, money managers, and paper shufflers flourished,” and was a time of little originality that harked back to the conformity and coherence of the 1950s as a lost utopia.⁴² The contrast of the mores of the sixties and the eighties was exemplified in the television series *Family Ties*, Ronald Reagan’s favourite sitcom.⁴³ The series featured Michael J. Fox as a conservative child of the eighties, who sleeps with a picture of William Buckley, Jr. above his bed, whose values are set against those of his countercultural parents. However, while the tensions inherent in this cross-generational conflict were maintained for the seven-year run of the programme, such conflict is always resolved and the idealism of the

⁴¹ 1969: *Production Information* (Los Angeles: Atlantic Releasing Corporation, 1988), 7; Leonard Klady, “‘1969’: A Look at Coming of Age in Turbulent Times,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1988, Calendar 28.

⁴² Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 461.

⁴³ David Haglund, “Reagan’s Favorite Sitcom: How *Family Ties* Spawned a Conservative Hero,” *Slate*, March 2, 2007, <http://www.slate.com/id/2160944/> (accessed March 22, 2007). The embodiment of eighties conservatism in Fox’s character is further enhanced by the intertextual relation with *Back to the Future* (1985) which Timothy Corrigan reads as epitomising the era’s nostalgia for an innocent 1950s utopia. Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 35.

sixties is reasserted in the films in this section – *1969*, *True Believer* (1989), *Flashback* (1990), and *Class Action* (1991).

1969 was the only film in this cycle to be set in the sixties, although, as an early voiceover informs, “The sixties hadn’t really hit yet in our small town in Maryland.” The film echoes *Running on Empty* in that it plays out the inter-generational strife of the sixties within the microcosm of a family. Its central character, proto-hippie Scott (Sutherland), clashes with his hawkish father (Bruce Dern) who alienates his wife and Scott by proudly sending his other son to Vietnam. Scott and his best friend Ralph (Robert Downey, Jr.) go to college and then embark on a voyage of self-discovery across America, enabling the film to use many of the standard signifiers of the era, before returning to their home town to protest the war as Ralph faces the draft and Scott’s brother is killed in action. The similar strategies of *1969* and *Running on Empty* were noted by reviewers on the film’s release, although the blanket denunciation of Thompson’s film was in stark contrast to the favourable responses to Lumet’s. In *The Washington Post*, Rita Kempley read *1969* as a synthetic attempt to evoke the spirit of the sixties that is lost in a “fog of nostalgia.”⁴⁴ Janet Maslin posited that the film fails to capture the mindset of the sixties because it is “set in the land of high sentiment, family feuds and generation-gap histrionics,” which David Ehrenstein saw as displaying “all the depth and insight of ‘New Republic’ editorial.”⁴⁵ Katherine Dieckmann

⁴⁴ Rita Kempley, “Dippy Hippie Drama,” *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1988, C7.

⁴⁵ Janet Maslin, “2 Families Seek Peace With Honor, in ‘1969,’” *New York Times*, November 18, 1988, C10; David Ehrenstein, “Flashing back to ‘1969,’” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, November 18, 1988, *1969* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

epitomised the general response by beginning her review in *The Village Voice* by stating that the film “is so bad, it’s a war crime.”⁴⁶ In Thompson’s attempt to ground *1969* in familial melodrama *and* discursively recount the many facets of the counterculture, the focus on family obfuscates any promise of a serious perspective on the anti-war protest movement. This “micro” take on the counterculture leaves the larger issues of the protest movement ambiguous and the characterisation of the protagonists, especially Scott’s continual invocation of “personal freedom,” makes them appear selfish.

The apparent selfishness of both Scott and Ralph is epitomised during the section of *1969* when they are at college. It begins with shots of girls on campus as seen through Scott’s telescope as he says, “This is our dream, a beautiful, beautiful girl. The kind of girl you’d die for.” Scott then becomes aware that Ralph has not read for class and asks him if he remembers why they came to college. When Ralph replies, “to have fun,” Scott responds angrily, “No, to not get drafted. That’s why we came to college.” At a time when protest against the war was predominant on campuses and the political awareness among students of gender inequality high, Scott’s emphasis on a “beautiful girl” as his dream and on avoidance of the draft as the reason for going to college serves to demonstrate a narcissism that many of those against the protest movement denounced it as being. This is especially, ahistorically troubling as *1969* attempts to revisit the year in which the My Lai massacre became public and the largest anti-war marches in Washington occurred. Yet

⁴⁶ Katherine Dieckmann, “The Year That Wasn’t,” *The Village Voice*, November 22, 1988, 70.

the film nevertheless sets up Scott and Ralph as a kind of comedic double-act, with Ralph's reduction of everything to jocularity designed to contrast with Scott's earnestness.⁴⁷

An anti-war protest that they encounter on campus enforces their, and consequently the film's, schematic involvement with the spirit of protest – the very “idealism” that Thompson wanted to capture. The scene takes place as their mothers and Ralph's sister, Beth (Winona Ryder), visit them. As they walk into the dormitory a professor is addressing a small crowd from the steps. Scott tells his mother that this is “your basic anti-war touch football demonstration,” metaphorically reducing the protest to a game. Significantly, there are no placards; SDS appears not to exist there. The professor asks three pertinent questions: “Why are we in Vietnam? How many of you sweet-faced mother's sons are dying to find out? What are you gonna do about it?” The only reply that comes is “take the building,” and chaos ensues as baton-wielding police appear from nowhere as Jimi Hendrix's version of “All Along the Watchtower” erupts on the soundtrack. Therefore, *1969* answers the questions raised by U.S. involvement in Vietnam only with the chaos that characterised much of the media coverage of the day and thus offers a decontextualised explanation for campus violence. Furthermore, the presence of the mothers and Beth within the scene is an example of the obfuscation of a

⁴⁷ It is not my intention here to signal that every student at every university was involved in anti-war activity, or to deny that the narcissistic gratification that has come to characterise the era is myth. Even those only exposed to the era through the cinematic products of the counterculture from *The Trip* (1967), through *Psych-Out* (1968) and *Easy Rider* (1969), to the poignant campus-comedy *Getting Straight* (1970), would be aware of this. However, for a film that attempts to depict *cross-generation* anti-war sentiment, these scenes of campus life seem glib.

serious interpretation of the era or the complexities of police involvement through the focus on family. Scott enters the melee, not as a participant in protest, but to rescue Beth. Tellingly, as Scott and Ralph leave the building, Ralph says, “Man, that was fun,” and Scott replies unironically, “We fought in the revolution, man.” In the scene that follows Beth, who the film informs us is “the smart one,” addresses her graduating high school class as valedictorian and tells them that she witnessed a “*fight* over the war in Vietnam” at the college. As she is “the smart one,” her avoidance of analysis of the socio-political situation is synonymous with the film’s position, reducing the extant divisions in the country to a mere “fight.” “There’s something wrong in America,” she says, “I don’t know what it is but I’m scared. There’s something wrong when everybody’s mad with everybody else. There’s something wrong when we don’t understand what our country’s doing.”⁴⁸

The tendency in *1969* to present a schematic version of the era is continued as Scott and Ralph embark on a road trip. Contrary to the possibility to transform and restructure society and the bounds of the human imagination that many saw in the counterculture, for Scott “freedom” is, “School’s out.

⁴⁸ The screen time afforded to Beth’s speech, signalling its importance to the filmmakers, and the absence of analysis within it, warrants reproduction of the text in full: “There’s something wrong in America. I don’t know what it is but I’m scared. There’s something wrong when everybody’s mad with everybody else. There’s something wrong when we don’t understand what our country’s doing. When we were little kids, and too young to understand, John Kennedy said, ‘Ask what you can do for your country’ [*sic.*]. And whom are we supposed to ask now? President Nixon? Does he know? Does he care? A few weeks ago, down at Barton State, there was a fight over the war in Vietnam. And this boy fell against me bleeding. And now, like Lady MacBeth, I can’t seem to get the blood off. My neighbour’s over there. He is my friend, I don’t want him to die. My other friends could go, or my own brother. And for what, to win? Is that winning, when hundreds of American boys die week after week? If I were a boy, I wouldn’t want to go die for something that makes people so angry. Would you? We already have bombs enough to destroy every organism on this planet. Where will we be five years from now? Or twenty years from now? We are supposed to be the future. This is our country, what can we do?”

You put your brains away for the summer [as] you're grooving along in your own car." Scott likens them to leaves because like leaves "the wind will pick us up and take us wherever we want." Their immaturity, as illustrated in their encounter with campus protest, is continued as they encounter a naked "be-in" yet remain clothed, while Ralph just wants to "go home." On their return Ralph is arrested after he breaks into the draft board office to remove his file, and, after clashing with his father, Scott (along with Beth with whom he has become romantically involved) decides to flee to Canada to avoid the draft but they return at the border.

1969 reaches its denouement at the funeral of Scott's brother who, having been reported missing in action, is confirmed as being killed in Vietnam. Speaking at the funeral, Scott reaches a reconciliation with his father by noting that he fought in a good war in contrast to Vietnam. Although crucially he has not tried, Scott says that "it seems there's really nothing you can do" about ending the war, but manages to persuade his father and the rest of the town to unite behind him as he marches on the police station to call for Ralph's release. The town's sheriff, having previously told Scott's father that his own son has not been the same since he was in Vietnam so "we all just better think about it some," releases Ralph to the cheering crowd. Scott's final voiceover relates that later that year many from the town, including his father, marched in Washington along with 700,000 others to protest the war, before closing the film with the words, "This film is dedicated to all of us dedicated to peace."

During the march to the police station the group pass a cinema with a marquee advertising *Easy Rider* (1969) and *True Grit* (1969) – a perfect analogy for the polarisation of the era and for the reconciliation that has just occurred. Richard Combs, in his review, noted the symbolic potential of this moment and argued that it is indicative of the quality of 1969 that this moment seems “more inadvertent than intentional, more a matter of earnest period drama than any attempt to extract and reflect upon significant detail.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, the film fails to enlighten or bring a serious perspective on the “idealism” that Thompson intended to provide to his audience. It presents its protagonists as searching for a selfish kind of personal freedom rather than, like the film, engaging in the era’s upheavals in a meaningful way. Instead of a defence of the sixties, this apparent narcissism practically invites the film to be invoked in a right-wing critique of the counterculture. It is, therefore, precisely the sort of film that Michael Medved could use in his section, “Vicious Vets, Pristine Protestors,” which targets films in which “left-wing crusaders from the 60s... contrast the ‘selfish materialism’ of the 1980s”.⁵⁰

Two legal thrillers, *True Believer* and *Class Action*, focus upon the disparity between the values of the sixties and the eighties through the differences between their young and older protagonists. In *Class Action* it is the older man whose liberal values contrast with his daughter’s corporate mentality, whereas in Robert Downey, Jr.’s next film after 1969, *True Believer*, it is his youthful idealism that reignites the spirit of sixties in the

⁴⁹ Richard Combs, review of 1969, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1989, 245.

⁵⁰ Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 230.

older man (former-counterculture lawyer Eddie Dodd played by James Woods). Although Dodd maintains a hippie appearance with his long, graying ponytail and his penchant for marijuana, he now specialises in defending drug dealers having deceived himself into thinking that drug cases represent the last front in the battle for “basic personal freedoms” of the constitution against police entrapment. This perspective is at odds with an era when drugs are cited as a major cause of the disruption of society. Dodd’s office is decorated with tellingly faded photographs evoking a lost era that is contrasted by the clientele that fill his office. The photographs signal his participation in anti-war demonstrations, he is pictured alongside Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, and he is variously shown celebrating his successful defences with and of members of the Black Panther Party and the protest movement. It is this Eddie Dodd that attracts recently graduated Roger (Downey Jr.) to come to New York and work for him. Roger knows many of Dodd’s summations by heart and they have fuelled his idealistic mentality, but he is appalled by what Dodd has become. Redemption for Dodd comes through the case of an Asian-American refugee who has served eight years for a murder he did not commit due to institutional inequalities and police racism. Dodd initially refuses to take the case, but agrees with simplistic ease once Roger berates him for selling out his principles, after which Dodd becomes a self-proclaimed “true believer.”

Of course there is a simplicity in the *True Believer*’s message that a little idealism can relight the fire of those former radicals who are seen to have

sold out their principles, Furthermore, the film emphasises that the cynicism that Dodd has come to embody need not be the final end of the countercultural idealism. David Denby saw *True Believer* as a “defiant antidote to all those films, plays, and TV shows that look back on the sixties in a spirit of self-despairing pity,” in which a belief that one can change the world has been clouded by an imagined need to face up to reality.⁵¹ The film’s interrogation of the Dodd’s redemption is significant when considered alongside the career of J. Tony Serra on whom Dodd is based. Serra, who defended Huey Newton in 1979 and SLA member Russell Little in 1981, objected to the film’s casting of him as “a burnout,” calling it “b.s. imported from Hollywood.”⁵² However, Serra admitted that he admired the “courage, the risk taking, the risk taking, the bravado,” as well as the honesty and integrity of drug dealers and believes in defending them.⁵³ In changing Serra’s story and offering a more conventional narrative resolution, then, *True Believer* is advocating a reappraisal and reclaiming of the sixties spirit that cleanses the defending of drugs and drug-use – a negative legacy of the era frequently raised by it detractors – and replaces it with a more acceptable and admirable goal of clearing a wrongfully accused (minority) prisoner.

Where *True Believer* centres its advocacy of sixties idealism on the acquittal of imprisoned innocent, *Class Action* uses the disregard for public

⁵¹ David Denby, “Out of the Sixties,” *New York*, February 20, 1989, 70.

⁵² Robert Chow, “Counterculture’s Warrior Lawyer,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1989, E1. Serra was also the subject of a feature profile in the *New York Times* when the film was released. Sonia Taitz, “‘True Believer’ Makes a Case For Idealism,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1989, H23.

⁵³ Chow, “Counterculture’s Warrior Lawyer,” E1.

safety in favour of profits of a major car company as its plot device. It again sets the mores of the sixties and the eighties within a generational conflict as the father, a famous civil liberties lawyer Jed (Gene Hackman), acts for the defence against his daughter, Maggie (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), who works for a typically nefarious corporate law firm. The contrast between the two, both as characters and as representatives of their generations, is effectively established in the film's opening that cross-cuts between neighbouring courtrooms where they are trying different cases. Jed's style of argument is poetic and colourful as he defends a man who has driven his truck into a factory that has polluted his local environment, a day he describes as "one bright shining day when that hellhole of a factory closed down." The applause that his rhetoric encourages distracts the judge in the courtroom in which Maggie is clinically stating that the "law not charity must dictate our course here today." Their differences are further contrasted through the *mise-en-scène* of their respective offices and homes. Jed's office is cluttered and warm, decorated with Native American art, and has the multicultural staff and working class clients that one would expect from the author of "Civil Rights on Trial," whereas Maggie works in a modern glass and steel skyscraper with blank offices characteristic of a "production line corporate clone" that her father maligns her as being.⁵⁴ Domestically, Jed's home contains a framed

⁵⁴ The offices used in the production as the location for Jed's practice are the offices of J. Tony Serra, the basis for the character of Eddie Dodd in *True Believer*. Serra's courtroom style influenced Gene Hackman's portrayal of Jed. Having seen Serra in court, Hackman noted that "I watched this man, and I thought, boy, he just gives you permission to do what you think is right." Class Action: *Production Information* (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1991), 6; Julie Lew, "San Francisco becomes a 'Class Action' suitor," *New York Times*, February 25, 1990, B23.

photograph of George McGovern, while Maggie's cold apartment is decorated with framed posters of the "Monopoly" squares Boardwalk and Park Place.⁵⁵

As in the case of *Running on Empty*, the marketing of *Class Action* made no reference to its political themes in its focus on the rivalry between the father and daughter. However, the theme of contrasting eras is paramount in the film as it represents the motivation for their estrangement and their different ideologies. Maggie's choices are presented as being in opposition to everything her father stood and stands for because of Jed's extra-marital sexual exploits. Specifically, Maggie blames Jed's affair with his legal partner as having taken not only her faith in her parents' marriage but also her faith in her childhood role model of the female lawyer. Maggie's resentment is not assuaged by her father's renunciation of his philandering, and her association of his betrayals with his civil liberties work has coloured her perception to the extent that she blurs his narcissism with his civil liberties work. She berates him by saying, "the only thing you cared about the huddled masses was how high you could stand on their shoulders." As Jenny Turner observed in her review, both Jed and Maggie view the other as being unfaithful in some sense: Maggie cannot forgive Jed for his adultery, and Jed cannot forgive Maggie for "flouting his influence and selling out" to her corporate firm.⁵⁶ It is as important to the film that Jed's newly-found fidelity stands as a repudiation of the sexually-relaxed sixties, just as Maggie's eventual comprehending of her client's deception and (unethical) assistance to Jed's case signals her rejection

⁵⁵ James Bowman, "Swinging No More," *The American Spectator*, May 1991, 43.

⁵⁶ Jenny Turner, review of *Class Action*, *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 3 (1991): 40.

of the self-serving corporate mentality of the eighties. Rather than a simple return to sixties idealism, then, the film offers a negotiation between the two eras.

Of the films that deal with the sixties-eighties conflict, the most successful and interesting is a very different Kiefer Sutherland vehicle to *1969: Flashback*, co-starring Dennis Hopper.⁵⁷ The tension inherent in the film's premise is immediately foregrounded through its poster legend – “The Yippie and Yuppie. Only a vowel stands between them.” – and the opening credit sequence effectively contrasts the conservative eighties with the spirit of the sixties. It begins with an ironic collage of images of eighties consumerism that targets narcissistic body fascism through images of gymnasiums, sun beds, liposuction operations, diets, vitamin pills and Perrier adverts. Scenes featuring homeless people counter shots of commuter stations, Wall Street, credit cards and ATMs, which are, in turn, juxtaposed with foreign currency, a Japanese flag, Toyota assembly lines and tarred-wildlife, consequences of environmental disaster. Images of satellites segue into station idents for music channels MTV and VH1 that significantly bear the legend: “Because Baby Boomers Deserve Their Own Channel.”

⁵⁷ *Flashback* was produced by Marvin Worth, who also produced *Patty Hearst* and *Malcolm X* (1992). While it is now difficult to disassociate Sutherland from the conservative television series *24*, during this period he also starred in *Article 99* (1992) which was set in a V.A. hospital. This film offers no indication as to *when* it is set, but as idealistic young doctors battle the cynical hospital administrators the film cannot help but recall *M*A*S*H* (1969) and, therefore, the extratextual invocation of Donald Sutherland, Kiefer's father, and his anti-war participation in the FTA (Fuck the Army) concert movement. This is especially evident in a scene in which Kiefer's character dons Hawkeye's trademark round spectacles and fishing cap.

Flashback follows clean-living FBI agent Jack Buckner (Sutherland) as he transports a recently surfaced, ageing radical Huey Walker (Hopper) to trial. Although the name Huey Walker suggests “the serious militancy of the 60s,” Hopper’s character is a thinly veiled version of Abbie Hoffman.⁵⁸ Early in the film a doctored *Life* magazine cover proclaims him the “Court Jester of the Radical Left,” whose crime is that he uncoupled Spiro Agnew’s train carriage at a campaign rally.⁵⁹ In addition, the character of Walker is obviously a play on the intertext of Hopper’s own iconic association with the sixties through *Easy Rider* (1969), a film that presidential candidate George Bush used to characterise the “permissive philosophy” of the 1960s in a campaign speech in 1988.⁶⁰ At one point in the film Walker berates some “reformed” hippies trying to find *Born to be Wild* on the jukebox for believing that they are still radical just because they rent *Easy Rider* once in a while.

Roger Ebert likened *Flashback* to *Midnight Run* (1988) so it comes as little surprise when the pair are stranded penniless and on the run from the authorities during their cross-country trip.⁶¹ *Flashback* reveals that Walker has engineered his own capture to obtain publicity for his autobiography that his

⁵⁸ Vincent Canby, “Liberal Old vs. Conservative Young in ‘Flashback,’” *New York Times*, February 2, 1990, C13. Intriguingly, *Flashback* started production on April 10, 1989, just a few days before Hoffman’s suicide.

⁵⁹ In interviews promoting *Flashback*, Hopper repeatedly denied that his character was based on Hoffman, although from the film it is clear that he protests too much. See, for example, David Denicolo, “Dennis Hopper,” *Interview*, February 1990, 123; Judy Stone, “Dennis Hopper’s Return Trip To the ’60s,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 28, 1990, Sunday Datebook 25.

⁶⁰ Maureen Dowd, “Bush Boasts of Turnaround From ‘Easy Rider’ Society,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1988, B7.

⁶¹ Roger Ebert, review of *Flashback*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 2, 1990, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1990/02/529368.html (accessed August 25, 2004). *Midnight Run* follows a bounty hunter who must take a white collar criminal from New York to Los Angeles, while avoiding capture by local police, the FBI, and the mafia.

publisher has opted not to issue due to a general disinterest in the sixties which echoes Gus's lament about the disinterest of the press in *Running on Empty*. Coloured by his years of underground despair, Walker has come to think of himself as "just a prankster," doubts that are assuaged when the pair come across an abandoned hippie commune. The former commune's lone remaining inhabitant, Maggie, imparts to him the importance that his speeches have had for her "generation," thereby reinforcing the historical importance of protest for both Walker's character and the wider consensus version of the sixties that the films in this chapter re-imagine. Furthermore, a mural painted on the wall of the commune's main building that depicts Walker wearing a toga made of an American flag, which again links his character to Abbie Hoffman who was often pictured wearing a shirt made from the flag. This signifier serves to reinforce the patriotism of Walker's and, by association, his generation's anti-war position.

Flashback explicitly underlines the value of sixties' protest as the film nears its conclusion. As the police close in to recapture Walker, a diversion is created in order to aid his escape through the playing of an 8-track (!) recording of one of his speeches through the loudspeaker system of the commune's psychedelically decorated hippie bus.⁶² As the speech plays a crowd with a broad demographic gathers around the bus and is moved by Walker's universally relevant message when he says: "It's a crazy time. You

⁶² The decoration of the bus makes it a double for Ken Kesey's travelling bus "Furthur," and the 1960s political satirist Mort Sahl wrote the speech. Leonard Kladay, "Back to his roots," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1989, *Flashback* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

must not ratify your government's madness. They talk of patriotism but it's a song of death... You can make a difference. You can make a choice."⁶³ That this speech touches on the trope of patriotism that was often used to attack those protesting the war makes the film's intention clear, especially when the crowd begin to clap and the camera moves through the young, the middle-aged to the elderly, all united in agreement with Walker's words.

The family theme of the majority of the films in this chapter is also present in *Flashback*. Buckner's character, it is revealed, grew up on a commune established by his mother and father, only to reject his upbringing as a result of the peer-ridicule it generated at school. His rejection of his sixties origins is due to embarrassment rather than the violence associated with the period and offers an interesting counter to the ridicule that often characterises clichéd remembrances of the hippie movement, even when they are intended positively as in *1969*. Through contact with positive representatives of the sixties – Walker and Maggie – and his consequent

⁶³ The full speech heard in the film reads: "Wow! What a crowd. Talk about your vast multitudes. Be honest now. Show of hands. How many of you came to see me? Okay. Now, how many of you came here for the free sex? That's what I thought. Well, guess what. You're having free sex right now. That's right. I say you're being screwed right now and you don't even know it. I'm talkin' about this war we're in. I'm talkin' about the bozos who sit in the driver's seat of our government. They're givin' it to you good. And all of you, you know what? They're not even going to call you in the morning to say thanks. I wanna say something about this war... [inaudible] But how do we get out? Turn the boats around. We've now dropped more bombs, by tonnage, on Vietnam than on Germany and Japan together in WW2. Enough to kill everyone in Vietnam twenty-eight times. Unfortunately most of us can only die once... [inaudible] We spent seventeen billion in Vietnam. We could've bought every Vietnamese a house cheaper than that. It's a crazy time. You must not ratify your government's madness. They talk of patriotism but it's a song of death. If you're a girl, no one will be here to love you. If you're a parent, you'll never see the harvest, the grandchildren. But those have the most at stake are the young and the strong and the hopeful, the boys. Only our best qualify to die. It's not dangerous to be old and frail. The young have the most to lose. And they're betting you don't care and I'm betting you do. You can make a difference. You can make a choice. In that sense, you're the most important generation since Jefferson. And what do you get if you win? The only thing I can promise you is a clear conscience. Well some of us have to be in court in the morning so I'll see you later."

rediscovery of his roots, Buckner is able to reconcile his rejection of his familial and cultural past in a way that the filmmakers clearly hope and believe America can and possibly will. David Loughery, the screenwriter of *Flashback*, believed that this would be the case. Recognising the conservative revolt against the era he told an interviewer, “What we saw during the ’80s was a rebellion against the ’60s lifestyle. The late ’80s are very conservative, much like the early ’60s. I think there is going to be another counter-culture revolution in the next few years – another rebellion against the status quo.”⁶⁴ Reviewers observed this belief in the film. For example, Stanley Kauffmann saw its regret at the passing of the sixties idealism, but noted that it ends “with a hope for the recrudescence of that spirit.”⁶⁵ *Flashback*’s desire to paint a positive legacy for, and indeed to draw future hope from, the protests of the sixties is clear. Despite Walker mistakenly predicting that “the 90s will make the 60s look like the 50s” (Newt Gingrich would recognise the irony), *Flashback* cleverly plays with the tension that arises through the juxtaposition of sixties and eighties types and ideologies.

With the exception of *1969* wherein the presentation of the era stymied its intention, the films analysed in this section all successfully reassert the idealism of the sixties in contrast to the materialism of the eighties by “smuggling,” to use Martin Scorsese’s term, their messages into generic templates.⁶⁶ However, they do so by reaching a negotiation of sorts.

⁶⁴ *Flashback: Production Information*, 2.

⁶⁵ Stanley Kauffmann, “Old times,” *The New Republic*, February 19, 1990, 26.

⁶⁶ Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 98.

Flashback may end with Buckner leaving the FBI to ride off into the sunset on a motorcycle (another reference to *Easy Rider*), but Walker emerges from a limousine having seen healthy profits from his autobiography. Similarly, in *True Believer* Eddie Dodd rediscovers his idealism in ceasing to defend drug dealers (drugs being here synonymous with the sixties) in order to defend the innocent, while Jed in *Class Action* regains his daughter's respect by repudiating his sexually free past. Nevertheless, these three films certainly represented a positive sixties for an eighties audience.

III: The Exception of *Born on the Fourth of July*.

In the first chapter of this thesis I argued that, in setting their representations of Vietnam veterans in the 1980s present and generically subsuming their experiences within familial melodramas, *Distant Thunder*, *Jacknife*, and *In Country* removed their veterans from the context of a divided nation. This enabled the films' avoidance of the political realities of the veteran's immediate return that were antithetical to their agenda of healing. The films analysed in this chapter operate similarly in that they retrospectively assert the positive legacies of the sixties but, through their location in the (1980s) present, they do so in a manner that engages less in the intricacies of the period than in a generalised idealism that eschews the possibility of experiential recreation of the times and their complexity.⁶⁷ As I argued in chapter one, *Born on the Fourth of July* reinserted much of the era's divisiveness that impacted upon the experiences of returning veterans into the cultural memory. This was substantially enabled by its period setting. Further, its representation of the anti-war movement and the counterculture is not obstructed by the narrative constructs of the peaceful-violent protestor binary or the opposition between the values of the sixties and the eighties as the films in this chapter are. Therefore, even though its representation occupies only a small section of the film, Stone presents the least contrived representation of the anti-war movement's complicated, multifarious nature to date: *Born on the*

⁶⁷ Of course *1969* is set in the period, but its schematic nature prevents it from being taken as a "serious" representation of the era.

Fourth of July was also seen as the “first popular film to deal seriously with the antiwar movement”⁶⁸

The first example that the film provides of protest against the war is in television reports of the street riots that occurred in Chicago at the time of the 1968 Democratic Convention that Kovic watches while he is in the veterans’ hospital. The news footage first shows police officers clubbing protestors before cutting to the burning of an American flag as a disembodied commentator states that Chicago has an “Alice in Wonderland quality about it.” Kovic’s reaction is that the protestors should “love it or leave it.” Crucially, this sequence represents the skewed version of anti-war protest that television news portrayed and is symptomatic of its preferred focus on violence and discord. The final image of the news report shows a group of demonstrators making peace signs, but their images are blurred so that no distinction can be made between them: they become a homogenous mass rather than individuals whose points of view can be heard. Furthermore, Kovic’s viewing is interrupted by a raving veteran whose shouting drowns out the report and is representative of the “noise” that many in the population experienced the protests as being. This is again underlined later in the film when Kovic’s mother, its representative of the silent majority’s support for the war, changes the channel from a report on an anti-war march in Washington to “Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In”; protestors are present in American living rooms but the channel can always be changed.

⁶⁸ Jack E. Davis, “New Left, Revisionist, In-Your-Face History: Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* Experience,” in *Oliver Stone’s USA: Film, History, and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 143.

The first personal experience that Kovic has of protest in *Born on the Fourth of July* comes on his return to Massapequa when he participates in the Fourth of July parade. In a brief scene there are a multiplicity of protest reactions presented. To the strains of “Up, Up and Away,” Kovic, dressed in full uniform, rides in the back of a white Lincoln Continental bearing the sign “Welcome Home Ron Kovic.” He waves nervously at first and then flinches at exploding firecrackers in the same way the Second World War veterans had in the film’s opening 1956 parade. Unlike 1969, the sixties have definitely come to this small town. Stone shows that ‘Head’ shops have joined the A&P on Main Street and a diverse section of the population is shown in the crowd watching the parade. Young “rockers” hurl abuse at the passing soldiers and incite them into a confrontation. Denim-clad “redneck” types direct their middle-fingers at him, and are juxtaposed with the peace signs of tie-dyed clothed hippies. The widescreen frame is also filled with the flags of the silent majority, the majority of whom cheer, but some older folk look on sympathetically and shake their heads at what the war has done to Kovic. The tensions within the crowd is paralleled by changes in the soundtrack: the military march that has taken the place of “Up, Up and Away” in turn gives way to John Williams’ mournful score. Roger Ebert, in his review, collapsed the various crowd groups into a single description of them as “peaceniks,” but this misinterprets what this short sequence achieves.⁶⁹ It builds on the television images of the blurred, homogenous mass of protestors at the

⁶⁹ Roger Ebert, review of *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 20, 1989, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1989/12/388523.html (accessed May 21, 2004).

Democratic Convention by showing that there was more than one method of protesting the war even in the small town of Massapequa.

Born on the Fourth of July's representation of anti-war protest continues when Kovic goes to visit his childhood-sweetheart, Donna, at university. The film emphasises peaceful student activities and the singing of anti-war songs that provides a backdrop for their night-time promenade around campus. Stone has retrospectively noted that the scene represented an "idyllic view" of campus life, but that "students *were* the heart and soul of the protest movement... great as a body... the best part of America [at that time]." ⁷⁰ And yet Stone is not afraid to skewer their naïve hubris. In the scene that precedes Ron and Donna's walk the couple catch up in a bar. Donna, on the organising committee for a post-Kent State demonstration, conveys her earnest feelings about the war and its consequences for the boys "who've sacrificed their bodies and minds." She tells Ron of the way in which the footage of the "dead girls" at Kent State could not but help bring to mind "that poster of the children who were killed at My Lai." While epitomising the way in which many in the protest movement drew parallels between these two events – the bringing home of the war – this leaves Ron, who still believes in the war and America, aghast. Despite being a radical, Donna is never shown to be violent or intent on the overthrow of the government and yet her speech is evidence of an extraordinary social reality in which ordinary people are forced into extraordinary circumstances by their beliefs. As Donna says at the

⁷⁰ Oliver Stone, "Commentary," *Born on the Fourth of July*, special ed. DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2004).

conclusion of their conversation: “The war is so wrong, Ronnie. It’s so wrong. I just had to do *something*.”

The movement’s hubris is also displayed in the scene of campus protest, the most evocative yet filmed. The real Abbie Hoffman, flanked by Black Panthers on one side and SDS activists on the other, declares that “we’re really getting an education now,” and rails against “General Waste-more-land” as an effigy of Richard Nixon is burned.⁷¹ However, unlike the decontextualised college protest scene in *1969*, Stone establishes this demonstration as one of many in America: Hoffman tells the crowd that over two-hundred high-schools and over four-hundred universities are closed down by protests. Stone underlines the legitimacy and broad nature of the protest by contrasting the expected anti-war rhetoric of Hoffman with the voice of an African American veteran. The veteran, whose presence signals that anti-war protest was not just the domain of the privileged middle-class, tears off his medals while saying, “It don’t mean a thing... This is war. They just killed two brothers at Jackson State!” The police move in and attack the protestors, to evocative chants of “the whole world is watching.” This is far from a mere “fight” over the war that was presented in *1969*. Kovic looks on incredulously and his face shows another stage in his gradual transformation into an anti-war

⁷¹ Significantly, despite the cultural authority of Stone and Kovic, the problem of accurately representing history on film enables the “historian cop” to deride their attempts to reinvigorate and re-present the protest movement. This scene created a controversy at the time of the film’s release. Given that post-Kent State demonstrations and police violence occurred on many campuses around the country, this scene is a legitimate use of “dramatic licence.” However, Kovic never went to Syracuse University and police did not attack demonstrators there. This led to it being widely reported that the Syracuse Police union was considering filing a defamation suit against Stone. John Cassidy, “Into battle on political lines,” *The Sunday Times*, March 4, 1990, E1.

protestor, especially in light of Donna's words the night before the demonstration: "If you have any feelings against the war, you could really help. I mean you've been there and you know what it's like. You could tell people what's happening and they'd really listen to you."

Critics of the film took issue with Stone's brief representation of the protest movement. Devin McKinney claimed that in the film "social movements of great intricacy are freeze-dried into automatic, received images," the politics that bred them lost in a decontextualised nostalgia.⁷² Of course, the social movements of the era that led to this post-Kent State demonstration are not covered in the film, but the theme of the anti-war protest of non-veterans represents only one facet of Kovic's story. McKinney also overlooks the fact that the film is not merely revelling in nostalgia. Certainly, as Stone admitted, he presents an idyllic view of campus life, but he also presents the hubris of those in the movement and the difficulty that many ordinary citizens had in comprehending their message through the way it was represented in the media. The film insists that its representation of a campus protest was not an isolated event and sets it in the firm context of the post-Kent State moment. Significantly, while *Running on Empty*'s peaceful-violent protestor binary makes the Popes *too* nice and *too* perfect, *Born on the Fourth of July*'s rhetorical confidence circumvents the need for such a justifying narrative construct. Therefore, it is the least contrived film to date about the anti-war movement's complicated, multifarious nature.

⁷² Devin McKinney, review of *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1990): 45-6.

Given Stone's industry clout, and the creative independence that this allows within certain budgetary constraints, he could make the film that he wanted to make. Stone's quasi-independence and public persona, which allowed him to present the film to the public on his own terms, enabled him to avoid the industrial barriers that hindered other filmmakers. While the success of *Platoon* created a conducive industrial environment for the "green-lighting" of films about the sixties, marketing and distribution conflicts often stymied the attempts of the other filmmakers, forcing them to foreground their young "Brat Pack" stars and "micro" representations of the protest movement to the detriment of their original objectives – most notably in the case of *Running on Empty*. Furthermore, in creating a consensus view of the sixties, either in terms of differentiating peaceful from violent protestors or in contrasting the idealism of the sixties with the mores of the eighties, these films are forced to repudiate certain aspects of the counterculture – whether it be drugs in the case of *True Believer*, sexual freedom in the case of *Class Action*, the contrast of the monogamy of the Popes to Gus in *Running on Empty*, or the parody of sexual "camaraderie" in *Patty Hearst*. In resorting to such narrative constructions, in setting their narratives in the present-day (1980s), and through distilling the wider implications of the protest movement into the familial realm, these films often obfuscate the broad complexities of the anti-war movement and the counterculture. It is precisely because they obfuscate these wider realities that they succeed, albeit superficially, in setting up a

retrospective liberal consensus that reasserts the worth of sixties idealism. They add this to the cultural memory of the sixties in the face of the neo-conservative onslaught against the decade. *Born on the Fourth of July* is the exception that proves this paradigm. Its presentation of the ambiguities and hubris of the movement illustrates both the value and the necessity of anti-Vietnam War protest, emphasising the suffering inherent in protest that is devolved to the subtextual level in *Running on Empty*. Despite the pain and upheaval that protest causes, Stone shows that the protest movement's role in precipitating the end of an unjust war is a legacy worth defending.

Chapter Three

The Battling Biopics: The Assertion of Unconventional Lives.

For the second half of 1992, the major studios have planned three comparably expensive and ambitious film biographies, with Denzel Washington starring in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, Jack Nicholson playing the lead in Danny De Vito's [*sic.*] *Hoffa*, and Robert Downey Jr., impersonating Charlie Chaplin in Sir Richard Attenborough's *Chaplin*... Needless to say, all three of the chosen subjects provide filmmakers abundant opportunities to emphasize the injustice, intolerance, corruption and hypocrisy of the bad old U.S.A. One can only marvel at the fact that major studios have announced no plans to balance such downbeat tales by offering biographical epics with more affirmative potential: despite the unmistakable potential for profit and popularity, patriotic projects are flatly out of fashion in the film industry.

Michael Medved.¹

The biopic, defined by George Custen as a film "which depicts the life of a historical person, past or present," remains one of the most derided of Hollywood's genre staples.² Biopics are consistently expected to provide "the sentimental and conservative gratifications of the family melodrama," and a conventional type of history that has been "the butt of jokes rather more often than it has been the focus of serious analysis" by historians, film critics and theorists.³ Biopics are generally seen to satisfy the need for a benign metanarrative of history, but the four films examined in this chapter – *The*

¹ Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 231.

² George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 6. Custen's book, the only full length study of the genre, covers the almost three hundred biopic produced in Hollywood during the classical period of 1927-60. Custen continues his survey in "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980," *Biography* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 127-159.

³ Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo, "Hollywood Lives: the State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 93; Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 60.

Doors (1991), *JFK* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Hoffa* (1992) – seek to reassert the importance to American history of figures who stand somewhat outside of the standard narrative of nation. Further, they assert the importance of such figures in ways that are incommensurate with the right's preferred version of history during the culture war period.

Michael Medved complains that the major biopics produced during 1992 presented a version of the “bad old U.S.A.,” but in terms of the concerns of this thesis they represent an attempt to assert figures that have previously been marginalised, ridiculed or, in the case of Jim Garrison in *JFK*, demonised. Custen has suggested Hollywood biopics “cultivate the interests of their producers, presenting a world view that naturalizes certain lives and specific values over alternate ones.”⁴ The films in this chapter assert lives and values “alternate” to the dominant culture, (or to what the culture warriors would have been the dominant culture). Of course, these films may be seen to demonstrate a frustration with the twelve years of Republican power that comes to an end with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992; *Hoffa* especially reasserts the worthiness of union organising at the end of the Reagan-Bush era during which the unions had been reduced to little more than a special interest group. However, I argue that these films represent a historicist attempt to reassert the importance of sixties values through both the protagonists of the films themselves and the discourse that they generate through their controversies and buttressing extratexts.

⁴ Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 4.

I: The Problems of a Dionysian Biopic: Reading *The Doors* as the Sixties.

The programme for this evening is not new. You've seen this entertainment through and through... Did you have a good world when you died? Enough to base a movie on?

Jim Morrison.⁵

If Jim Morrison really was the way he is portrayed in Oliver Stone's *The Doors*, it's hard to see how he rates a movie.

Mick LaSalle.⁶

The Doors proved an instant referendum on the '60s, as well as on Morrison and Oliver Stone.

J. Hoberman.⁷

J. Hoberman notes that for the early months of 1991 New York appeared caught in a time warp. As protestors against the Gulf War filled the streets of the city and 1960s retro-fashions filled shop windows, Jim Morrison's face adorned the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire* and *The Village Voice*.⁸ However superficial the appearance of these sixties' tropes may appear, Hoberman's observation that Oliver Stone's *The Doors* (1991) was a cultural lightning rod was confirmed through the violently polarised reviews that the film received, although the positions that the film bolstered are surprising. Reviewing the film for *The Boston Globe*, Jay Carr expected it to get mixed reviews – "How you feel about it will depend on what baggage you bring to

⁵ Oliver Stone uses Morrison's poem *The Movie*, posthumously put to music by The Doors, to open his film.

⁶ Mick LaSalle, "The Doors Raises the Dead," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 1, 1991, E1.

⁷ J. Hoberman, "Out of Order," *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 1 (May 1991): 7.

⁸ Ibid.

it.”⁹ Unfortunately for Stone, what critics brought to this film were not preoccupations with Morrison or late-1960s acid rock, but with the meaning of the sixties themselves. Perhaps this is not surprising given Stone’s reputation as a chronicler of the sixties, but that the film can be clearly categorised as a biopic – a fairly conventional entertainer biopic - and therefore *not* political or historical, complicates responses to the film.¹⁰

Where the intentions of filmmakers discussed in the previous chapter stemmed from a desire to reassert the positive legacy of the sixties, Stone’s goal in presenting Morrison supposedly stems from his desire to “bring his life out into the light,” or perhaps more precisely, to show that “I worshipped *him*.”¹¹ As Stone told Craig MacInnis, he was “already braced for the thumbs-down he figured he would receive from ‘blue-nosed reactionaries,’” adding that the “right-wing media” were also certain to take exception to the film’s lush, psychedelic narrative.¹² In this section I contend that despite conducting comprehensive research for the project, Stone’s personal version of Morrison was not shared by others who subsequently attacked the film. I argue that Stone fundamentally misread the cultural landscape and the way in which, as J. Hoberman observed, his film would become a referendum on the sixties. His submersion in the debauchery of the late 1960s counterculture served to subvert those who attempted to “save” the legacy of the counterculture and,

⁹ Jay Carr, “In the end, a trip true to Morrison,” *The Boston Globe*, March 1, 1991, 25.

¹⁰ This was in spite of the fact that he had only made two “sixties” films up to this point, *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989)

¹¹ Glenn Collins, “Oliver Stone Is Moving on from Vietnam,” *New York Times*, January 2, 1990, C14; John H. Richardson and Judson Klinger, “People are Strange,” *Premiere*, March 1991, 64 (my emphasis).

¹² Craig MacInnis, “Stone worships at the altar of the Lizard King,” *The Toronto Star*, March 1, 1991, D1.

therefore, drew criticism from them. At the same time, the film provided fuel for those on the right who could express dismay with, yet secretly relish, the quasi-suicide of the Dionysian sixties represented in *The Doors*.

Stone embarked on his customarily intense research for *The Doors*, building on an already convoluted and protracted development process. A version of the film had been mooted for production as far back as 1980 with, among others, William Friedkin and Brian de Palma slated to direct and John Travolta and U2's Bono discussed as possible stars.¹³ The production company, Carolco, owned the rights to Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman's *No One Here Gets Out Alive: The Biography of Jim Morrison* (a bestseller of 1980) along with seventy-five interview transcripts that formed the raw elements of the book.¹⁴ In addition, Stone carried out further interviews, read many of the other works about The Doors, recruited Sugerman (the band's manager and still head of their business affairs), Paul Rothchild (their producer), and band members Robby Krieger and John Densmore as consultants. Stone also required his actors to attend a 1960s cultural "boot camp" to increase their understanding of the period.¹⁵

The history of The Doors is fraught with controversy and division. Although often considered the definitive biography, *No One Here Gets Out Alive* is inaccurate to many, including Morrison's family whose consent was

¹³ For an exhaustive summary of this process see Richardson and Klinger, "People are Strange," 66-8. Richardson and Klinger note that Stone had previously been (prophetically) rejected as a possible director by the surviving members of The Doors as "too dark."

¹⁴ Oliver Stone, "Stone Responds: On Seven Films," in *Oliver Stone's America: Film, History and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 240.

¹⁵ Paul Chutkow, "Oliver Stone and *The Doors*: Obsession Meets the Obsessed," *New York Times*, February 24, 1991, B18.

legally required before the film could proceed. Divisions also emerged among the surviving members of the band. Band leader Raymond Manzarek objected to the script's "melodramatic" treatment of Morrison and refused to be involved, and an early set report implied that Densmore had left the project after an argument with Stone.¹⁶ Even Sugerman, who was generally happy with the film and the resulting publicity for the band, felt that Stone "played too much to Morrison's dark side."¹⁷

The problem for Stone was that everyone had their own version of Morrison. As he told Edward Guthmann, "There's no way I'm not going to get killed on this. It's a bit like *Citizen Kane*: Everybody sees Morrison differently. He's an enigma and that's good."¹⁸ While Stone may be correct in his assessment that Morrison's enigmatic quality is good for drama, for the purposes of the film biopic, a conservative genre that generally plays to a romanticised view of the historical figure in question, such contradiction practically assures attacks from those obsessed with their own perceived

¹⁶ Lance Loud, "Can Val Do the Backdoor Man?" *American Film*, August 1990, 9. Stone's assertion that Manzarek "assiduously manufactured... intense negative propaganda" was born out when Manzarek later said "I hated the movie" while promoting a long-form video *The Soft Parade*. He added, "The release of the video occurs within two weeks of the release of Stone's film to the home video market, so people will have a choice; or they can compare them to see where Stone went wrong." Also defiantly reasserting another version of Morrison was Patricia Kennealy, perhaps the loudest voice against the film. Kennealy, who had been involved with Morrison and is depicted in the film as a reporter who practices witchcraft (the character is a composite of many of the women in Morrison's life), published *Strange Days: My Life With and Without Jim Morrison* in 1992. Promoting the book she claimed that, "Oliver lied about me, he lied about Jim, he lied about The Doors and he lied about the '60s. He raped me on the screen... I couldn't let the movie be the final word." See Stone, "Stone Responds," 240; Steve Morse, "Ex-Door replies," *The Boston Globe*, October 3, 1991, 11; Gail Pennington, "'Strange Days' with Jim Morrison," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 25, 1992, D3.

¹⁷ Chris Dafoe, "Protector of The Doors' myth hasn't faded," *The Toronto Star*, March 20, 1991, F1.

¹⁸ Edward Guthmann, "Oliver Stone Lights a Fire," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 3, 1991, 20.

version. Stone's solution to the problem of myriad versions of Morrison only served to increase the chances of attack: He chose to make a filmic poem to Morrison and structured the film around the emotional states of the twenty-five Doors songs that provide the chronology of the film.¹⁹ *The Doors* begins as a conventional musician biopic with Morrison meeting the rest of the band who then embark on rehearsals during which the evolution of the writing of "Light My Fire" is presented according to genre conventions. Nevertheless, the film soon becomes an exhausting chronicle of Morrison's decline into an alcoholic and drug-induced stupor and the resulting stresses it places on the band, his arrest for lewd onstage antics, and his eventual death from a heart attack at the age of twenty-seven.²⁰

The central problem with Stone's film is that his desire to present the Morrison he worships conjures a hedonism which is hard to stomach. Stone's relationship to Morrison means that *The Doors* revels in the mystical debauchery that fascinates Stone and is enhanced by his technical brilliance (or sledgehammer exploitation of the audience) that makes the audience "feel" the events on screen, especially the visceral concert scenes. David Ansen epitomises the general critical response to film as "powerfully evocative of

¹⁹ Jay Carr, "Oliver Stone opens up on life, art and the impact of the '60s," *The Boston Globe*, March 1, 1991, 25. In addition to Stone's assertion that the film is structured around the songs of The Doors, Susan E. O'Hop concludes that Morrison's poetry can be seen to influence the film's imagery and structure. While it is not clear that this was Stone's intention, his desire to make the film as a poem to Morrison lends credence to this reading. Susan E. O'Hop, "Enough to Base a Movie On?" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1997): 163-172.

²⁰ As Roger Ebert noted in his review of *The Doors*, the film defies the conventional parabola of the biopic in that Morrison's life (as depicted or not depicted by Stone) lacks a contextualising first or redemptive third act. Roger Ebert, review of *The Doors*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 1, 1991, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1991/03/637361.html (accessed May 21, 2004).

[the sixties] without being particularly insightful.”²¹ Reviewers consistently noted that Stone indulges in a contradictory kind of hagiography that demonstrates that Morrison “was a bad drunk and a worse friend, and that in no way was his life exemplary.”²² *Variety*’s review of the film concluded that the film “creates the impression that the late 1960s were an awful time to be alive and young,” while Hal Hinson’s wholly negative review in *The Washington Post* expresses delight that “the film could strike a killing blow to our nostalgia for those days.”²³

In focusing exclusively/narrowly on Morrison, *The Doors* essentially obscures possible representations of the politics of the era that many were expecting from it, and, of course, audience expectations are often a key facet in a film’s reception, shaping the viewing process and colouring reaction. In several interviews coinciding with the film’s release, Stone expressed a belief that the film would be a “litmus test of America’s political mood” given that protestors were on the streets again and that there was “a major time-warp going on here. The quickening of the American pulse. We all feel the 60’s [*sic.*] are coming back.”²⁴ When asked about what he hoped the film would bring to the young Stone said, “I hope they’ll remember that there was a time, a little bit of time, when a sun shone in and kids questioned everything. They

²¹ David Ansen, “Your Not-So-Basic Showbiz Movie Bio,” *Newsweek*, March 18, 1991, 57.

²² Richard Corliss, “Come On Baby Light My Fizzle,” *Time*, March 11, 1991, 73. See also Joe Brown, “Stone’s Window On ‘The Doors,’” *The Washington Post*, March 1, 1991, N38; Janet Maslin, “Flying, Falling: Days of the Doors,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1991, C1.

²³ Cart, review of *The Doors*, *Variety*, March 4, 1991, *The Doors* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA; Hal Hinson, “‘Doors’: The Time To Hesitate Is Now,” *The Washington Post*, March 1, 1991, B1.

²⁴ Chutkow, “Oliver Stone and *The Doors*,” B19.

were rebelling. They questioned their parents, and they questioned authority.”²⁵

In suggesting that the sixties are “coming back” (whatever that may mean), Stone positioned his film in terms of a referendum. Yet his expectations that the film would be attacked by “blue-nosed reactionaries” and the “right-wing press” proved erroneous; a conservative backlash arguably deflected by the onset of the Gulf War.²⁶ However, unexpected by Stone, the film was attacked by the liberal-left as a defilement of the sixties they sought to preserve with Morrison taken as an aberration rather than as a representative figure of the counterculture. A representative trio of critiques of the film were firmly couched in terms of an experiential authority to speak about the era, as well as to speak for their generation implied in their frequent use of the collective (“we”) voice. David Denby began his appraisal in *New York* magazine by stating that Stone’s film was the only thing he could imagine “more pretentious than The Doors themselves.”²⁷ Spending most of his review ridiculing Morrison and Stone’s pretensions to “great art,” Denby asserted his cultural authority as residing in the fact that he lived in the San Francisco area at the end of the decade, enjoying the music yet ignoring “the drug mysticism and philosophical vapors emanating from groups like The Doors... [as] conscious commercial style.”²⁸ He aligned this monetary

²⁵ Jay Carr, “Oliver Stone opens up,” 25.

²⁶ *The Economist*, “Oliver Stone and ‘The Doors,’” March 16, 1991, 91.

²⁷ David Denby, “The Pursuit of Unhappiness,” *New York*, March 25, 1991, 68.

²⁸ Ibid.

imperative with Stone's own "commercial acumen" which he stated should not "be hailed as an artist's solution to the problem of reviving the sixties."²⁹

Writing in the *New Yorker*, Terrence Rafferty dismissed *The Doors* as "pure exploitation," arguing that "Stone gobbles up Morrison and the sixties and rock and roll as if they were drugs... the substance that Oliver Stone abuses in 'The Doors' is history itself."³⁰ For Rafferty there is a lot at stake in the film in that it "reduces the richly contradictory experience of the sixties to the myth of Morrison, and, in the process... restricts the viewer's freedom to imagine sixties culture as anything but a movement with a single voice."³¹ These are certainly grand criticisms that make grand claims for the affective potential of a single film. Such perspectives presuppose that Stone is attempting to encapsulate the sixties experience in his depiction of Morrison – which he clearly is not – but Rafferty's elevation of the film to a grand narrative level reveals a cultural anxiety about the possibilities that it offers to those seeking to demean the legacy of the era during a period of culture war. Of even greater importance to Rafferty is the supposed trivialising of many of the tragedies and atrocities of the late 1960s that appear as a newsreel compilation late in the film – the only view that the film provides of a world outside Morrison's proximity – and that precedes Morrison's declaration that "I think I'm having a nervous breakdown." This "gag" personifies the film's

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Terrence Rafferty, "Stoned Again," *New Yorker*, March 11, 1991, 81.

³¹ Ibid., 81.

bad faith for Rafferty as the moment that reveals that in the film's world "the sixties are just a hallucination."³²

Where Rafferty concludes that "the movie leaves us exhausted and depressed; it makes us feel like voyeurs of our own memories," Brent Staples' *New York Times* editorial, "'The Doors' Distorts the 60s," noted that "this film pains my generation," lacking "the brightness of the time and the sense of boundless possibility that was so deeply felt then."³³ The absence of "hope and light" that Staples lamented is predicated on a desire to maintain the positive sixties as differentiated from the decade's darker side in a manner akin the cultural right's opposite rendering of the era as exclusively negative.

However (politically or historically) "correct" or "incorrect" Stone's rendering of the late sixties counterculture may be, the concerns of these reviewers serve to underline the tenacious battle for the memory of the era. The anxiety they express over the legacy that is affected by *The Doors* is legitimised in the few right-wing critiques of the film that emerged. Hal Hinson's glee that *The Doors* could stifle sixties nostalgia is not as directly expressed by James Bowman, film critic of *The American Spectator*, but is certainly explicit in his review. Bowman took the opportunity to review the film in order to retrospectively scorn the fans of The Doors' mysticism and rebellion. His derision of The Doors' fans as people who wanted sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, but "whose middle-class guilt made them also want to believe that *that* was sacred," skilfully conjures the view of sixties activists as

³² Ibid., 82.

³³ Ibid., 82; Brent Staples, "'The Doors' Distorts the 60s," *New York Times*, March 11, 1991, A16.

spoilt, disillusioned children *performing* rebellion.³⁴ The adroitness of Bowman's argument and his sober conclusion – "I don't mind Jim's [Morrison] having fun, but I do mind Stone's attempt to convince us that he was a hero for doing it" – suggest that the culture war concerns of liberal-left critics were legitimate.³⁵

The major opportunities for attack that they may have feared were fully taken up by George Will. In a lengthy piece entitled "Slamming The Doors" in *Newsweek*, Will argues Morrison was a "bad influence" whose death was "a cautionary reminder of the costs of the Sixties stupidity that went by the puffed-up title of 'counterculture.'"³⁶ Not content with ridiculing Morrison and Stone – "a Sixties-aholic" and "confused man" – Will uses his column to launch a comprehensive assault on the sixties and its legacies, thereby illustrating that any film about the era is open to an all-out attack on the decade in a wide-circulation news magazine. It is significant that Will hits all of the right's culture war targets: the universities are the "last redoubt" of sixties radicalism; pronouncements of a new epoch of expression were really symptoms of "Sixties disorder"; and the myth of the sixties is that "wretched excess was really a serious quest for new values."³⁷ Will reduces sixties ideals to "juvenophilia" and concludes that "the Sixties are dead. Not a moment too soon."³⁸ While there is no doubt that Will's opinions would have been expressed in some way (his article could be worked around any sixties text

³⁴ James Bowman, "Swinging No More," *The American Spectator*, May 1991, 42.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ George Will, "Slamming The Doors," *Newsweek*, March 25, 1991, 65.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

that could emerge), it is significant, as voiced in the liberal-left criticisms of *The Doors*, that the Morrison legend illustrates a version of the “bad sixties,” the destructive and hedonistic side of the counterculture. For a balanced view of history, or a fully-rounded “cultural memory” of the era, this need not be a bad thing. But when what is at stake is politicised memory of that era, Stone’s film clearly presents problems for liberal critics and Hollywood alike.

In an interview given at the time of the release of *The Doors*, Oliver Stone stated he had decided to use the success of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* to “do films that normally wouldn’t get done – such as the Kennedy murders. I’ve reached the point where I’ve gotten some license to do that.”³⁹ The reception of *The Doors* shows that he may have misjudged. That is not to say that the film was not successful – financially it did well, if not spectacularly – but Stone’s misreading of the cultural landscape led to the film only succeeding in providing ammunition for those who would oppose his view of the sixties.⁴⁰ His belief in his right to tackle subjects away from his cultural authority as a veteran to represent Vietnam was again proved wrong with *JFK*, criticism of which was as virulent as that directed against any film in Hollywood history. However, a method of his, noted by his crew, provided him with the means for combating criticism. Stone’s crew noted that the

³⁹ Jay Carr, “Oliver Stone opens up,” 25.

⁴⁰ *The Doors* opened strongly at the box office, grossing \$9.1million from 840 screens in its first weekend, entering the chart at number two behind *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), but with a far larger per-screen average. Subsequent weeks saw a standard drop for a “fashionable” film and the final gross was \$34.4million, well below its \$40million budget. However, the film received a huge promotional push for its video release in October, with various product tie-ins, and performed well. *Box Office Mojo*, www.boxofficemojo.com (accessed 13 October, 2005). Hereafter, all box office figures are taken from *Box Office Mojo* unless otherwise noted.

film's subject affected Stone's working method. Cinematographer Robert Richardson observed Stone "becoming Morrison. He was drinking a lot, doing a lot of peyote, all under what he calls 'doing research.' Oliver was a lunatic on that film. He went as deep and as dark as you can go."⁴¹ This led Stone's biographer, James Riordan, to conclude that Stone may be a "method director." In taking on the combative characteristics of Jim Garrison, a figure subject to the same ridicule as Stone, Stone was able to defend his film.

⁴¹ James Riordan, *Stone: The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (London: Aurum Press, 1996), 337-8.

II: “Destined to become fodder for every op-ed writer in the country”: Jim Garrison as Problematic Hero in *JFK*.

He’s a District Attorney. He will risk his life, the lives of his family, everything he holds dear for the one thing he holds sacred... the truth.
JFK advertising legend.

Perhaps the most notable misrepresentation is the movie’s view of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney in 1967 who dreamed up conspiracy charges against a retired businessman, Clay Shaw. Mr. Garrison was a malevolent force, not the Frank Capra good guy he’s made out to be.

Brent Staples.⁴²

What’s almost as interesting as the film itself – and in a perverse way gives it credibility – is the energy already put forth in the media to discredit it.

Jay Carr.⁴³

As the promotional tagline for *JFK* demonstrates, Oliver Stone based his controversial summation of the circumstances surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy (and the subsequent Warren Commission enquiry) on the investigation of District Attorney Jim Garrison which the film characterised as a dedicated search for truth against insurmountable odds. However, as Brent Staples asserted in an op-ed column for the *New York Times*, the real Garrison was far from the heroic truth-seeker the film portrayed. Where most other criticism about the film focuses attention on demythologising Stone’s deification of Kennedy and what the film postulates as his intention to withdraw from Vietnam, the film is nominally about Kennedy in a biopic

⁴² Brent Staples, “History by Default: The Blame Transcends Oliver Stone,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1991, reprinted in Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 311.

⁴³ Jay Carr, “Oliver Stone’s ‘JFK’ fights the right fight,” *The Boston Globe*, December 20, 1991, 53.

sense. The generic classification of *JFK* as a biopic comes from its representation of Jim Garrison. In this section on *JFK*, I examine the already well-mined media uproar surrounding the film, but with specific regard to Stone's use of Garrison as its moral centre. I argue that, in using Garrison as the conduit for his interrogation of the assassination, Stone left himself open to further criticism than the film might have received, but that in taking on characteristics of Garrison's combative resistance to criticisms levelled against him, he was more able to defend his film and its position.

JFK was the subject of the most sustained and vituperative press attacks of any film in living memory, as David Ansen predicted it was almost "destined to become fodder for every op-ed writer in the country."⁴⁴ Barbie Zelizer has contextualised the press response to the film within "an ongoing contest for authorization" as to who has the cultural authority to tell the assassination tale.⁴⁵ For Zelizer, journalists reporting of the events in Dallas were threatened by Stone's "counter-myth," so they proceeded to attack *JFK* in defence of their authority as keepers of the public record, often asserting their personal history of covering the assassination as a form of self-credentialing. Of course, print criticism of Hollywood histories is not novel in itself, but the case of *JFK* is different because attacks against the film began even before the film had finished shooting. Initial attacks were based on a

⁴⁴ David Ansen, "A Troublemaker for Our Times," *Newsweek*, December 23, 1991, 50. The published screenplay book, *JFK: The Book of the Film*, compiled ninety-seven reactions and commentaries, a fraction of the press the film received. In his introduction to the articles section of the book, Frank Mankiewicz noted that nearly thirty articles against the film were published by the *New York Times* alone. Frank Mankiewicz, "About the Debate," in *JFK* (see note 42), 187.

⁴⁵ Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 201.

leaked version of its shooting script. George Lardner, Jr., in a three-thousand word article in *The Washington Post* entitled “Dallas in Wonderland,” asserted that “Stone is chasing fiction... there isn’t space to list all the [script’s] errors and absurdities.”⁴⁶ Several days earlier, Jon Margolis of the *Dallas Morning News* had summarised the assassination theory in the script, including the involvement of Lyndon Johnson, as “a point at which intellectual myopia becomes morally repugnant,” before positing his own conspiracy theory that *Time* magazine’s review of the film would be influenced by the fact that Warner Bros., also a division of Time-Warner, was distributing the film.⁴⁷ However, in its first June issue, *Time* published an article on the brewing furore that quoted David Belin, former counsel to the Warren Commission and author of “two books on the assassination,” referring to the script as “a bunch of hokum” that will “deceive the American public.”⁴⁸

These early articles about the film are united by their need to denounce *JFK* as a fiction designed to deceive the American people and, more notably, also by their indictment of Jim Garrison. Indeed, Lardner’s article is essentially a point-by-point refutation of Garrison’s entire investigation. Stone responded to these initial broadsides through the letters pages of *The Washington Post* and *Time*, noting the futility of “reviewing” a film before it had been completed and changed through the shooting and editing process. He

⁴⁶ George Lardner, Jr., “On the Set: Dallas in Wonderland,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1991, D1. Lardner’s article appeared approximately half-way through principal photography for *JFK* which finished on July 31, 1991. The film was released theatrically on December 20, 1991.

⁴⁷ Jon Margolis, “JFK Movie and Book Attempt to Rewrite History,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 14, 1991, in *JFK* (see note 42), 191.

⁴⁸ Richard Zoglin, “More shots in Dealey Plaza,” *Time*, June 10, 1991, 64-65.

also called for a fresh hearing for Garrison and his “courage to stand up to the establishment and seek the truth” as opposed to reiterating “old attitudes” about Garrison and the assassination.⁴⁹ Although the debate subsided between these initial skirmishes and the release of the film, this pattern of attack and defence would recommence upon its release. Regardless of how outlandish the compendium of assassination theories (re-)presented by Stone may be, *JFK* was always going to be criticised on this count: the film clearly opened itself to attacks through the use of Jim Garrison as the film’s central figure and protagonist. As Christopher Sharrett noted when assessing the furore surrounding the film: “It appears that Stone’s principal sin is his rejection of the official public version of the assassination in favor of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison’s ‘thoroughly discredited’ late Sixties investigation of an assassination conspiracy.”⁵⁰

Garrison’s investigation opened in 1966 when he began re-examining Lee Harvey Oswald’s movements in the summer of 1963 in New Orleans, where Garrison was District Attorney. It culminated in 1969 with the failed trial of Clay Shaw, who, Garrison believed, was an integral part of the conspiracy to kill Kennedy, but was found to be innocent by the jury in less than an hour. The investigation is widely held to have been farcically amateurish, albeit obstructed by federal agencies at every turn. Garrison was accused, amongst of things, of: the character assassination of Clay Shaw;

⁴⁹ Oliver Stone, “Stone’s ‘JFK’: A Higher Truth?” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1991, D3; Oliver Stone, “Oliver Stone’s JFK,” *Time*, July 1, 1991, 4.

⁵⁰ Christopher Sharrett, “Debunking the Official History: The Conspiracy Theory in *JFK*,” *Cineaste* 19, no. 1 (1992): 11.

alienating his staff; having connections to organised crime; erratically changing his theories daily; and of threatening, intimidating, bribing, drugging, and hypnotising witnesses. Members of the media seized upon on the historical Garrison as a direct way to discredit Stone: the demonising of Garrison could essentially be used as a tactic to dismiss the whole film. Garrison was described by the U.S. press as an “incompetent buffoon,” a “24 karat kook,” and a “self-promoter” whose investigation “is now regarded, even by other conspiracy believers, as having been a travesty of legal process.”⁵¹ Tellingly, the *New York Times* published two op-ed articles on the day of *JFK*’s release that questioned Garrison’s integrity, not only in his investigation, but also in his subsequent career as an appeals court judge.⁵² Even the men’s magazine *GQ* printed a story titled “The Case Against Jim Garrison.”⁵³

Considering Jim Garrison’s investigation had been the subject of a book called *American Grotesque*, why did Stone use him?⁵⁴ Most obviously, Garrison was the only public official to bring to trial a case that challenged the Warren Commission’s official version of the assassination, but a look at the development process of the film provides a fuller explanation. Surprisingly,

⁵¹ Thomas Oliphant, “The Politics of *JFK*,” *The Boston Globe*, December 21, 1991, in *JFK* (see note 42), 283; Fred Bruning, “A ticking bomb at the movies,” *MacLean’s*, January 13, 1992, 11; John P. MacKenzie, “Oliver Stone’s Patsy,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1991, A34; Tom Wicker, “Does ‘J.F.K.’ Conspire Against Reason?” *New York Times*, December 15, 1991, B1.

⁵² Frances Frank Marcus, “Kennedy Film Puts Originator of a Conspiracy Theory in Limelight,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1991, A26; MacKenzie, “Oliver Stone’s Patsy,” A34.

⁵³ Nicholas Lemann, “The Case Against Jim Garrison,” *GQ*, January 1992, reprinted in *JFK* (see note 42), 337-345.

⁵⁴ James Kirkwood, *American Grotesque: An Account of the Clay Shaw-Jim Garrison Affair in the City of New Orleans* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

Oliver Stone had never doubted the official version of the assassination until he was given a copy of Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* in 1988 by Ellen Ray, the book's publisher, in an elevator at a film festival in Cuba where he was accepting an award for *Salvador* (this vignette was also knowingly used against Stone and the film).⁵⁵ Zachary Sklar, Stone's co-screenwriter on *JFK*, edited Garrison's book which was originally written as a "scholarly work" in order to deflect the negative associations that Garrison knew were attached to his own name. But, at Sklar's suggestion, it was rewritten making Garrison "the detective who had to piece together the evidence and whose consciousness is changed as a result."⁵⁶ As Robert Sam Anson observed, the narrative of a lone crusader battling against the odds to find the truth was "not unlike a typical Oliver Stone film."⁵⁷ Stone, however, went further into the case, optioning the rights to *Crossfire* by Jim Marrs, essentially a compendium of the work done by independent researchers into the assassination, and incorporating much work done since Garrison's investigation into the film.⁵⁸

This choice makes the Garrison investigation portrayed by *JFK* anachronistic, but Stone was frank about this decision in an interview he

⁵⁵ As Stone told *Esquire* magazine, "I thought people like Mark Lane [author of the first major work to counter the Warren Report, *Rush to Judgement* (1966), and the central investigative figure in Emile de Antonio's 1967 documentary of the same name] were crazy, I thought Lee Harvey Oswald shot the president." This depicts Stone in the same "my eyes are now open" way as both Garrison and Stone's standard protagonist. Robert Sam Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," *Esquire*, November 1991, in *JFK* (see note 42), 212-13.

⁵⁶ Track Clark, "Zachary Sklar: A Conscientious Writer," *Screenwriter Magazine*, <http://www.creativescreenwriting.com/spw/zsklar.cfm> (accessed May 21, 2006). It is of note that Garrison's story appears to have been amended and embellished in a similar way to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in order to make their narratives of reformation and conversion more believable and impacting.

⁵⁷ Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," 213.

⁵⁸ Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1989).

granted as early as July 1991. Forthright in stating that he had included information outside of the Garrison trial, he admitted “I’ve taken dramatic license. It is not a true story per se. It is not the Jim Garrison story.”⁵⁹ In the same interview Stone admits that he too had been initially sceptical of Garrison – finding him “a Southern buffoon, a Huey Long type” – but that he found his journey to be the “kernel of a very powerful movie.”⁶⁰ Here is the crux of what makes *JFK* a revisionist biopic of Jim Garrison. Stone essentially uses the romantic associations of the lone crusader against a disinterested and hostile government and press as the identifiable core to his film and as a conduit for his summary of anti-Warren Commission work. He reasoned that Garrison was a “metaphoric protagonist,” and Stone had to make considerable changes to transform the real Jim Garrison into the Garrison of the film.⁶¹ As Robert Brent Toplin observed “Stone’s film would have lost much of its punch if it had tried to portray both positive and negative pictures of Kennedy and Garrison,” adding that “*JFK*’s tendency to portray Garrison as a man as honest and genuine as Jefferson Smith in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* contrasts glaringly with the district attorney’s record in public office.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Richard Bernstein, “Oliver Stone, Under Fire Over the Killing of J.F.K.,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1991, B9.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Jennet Conant, “The Man Who Shot JFK,” *Esquire*, January 1992, 66. Stone continues: “He stands in for about a dozen researchers, and in that sense we take liberties and make his work larger, and make him more of a hero.”

⁶² Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 55-56. Many critics noted the Capraesque nature of Stone’s Garrison often playing on the title of Capra’s film. David Ansen called it *Mr. Smith Goes to the Assassination* and, perhaps most appropriately, Todd Gitlin added *Mr. Smith Goes After the Military-Industrial Complex*. David Ansen, “A Troublemaker for Our Times,” *Newsweek*, 23 December 1991, 50; Todd Gitlin, “The Stoning of Oliver and the Fascination of *JFK*,” *Tikkun* 7, no. 2 (1992): 52.

However, Stone chose to use Jim Garrison because of what he regarded as the best traits of his character – his courage to come out and lead “with his chin” despite the best attempts of the government to discredit and hinder his investigation. Stone’s “metaphoric protagonist,” therefore, accurately reflects the work of those researchers who he is representing, those who have ploughed on for years despite the derision of most of society and have succeeded in casting doubt on the “official history” of the assassination. The utilisation of composite characters is a central plank of historians’ criticisms of history on film but, as Robert A. Rosenstone has noted, this is an essential tool for condensing the complexities of events portrayed into the requisite screen time and “Stone is doing no more than finding a plausible, dramatic way of summarizing evidence that comes from too many sources to depict on the screen.”⁶³ The reformation of Garrison extended beyond the writing and construction of the film to the casting. The intertextual weight brought to the film through the casting of Kevin Costner as Garrison cannot be underestimated and must be seen as a masterstroke of Stone’s attempt to elicit identification with the character; Costner’s integrity being the central plank of his star persona as cultivated in films such as *The Untouchables* (1987) and *Field of Dreams* (1989). Indeed, critics saw this as a further example of the film’s “deck-stacking” in Garrison’s favour, and yet it is clear that the audience *had* to identify with Garrison since the development of the

⁶³ Robert A. Rosenstone, “JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film,” *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (1992): 508.

assassination case in *JFK* is presented *through* him.⁶⁴ Costner had won the Best Picture and Director Oscars that year for *Dances with Wolves* (1990), a film admired by audiences if loathed by critics, and starred in the top-grossing family film of the summer, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991).⁶⁵ That Costner was known to play golf with President George Bush served to further soften the radical nature of Stone's film.⁶⁶



Figure 5: Jim Garrison.



Figure 6: Kevin Costner as Garrison in *JFK*.

⁶⁴ Henry Sheehan, review of *JFK*, *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 10 (1992): 50.

⁶⁵ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 2003), 575. Costner was the number one box office star of 1991 and these two films ensured that he was a near permanent fixture in cinemas that year. *Dances with Wolves* (released in 1990 but earned the majority of its box office takings – \$123 million of its total \$184 million – in 1991) remained in the box office top 15 until the final weekend of May just two weeks before *Robin Hood*'s June 14 opening. In turn *Robin Hood* remained in the top 15 until the end of October.

⁶⁶ Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," 228.

In addition to the intertextual weight bought by Costner to the softening of Garrison, the physical differences between Costner and the real Garrison are worth considering. Garrison stood six feet seven inches tall and was physically intimidating (see figure 5). The choice of Costner provides an everyman quality, while the decision to have Costner wear spectacles – Garrison did not wear them in public – brings something of the studiousness of a trusted professor to the character. The presentation of Garrison’s family in *JFK* also serves to enhance audience identification with him. Despite the assertions of many that he was a neglectful family man – several critics suggest he abused his wife in public and that he flirted with homosexuality⁶⁷ – Garrison is continually seen interacting with his large, loving family and witnesses many of the key events of the film while at home: he watches Lee Harvey Oswald shot by Jack Ruby, and the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, on his home television and discusses the shortcomings of the Warren Report at the dinner table. The stability of the family is affected as Garrison gets deeper into the case and he and wife Liz begin to argue, a state exacerbated by intimidating phone calls and Garrison’s personal nadir in the film. In a scene in which he argues with Liz, he tells her that their “life is fucked”: this causes her to threaten divorce to which he responds, “somebody’s got to try, god-dammit, somebody.” That Garrison’s persistence and dedication to the search for truth threatens his family and family life continually reemphasises his idealism which the film rewards

⁶⁷ Patricia Lambert, *False Witness: The Real Story of Jim Garrison’s Investigation and Oliver Stone’s Film JFK* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1998), 231-8.

through the reconciliation of Jim and Liz after the assassination of Robert Kennedy. “You were right,” Liz tells him and she attends the trial. After the jury hands down its verdict, the film ends with Garrison leaving the court flanked by Liz and their son, Jasper. Garrison is reunited with his family despite losing the case.

A further indication of the film’s strategy of audience identification comes at the end of Garrison’s closing statement to the jury. Having outlined what the film clearly states is a speculative recounting of what *may* have happened in November 1963, Costner as Garrison concludes, “Show this world that this is still a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. Nothing in your life will ever be more important.” He then turns directly to the camera, breaking the fourth wall, and says, “It’s up to you.” It is an audacious moment that provides a jolt to the audience who, many have suggested negatively, have already been bruised by the style of the film. In this moment Oliver Stone addresses his audience: it overtly serves as a metonym for the way in which Stone took on the actual Garrison’s combative strategy towards a press critical of his investigation. This strategy is introduced in an earlier scene where X, played by Donald Sutherland, advises Garrison that “they’re gonna destroy your credibility; they already have in many circles in this town... the best chance you’ve got is [to] stir the shitstorm.” Stone’s detractors pejoratively likened him to Garrison, as equally disrespectful of the country and its institutions, with John P. MacKenzie going

so far as to assert that “Mr. Stone is as careless with the truth as is his hero.”⁶⁸ Stone heeded the advice of his fictional character and defended his film to the hilt on many op-ed and letters pages, in interviews (both in print and on television), and he even addressed the National Press Club in January 1992. In addition, Stone and Warner Bros. had to threaten to take out ads or legal action against *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to get Stone’s rejoinders printed.⁶⁹ He recruited Robert Kennedy’s former press secretary Frank Mankiewicz, then of the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton, as his “bodyguard” in Washington D.C. and for his media engagements, learning “the game” as he went along.⁷⁰

Indeed, such was Stone’s ubiquity and adroitness at dealing with criticisms and turning them into publicity for the film that David Belin, a counsel to the Warren Commission, expressed anger at “the media’s unfair bias *toward* Stone.”⁷¹ Richard Cohen observed that for all his “anti-

⁶⁸ MacKenzie, “Oliver Stone’s Patsy,” A34. David Sam Anson provides a useful summary of the criticisms directed at Stone personally: “He’s been accused of distorting history and sullyng the memory of a martyred president; of recklessness and irresponsibility, mendacity and McCarthyism, paranoia and dementia – even of treason. His lengthening list of opponents, which unite foes who have been fighting over the Kennedy assassination for decades, have characterized him as a liar, a hypocrite, a megalomaniac, and a charlatan. It’s been written that his morals are ‘repugnant,’ that there is ‘nothing too obscene, to indecent, to unethical’ that he would not do to ‘exploit and commercialize a great national tragedy.’ He has been charged by otherwise-sober folk with defamation of character, poisoning young minds, and undermining confidence in American institutions. Some have ridiculed his film (*Dances with Facts*); others have recommended that it be boycotted.” Anson, “The Shooting of JFK,” 209.

⁶⁹ Gary Crowds, “Clarifying the Conspiracy: An Interview with Oliver Stone,” *Cineaste* 19, no. 1 (1992): 26. This proved to be a two-way street as *Brandweek* suggested that several advertisers had withdrawn their ads from a television airing of *Born on the Fourth of July* due to the negative associations with furore over *JFK*. See *Brandweek*, “Advertisers Bolt ‘Fourth of July,’” January 27, 1992, 8.

⁷⁰ Phil McCombs, “Oliver Stone, Returning the Fire,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1991, F1.

⁷¹ Charles E. Claffey, “‘JFK’ enrages lawyer for Warren probe,” *The Boston Globe*, December 27, 1991, 41 (my emphasis).

establishment” rhetoric, Stone was the epitome of the establishment given that behind him and his film was the might of the Time-Warner conglomerate, asserting that against this “critics such as myself might as well be in a rowboat, shooting at a battleship with a peashooter... I sometimes wonder who I am writing for.”⁷² Cohen’s lament for the power of the written word in its failure to combat audiences’ susceptibility to Stone’s cinematic history would be persuasive were it not for the presence of much anti-*JFK* sentiment on television, the main opinion source of the majority of the population. For example, Dan Rather attacked the film twice on CBS News and presented a special edition of *48 Hours* on the assassination.⁷³ ABC’s *Nightline* devoted two entire episodes to the assassination, and Andy Rooney of *60 Minutes* “urged his viewers to see the film, but advised them to remember that it is a fiction.”⁷⁴ Many other programmes featured “experts” holding forth and, as Barbie Zelizer notes, these debates “failed to differentiate between Stone’s theory [and] his right to have his theory.”⁷⁵ In addition, networks circulated many documentaries to reawaken and profit from the interest in the assassination, while home video companies repackaged and re-released feature films, documentaries and miniseries, and video stores reported increased interest. Alan Ferraro, of the New Jersey chain Palmer Video, summarised the trend by saying: “Anything to do with John F. Kennedy is hot

⁷² Richard Cohen, “Oliver’s Twist,” *The Washington Post*, January 19, 1992, W5.

⁷³ Roger Ebert, “Pundits-turned-critics miss point of film,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 19 January 1992, Show 3; For information on the content of the *48 Hours* special see Bill Carter, “Rather Pulls CBS News Back to the Assassination,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1992, C11.

⁷⁴ James R. Keller, “Oliver Stone’s *JFK* and the ‘Circulation of Social Energy’ and the ‘Textuality of History,’” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 21, no. 2 (1993): 77.

⁷⁵ Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 205.

in all of our stores.”⁷⁶ Analogous to the renewed interest in JFK-related video titles was a surge in book sales. Several newspaper columns appeared providing readers with guides to available books on the assassination and many were reissued, including the original report of the Warren Commission. By mid-February 1992, three of the top five titles on the non-fiction *New York Times* paperback best sellers list were assassination-related, including Garrison’s *On the Trail of the Assassins* which occupied the top position for several weeks.⁷⁷

The flurry of interest in the assassination can be seen as a direct result of the intense debate surrounding Stone’s film and serves to discount the apocalyptic claims of critics who warned that *JFK* would be seen as the definitive word on the assassination. Questions surrounding the film’s veracity sparked renewed calls for the release of classified documents pertaining to the assassination: Stone and Warner Bros. thus concocted a “Free the Files” campaign with buttons bearing the message distributed at theatres screening the film.⁷⁸ Unexpectedly, the call was also answered by critics who saw *JFK* as a way to stymie the paranoia and distrust in government that they believed the film generated. Among those calling for the release of the files were

⁷⁶ Christopher John Farley, “Video rentals reflect mass replay of JFK’s death,” *USA Today*, February 11, 1992, D1. Bob Karcy, president of VIEW Video who distributed of *JFK: The Day The Nation Cried*, reported that “We’ve sold more copies of ‘JFK’ in the last 60 days than in the past year and a half,” while Fred Endemann, vice-president of marketing at Starmaker, concluded, “The bottom line is, when you have a movie with all this publicity surrounding it, it reawakens interest in the subject.” Quoted in Paul Verna, “JFK Titles Getting New Push In Wake Of Film’s Success,” *Billboard*, February 8, 1992, 45.

⁷⁷ See, for example, S. Keith Graham, “Fact or fiction, books on Nov. 22 events abound,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 7, 1992, D6; Janice Castro, “Where can I get the Warren report?” *Time*, February 10, 1992, 15; *New York Times*, “Paperback Best Sellers,” February 9, 1992, G28.

⁷⁸ Eric Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon, Oliver Stone and Me: An Idealist’s Journey from Capitol Hill to Hollywood Hell* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), 37.

former-President and Warren Commission member Gerald Ford, and Representative Louis Stokes who had headed the 1970s House Select Committee on Assassinations, both of whom had opposed their release as recently as December 1991.⁷⁹ The resulting signing into law of the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act in late 1992 stands as a testament to the power of the film to change public opinion and prompt legislative action to an almost unprecedented extent.

The public debate over *JFK* was centred on journalists' anxieties about their cultural authority and often took the form of "historian-cop" objections to the factual veracity of the film. Therefore, William D. Romanowski overstates the "culture war" aspect of the *JFK* debate when concluding that conservative critics' "inflammatory reaction to *JFK* revealed the confluence of their religious convictions and conservative politics."⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the film was certainly used by culture warriors on both sides of the political spectrum. Tom Hayden was quick to opine that the debate over *JFK* was "really over the meaning of the 1960s," enthroning Stone as "an incarnation of the 1960s who cannot be dismissed" who expresses "the unanswered cry of the 1960s."⁸¹ Todd Gitlin called Stone a "terrorist of the cinema" castigated precisely because his movie "damages a deep and unexamined, even unarticulated, idea that Americans – including journalists, for all their famous

⁷⁹ George Lardner Jr., "Ford Urges House Leaders to Seek Release Of All Records on Kennedy Assassination," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 1992, in *JFK* (see note 42), 423-424; *New York Times*, "J.F.K. May Elicit Action on Files," January 11, 1992, A6.

⁸⁰ William D. Romanowski, "Oliver Stone's *JFK*: Commercial Filmmaking, Cultural History, and Conflict," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 21, no. 2 (1993): 69.

⁸¹ Tom Hayden, "Shadows on the American Storybook," *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1992, reprinted in *JFK* (see note 42), 386-387.

cynicism – harbour about the national essence.”⁸² Perhaps the most explicit aligning of Stone with the spirit of the sixties came from Michael Lerner writing in *Tikkun*:

So why the brouhaha about Stone’s film? Because for one moment it put people back in the consciousness of the sixties, back before deconstruction and irony and cynicism and pessimism had triumphed, and back into remembering how good it felt to see the world from the standpoint of hope, possibility, and an empowering commitment to principle... Garrison embodies in the film that sense of empowered rage that made him feel entitled to seek the truth and courageous to take risks to change a reality he found appalling. It was that spirit of empowerment that gripped millions of people in the sixties, and what is most important about the film is the degree to which it reminds us of how good and whole it was to have those feelings.⁸³

It is important to note that Stone did not publicly espouse the values of the sixties in relation to *JFK* as he had when promoting *The Doors*. The majority of his public statements involved defending the veracity of the film’s assertions and his right to make it. However, he did tell the *Los Angeles Times* that he saw the film as part of “a battle over the meaning of my generation with the likes of Dan Quayle, a battle between official mythology and disturbing truth,” a sentiment that Michael Medved included in *Hollywood vs. America* without, ironically, mentioning the extent of the attacks that the film received.⁸⁴ Syndicated columnist William Pfaff erroneously condemned Stone a “New Left McCarthyite” since Stone is a product of the demise of the New Left rather than its rise, but the implication was clear: Stone was seen as a

⁸² Todd Gitlin, “The Stoning of Oliver,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 16, 1992, Image Magazine, in *JFK* (see note 42), 456-457.

⁸³ Michael Lerner, “*JFK* and the Possibility of Possibility,” *Tikkun* 7, no. 2 (1992): 39.

⁸⁴ Robert Scheer, “Oliver Stone Builds His Own Myths,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1991, Calendar 4-5; Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 293. Medved appends “as nothing less than” to the beginning of this quotation.

remnant of sixties activism.⁸⁵ Peter Collier, co-author of *Destructive Generation*, a pejorative account of the New Left, likened Stone to Leni Riefenstahl and *JFK* to *Triumph of the Will* (1935) in a lengthy demonisation in *The American Spectator* titled “Ollie Uber Alles.”⁸⁶ Ronald Steel continued the Nazi theme in suggesting that Stone’s apparent nostalgia for Kennedy was “a disturbing weakness for the Führer-prinzip.”⁸⁷ Steel called *JFK* a “deconstructionist’s heaven,” invoking a central bugbear of the cultural right’s criticisms of education, which was further stimulated by the decision of Warner Bros. to distribute 13,000 *JFK* “study guides” to schools around the country.⁸⁸ As he had with *The Doors*, George Will made a strong statement against the film commensurate with his antipathy toward the 1960s. Will denounced Stone as “another propagandist frozen in the 1960s like a fly in amber, combining moral arrogance with historical ignorance. He is a specimen of 1960s arrested development, the result of the self-absorption encouraged by all the rubbish written about his generation.”⁸⁹

Jefferson Morley has suggested that the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy have become almost a “Rorschach test of the American political psyche” in the sense that “in Kennedy’s death, Americans have seen a cathartic test of national resilience or a paranoid

⁸⁵ Michael Rogin, “JFK: The Movie,” *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (1992): 501.

⁸⁶ Peter Collier, “Oliver Uber Alles,” *The American Spectator*, April 1992, 29.

⁸⁷ Ronald Steel, “Mr. Smith Goes to the Twilight Zone,” *New Republic*, February 3, 1992, 31.

⁸⁸ Steel, “Mr. Smith Goes,” 30; Pat H. Broeske, “School daze,” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 24, 1992, 9. For a lengthy critique of this decision see David W. Belin, “Earl Warren’s Assassins: A JFK study guide enters the curriculum,” *New York Times*, 7 March 1992, A25.

⁸⁹ George Will, “JFK: Paranoid History,” *The Washington Post*, 26 December 1991, A23.

nightmare of triumphant corruption.”⁹⁰ The reaction to *JFK* can be seen precisely in these terms, especially in the context of the culture wars in which the film acts a palimpsest. Such was the national outcry surrounding the film that representatives of other Hollywood studios began to question the lack of control that Warner Bros. seemed to have over Stone and the film (although “the studio was caught off guard by the firestorm”).⁹¹ Even the President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (and former LBJ aide), Jack Valenti, publicly criticised Stone and the film. However, by the time of *JFK*’s release, Warner Bros. were understandably more pre-occupied with a film that had the potential to be more explosive than *JFK*, *Malcolm X*, and a director who was being far less conscientious and cooperative than Stone: Spike Lee.

⁹⁰ Jefferson Morley, “The Political Rorschach Test,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1991, in *JFK* (see note 42), 231.

⁹¹ Bernie Weinraub, “Hollywood Wonders If Warner Brothers Let ‘J.F.K.’ Go Too Far,” *New York Times*, 24 December 1991, C9.

III: Many Malcolms, but Whose Malcolm?: *Malcolm X* and Spike Lee's Fidelity to the Myth of Malcolm.

With *Malcolm X*, Spike Lee has made not his best, but his greatest film – a movie that propels a complex, furious, little-comprehended black man into the pantheon of American icons.

Lisa Kennedy.⁹²

The most conspicuous achievement of Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" is its very existence – or, rather, its existence in the form of a three-hour-and-twenty-minute epic biography distributed and (largely) financed by a major Hollywood studio.

Terrence Rafferty.⁹³

Scholar. Convict. Leader. Disciple. Hipster. Father. Hustler. Minister. Black Man. Every Man.

Malcolm X advertising legend.

As the advertising slogan for Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* encapsulates, there were many different Malcolms, not only in life but also in people's perceptions and readings. Marlon Riggs has assessed that "Malcolm constitutes the quintessential unfinished text. He is a text that, we as Black people, can finish, that we can write the ending for, that we can give closure to – or reopen – depending on our own psychic and social needs."⁹⁴ However, in 1991, two texts were perceived as intent on providing closure through a definitive account of Malcolm – Spike Lee's film and Bruce Perry's long-anticipated and exhaustively-researched biography, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who*

⁹² Lisa Kennedy, "Is *Malcolm X* the right thing?," *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 2 (February 1993): 6.

⁹³ Terrence Rafferty, "Still Life," *New Yorker*, November 30, 1992, 160.

⁹⁴ Marlon Riggs, "Sexuality, Television, and Death: A Black Gay Dialogue on Malcolm X," in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 141.

Changed Black America.⁹⁵ They were met with derision and suspicion in equal measure from the black community and critics. Indicative of the polysemy of Malcolm's image is the fact that he has been cited as an inspiration by as politically diverse a group of people as Jesse Jackson, Clarence Thomas and Louis Farrakhan. He has appeared in Public Enemy videos (replacing George Washington on the dollar bill in the video for "Shut 'Em Down") and Bill Clinton was frequently seen jogging in an "X" baseball cap.⁹⁶ But as Lee continually asserted in interviews, the film was "Spike's Malcolm" even though he was hyper-aware, as one of the most business-oriented of filmmakers, of the need to satisfy the different factions while making a film that could appeal to a white audience.⁹⁷ This section examines the shaping, construction, and intent of "Spike's Malcolm," the first Hollywood biopic of a black American made by a black director, which caused much controversy before its release but, surprisingly to many, generated little of the post-release furore that *JFK* had.

The Malcolm X film project had been in development at Warner Bros. for over twenty years. "Mr. Biopic Producer" Marvin Worth had obtained the film rights in the late 1960s from Malcolm's widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, and had persevered through the film's many incarnations and false starts.⁹⁸ Writers

⁹⁵ Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1991).

⁹⁶ Janice C. Simpson, "The 'X' factor," *Time*, November 30, 1992, 71.

⁹⁷ In interviews Lee frequently repeated the anecdote of how every time he walked from his house to his offices, people would warn him "not to mess up Malcolm."

⁹⁸ Ronald Bergan, "True lives and Lenny," *The Guardian*, April 29, 1998, 16; Bernie Weinraub, "A Movie Producer Remembers The Human Side of Malcolm X," *New York Times*, November 23, 1992, C11. Worth produced the Oscar-nominated documentary *Malcolm X* (1972) which according to Thomas Doherty was rarely seen. However, the

as diverse as James Baldwin, David Mamet and Charles Fuller had written scripts, with Sidney Lumet and Norman Jewison set to direct at various points, and even Richard Pryor set to star, but the film failed to get made. Writer David Bradley, who wrote several rejected scripts between 1984 and 1986, hypothesised that Warner Bros. failed to go ahead with production not “because the scripts were wrong [but] because the *story* was wrong,” since “Malcolm frightened the feces out of damn near everybody.”⁹⁹ And yet, despite the culture wars climate that would seem to discourage such a film, Warner Bros. did put the film into production in 1991 as a result of the gradual change of attitudes towards Malcolm. Certainly, there were still those who viewed Malcolm as a threat to white America as he was portrayed in the Mike Wallace documentary of 1959, *The Hate That Hate Produced* (a view which remained commonplace with Malcolm seen in opposition to Dr. Martin Luther King), and black figureheads also spoke out against Malcolm. Thurgood Marshall, for example, was quoted in several articles stating “I see no reason to say he is a great person, a great Negro... And I just ask a simple question: What did he ever do? Name me one concrete thing he ever did.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, there remained a number for whom Malcolm was an inspirational figure. Even Dan Quayle was reportedly looking to *The*

documentary received a small theatrical re-release in the wake of Lee’s film and appears on the 2005 special edition DVD of the Lee film. Thomas Doherty, “Malcolm X: In Print, On Screen,” *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 34; Herb Boyd, “Film Forum 2 features Malcolm X documentary,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 23, 1993, 20.

⁹⁹ David Bradley, “Malcolm’s Mythmaking,” *Transition* 56 (1992): 25.

¹⁰⁰ Vernon Jarrett, “Thurgood Marshall sticks pin in Malcolm X revival balloon,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 24, 1992, 35. Marshall’s view was used as ballast for a negative column in *The Washington Post* on Malcolm (not the film) at the time of the film’s release. Colman McCarthy, “Malcolm X’s Ruinous Message,” *The Washington Post*, November 21, 1992, A25.

Autobiography of Malcolm X “for clues to racial conflict and to its mitigation.”¹⁰¹ There was also a popular resurgence of interest in Malcolm, partly due to his being championed by a burgeoning number of rap acts who cited him as an inspiration. Endorsements of Malcolm in popular culture resulted in sales of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* rising by three-hundred percent in the three years prior to production, thereby illustrating to the studio that the film could be marketable.¹⁰² The late 1980s and early 1990s also saw the rise of a number of African-American filmmakers whose films, crucially, proved not only critically but also financially successful – especially John Singleton’s Best Director Oscar nomination for *Boyz N the Hood* (1991).¹⁰³ Foremost among these filmmakers was Spike Lee who publicly lobbied to direct *Malcolm X* when Norman Jewison was announced as director, claiming that a white director could not do justice to Malcolm’s story. Warner Bros. replaced Jewison with Lee, although this was represented as Jewison stepping down in favour of Lee, because, Marvin Worth suggested, “I think they felt it would be more of an event with Spike.”¹⁰⁴ Warner Bros. certainly got the “event” they desired, although not quite what they were expecting.

“The trials and tribulations” of the making of *Malcolm X*, to borrow the subtitle of Lee’s book about the production, were widely known and

¹⁰¹ Sam Roberts, “Dan Quayle, Malcolm X and American Values,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1992, B3.

¹⁰² David Ansen, “The Battle for Malcolm X,” *Newsweek*, August 26, 1991, 52. In an interview given to the BBC programme *The American Late Show* in 1991, Lee suggested that Warner Bros. were going ahead with production now because they can smell the money from rap lyrics and clothes.

¹⁰³ Notably, Mario Van Peebles’s *New Jack City* had been Warner’s own most profitable film at the box office in 1991, grossing \$48 million from an \$8 million budget.

¹⁰⁴ Janice C. Simpson, “The battle to film ‘Malcolm X,’” *Time*, March 16, 1992, 71.

recounted in a plethora of media articles throughout the film's gestation, so much so that *Entertainment Weekly* began its recounting of the production history by indicating that "mostly due to [Lee's] penchant for publicity, the points of the story are familiar to anyone who reads the entertainment press."¹⁰⁵ In short, Warner Bros. provided Lee with a budget of \$28 million, \$6 million less than Lee's most conservative estimate of the true cost of the film, and installed a bond company to oversee the production and keep Lee on budget. Lee began filming with no intention of compromising his vision and, once he had exhausted the budget, the bond company (which was financially liable for any budget overruns) stepped in, threatening to shut down production. Lee persevered, bankrolling the film's post-production himself with two-thirds of his \$3 million salary, famously recruiting financial support to finish the film from prominent members of the African American entertainment community (such as Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Janet Jackson and Magic Johnson). He announced this as a publicity coup at a press conference at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. Crucially, Lee declared this strategy had been "forced" on him, not by Warner Bros., but by the bond company.¹⁰⁶ Lee constantly framed the production problems in terms of race and frequently, publicly referred to the studio as

¹⁰⁵ Spike Lee with Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of Making Malcolm X... (while ten million motherfuckers are fucking with you!)* (London: Vintage, 1993); Anne Thompson, "'I'm for truth,' Malcolm X said...," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 27, 1992, 27.

¹⁰⁶ Lena Willaims, "Spike Lee Says Money From Blacks Saved 'X,'" *New York Times*, May 20, 1992, C15. This press conference came at a time when the furore over *JFK* (also a Warner Bros. release) was just beginning to subside, and perhaps to avoid further negative publicity surrounding *Malcolm X*, they began to bankroll the film again.

“the plantation.”¹⁰⁷ Warner Bros. could be admonished for their perceived negativity towards the film, not simply for the fact that they were going ahead with a potentially explosive project so soon after the furore over Ice-T’s “Cop Killer.” There was a general trend in Hollywood in the early 1990s of studios tightening budgets (*Hoffa* was also affected) and a rival studio executive anonymously admitted that \$30 million was “just too much money for a bio film... Not making *Malcolm X* at \$33 million is an easy decision.”¹⁰⁸ In his dealings with the studio, Lee constantly compared his film to *JFK* in terms of budget and length, promising to “kick and scream if we don’t get the same motherfucking shit they gave Oliver Stone and *JFK*. This movie is just as important, or even more important, from our perspective.”¹⁰⁹ However, the industrial structure of the Hollywood system at this time was misunderstood by Lee. *JFK* was a textual property bought by Stone himself. Also, the production “package” of Kevin Costner, Stone and the property was put together by the most powerful agency in Hollywood, Creative Artist’s Agency (CAA), and presented to Warner Bros. as a done deal. By contrast, *Malcolm X* was an in-house production, developed over many years and subject to different economic imperatives and expectations.

Aside from his dealings with the studio, Lee encountered pre-release controversy in other areas, some self-inflicted and others unsolicited. Lee was criticised for urging school children to play truant to see the film on its

¹⁰⁷ Lee even noted that the Warner Bros. building “definitely looks like an old-time plantation with those white columns out front.” Lee, *By Any Means*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Kim Masters, “By Any Means Necessary,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1992, G1.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, *By Any Means*, 30.

opening day, a request at odds with the educational intent that shaped much of Lee's promotion of the film. He was also censured for his misinterpreted request that magazines and newspapers assign black interviewers to the story, which was perceived as a demand and, therefore, as reverse-racism.¹¹⁰ Lee was read as displaying "broad assumptions [that] perpetuate the myth of the 'black community' as a monolithic entity," an error which Lee should have been able to avoid given his experiences earlier in the production.¹¹¹

The "race card" Lee had played to replace Norman Jewison as director rebounded when the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, a group created for the occasion, intimated (before production even started) that Lee himself was unsuitable to direct the film. Representing the group, Amiri Baraka, who had labelled Lee the "quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black, petit bourgeois professional," stated that Malcolm's life was not a commercial property.¹¹² At a specially organised and widely-reported rally in Harlem, he announced that the group "will not let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier."¹¹³ In turn, Lee questioned the right of self-appointed "ministers of black culture" to cast doubt upon his integrity as an artist and on his suitability for the

¹¹⁰ Rob Cohen, "Spike Lee's Racial Preference," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1992, A27.

¹¹¹ Robin D. Givhan, "Spike Lee's Request Only Worsens Racism," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 2, 1992, B3.

¹¹² Amiri Baraka, "Spike Lee at the Movies," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 146; Jacqueline Tresscott, "The Battle Over Malcolm X," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 1991, G1.

¹¹³ David Ansen, "The Battle for Malcolm X," *Newsweek*, August 26, 1991, 52.

project.¹¹⁴ What is at stake in this conflict is not necessarily who has the right to interpret Malcolm's life, but an anxiety over which or whose Malcolm the film would present. As Baraka told Jacqueline Trescott:

Malcolm X's life was a real life. I do not want to see Malcolm's Detroit Red days emphasized. They should be made to the exact proportion that they existed. I do not want to see the relationship with Elijah Muhammad de-emphasized. It was a critical and important influence and the film should show at what point they differed.¹¹⁵

Significantly, this would provide a fair description of Lee's film.

Anxiety and public disapproval over Lee's proposed film mirrors the reaction to Bruce Perry's biography, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*. Perry's book sought to correct many of the (self-made) canonical myths surrounding Malcolm's life that appear in the *Autobiography*. Perry made three most controversial statements: he suggested that Malcolm had had several homosexual encounters thereby problematising Malcolm's status as the epitome of black manhood; he claimed that the 1929 fire that destroyed Malcolm's childhood home was started by his father rather than the Ku Klux Klan; and he asserted that Malcolm, not the Nation of Islam, had firebombed his home in 1965 (these fire episodes remain intact as represented in the *Autobiography* in Lee's film). Among others, Baraka denounced Perry's "revisionism" and wrote that the "Bruce Perry calumny seems to me the action of one of George Bush's CIA 'proprieties' whose mission is to cover Malcolm's real life with a barrage of psychopathic

¹¹⁴ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 199.

¹¹⁵ Trescott, "The Battle," G1.

untruths,” and Lee this time aligned himself with Baraka to dismiss Perry’s claims, citing his own research for the film as justification.¹¹⁶

Misgivings regarding Lee’s supposedly bourgeois mentality were perhaps understandable given that he is one of the most business-minded of directors, aware of the need to market himself as well as his films so that they are commercially successful in order that he can keep working. The proliferation of “X” products – as many as 180 different items from dolls to packets of crisps were licensed – caused understandable concern.¹¹⁷ The excessive commercialisation of Malcolm’s image was seen by Victor Wolfenstein, author of *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution*, as “characteristic of the system to co-opt all forms of protest [that] pulls out the fangs from the politics.”¹¹⁸ For Lee, the self-marketing of *Malcolm X* (especially the “X” baseball cap) was essential to creating awareness, given that he did not expect Warner Bros. to extensively market the film.¹¹⁹ The extent to which Lee was personally to blame for the plethora of “X” products is uncertain, but he did little to justify his rejection of the exploitation of Malcolm when he opened the first Los Angeles branch of his

¹¹⁶ Amiri Baraka, “Malcolm as Ideology,” in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 19; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Just Whose ‘Malcolm’ Is It, Anyway?” *New York Times*, May 31, 1992, B13. For a fuller version of this interview with Lee see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Generation X,” *Transition* 56 (1992): 176-190.

¹¹⁷ Sheila M. Poole, “Firms trying to cash in on Malcolm X,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, November 18, 1992, A2. The legend on the bag of crisps read: “X stands for the unknown. The unknown language, religion, ancestors and cultures of the African-American. X is a replacement for the last name given to the slaves by the slave master. We dedicate this product to the concept of X.” Phil Reeves, “Making a mint out of Malcolm,” *The Independent*, November 15, 1992, 17.

¹¹⁸ Pat H. Broeske, “‘X’ marks the big money,” *Entertainment Weekly*, October 16, 1992, 6.

¹¹⁹ Kaleem Aftab, *Spike Lee: That’s My Story and I’m Sticking to It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 147.

merchandise chain of “Spike’s Joints” on Melrose Avenue and held a press event for the film there in the month before its release.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, in the marketing of “X” products Lee had the full support of Malcolm’s widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz. Cynics may argue that this was due to the fact that, through a deal struck with the Curtis Management Group to licence Malcolm’s image, merchandising would glean \$3 million for the estate. Shabazz was pleased “that people are recognizing Malcolm” and argued that any way of furthering awareness Malcolm’s teachings was worthwhile.¹²¹ Shabazz also made an important appearance at the press junket for the film, thereby providing key cultural caché for the film, and went on to praise it in the face of criticisms: she summarised it as “an excellent introduction to my husband.”¹²²

The ubiquity of “X” attire engendered anxiety over who was wearing the clothes – predominantly young black men – and whether they actually knew about the teachings of Malcolm X. The commonly held notion was that the clothing was seen as proof enough to the youths that they understood Malcolm, when in fact they held the same misconceptions as others who saw him as a racial separatist and threat to America. Dr. Robert M. Franklin defined their misconceptions as “want[ing] Malcolm’s rage without appropriating Malcolm’s discipline” as its cause as the mistaken image that surrounded Malcolm as symbol.¹²³ The conception that black youths held a

¹²⁰ Anne Thompson, “I’m for truth,” 26-34.

¹²¹ Broeske, “‘X’ marks the big money,” 6-7; Gary Pomerantz, “Malcolm’s Widow,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, September 6, 1992, A1.

¹²² Poole, “Firms trying to cash in,” A2; Jay Carr, “Spike and Malcolm,” *The Boston Globe*, November 15, 1992, p. 77.

¹²³ Franklin quoted in John Blake, “Malcolm X, not King, firing up younger blacks,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 26, 1992, A1.

mistaken vision of Malcolm's defiance, as the antithesis of non-violence, carried over into fears that the film could prove incendiary. This is unsurprising given that the rise of black cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s was often characterised by the "gangsta" aesthetic, a kind of Blaxploitation II, that had inspired several instances of gun-related deaths at screenings of *New Jack City* (1991) and *Juice* (1992), the directorial debut of *Malcolm X* cinematographer Ernest Dickerson.¹²⁴ The subject of *Malcolm X* would have anticipated such a reaction in the minds of many even before it became public that Lee had decided to open the film with footage of the beating of Rodney King, thereby raising the spectre of the Los Angeles riots of the previous year. Warner Bros. sought to counter the impact of the footage by creating a trailer for the film in which Malcolm is portrayed as moderate. The studio also ensured that the film be rated "PG-13" to assuage doubts, and arranged special screenings for authorities across the country, including the Los Angeles Police Department and Mayor Tom Bradley.¹²⁵ One cinema chain in Portland refused to show the film until lobbied by local citizens to do so and no violent incidents were reported in the opening days of release.¹²⁶ It is significant that many reviewers of the film sought to show readers that it was not threatening: as Richard Alleva noted, "white movie critics have

¹²⁴ Richard W. Stevenson, "An Anti-Gang Movie Opens to Violence," *New York Times*, July 14, 1991, A10.

¹²⁵ Mark Whitaker, "Malcolm X," *Newsweek*, November 16, 1992, 66. The American "PG-13" rating suggests to parents that the film may not be suitable for children under thirteen but does not restrict them from attending without a parent or guardian in the way that an "R" rating does. Lee ensured that the film obtained this rating as he wanted no one to have an excuse not to see the film.

¹²⁶ Simpson, "The X factor," 71.

rushed into print to assure white audiences that they will find this movie irresistible.”¹²⁷

In general, film critics lavished praise on *Malcolm X*. Roger Ebert (of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Siskel and Ebert* televised review programme) and the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s Edward Guthmann named it their film of the year.¹²⁸ Jay Carr of *The Boston Globe* echoed these sentiments: “the Hollywood film year can be summed up in one sentence. There is ‘Malcolm X’ and there are all other Hollywood films. It’s that simple. You can’t be a serious person in America in 1992 and not see it.”¹²⁹ Reviewing the film for the mainstream magazine *Entertainment Weekly*, Owen Gleiberman called the film “a triumph, an intimate and engrossing biographical saga that is also one of the most passionate political films ever made in this country.”¹³⁰ However, Gleiberman added that “it’s a shock, at first, to see Lee... make a lavishly conventional Hollywood biopic.”¹³¹ Its conventionality disappointed several critics, notably Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine and Todd McCarthy of *Variety*.¹³²

¹²⁷ Richard Allea, “Split Down the Middle: Lee’s *Malcolm X*,” *Commonweal*, January 15, 1993, 19.

¹²⁸ Roger Ebert, “Ebert’s Top 10 Films,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 27, 1992, Show 3; Edward Guthmann, “A Magnificent Malcolm X,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, November 18, 1992, E1.

¹²⁹ Jay Carr, “‘Malcolm X’: Just see it,” *The Boston Globe*, November 18, 1992, 45.

¹³⁰ Owen Gleiberman, review of *Malcolm X*, *Entertainment Weekly*, November 20, 1992, 68.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Richard Corliss, review of *Malcolm X*, *Time*, November 23, 1992, 64-65; Todd McCarthy, review of *Malcolm X*, *Variety*, November 16, 1992, *Malcolm X* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA. McCarthy began his review, “Spike Lee has made a disappointingly conventional and sluggish film,” and concluded, “it is a measure of how the film – as ambitious, right-minded and personal as it is – falls short of its goals that the climatic documentary footage and stills of the real Malcolm prove infinitely more powerful than any of the drama that has preceded it.”

Malcolm X is certainly a conventionally structured Hollywood biopic. This is attributable to Lee's fidelity to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, maintaining the book's three-act structure. Lisa Kennedy has noted the importance of the credit sequences to the meaning of Lee's films in that they "act as a bridge between the reel life and real life, the two realms that Lee, and we the audience, inhabit." This is an accurate observation in that, through the combination of Malcolm's famous "I Charge the White Man" speech, an American flag burning down to reveal an "X," with the video footage of the Rodney King beating that sparked the Los Angeles riots, the credit sequence of *Malcolm X* serves to insist the continuing resonance of Malcolm's life and teaching in the present.¹³³ Lee's epilogue also serves to connect the core biography of the film with the present: he uses Ossie Davis's eulogy to Malcolm on the soundtrack over images that chart African American history to the present day; he includes Nelson Mandela reading Malcolm's words before closing with Malcolm himself saying "by any means necessary." However, these diegesis-fracturing framing devices are rare stylistic flourishes in a film that, surprisingly for Lee, mostly follows the standard docudrama style.

This is not to say that Lee's choice to forgo his usual bravura style is unsuitable for the film. It enables the film to let Malcolm speak for himself to the extent of including many extracts from the *Autobiography* almost verbatim on the film's voiceover and several of Malcolm's speeches. During the first hour of *Malcolm X*, which covers Malcolm's "Detroit Red" phase as a young

¹³³ Kennedy, "Is *Malcolm X* the right thing?" 9.

hustler in Boston, this strategy works to counter the concerns that Amiri Baraka expressed over possible sensationalism. The film shows the seductiveness of this lifestyle but subverts the attractiveness of the criminal life. It expresses Malcolm's misgivings about this phase of his life on the voiceover, as well as showing the fate of his partners-in-crime, Shorty and, especially, West Indian Archie, whose descent into drug addiction is effectively juxtaposed with Malcolm's political and religious development. The absence of "showy" technique from the film makes more effective the moments when stylistic virtuosity is used: the sequence during Malcolm's time in prison in which Brother Baines demonstrates the dictionary definitions of "white" and then "black" to metonymically illustrate to Malcolm the falsehood of received notions of race relations in America; the increasingly frequent use of black and white footage to demonstrate the way in which, as a figurehead, Malcolm becomes more and more media-mediated as he becomes more prominent.

The use of the standard rise-and-fall biopic template led to accusations that Lee had drained Malcolm of complexity and political perspective. Certainly Lee was aware that in its promotion of the film Warner Bros. was "trying to stress the Malcolm *after* Mecca, when he stopped calling white folk blue-eyed grafted devils."¹³⁴ This was a strategy Lee favoured in order that the largest audience possible see his film and be educated by it (see below for the discussion of Lee's "educational" intentions for the film). The majority of

¹³⁴ Gates, Jr., "Just Whose 'Malcolm,'" B13. The section on Lee's "educational" intentions for the film follows below.

contributors to the *Cineaste* symposium issue on the film bemoaned the absence of Malcolm's work during the final year of his life with the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). Herb Boyd notes that "in several ways the OAAU and its aims are Malcolm's last will and testament" that point towards an internationalising of his programme to align his emerging prosocialist tendencies with those of revolutionary African leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya.¹³⁵ However, *Malcolm X* is two-hundred minutes long and the amount of time that it would take to introduce new characters and situations late in the film proved prohibitive. The inclusion of Nelson Mandela in the closing montage can be read as an acknowledgement of Malcolm's international resonance, but the absence of context for Mandela's appearance is unfortunate in that it led the conservative critic James Bowman to dismiss the moment as "a celebrity guest spot."¹³⁶ This suggests that the importance of Mandela's inclusion may be lost on those unaware of Malcolm's later positions. Bowman also criticised Lee for the "almost complete omission of the ratiocination by which the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Mohammed came to seem so compelling to Malcolm," and the other "many crackpot ideas" of the Nation of Islam.¹³⁷ In Lee's defence, the film does not sanitise the Honourable Elijah Mohammed and clearly expresses the personal reasons for Malcolm's break with the Nation of Islam,

¹³⁵ Herb Boyd, "Malcolm After Mecca: Pan-Africanism and the OAAU," *Cineaste* 19, no. 4 (1992): 12. Other contributors to the *Cineaste* symposium include Manning Marable, Julius Lester and bell hooks.

¹³⁶ James Bowman, "Heroic Failures: the 'Malcolm X' phenomenon," *The New Criterion*, January 1993, 14.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

a choice that appears brave given Lee's previous relationship to the Nation (given he used them as security on his productions and given the intimidation that the Nation and Minister Louis Farrakhan exerted on the filmmaker over *Malcolm X*).¹³⁸

Perhaps the most significant criticism of *Malcolm X*, considering its adherence to the structure and content of the *Autobiography*, is that Lee uses the text "not as a fulcrum for mass activism but as a bible for personal improvement."¹³⁹ This reading of the film can be used to account for the lack of "culture wars" furore when the film was released. There were several calls for the film to be banned, notably from the National Association for the Advancement of White People of Michigan, founded by former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke, and a pipe bomb was found in one Dallas cinema showing the film.¹⁴⁰ In addition, Lee raised (conspiratorial) concerns about the wide availability of pirate videos and a curious incident in which several patrons were issued with tickets for other films when requesting *Malcolm X*, thereby causing revenue to be diverted away from the film (although this was later shown to be an isolated incident).¹⁴¹ The lack of a wider op-ed debate on the film may simply be accounted for by the blanket Presidential election coverage. (In fact, one of the few op-ed articles on the film appeared in the

¹³⁸ Lee, *By Any Means*, 49-58.

¹³⁹ William Lyne, "No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office," *African American Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): 55.

¹⁴⁰ *L.B. Press-Telegram*, "David Duke group asks theaters to ban 'Malcolm X,'" November 15, 1992, *Malcolm X* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA; *Los Angeles Times*, "Bomb Is Found in 'Malcolm X'" Theater, January 3, 1993, *Malcolm X* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁴¹ *Jet*, "Lee blasts 'Malcolm X' box-office ticket mix-up," January 11, 1993, 36.

Wall Street Journal and was even titled “Malcolm X: Conservative Hero.”)¹⁴²

However, the previously noted diversity of those claiming Malcolm as an inspiration - there was more convergence between the spiritual beliefs of Malcolm X and the conservative right than had been considered – and the fact that the *Autobiography* had been added to undergraduate reading lists were certainly factors.¹⁴³ It is also likely that Lee’s fidelity to the *Autobiography*, the unexpectedly unexplosive nature of the film, and the maintaining of Malcolm as Riggs’ “quintessential unfinished text” provided a Malcolm that most could accept.

Surprisingly, one aspect of the film’s release that did not court controversy was Spike Lee’s educational intention in making the film. Warner Bros. distributed a study guide to schools – ironically, a strategy they had used for *JFK* and for which they were much criticised in that case. As Lee told *Time* magazine in a substantial piece on the eve of the film’s release:

Malcolm is very important to me, and the reality is that young people – not just black but white kids also – don’t read anymore. They get their information from movies, television, radio. *So this is going to be a history lesson.* This is going to open up the history book.¹⁴⁴

Lee clearly intended his film as “a primer” or “a starting point” that would make black and white Americans more aware of Malcolm and his teachings and make them want to explore further. A *Newsweek* poll conducted at the

¹⁴² Kevin Pritchett, “Malcolm X: Conservative Hero,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 1992, A24. Pritchett argues that in spite of the revolutionary myth, “Malcolm X really stood for another kind of action more useful to black Americans – the ‘action’ of taking control of one’s own life, of voting, or starting a business, or of giving up a life of welfare.”

¹⁴³ Docherty, “Malcolm X,” 30. Also of note here is that David Ansen notes “the movie forces one to consider the unlikely kinship between this ‘60s revolutionary and the born-again believers of today’s religious right.” David Ansen, *From Sinner to Martyr: A Man of Many Faces*, *Newsweek*, 16 November 1992, 74.

¹⁴⁴ Janice C. Simpson, “Words with Spike,” *Time*, November 23, 1992, 66 (my emphasis).

time of the film's release showed that, although many were aware of Malcolm, few knew much about his teachings (including the young whose celebration of Malcolm without knowledge of his teachings had caused much anxiety pre-release).¹⁴⁵ Following the film's release, many articles reported that classes were taking field trips to see the film, using the film as a catalyst for wider thematic discussions, and that Malcolm had become one of the most popular research topics in American schools.¹⁴⁶ Martin Davis, Principal of Duke Ellington high school in Washington D.C., noted that the movie "put Malcolm in the mainstream."¹⁴⁷ Lee even appeared on *Nightline* discussing the film with high-school students.¹⁴⁸

Sales of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* had risen by 300% in the three years to 1991, and just as *JFK* had led to books on the subject becoming bestsellers, the *Autobiography* stayed at the top of the *New York Times* paperback bestseller list for fourteen weeks following the release of Lee's film.¹⁴⁹ Two dozen books on Malcolm from biographies to collections, were published or reissued in 1992.¹⁵⁰ In general, book sellers and publishers echoed Lee's educational intent, setting up promotional campaigns, discussion groups, and sales tables outside cinemas "with the main goal of trying to get

¹⁴⁵ Whitaker, "Malcolm X," 66; Patricia Smith, "Black youths pin hopes on film about Malcolm X," *The Boston Globe*, November 9, 1992, 1. The *Newsweek* poll reported that "84 percent of those aged 15 to 24 said they consider him a hero, although only 1 in 4 said they know a lot about him."

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Lynda Richardson, "For Youths, 'Malcolm X' Is Reflection and Identity," *New York Times*, November 19, 1992, B4; Sari Horwitz, "Lessons From the Big Screen," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 1992, C1; Simpson, "The X factor," 71.

¹⁴⁷ Horwitz, "Lessons From the Big Screen," C1.

¹⁴⁸ *The Hollywood Reporter*, "'X' on 'Nightline,'" November 17, 1992, *Malcolm X* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁴⁹ *New York Times*, "Paperback Best Sellers," January 31, 1993, G32.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, "Who Speaks for Malcolm X? The Writings of Just About Everybody," *New York Times*, November 29, 1992, G3.

people to read the man's words."¹⁵¹ Libraries also reported being unable to meet the high demand and "teenage appetite" for books about Malcolm, leading the *New York Times* to assert that "*Malcolm X* has apparently done what literacy programs, bookmobiles, librarians, English teachers and Barbara Bush have tried to do for years – get urban young people to read."¹⁵²

However, box office reports showed that the success of the film in (re)educating the young may have been overestimated. Although not a failure, *Malcolm X*'s returns were seen as disappointing and research conducted by Warner Bros. suggested that three-quarters of the audience were twenty-five and over.¹⁵³ Of course, this research is based on cinema attendees and does not include those who may have seen the film on video, either when it was officially released or on the widely-reported bootlegs. The educational effect of viewing a film is obviously never exactly quantifiable, but the increase in awareness and appetite for books on Malcolm suggests Lee's project was successful. A research project by Christian Davenport and Darren Davis of the University of Houston concluded that, among those they questioned, younger African-Americans who did see the film "became more racially conscious,

¹⁵¹ Jon Mutter, "Bookstores Gear Up For Spike Lee's 'Malcolm X,'" *Publisher's Weekly*, November 9, 1992, 25.

¹⁵² Isabel Wilkerson, "Young Believe Malcolm X Is Still Speaking to Them," *New York Times*, November 18, 1992, A1.

¹⁵³ Terry Pristin, "Teens Don't Flock to 'Malcolm X,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 28, 1992, B23. Despite the general perception that the film underperformed at the box office, Pristin adds "A.D. Murphy, box-office analyst for *Daily Variety*, said the film's performance has been 'remarkable' considering that it does not, in his view, have mass appeal. 'This is not a broad-based film; nor is it necessarily 'holiday' in ambience,' he said. 'I think \$38 million is twice what it might have done.'" The film's final gross was \$48m.

more likely to consider race relations more important, and better informed about Malcolm X” compared to those of the same age who had not.¹⁵⁴

In his review of *Malcolm X* in the *Village Voice*, J. Hoberman asked “was ever a film more burdened with expectations?”¹⁵⁵ It is certainly hard to disagree with Hoberman that this film, despite the limitations caused by its conventionality to achieving the high expectations, is an achievement by its very existence as the first big-budget Hollywood biopic of a black political icon that propels the (formally) divisive Malcolm into the American memory. Hoberman goes on to say that “the discourse surrounding this three-hour-and-21-minute epic does more to justify the movie than vice versa.”¹⁵⁶ This points to the fact that *Malcolm X* may be an ideal memory text in that it maintains the “unfinished text” quality of its subject while generating a high level of interest through the discourse surrounding its production and release. The unavoidable plethora of magazine articles on the film re-presented Malcolm in a way counter to the established perception (of both whites and blacks), the television coverage of the film and the number of documentaries provided further perspectives, and the sheer cultural weight of the “X” marketing cannot have failed to impact almost everywhere. As Ed Guererro concluded his examination of the film: “Malcolm and his ideas, in large part due to the efforts of Spike Lee and company, are more alive today and available to a new

¹⁵⁴ Darren W. Davis and Christian Davenport, “The Political and Social Relevancy of Malcolm X: The Stability of African American Political Attitudes,” *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997): 561.

¹⁵⁵ J. Hoberman, “Rating X,” *The Village Voice*, November 24, 1992, 55.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

generation than at any time during his life.”¹⁵⁷ Where the discourses generated by and surrounding *JFK* and *Malcolm X* propelled their subjects onto the national stage, leading to a high level of renewed interest in them, it is significant that the less-hyped and extratextually-marketed *Hoffa* failed to make a cultural impact.

¹⁵⁷ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 204.

IV: Exhuming Hoffa.

Some observers of the labor movement - and more crucially, organized crime - are questioning whether heroizing Hoffa isn't a bit like making a film called "Mussolini: Friend of the Commuter" or "Hitler: Innovator of Plumbing and Medical Research."

Steven Gaydos.¹⁵⁸

How odd that director Danny DeVito, with no ostensible ax to grind in "Hoffa," turns in a more irresponsible and meretricious bio-pic than does Spike Lee, who approached "Malcolm X" with an obvious political agenda.

David Montgomery.¹⁵⁹

I believe Jimmy Hoffa did more for the American working man than any man alive. That's something I'd like my kids to know about.

Danny DeVito.¹⁶⁰

In 1992 the popular conception of James R. Hoffa, the most influential union leader in American history, positioned him as synonymous with organised crime, late-night television jokes about his fate, and periodic claims from those who had claimed to solve one of the most famous of disappearances.¹⁶¹ Publications on Hoffa were classified as "true crime" in light of his notoriety and his implication in numerous financial scandals relating to the (mis)use of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Pension Fund. It is, therefore, understandable that Danny DeVito's biopic, which in many ways romanticises the Teamsters' President, would inspire the questioning of commentators such as Steven Gaydos and David Montgomery. However, in adapting David Mamet's screenplay to the screen, DeVito found much to admire in the

¹⁵⁸ Steven Gaydos, "'Hoffa' – It's a Wonderful Lie," *LA Weekly*, December 25, 1992, 14.

¹⁵⁹ David Montgomery, "The Real Story," *Buffalo News*, January 22, 1993, 20.

¹⁶⁰ David Kronke, "Hoffa," *The Ottawa Citizen*, December 24, 1992, C1.

¹⁶¹ Garry Abrams, "Resurrecting Hoffa," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 24, 1992, B19.

achievements of Hoffa's organising and his commitment to the project and its promotion paralleled that of Oliver Stone and Spike Lee. *Hoffa* asserts the importance of its protagonist's oft overlooked contribution to the effective organisation of labour. This is especially resonant given that Hoffa's boast that he had brought the American working man into the middle-class had effectively been reversed during the Reagan years, during which inequality had increased, the size of the middle-class had decreased, and the power of unions had been reduced to, at best, a special interest group.¹⁶²

Despite having the largest budget of the films in this chapter and significant promotional support, *Hoffa* was a "surprise flop" at the box office.¹⁶³ It generated an equally surprising lack of media attention on its release – although, as in the case of *Malcolm X*, this was attributable to its release coinciding with the Presidential election – and articles that were published on *Hoffa* functioned as a referendum of its protagonist rather than the film itself. Also, the film has been the focus of little scholarly attention.¹⁶⁴ In this section, I argue that the version of Hoffa's life that the film presents is commensurate with and, therefore contributed to, an evolving reassessment of him. I find that *Hoffa* consciously exists not as the final word on its subject

¹⁶² Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 243

¹⁶³ The budget for *Hoffa* was \$45 million and its final gross box office was \$29.3 million. Bernie Weinraub, "The Talk of Hollywood," *New York Times*, January 4, 1993, C11; Patrick Goldstein, "A Labor-Intensive 'Hoffa,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1992, Calendar 78.

¹⁶⁴ Whereas *Cineaste* had featured comprehensive symposia on *JFK* and *Malcolm X*, it relegated Hoffa to a short, back-page dismissal. The only piece published in an academic journal analyses David Mamet's screenplay for *Hoffa* alongside his script for *The Untouchables* (1987) providing little focus on the film itself. Paul Arthur, review of *Hoffa*, *Cineaste* 19, no. 4 (1993): 81; Gaylord Brewer, "*Hoffa* and *The Untouchables*: Mamet's Brutal Orders of Authority," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2000): 28-33.

but as a corrective revision of existing accounts that asserts his achievements but is mindful of his deficiencies.

Discussions of *Hoffa* in the print media were primarily centred on authors who had written about Hoffa and reporters on the labour movements in America. As noted, books on Hoffa were primarily categorised as “true crime” so it is inevitable that his mafia connections formed much of the focus of these articles. A principal figure in these pieces was Dan Moldea, whose book *The Hoffa Wars* begins: “Jimmy Hoffa’s most valuable contribution to the American labor movement came at the moment he stopped breathing on July 30, 1975.”¹⁶⁵ Moldea was the principal interviewee in Steven Gaydos’ piece on the film and his assertion that the film represented the “worst case of Hollywood retelling of history since Oliver Stone’s paranoid paradise, *JFK*,” clearly shaped Gaydos’ conclusion that *Hoffa* presented irresponsible history in its “rosy fiction.”¹⁶⁶ Moldea’s fundamental objection to the film was that it ignored Hoffa’s involvement with organised crime in favour of “minor events” to depict him as fighting for worker’s rights, which he sought to correct with numerous examples from his book to conclude that the mafia “owned Jimmy Hoffa.”¹⁶⁷ Similar objections were raised by A.H. Raskin, the

¹⁶⁵ Dan E. Moldea, *The Hoffa Wars: The Rise and Fall of Jimmy Hoffa* (New York: S.P.I. Books, 1978), 3.

¹⁶⁶ Gaydos, “Hoffa,” 14. At the time of the film’s release, Moldea drew further similarities between *Hoffa* with *JFK* in reviving the possible involvement of Hoffa in the Kennedy assassination and connected Hoffa and Jim Garrison through their associations with Carlos Marcello, the New Orleans mafia figure. Dan E. Moldea, “Tales of Hoffa: Why Does Hollywood Make Thugs Into Heroes?” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1992, C1.

¹⁶⁷ Moldea, “Tales of Hoffa,” C1.

former labour reporter of the *New York Times*, who saw the film's portrayal of Hoffa as "a Robin Hood whose sleazy side is totally eclipsed."¹⁶⁸

However, although *Hoffa* does place less emphasis than was conventional on Hoffa's criminal connections, it does not delete them. Instead, it presents these connections in pragmatic terms as a necessary evil, in the same way as it provides examples of Hoffa's intimidation tactics (especially towards the press). The film emphasises the violent tactics used by companies in the Depression era to repress union activity and break up strikes in order to maintain unfair working practices. *Hoffa* posits that in order to improve the working conditions and remuneration for his members, Hoffa *had* to turn to the strength provided by the mafia. The film is supported in this supposition by Arthur A. Sloane's biography. Sloane, a sociology professor who spent time with Hoffa while researching his dissertation, concludes that many of Hoffa's criminal connections were voluntarily established and were "sound business moves" that furthered the interests of the union's membership.¹⁶⁹ Of more importance to Sloane in assessing Hoffa's legacy were those aspects of his life that Moldea termed "minor events": his ability as a union leader who had the adulation of his rank and file and the respect of employers who appreciated his fairness. Sloane gave several interviews at the time of the film's release that asserted his position and was echoed in his

¹⁶⁸ A.H. Raskin, "Was Jimmy Hoffa a Hood? Or Was He Robin Hood?" *New York Times*, December 20, 1992, H9.

¹⁶⁹ Arthur A. Sloane, *Hoffa* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 404.

praise for Hoffa's achievements by the labour reporters of the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.¹⁷⁰

Hoffa justifies its revisionist perspective through presenting its version of Hoffa through the eyes of one of his "rank and file," Bobby Ciaro, a fictional character. As is characteristic of Mamet's plays, *Hoffa* begins *in medias res*. Hoffa and Ciaro are waiting at a truck stop for D'Allesandro, the film's composite mobster, although this is only revealed later. As Hoffa and Ciaro speak Mamet's clipped, seemingly inconsequential dialogue, the camera slowly tracks in to tightly focus on Ciaro's eyes and the shot dissolves back into the past indicating that the film is showing his memory of Hoffa's early years as an organiser. This establishes that *Hoffa* is not an objective history; it is a constructed version of the past. *Hoffa* emphasises this further through the "Billy Flynn" story that is recounted twice by Ciaro. Early in the film we see Hoffa and Flynn, an older union man, commit arson, but things do not go to plan and Flynn is set afire. Later that night at a hospital where Hoffa and Ciaro are guarded by policemen, a priest asks Flynn if there's anything he wishes to admit to, but the horrifically burnt body can only exhale. This scenario is embellished, however, on each occasion that Ciaro recites the tale at length in order to impart the importance of not informing to younger Teamsters. In Ciaro's version, Flynn's dying words to the priest are "fuck

¹⁷⁰ See Abrams "Resurrecting Hoffa," B19; Henry Allen, "Hoffa," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 1992, C1; J. Hiscock, "The Rebirth of Jimmy Hoffa," *Courier-Mail*, October 19, 1992, 9; Goldstein, "A Labor-Intensive 'Hoffa.'"; Raskin, "Was Jimmy Hoffa a Hood?" H9.

you.” That Ciaro is played by the director Danny DeVito increases the film’s conscious muddying of “truth.”

Hoffa’s intention to present the version of the man beloved by his rank-and-file rather than the conventional wisdom was emphasised in the film’s press materials and in promotional interviews with DeVito. Standard press kits provide information on the production of the film and brief biographies and filmographies of the cast and crew. The materials distributed for *Hoffa* were very different. They eschew the usual biographies and, in addition to the production information that stress the working conditions of truckers in the despression and DeVito’s commitment to the project, they present two additional sections: “The Life and Times of James R. Hoffa,” a chronology of his life; and “The Mystery of Jimmy Hoffa.” Both of these documents chronicle Hoffa’s rise to power from his impoverished origins and include his dealings with organised crime and the various criminal charges that he faced. Tellingly, “The Mystery of Jimmy Hoffa” concludes by raising the question of his place in history. This document asks whether or not he was the champion of the working class that his rank-and-file cheered, “an up-from-the-gutter, blue collar David challenging and vanquishing boardroom Goliaths? Or was he, as Robert Kennedy depicted him, a ‘living symbol of corruption’ who sold himself – and his trust – to organized crime?”¹⁷¹ This is a question that the film leaves unanswered. In overtly presenting its Hoffa through the eyes of Ciaro/DeVito it rejects the possibility of an objective

¹⁷¹ “The Mystery of Jimmy Hoffa,” *Hoffa Press Kit* (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1992), 9.

history, an approach that carried through in DeVito's subjective description of the film in the press.

Interviews with DeVito at the time of *Hoffa*'s release emphasised his commitment to the project.¹⁷² As was the case with Oliver Stone's ignorance of Jim Garrison's investigation into the Kennedy assassination before he began work on the film, DeVito knew little about Hoffa beyond the standard version of his life. However, DeVito spent two years researching Hoffa's life and became so dedicated to the project that when the film went over budget he used his own fee, \$6 million, to cover the overruns so that he ended up working for scale as director and actor.¹⁷³ The director was steadfast in his defence of Hoffa, referring to him as a "hero" for dedicating his life to the Teamsters and made a salient point regarding his connections to organised crime: "They say Jimmy Hoffa did business with people who built Las Vegas. So does the government of Nevada. I don't know what's corrupt."¹⁷⁴ However, DeVito displayed a glibness in his interviews (incommensurate with the precise combativeness of Stone and Lee when dealing with the media) which, arguably, prevented the film from being taken as seriously as other films discussed in this chapter. Paradoxically, he stated that he wanted the

¹⁷² In addition, Jack Nicholson showed an unusual commitment to the project. Nicholson has it written into his contracts that he be exempt from participating in press work for the films in which he appears, but he broke his rule to promote *Hoffa*. Hunter Davies, "Great film, Jack, now let's talk about you," *The Independent*, February 23, 1993, B15.

¹⁷³ *Variety*, "Buzz: Completion bondage," April 13, 1992, *Hoffa* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA. DeVito's devotion to the project was such that he spent the majority of the press junket for *Batman Returns* (1992), in which he starred, talking about *Hoffa*. Rob Salem, "Danny De Vito finds solidarity with union boss Jimmy Hoffa," *The Toronto Star*, December 24 1992, D3.

¹⁷⁴ Matthew Gilbert, "'Hoffa' meets the press," *The Boston Globe*, December 20, 1992, B7.

film to have a “a visceral, rather than educational, effect,” noting that liberties were taken for the sake of narrative flourish, and yet he said that the film tells “basically everything the way it was.”¹⁷⁵ This inconsistency is apparent in *Hoffa*’s script that foregrounds Mamet’s style but reverts to transcripts of the contests between Hoffa and Robert Kennedy during the McClellan Hearings that investigated union corruption.

The representation of Robert Kennedy in these scenes prompted further attacks in the media from members of Kennedy’s group of prosecutors and it formed the cornerstone of Jay Carr’s objection to what he read as *Hoffa*’s “facile mythologizing” because “its idea of the devil is Robert Kennedy.”¹⁷⁶ In general *Hoffa* received negative notices from reviewers who identified a lack of psychological depth.¹⁷⁷ Reviewing the film in *The Washington Post*, Desson Howe labelled it the “emptiest prestige picture of the year,” while in *The San Francisco Chronicle* Peter Stack rejected it as “fawningly reverent.”¹⁷⁸ In contradistinction, others praised the film for its ambiguity. Roger Ebert commended DeVito for being “confident enough to simply show us Jimmy Hoffa instead of telling us all about him,” and in the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ronald Goldfarb, “Movie whitewashes Hoffa’s crimes,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 1993, *Hoffa* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA; Phil Reeves, “‘Hoffa with a halo’ film angers Kennedy aides,” *The Independent*, January 17, 1993, 14; Jay Carr, “In grand style, Teamster’s story stays superficial,” *The Boston Globe*, December 25, 1992, 57.

¹⁷⁷ Arthur, review, 81; Owen Gleiberman, review of *Hoffa*, *Entertainment Weekly*, January 8, 1993, 32-4; Todd McCarthy, review of *Hoffa*, *Variety*, December 21, 1992, 59.

¹⁷⁸ Desson Howe, “He’ll Hoffa, He’ll Poffa,” *The Washington Post*, December 25, 1992, N28; Peter Stack, “‘Hoffa’ Disappears Again,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, December 25, 1992, D1.

New York Times Vincent Canby admired the film for forcing viewers to draw their own conclusions about Hoffa's evolution.¹⁷⁹

In this way the film operates as a consummate memory text. It presents a version of Hoffa's life that is incommensurate with existing perceptions of him, provides audiences with the context of his evolution that had previously been absent, and intends that people make up their own minds about the man. As DeVito said, viewers will "have to get out and crack those books."¹⁸⁰ Hoffa's children were, to an extent, approving of the film. James P. Hoffa, a successful labour lawyer, acknowledged that it had the power to shape the public image of his father and expressed concerns about the level of violence depicted in the film, but hoped that, in the same way that *JFK* had influenced the unlocking of government files on the assassination, *Hoffa* could prompt the opening of FBI files on his father's disappearance for which he and his sister, an administrative law judge, had continually petitioned.¹⁸¹ Ultimately, they hoped that the film and DeVito's frequent television appearances championing Hoffa's achievements would be the beginning of a new perspective.¹⁸² *Hoffa*, then, presented a new Hoffa to filmgoers. Certainly its portrait was romanticised, but it was far from hagiographic. It enabled the revisionist appraisals of biographers such as Sloane to be circulated within

¹⁷⁹ Roger Ebert, "It's Striking," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 25, 1992, 35; Vincent Canby, "Big Labor's Master Of Manipulation," *New York Times*, December 25, 1992, C1.

¹⁸⁰ Gilbert, "'Hoffa' meets the press," B7.

¹⁸¹ Hiscock, "The Rebirth of Jimmy Hoffa," 9; David Grogan, "Memories of Jimmy," *People*, February 1, 1993, 58.

¹⁸² Grogan, "Memories of Jimmy," 58.

popular discourse negotiating for prominence against the standard accounts of Hoffa's criminal connections.

Throughout this chapter I have argued that in biopics of the culture wars period filmmakers asserted lives that were incommensurate with the right's preferred heroic version of history. Danny DeVito, Spike Lee and Oliver Stone displayed similar devotion to their subjects through their spirited public defence of their protagonists, their films, and their personal right to engage in history making in the face of criticism from both ends of the political spectrum. Their films assert the importance of their subjects to a fuller understanding of the American past and offer revised versions of often misunderstood figures for consumption and negotiation with the circulating cultural memory of the sixties. Through their extratextual buttressing and intertextual allusions, these films (especially *JFK* and *Malcolm X*) encouraged audiences to develop a broader understanding of their figures through other media and, therefore, stymied criticism that their representations threatened to become the definitive (inaccurate) portrait of their protagonists and associated history. Their subversive use of the conventions of one Hollywood's most traditionally conservative genres is notable, for it would be a faux-biopic, *Forrest Gump* (1994), which would enable conservatives to demonise the counterculture and sixties era in the service of the Republican election campaign in 1994.

Chapter Four

“Decency, Honor and Fidelity Triumph Over the Values of Hollywood”: The Right’s Enlistment of *Forrest Gump*.

That this picaresque tale of an idiot has been taken straight (picaros have traditionally been satirical figures) tells us all we need to know about the death of irony in our culture.

Allison Graham.¹

Upon its release in July 1994, *Forrest Gump* quickly became an unexpected cultural and financial phenomenon and went on to become the third highest grossing film of all time. Its success had commentators clamouring for an explanation as to why the film had struck a chord with audiences. Even the filmmakers expressed surprise that a film with “no typical storytelling devices: no villain, no ticking clock, no burning fuse,” had proved so successful.² Pat Buchanan, however, had the answer. It was successful, he said, because it was a “morality play where decency, honor and fidelity triumph over the values of Hollywood.”³ Whereas Dan Quayle had chastised Murphy Brown as being symptomatic of the nefarious cultural influence of the “cultural elite,” Republicans took Forrest to their hearts, appropriating him as an avatar of “traditional values” in the service of their successful 1994

¹ Allison Graham, “Contracting America: The Gumpification of History,” unpublished review, quoted in David Lavery, “‘No Box of Chocolates’: The Adaptation of *Forrest Gump*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1997): 18. Graham’s review is ostensibly a critique of the film’s representations of “Southernness.” While the tension between “Americanness” and “Southernness” and the “Southernization” of the nation are key questions regarding *Forrest Gump*, they are outside the purview of this thesis. Graham’s position on the film is further discussed in her *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 191-3.

² Richard Corliss, “The World According to Gump,” *Time*, August 1, 1994, 53.

³ Patrick J. Buchanan, “Hollywood Surprise: Hello, I’m Forrest Gump and I’m a Conservative,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 8, 1994, B3.

Congressional Election campaign. *Forrest Gump*'s role in an election that is characterised as centring on a reinstatement of white patriarchy has subsequently led to an academic orthodoxy that reads the film as strategically eliding or demonising "representations of American identity that challenge the centrality of the straight white male."⁴ In short, the prevailing (leftist) understanding of the film focuses upon historical erasures: the omission of turmoil in the 1960s; the marginalisation of racial and gender differences in the narrative of nation. Therefore, for Thomas Byers, the most influential academic critic of *Forrest Gump*, it is an "aggressively conservative film – in fact a reactionary one."⁵

It is my contention that the damnation inherent in orthodox readings of *Forrest Gump* is derived not from the film itself, but from its exploitation by Newt Gingrich and the right in the service of the "family values" plank of their campaign. Although I would not insist, as Susannah Radstone does, that these perspectives constitute "paranoid readings" based on a fear of "audiences passively and helplessly falling under the 'evil spell' of *Forrest Gump*," I would agree that such readings underestimate audiences' ability to

⁴ Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith. *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film*. (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), 148.

⁵ Thomas B. Byers, "History Re-Membered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counterculture," *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, no. 2 (1996): 421. Byers' article informs the analysis of *Forrest Gump* as a "conservative" film in the work that follows by, for example, Karen Boyle, "New Man, Old Brutalisms? Reconstructing a Violent History in *Forrest Gump*," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, December 2001, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/new-man.htm> (accessed October 17, 2003); Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 104-119; Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (London: Praeger, 2002), 125-154; and Jennifer Hyland Wang, "'A Struggle of Contending Stories': Race, Gender, and Political Memory in *Forrest Gump*," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 3 (2000): 92-115.

interpret the film as offering a perspective beyond a straightforward reinscription of white conservative patriarchy.⁶ The “death of irony” that Allison Graham observes in the popular reception of *Forrest Gump* can be extended to the political and subsequent critical responses it engendered.⁷ It is an ironic and playful film that resists the flattening and erasure of history that critics have read into it, and is, as Vivian Sobchack notes, “absolutely dependent for its humor and irony upon historically (self-) conscious viewers who have been immersed in questions about the boundaries, meanings, and place of history in their daily lives.”⁸ Sobchack posits that audiences would have been aware of the contestation of popular history (a key component of the culture wars) which in 1994 had been focused through discursive battles over the History Standards for schools, the campaign against Disney’s proposed Civil War theme park in Virginia, and Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibition.⁹ In addition to these public debates I would add the intertextual weight of screen histories of the 1960s era and the media discourses that surrounded them that have been analysed in previous chapters. Consequently, in this chapter, I argue that the use of *Forrest Gump* by the right was not inevitable, but the result of the specific historical and cultural context of the moment of its release. I argue that the right’s appropriation of the film was not immediate, but the result of the film’s popular success, its politically-neutral

⁶ Susannah Radstone, “Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory,” in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 92.

⁷ Graham, “Contracting America.”

⁸ Vivian Sobchack, “History Happens,” in *The Persistence of History: cinema, television and the modern event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

⁹ Ibid.

marketing campaign that was influenced by the culture wars climate, and the absence or reluctance on the part of liberals to claim the film for their own position. As a result, in the second section, I take issue with the critical orthodoxy that reads the film itself as conservative and I offer alternative readings.

I: Complicating the Right's Appropriation of *Forrest Gump*.

The appropriation of *Forrest Gump* by the right had an unusual gestation. Initially the film was ignored by conservative critics and given mixed to positive reviews in the popular press, but these positions shifted as the film became successful. Of the popular critics, Roger Ebert hailed “a magical movie,” seeing the accommodation that Jenny and Forrest reach after their parallel journeys as being “like a dream of reconciliation for our society.”¹⁰ Richard Corliss, in *Time* magazine, echoed Ebert’s praise. His review evaluates the film in terms of an acknowledgement of Tom Hanks as “throwback to old Hollywood,” finding Forrest’s climactic declaration of love rendered “magnificently,” and concluding that although “simple things seem unattainable; when attained, they feel sublime.”¹¹ *Rolling Stone*’s Peter Travers wished the film “Godspeed,” and saw in the film’s skewering satire a capacity for hope that is “an ambitious goal in this age of rampant cynicism.”¹² Jay Carr, film critic of *The Boston Globe*, was rare in identifying the social comment inherent to the film. He opined that for all its lightness, *Forrest Gump* is “no less filled with rage than *Born on the Fourth of July*.”¹³

Carr was the only critic on the liberal-left not to shift his position on *Forrest Gump* in the course of the following year. He later argued that liberal commentators had made an error when they “forfeited to the right the powerful appeal of the film’s populism” because it was successful for the

¹⁰ Roger Ebert, review of *Forrest Gump*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 7, 1994, B33.

¹¹ Richard Corliss, review of *Forrest Gump*, *Time*, July 11, 1994, 58.

¹² Peter Travers. “The Wolf, the Lion, and the Lamb,” *Rolling Stone*, July 14-28, 1994, 97.

¹³ Jay Carr, “‘Forrest Gump’: nobody’s fool,” *The Boston Globe*, July 6, 1994, 69.

same reason that Bill Clinton won the 1992 presidential election: “it gave people hope.”¹⁴ Ebert also maintained his opinion of the film in his “year in review” column but was careful to position himself against Rush Limbaugh and to qualify his reading of the film as “apolitical, a delicate, witty meander down memory lane.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, Travers’ review of the year lambasted the film as “safe entertainment that envelops you like a warm bath and lays anxiety to rest,” and bemoaned what he saw as its cynical marketing of “ignorance as bliss,” while Corliss reversed his position (just weeks after his initial appraisal) and dismissed the film as “social tragedy sanitized for a *Saturday Evening Post* cover.”¹⁶ One of the few liberal columnists to lay claim to the film was Frank Rich in the *New York Times*. Two weeks into the film’s release, Rich (as Carr later would) explicitly compared Forrest to Bill Clinton as a white Southerner, raised by a single mother, who “instinctively believes in racial and social justice.”¹⁷ Rich also saw echoes of Clinton in Forrest’s lack of cynicism, his position as a healing figure, and his embrace of idealism.¹⁸

¹⁴ Jay Carr, “Life is like a box of nominations,” *The Boston Globe*, February 12, 1995, 53.

¹⁵ Roger Ebert, “The Best (And Worst),” *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 18, 1994, Show 1.

¹⁶ Quoted in Andrew Howe, review of *Forrest Gump*, <http://www.filmwritten.org/reviews/1994/forrestgump.htm> (accessed September 30, 2003); Corliss, “The World According to Gump,” 54.

¹⁷ Frank Rich, “The Gump From Hope,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1994, A23.

¹⁸ The theme of Forrest as a healing figure forms the basis of the first published and most positive academic piece on *Forrest Gump*. For Peter Chumo, Forrest acts as a spiritual redeemer and “is largely an agent of *redemption* for society’s divisions. Specifically, he becomes a *mediator* who can reconcile oppositions and *heal* the nation in the process.” The date of publication of Chumo’s article is important to note. Given the peer review process and print lead times, it is likely that his essay was written *before* the film was used by the GOP, supporting my contention that the political use of the film tainted academic responses. Peter N. Chumo, “‘You’ve Got to Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On’: *Forrest*

Jennifer Hyland Wang has observed that initial reviews in conservative publications such as the *National Review* and *The New Republic* were negative, but that both eventually changed their position as *Forrest Gump* became popular.¹⁹ Although Wang is correct to note that the film's popularity was used by conservatives to demonise the counterculture in the service of its electoral strategy, she simplifies the development of the right's position on the film which was more contested than has been assumed. John Simon's appraisal in the *National Review* appeared three weeks *after* Pat Buchanan had first claimed the film as conservative, yet Simon dismissed it as "idiot savantish" and failed to read any political import in what he saw as the film's "randomness."²⁰ In addition, James Bowman, perhaps the most conservative film critic of the time, abstained from reviewing the film in *The American Spectator* because he "hated" it.²¹ On the same day as Buchanan's appropriation was published, the conservative *U.S. News and World Report* ascribed the film's popularity not to any politics read into the film, but to its humour, its special effects, and the star power of Tom Hanks. This article dismissed Frank Rich's comparison of *Forrest* to Clinton not because it claimed the film was critical of the counterculture, but because of its "careful ambivalence about the turmoil of the 1960s."²²

Gump and National Reconciliation," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 23, no. 1 (1995): 3 (my emphasis).

¹⁹ Wang, "Struggle of Contending Stories," 104.

²⁰ John Simon, "Technology rampant," *National Review*, August 29, 1994, 63.

²¹ James Bowman, review of *Contact*, July 1, 1997, <http://www.jamesbowman.net/reviewDetail.asp?pubID=449> (accessed April 15, 2007).

²² John Leo, "A Gump in our throat," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 8, 1994, 22.

The reception of *Forrest Gump* by the right, then, was not one of straightforward embrace and this provides a key example of the way in which a film might prompt multiple, contradictory viewing positions. This is exemplified in the reaction of Charles Moore to Buchanan's reading of the film as celebrating "the values of conservatism, of the old America, of fidelity and family, faith and goodness."²³ Moore admonished Buchanan for overlooking that "the movie reeks of political correctness," which he saw as evidence of "how much PC has become part of the normal background noise of our lives."²⁴ Moore identified several narrative details to support what Martin Walker saw as paradoxically the "best liberal defence" of the film: Forrest is raised by a single mother who is subjected to sexual harassment; Jenny's "life of shame" is ascribed to the sexual abuse of her father; Forrest excels in the military *because* he has the lowest IQ; and, fundamentally, Forrest's life is devoid of the influence of "healthy white males."²⁵ There are several examples of audiences reading *Forrest Gump* in this way. A letter to the editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times* vehemently objected to the smearing of America's leaders at the hands of a "politically correct mob" who depict ordinary Americans as "dupes," while a letter in *The Washington Post* echoed Moore's observations and concluded that *Forrest Gump* "exposes the evils of American society."²⁶ However, these debates among conservatives as to the

²³ Buchanan, "Hollywood Surprise," B3.

²⁴ Quoted in Martin Walker, "Making saccharine taste sour," *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 10 (1994): 17.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ T.A. Whelihan, letter to the editor, *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 21, 1994, 42; David Batchelor, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, August 20, 1994, A17.

film's meaning were settled by the Republicans', and especially Newt Gingrich's, use of it in their Congressional election campaign. After the *National Review* had named *Forrest Gump* the "Best Picture Indicting the Sixties Counterculture" (in a feature on the hundred best conservative films), Gingrich incorporated a view of the film into his campaign speeches; he argued that it represented the evils of the counterculture and directly associated its picture of the sixties' mores with Bill Clinton.²⁷

Although Pat Robertson saw *Forrest Gump* as evidence of a "tiny cell of conservatism burrowing deep inside the Hollywood elite," the commandeering of it by the political right should not be seen as the intention of the filmmakers.²⁸ Far from being the right-wing ideologues that its critics would assume, the production notes distributed to accompany the film's release accentuate the liberal leanings of those involved in the production. They proudly state that one producer, Steve Starkey, is a veteran of the anti-war demonstrations at Berkeley and another, Steve Tisch, had previously worked on socially conscious telemovies such as *Evil in Clear River* (1988) and *Heart of Dixie* (1989).²⁹ Tisch spoke in later promotional material of being a veteran of anti-war marches in Boston between 1967 and 1971 and

²⁷ Spencer Warren, "The 100 Best Conservative Movies," *National Review*, October 24, 1994, 54; William Douglas, "Gingrich Leaves No Doubt Where He Stands," *Plain Dealer*, October 30, 1994, A5.

²⁸ *The Observer*, "Time is Right for America's Holy Fool," February 19, 1995, 24.

²⁹ *Forrest Gump: Production Information* (Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 1994), 12. Peter Kramer has suggested that distributor's press material is worth attention because "its statements find their way into a wide range of publications, thus shaping the expectations of prospective film audiences." This observation may go some way to explaining the initial coldness of conservative reviewers, as well as the unlikely appearance of the literary term "picaresque" in many pieces about the film. Peter Kramer, "Would you take your children to see this film? The cultural and social work of the family-adventure movie," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 308-309.

screenwriter Eric Roth also told members of the press that he had been a Vietnam protestor *and* lost friends in the war.³⁰ Roth's liberal credentials are illustrated through his later collaborations with directors Michael Mann (*The Insider* [1999], a tract against "Big Tobacco," and the biopic *Ali* [2001]) and Steven Spielberg (for whom he wrote *Munich* [2005]). Similarly, the intertextual influence imported through the film's actors is hardly reactionary. Tom Hanks' subsequent involvement in films such as *Apollo 13* (1995) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) that champion traditional notions of heroism was not an issue for audiences in 1994. Their most recent exposure to Hanks would have been his Oscar-winning performance as a persecuted gay man dying from AIDS in Jonathan Demme's explicitly progressive *Philadelphia* (1993). Audiences also knew Sally Field as an Oscar-winner in progressive films, not only as a hardy, widowed smallholding farmer in *Places in the Heart* (1984), but also as the fiercely independent union activist *Norma Rae* (1979), directed by established Hollywood liberal Martin Ritt.

Robert Zemeckis, the director of *Forrest Gump*, went to great lengths while promoting the film to ensure interviewers knew that he intended the film to be "apolitical": because Forrest "is a pure and simple individual without any opinions or politics, he can travel through the tapestry of American images spanning three decades, reflecting back the mayhem and

³⁰ "Steve Tisch interview text and biography," *Forrest Gump: Music, Artists and Times*, CD-ROM, (Carlsbad, CA: GTE Entertainment, 1995), disc 3; Stephen Schaefer, "Why 'Gump' is happening," *The Boston Herald*, July 31, 1994, 42.

madness of what's going on around him.”³¹ Indeed, this is a unique film in the context of my thesis in that, unlike the most of the films under examination, *Forrest Gump* was not presented to the public as an historical film with a clear agenda. The release of a prestige historical film enables the individual studio and the Hollywood community to claim a “serious” contribution to national discourse and legitimise its role in national culture. However, the short retrospective window through which marketing departments evaluate how best to sell a film would have revealed an appetite amongst audiences for a specific type of history on film in 1994. The most immediate example for the marketers of *Forrest Gump* would have been *Schindler's List* (1993), which in the winter prior to *Forrest Gump*'s release dominated the supplemental sections and magazines as well as the Academy Awards. While the sober “window-to-the-past” version of the Holocaust presented in *Schindler's List* was predicated by an “authentic” fidelity to that past, the playfulness of *Forrest Gump*'s historical interventions and the film's manipulation of the historical archive place the film closer to debates surrounding the films of Oliver Stone. The residual impact of the furore over Stone's *JFK* (1991) – primarily centred on its “creative” use of historical record – can be seen to

³¹ Walker, “Making saccharine taste sour,” 17; *Forrest Gump: Production Information*, 2. This “apolitical” romantic selling of the film is underlined in the opening paragraph of the production notes: “On a shaded bus bench in Savannah, Georgia sits a most unlikely storyteller. Forrest Gump has seen it and done it all, but he may not have completely understood any of it. Forrest is not the brightest of fellows. But it's like his mama always told him: “Stupid is as stupid does.” And what Forrest Gump has done is follow the tide of history through the latter 20th Century, from football field to the battlefield, from the company of presidents to the clutches of the media, *into the arms of his one true love*” (my emphasis).

have coloured the reception to his next film, *Heaven and Earth* (1993).³² The likelihood that *Forrest Gump* would be equated with Stone's oeuvre provides ample reason for the film's marketing campaign to de-emphasise its historical and political aspects. This decision can also be seen to be influenced by the cultural climate of the early 1990s. "Family values" rhetoric was epitomised by Dan Quayle's public condemnation of Murphy Brown's decision to conceive a child out of wedlock, and informed Michael Medved's highly influential and commercially successful book, *Hollywood vs. America*.³³ Medved's tract, condemning the negative affect of the products of the entertainment industry upon "American values," serendipitously (for him) dovetailed with the emergent new Republicanism of Gingrich to make Medved a prominent fixture on the talk-show circuit. This provided a platform for his warnings to Hollywood, warnings undoubtedly heard by the makers of *Forrest Gump*. The confluence of these factors can be seen as determining the film's promotion not as an historical film, but rather as a love story set against a historical backdrop, with a large emphasis placed on its innovative special effects.³⁴

³² In polar opposition to the cultural impact of *Schindler's List*, *Heaven and Earth*, as noted in the first chapter of this thesis, was critically ignored and a commercial disaster that failed to advance an appraisal of the effect of the war on the suffering of the Vietnamese that Stone had intended.

³³ Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (London: Harper Collins, 1992).

³⁴ See "Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump," Disc 2, *Forrest Gump*, special ed. DVD, directed by Robert Zemeckis (1994; Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2001). *Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump* was a "making of" featurette distributed by Paramount to promote the film. This half-hour programme, shown on HBO at the time of the film's release and included with subsequent video and DVD releases, contains interviews with the actors and crew and spends far more time focusing on *how*, rather than *why*, the historical scenes were recreated. Additionally, the theatrical trailer for the film, despite running almost twice the length of the average two-minute trailer, emphasises Forrest's "differentness" and the film's love story.

In addition to influencing the presentation of *Forrest Gump* to the public, it is likely that this highly politicised cultural environment also coloured its production. As Douglas Kellner has noted, many cultural texts attempt to maximise their audiences through incorporating both “conservative” and “liberal” discourses and ideological positions.³⁵ Kellner’s paradigm is particularly salient in the case of *Forrest Gump* given that it was extremely expensive to make and had to reach as big an audience as possible to be profitable. Zemeckis had concerns about the financial prospects of a film that focused almost solely on “baby boomer” history and his unease was shared by Paramount.³⁶ The studio was at a loss as to how to market the film. Its solution was simply to allocate a promotional budget twice the industry average to buy “blanket” coverage for its television commercials that were twice the average length.³⁷ Significantly, the t-shirts, ping-pong bats, the 1-800 LUV GUMP order line, and the Bubba-Gump Shrimp Company caps and frozen shrimp that became ubiquitous were only available *after* the film

The only historical intervention shown in detail is the humorous “I gotta pee” moment with JFK, while brief images are shown of Gump’s encounters with Presidents Johnson and Nixon.

³⁵ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), 93.

³⁶ Robert Zemeckis, Steve Starkey, and Rick Carter, “Commentary,” in *Forrest Gump*, special ed. DVD. In fact, the studio’s doubts over the film’s prospects led to its losing money on the highest grossing film in its history. Rather than provide extra money that was required to cover a barely significant increase in budget, Paramount exchanged portions of the salaries of Hanks, Zemeckis and the producers for a significant percentage of the film’s gross box-office takings. Therefore, despite its huge grosses, the film had yet to break even a year after its release. Glenn Pfeiffer, Robert Capettini and Gene Whittenburg, “Forrest Gump – Accountant: A Study of Accounting in the Motion Picture Industry,” *Journal of Accounting Education* 15, no. 3 (1997): 319-344.

³⁷ Ron Grover, “Gump Happens and Viacom is Thanking Its Lucky Stars,” *Business Week*, August 8, 1994, 29.

became a success.³⁸ In an analysis of the adaptation process of Winston Groom's original novel to the screen, David Lavery suggests that the primary explanation for the distillation of much of the novel's satirical bite into the film's "maudlin folk wisdom" was due to a marketing decision, or a kind of self-censorship intended to make the film attractive to as many audience groups as possible.³⁹ The same logic can be used to account for the film's lack of explicit ideological content. This financial consideration would explain Zemeckis' abdication of authorial intention, given that a "political film" is generally seen to be box office poison. However, retrospectively he has suggested that the film was indeed intended to be subversive. When asked about the appraisals of *Forrest Gump* as Capraesque in 1995, he replied that in his opinion "there's a lot more cynicism and irony in this movie than in any of the Capra films."⁴⁰ Therefore, his silence could have been designed to avoid the "mechanism" he believes the right has "set up to complain about movies very loudly" that could have ruined the film.⁴¹ Ironically, through his desire to achieve financial success and avoid an Oliver Stone-type backlash, Zemeckis made a film that that right could use for its own ends.

³⁸ Anita M. Busch, "Merchandisers Race To Jump on 'Gump,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 4, 1994, B33.

³⁹ Lavery, "No Box of Chocolates," 21.

⁴⁰ Ted Elrick, "Gump Becomes Him: The Robert Zemeckis Interview," *DGA News*, February-March 1995, 29. It should be noted that these "Capra" comments were made in a "niche" industry magazine, in this case the union newsletter of the Director's Guild of America, not in a mainstream publication.

⁴¹ Jonathan Romney, "Tinsel town's auteur," *The Guardian*, September 26, 1997, B7.

II: *Forrest Gump* and the Possibility of Contradictory Readings.

In the aftermath of *Forrest Gump*'s success at the Academy Awards in March 1995, Jay Carr, the most consistent advocate of a liberal reading of the film, identified the film as a "political football" and lamented that Democrats had failed to argue that the "film is closer to Clinton's values than Buchanan's."⁴² In the first section of this chapter I have outlined the ways in which the right's appropriation of *Forrest Gump* was by no means inevitable, but predicated on the specific cultural and political context of the culture wars that influenced its promotion. Fundamentally, the intentional polysemy of *Forrest Gump* – its ability to sustain contradictory readings – enabled the right to appropriate it despite the filmmakers' intentions. For Todd Gitlin, the New Left's disappointment with the common man following its own disintegration led to a situation where the left could not imagine "a populism in which it could take part," thereby ceding the idea of a common America to the right by default.⁴³ This has resulted in a curious shift between the left and the right in which the right has taken the political centre and "now speaks the language of commonalities."⁴⁴ The political arena in which the right had appropriated the language of populism had a stymieing effect on producer Steve Tisch's attempt to reclaim *Forrest Gump* in the aftermath of the Republican capture of Congress. He said, "I don't think the film was a catalyst for a trend of any

⁴² Jay Carr, "The Politics of Gump," *Boston Globe*, 26 March 1995, B27.

⁴³ Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 71-73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

kind. I don't think this film is about conservative or liberal values, or even American values. The film is about human values."⁴⁵ However, Tisch's comment contains echoes of Pat Buchanan's earlier claim regarding the film's countering of Hollywood values. Tisch espouses what were traditionally liberal sentiments but, by 1995, such sentiments are the language of the right. This begs the question as to whether it is the fault of the text that it has been usurped by right.

In this section I take issue with the leftist critical orthodoxy on *Forrest Gump* that, because it has been used by the right to advocate its "family values" rhetoric it is, therefore, a reactionary film. This orthodox reading of the film echoes Carr's lament of the failure of liberals to identify their own politics within the film and epitomises Michael Bérubé's characterisation of the "academic left" as having been "so socially marginal for so long that it no longer considers persuasion important."⁴⁶ Bérubé is less damning than Gitlin for whom the left was a spent political force that had in the 1990s retreated into the realm of identity politics, turning its attention to the work of Michel Foucault and the study of power structures that naturalise white, heterosexual, masculine domination.⁴⁷ As if to literalise Gitlin's description of the left's retreat into the analysis of identity politics, Thomas Byers begins his influential dissection of *Forrest Gump* by invoking Foucault's Orwellian

⁴⁵ Quoted in Jeff Gordiner, "Mr. Gump goes to Washington," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 10, 1995, 29.

⁴⁶ Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), 36.

⁴⁷ Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 102-103.

conception of collective memory in which popular historical films function to control a people's memory, informing how and what they remember.⁴⁸

Building on work by Susan Jeffords and Fred Pfeil on the remasculinization of America, Byers performs a close textual analysis of *Forrest Gump* to illustrate the ways in which the film reconstructs traditional notions of (white) American masculinity at the expense of its racial, political, and gendered "others" through a selective forgetting of the past and a reinscription of conservative history. Byers asserts that considering that Forrest is presented as identifying with and being sympathetic to Southern blacks, the film "works hard to disavow white racism."⁴⁹ He also cites the absence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from the film's pantheon of prominent assassinations of the period. A repeated trope in *Forrest Gump* is the protagonist's interaction with historical figures, the circumstances of whose deaths are subsequently imparted to the audience through Forrest's voiceover. The exclusion of Dr. King and the inclusion of segregationist governor George Wallace with John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and John Lennon is problematic for Byers. The depiction of each assassination as having occurred, as Forrest informs us, "for no particular reason," has the effect of reducing each figure to the equivalent status of "wounded patriarchs." In Byers' interpretation, the racial politics of the film appear clear, but the film problematises his reading. The tone of Forrest's voiceover differentiates Wallace from the other assassinated figures through the pejorative inflection

⁴⁸ Byers, "History Re-Membered," 419.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 428.

in the description of Wallace as “*that* angry little man [who] *thought* it would be a good idea and ran for President.” In addition, the news commentary that accompanies the University of Alabama stand-off reports that President Kennedy (deified in a subsequent scene) would later send in troops against Wallace’s stand “in the schoolhouse door.” Indeed, the film implies that the fact that Wallace did not die while the others did is an injustice.

The omission of King from the film can be explained by the film’s irreverent treatment of historical figures (whether counterculture icons or Presidents) and the incompatibility of this strategy with the traditionally reverential (though rare) representations of King on film.⁵⁰ The omission of King may also be understandable given the film’s wilful, comedic pattern of positioning assassinations after scenes that ironically distort historical events and lampoon those assassinated. Such explanations are further supported by a scene that was shot but not included in the finished film.⁵¹ In the scene, which would have been the first scene in which we see Forrest as an adult (i.e. Tom Hanks), Forrest was to have been with Jenny by the river from where he would have heard the sound of a Civil Rights march. Arriving at the march led

⁵⁰ Sharon Monteith, “The movie-made Movement: civil rites of passage,” in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 127. In addition, Monteith notes that on the rare occasions that King is featured, such as in Richard Pearce’s *The Long Walk Home* (1994), his body is “typically concealed in a series of cutaway shots,” although his voice rings out clear and true.

⁵¹ *Forrest Gump: Final Shooting Script*, September 12, 1993, *Forrest Gump* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA, 25-8. A version of this scene is also included on disc two of the *Forrest Gump* special edition DVD. The scene was to have been followed by one in which Forrest is shown with Dr. King on television as waits in the town’s barber shop. One of the patrons asks “Was you on the bridge this afternoon with that nigra troublemaker...?!” Forrest’s reply is simply, “Huh?” Subsequently there would have been an image of Dr. King slain and Forrest’s voiceover would have said, “Some years later that nice young minister was getting some air outside his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, and somebody, for no particular reason, shot him dead.”

by Dr. King, Forrest would have witnessed the release of police dogs to attack the marchers only to intervene and play with the dogs whom, a flashback would have shown, he knew as puppies. The scene was to have ended with Forrest apologising to Dr. King with the words, “Sorry about your parade. They’re just dogs, they don’t know any better.” Of course, the implication that the racist police were “just dogs” could have provided the film with its most satirical moment but, in a film where almost nothing is sacred, the sole reference in the film to the Civil Rights Movement as “a parade” would have been too disrespectful. Therefore, I believe that the inclusion of King in the film would have explicitly opened the film to charges of disrespect to Dr. King and of a more general racism – a charge which further examination of the film discourages.

Byers notes that several scenes in the film have (anti-)racist struggles as their referents which furthers his claim that the film seeks to dilute the political and social import of white racism: most notably an early allusion to D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) in which *Forrest Gump* shows Hanks, playing a distant relative of Forrest (Nathan Bedford Forrest), the “Civil War hero” and founder of a “club” called the Ku Klux Klan. For Byers, replaying of the past through Forrest’s eyes results in a portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as “simply silly, not vicious,” thereby negating any historical injustice. However, there is a problem with Byers’ belief that it is possible to replace history and memory: this position seemingly echoes the redundant Mass Culture theory of the Frankfurt School that it is possible to directly

manipulate a passive audience with the text's preferred or dominant ideology.⁵² By showing the racist dimension of Forrest's family history, the film explicitly evokes that past for an audience who, if unaware of the notorious racial politics of Griffith's film, will certainly be aware of the evils of the Klan from *Mississippi Burning* (1988), and possibly from the fears of a resurgence of the Klan that circulated at the time of that film's release.⁵³ Indeed, in this context, Forrest's ridiculing of the Klan is fairly topical, and should *Forrest Gump*'s makers have desired to erase the history of Southern white racism, they need only have ignored it. As thorough as Byers' textual analysis is, it is fundamentally flawed by disallowing any kind of savvy audience agency or counter reading.

This disavowal of audience agency colours Byers' critique of the film's most startling scenes, those in which Forrest is inscribed into documentary footage, and therefore, as it were, into history. For example, Byers asserts that the insertion of Forrest into George Wallace's standoff at the University of Alabama, in which he enters the scene to help Vivian Malone (the University's first Black female student) carry her books, has the effect of reinscribing Forrest into the archival memory evoked. This results in the subsuming of the (real) image's larger import to the (fictional) story of Forrest so that through "the comedy of their eccentric connections to Forrest's life... all significant historical differences are flattened out," and history is

⁵² John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Harlow, UK: Prentice Hall, 2001), 94.

⁵³ Monteith, "The movie-made Movement," 132. There was little to no resurgence of the Klan in Mississippi after the release of *Mississippi Burning*, but fears of the possibility were prevalent at the time.

neutralised.⁵⁴ Byers misreads the intention and effect of the film's comedy. Vivian Sobchack notes that, while these scenes represent the over-punned slippage between the "real" and the "reel," *Forrest Gump* is essentially a one-joke movie: the film does not "presume that its audience will be at all categorically confused," because the scenes *depend* on the audiences' recognition of the inherent tension of the historical situation for their humour.⁵⁵ Therefore, in order to "work," the film needs the audience's complicity through recognising that Forrest's presence in the archive footage is inappropriate and *explicitly* fictional. However, in relegating the question of humour to a footnote, Byers refutes any possible ironic reading of the film by arguing that it is a clever enough text to offer alternate interpretations, but that a ironic reading runs counter to his preferred reading of the film and the wider media-discourses that surrounded it.⁵⁶ Byers' dismissal functions to illustrate the nature of his faith in textual analysis, that is, as I have shown, in turn determined by the uses to which the text has been put by the right, and his lack of belief in audience agency.

The political right's hold on the film, especially in repeated anti-counterculture rhetoric, has clearly coloured the reception of *Forrest Gump* in academic circles. Byers' project of illustrating the "re-membering" of gender histories in the film necessitates that, through the character of Jenny, the counterculture be shown as a "deviation": her "misguided attempts at self-

⁵⁴ Byers, "History Re-Membered," 426-427.

⁵⁵ Vivian Sobchack, "History Happens," 3.

⁵⁶ Byers, "History Re-Membered," 441n4. His dismissal of irony is unsurprising in a humourless piece, though there is a terrible pun ascribing *Forrest Gump* as a product of the "Newt" Hollywood.

expression and independence at once hurt Forrest, keep the two of them from fulfilling their ‘natural’ roles as soulmates (and parents), and endanger Jenny herself.”⁵⁷ Two immediate problems arise with Byers’ Forrest-Jenny binary. It is conventional for a Hollywood film to be focalised through the male character, even more so when its star is as big as Tom Hanks.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that it is Jenny and not Forrest who is associated with a “deviant” counterculture, although it should be noted that the assigning of the counterculture to the negative binary is Byers’ decision. Secondly, Byers reads criticisms of the counterculture made by the right into its representation in the film. Certainly, Jenny does suffer on her chosen path for she is shown as: suicidal (although this may be related back to the abuse she suffered as a child – hardly an example of family values); prey to abusive men; a cocaine addict in the disco era; and finally as HIV-positive. However, and I think this is an essential issue in reading *Forrest Gump*, in many of the film’s glimpses of her life she is also shown as extremely happy, a state that it rarely allows to Forrest. It is Jenny who is the more independent and strong of the two: she raises an intelligent boy in little Forrest without any male assistance; and, despite her apparent domestication, retains her countercultural identity as the very image of a “flower child” at their wedding. Indeed, Dave Kehr argues that it is Jenny who is the real hero of the film. Through her continual advice

⁵⁷ Ibid., 433.

⁵⁸ Byers does acknowledge this through his use of Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze in support of his view of the film’s patriarchal stance, yet later criticises the film for subsuming Jenny’s experience to Forrest’s through the film’s overt suturing of the viewer to Forrest’s position. Ibid., 424, 434.

that he run away when things get bad, Kehr asserts that Jenny gives Forrest the gift of flight while she herself is trapped and must fight to survive.⁵⁹

Byers' analysis of the film's representation of the anti-war movement as Orwellian ("the war is waged by peaceful boys, while the peace movement is like being in the army") is predicated on selective use of evidence.⁶⁰ It could be argued that the representations of the military in the film are primarily satirical – Forrest excels in basic training essentially because he is stupid⁶¹ – and, further, unnecessary given that there was a plethora of Vietnam training and combat films available in the audiences' recent memory, and that the necessary appearance of the film as "apolitical" meant the avoidance of what Tom Hanks described as an "editorial position" on the war.⁶² Byers' ignores the film's several positive, politically-charged details: the images of the Washington demonstration where Forrest and Jenny walking at night

⁵⁹ Dave Kehr, "Who Framed *Forrest Gump*," *Film Comment* 31, no. 2 (1995): 45-51. The notion that Forrest is not the hero of the film is supported by the "running" episode. This sequence is shot, in the words of cinematographer Don Burgess, like a "car commercial" and is accompanied by a middle-of-the-road '70s "driving" music that contrasts starkly with the counterculture rock of the rest of the film (made explicit through the use of former-country "outlaw" Willie Nelson performing the aurally mainstream *On the Road Again* in this sequence). The sequence's aesthetic blandness complements the context of the montage in which Forrest becomes a quasi-guru for narcissistic times in the mould of Jim Fixx only to disappoint his followers by returning home to Greenbow without uttering a single profundity. The message appears to be for the audience *not* to follow Forrest's example for he ultimately has nothing to say.

⁶⁰ Byers, "History Re-Membered," 435.

⁶¹ According to a memo from the Pentagon's chief liaison to the film industry the script's representation of the military led to the film being denied the army's assistance during filming on three grounds: "The depiction of the military in the 1960s is inaccurate, stereotypical, and implausible"; "The generalized impression [is] that the Army of the 1960s was staffed by the guileless, or soldiers of minimal intelligence"; "The improbable behavior of uniformed personnel and the portrayal of active and ex-service members is dyslogistic." *Harper's*, "The Military Inferiority Complex," November 2001, 18.

⁶² While promoting the film, Tom Hanks spoke of this desire to avoid an editorial position on how bad the war was "because in Forrest's mind, it just was." This is slightly amended from Groom's source novel in which the admittedly different-natured Forrest repeatedly refers to the war as "a bunch of shit." See *Through the Eyes of Forrest Gump*.

amongst amiable, peaceful protestors; the patriotism which the film ascribes to Abbie Hoffman through the stars-and-stripes pattern of his shirt; the images of dishevelled veterans bearing “veterans for peace” badges and hats. This last detail is especially important given that the reality of veterans protesting the war was omitted from all representations of the Vietnam veteran during this period with the exception of *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Indeed, *Forrest Gump* is the first film to visually recreate a mass protest in Washington, D.C., on screen. Unlike the films analysed in chapter two which reasserted the values of sixties idealism but did so either within generic and present day contexts or through the recreation of campus protests, *Forrest Gump* encourages audiences to remember that such large scale protests occurred and were attended by thousands. Instead of recognising this, Byers concentrates on the representations of the Black Panthers and the character of Jenny’s abusive boyfriend, SDS leader Wesley. He is correct that the film is critical of these particular elements of the counterculture, although when set against the positive representations of other facets of the movement, this critique may be interpreted slightly differently. Wesley’s slapping of Jenny can be read as indexical of the misogyny generally acknowledged to have been an element of the New Left and which has been seen as a springboard for the second wave of feminism (which may in turn explain Jenny’s future as a self-sufficient single mother). If *Forrest* is taken to be representative of “common America,” then the film appropriately represents the New Left and the Black Panthers as speaking a form of political rhetoric that is not only

alien, but also threatening, to Forrest as representative of the white status quo.⁶³ Despite its community projects for the social good, the Panthers' rhetoric signified a threat to "normal" Americans (like Forrest). This is a reality that, along with the hubris of the New Left, is captured by the film.

While informed by Byers' analysis, Robert Burgoyne's critique of the film uses the concept of "prosthetic memory" as an alternative analytical tool, yet reaches many of the same conclusions as Byers.⁶⁴ Alison Landsberg believes a positive result of the growth of the mass media technologies is that they have the capability to generate empathy through their capacity to expose individual viewers to a "collective past they either did or did not experience," terming the experiential result a "prosthetic memory."⁶⁵ Where Landsberg takes a utopian view of the possibilities of such memories, Burgoyne sees their nefarious possibilities and suggests that such "prosthesis" could function by "supplementing or even replacing organic memory."⁶⁶ Discussing the Vietnam section of *Forrest Gump*, Burgoyne argues that the "real" history of the war is flattened into a succession of quotations from the iconography of Hollywood's Vietnam films, "parasitizing [*sic.*] these films in a way that empties them of their original content, *Forrest Gump* in a sense 'samples' the Vietnam genre and converts it to a different message."⁶⁷ While Burgoyne is

⁶³ Steven Scott finds the equating of Forrest with America to be extremely subversive in that it reduces Americanism (extolled by Gingrich et al) as perceived in *Gump* to the point of view of a character with an IQ of 75. Steven D. Scott, "'Like a Box of Chocolates': *Forrest Gump* and Postmodernism," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2001): 26-27.

⁶⁴ Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, 104-119.

⁶⁵ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

⁶⁶ Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, 107-8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

correct that the film samples other cinematic representations of the war in keeping with its postmodern bricolage style, the loss of original context that he observes is hard to accept. Rather, it is clear that traces of the “original” contexts remain in the film’s pastiche. Although familiar as signature scenes in films as different as *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1981) and *Birdy* (1984), the “boot camp” scenes in *Forrest Gump* most explicitly evoke scenes in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) through their dehumanising symbolism of men tooth brushing floors and being put upon by screaming drill sergeants. Even the light relief, Bubba’s perpetual cataloguing of shrimp dishes, cannot dispel the horrific expectation of “soap-bashing” when Forrest is lying isolated in his bunk at night. Instead, a fellow soldier distracts him with a copy of *Playboy* (though the picture of Jenny that he sees therein is as affecting as a different form of violence). The evocation of *Full Metal Jacket* in *Forrest Gump* can be seen to subvert any hegemonic rewriting of past films which Burgoyne associates with *Forrest Gump*. If anything, the presence of a black drill sergeant in the barracks, as well as Forrest’s excelling at basic training as a consequence of his stupidity, makes these scenes explicitly critical of white male conceptions of the military.

The sequences in Vietnam clearly echo the films of Oliver Stone; even through songs by The Doors being used more frequently than those of any other musicians.⁶⁸ The scenes of combat in the jungle are in the style of *Platoon* (*Forrest Gump* shares the same military adviser, Dale Dye). In

⁶⁸ Stone, of course, directed *The Doors* (1991). In addition, John Williams score for Stone’s *JFK* is musically evoked earlier in the film through the introduction of a brief drum motif over imagery of Kennedy’s motorcade in Dallas.

Forrest's first meeting with Lt. Dan Taylor, the latter brings to mind Willem Defoe's Elias in *Platoon*: through the beads he wears around his neck, and the film's identification of him as Forrest's guide in hell (ironised upon his introduction in the film as "Lt. Dante"). However, it is in the post-Vietnam Dan that *Forrest Gump* makes its most explicit intertextual allusion to Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*: this Dan, as Robert Burgoyne describes him, is an "almost mocking commentary on or counterpoint to *Born on the Fourth of July*."⁶⁹ For Burgoyne, unlike Kovic in *Born*, Dan is treated unsympathetically because his rage is subsumed to Forrest's "sweet incomprehension" and disconnected from the revisionist text of nationhood promoted by the film. Yet it should be noted that Dan is constantly identified with signifiers of Americanness. His wheelchair carries the starkly ironic sticker, "America: Our Kind of Place," and he is framed in front of the Stars-and-Stripes as he rails against God in the shrimp-boat's crow's nest during a hurricane. The intertextual allusion to *Born on the Fourth of July* enables *Forrest Gump*'s audience to take a "short-cut" to the psyche of Dan's character. Far from the born-again capitalist Burgoyne sees who finally "makes his peace with God," the last time Dan appears in the film is at Forrest's wedding, apparently "cured," both literally and mentally, of his veteran's anger through his "new legs" and Vietnamese bride. However, the final long shot of the wedding scene shows Dan standing apart from the rest of congregation. Whether this is to suggest his continuing rejection of religion is possible, but his isolation indicates a continuing separation from the congregation of "nation" (as many

⁶⁹ Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, 111.

Vietnam veterans remained despite the “healing” intentions of cultural representations of them). It is a conclusive shot that echoes Ron Kovic’s consistently oppositional position in relation to the American “establishment.”

For Burgoyne, the film not only implants revisionist memories of Vietnam, but also changes audiences’ memories of the tropes of other Vietnam films, including the traditional representations of segregation and racial hostility in *Platoon*. However, the friendship between Bubba and Forrest explicitly evokes the often-overlooked fact that, especially in the Vietnam War, class as well as race predicated the make-up of the army. Therefore, *Forrest Gump* reminds the audience not only of other Vietnam films and their contexts, but also that it was predominately poor, uneducated social groups who were sent to Vietnam regardless of colour. This is underlined by the playing of Creedence Clearwater Revival’s anti-war anthem “Fortunate Son” on the soundtrack as Forrest and Bubba arrive in Vietnam. Unusually, in a film that generally uses music in the background or to periodise narrative changes, the song plays for a significant period and its lyrics are clearly audible, including the refrain, “It ain’t me. It ain’t me, I ain’t no Senator’s Son” with its clear class message. As with the film’s earlier allusion to *The Birth of a Nation* to outline the Gump family’s racist past, the film could have avoided reference to the class issue by invoking traditional representations of inter-platoon racial tension. That it foregrounds class problematises a reading of the film in which it is seen to pacify the divisions of history.

Burgoyne echoes Thomas Byers in criticising the film for subverting the countercultural messages of the rock songs used on the soundtrack through juxtaposing them with the (apparently) “conservative” bent of the screen action.⁷⁰ The example of “Fortunate Son,” however, offers an alternative reading in which the music’s previously known context allows a less dogmatic effect. Mark Kermode suggests that the film’s accomplished use of period(ising) music offers an “ironic, subversive counterpoint to [the character] Gump’s naïve commentary.”⁷¹ While I would avoid such a totalising claim, it is clear that the intertextual relationships between the texts that the film quotes offer the possibility of alternative viewing positions to those presented by Byers and Burgoyne.

In the context of *Forrest Gump*’s extensive textual quotation, Paul Grainge offers an interpretive model for the film through his use of Jim Collins’ work on developments in genericity which is, in turn, a response to contemporary semiotic excess.⁷² Collins identifies two new types of genre film that have developed in response to what he terms the “array,” that is, “the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that form the fabric of postmodern cultural life.”⁷³ *Dances With Wolves* (1990) is an example of a “new sincerity” film which attempts to escape from the suffocating constraints of the “array” through a fantasy of technophobia. The other genre

⁷⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁷¹ Mark Kermode, “Endnotes,” *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 12 (1994): 63.

⁷² Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, 125-153.

⁷³ Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 246.

development, termed “eclectic irony” by Collins, carries out an ironic hybridisation of genre and signs and produces an “eclecticism that attempts to master the array through techno-sophistication.”⁷⁴ Grainge identifies *Forrest Gump* as a filmic example of Collins’ “eclectic irony” but, through his investigation of the political interests served by the stylistic use of monochrome in *Schindler’s List* and *Forrest Gump*, he concludes (along with Byers and Burgoyne) that *Forrest Gump* exhibits a politicised nostalgia for white male agency and authority.⁷⁵

It is possible to offer a different reading of *Forrest Gump* through an alternative interpretation of “eclectic irony.” The recirculation of signs in the film need not be de-historicising given the interpretive role of an active audience who can recognise both the original and new contexts of the quotation. For Collins this type of “foregrounded, hyperconscious intertextuality reflects changes in terms of audience competence and narrative technique” and can be related to the type of postmodern historiography (associated with the work of Hayden White) which posits that the past is only accessible through narrative representations.⁷⁶ Countering Fredric Jameson’s nostalgia for the loss of the historical “real,” Linda Hutcheon has argued that postmodernism “represents an attempt to re-historicize” through its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, to problematise the possibility of historical representation and established notions of “natural” historical

⁷⁴ Ibid., 262.

⁷⁵ Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, 149.

⁷⁶ Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties,” 248-250; For a concise account of White’s position as related to the historical film see Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *American Historical Review* 93, no. 2 (1988): 1193-1199.

narrative.⁷⁷ Therefore, the quoting of past representations by *Forrest Gump* need not necessarily have a negative effect.

A central controversy surrounding the release of *Forrest Gump*, and its proposed effect on historical understanding, centred upon its digital manipulation of the documentary archive. Critics worried that audiences would be “Gumped” into believing what they saw and, therefore, found it hard to “write off the historical revisionism of [*Forrest Gump*] as an F/X spoof.”⁷⁸ Robert Burgoyne laments the way in which the birth of digital technology has led to the death of the quasi-Bazinian ontology of the photographic image (exemplified by the long take and deep focus that Bazin likened to taking a death shroud of reality) and he questions the ability of the new digital technology to serve historical representation and understanding.⁷⁹ Arguing that the enhanced imagery of *JFK* offers a deeper understanding of the “temporal process... and of the way the past itself changes under the pressure of new perspectives,” Burgoyne rejects *Forrest Gump*’s digital tomfoolery as a conservative rewriting of the past, while, conversely, he praises the exposure of the nefarious possibilities of computer imaging technologies in *Wag the Dog* (1997).⁸⁰ However, by setting aside the politics that critics have read into the film, *Forrest Gump*’s visual strategies can be seen to offer a *Wag the Dog*-style corrective to Burgoyne’s criticisms. Certainly, they offer a more succinct

⁷⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 225.

⁷⁸ Amy Taubin, “Plus ça change,” *The Village Voice*, August 9, 1994, *Forrest Gump* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷⁹ Robert Burgoyne, “Memory, history and digital imagery in contemporary film,” in *Memory and Popular Film* (see note 50), 220-222.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 230-1. Burgoyne refers to his previous analysis of the film in *Film Nation* as discussed earlier in this chapter.

problematizing of the possibilities of digital manipulation technology than the confusion of fact and fiction evidenced in *JFK*.

It is significant that one of Robert Zemeckis' *auteurist* signatures is the use of (Bazanian) long-takes that have become more complex as his use of special effects has increased, and that also overtly illustrate their (un-Bazinian) rendering of a created, manipulated reality.⁸¹ Despite the fact that the archival manipulation scenes rely on the audience's comprehension of their humour in order to work, Zemeckis went to great lengths at the time of the film's release to assert their *unreality*.⁸² Echoing sentiments expressed by Zemeckis in the film's extratextual promotional material, visual effects supervisor Ken Ralston referred to the nefarious possibilities of the new technology by observing that he believed the filmmakers were saying, "here's the technology to do really dangerous work. It's been done in the past with stills, but now, in the wrong hands, we have the technology to do some really scary things."⁸³ That the film was used by the right in the service of its "family values" rhetoric suggests, as many critics on the left have argued, that the technology described by Ralston was already in the "wrong" hands. However, by immediately associating the technology with fantasy – through the absurdity of Forrest's adventures in the archive – the filmmakers were

⁸¹ Although Zemeckis, more than any other director, has pioneered the use of "invisible" special effects in films, that is effects that enhance the quotidian nature of the film's diegesis, he also continues to assert their "un-reality." One need only think of the breathtaking opening shot of *Contact* (1997), or the complex camera move in *What Lies Beneath* (2000) that follows the Michelle Pfeiffer character's car onto a bridge via the river and *through* the bridge's railings.

⁸² This can be seen as a further example of the desire to avoid an Oliver Stone manipulating history-style critical reaction.

⁸³ Ron Magid, "ILM Breaks New Digital Ground for *Gump*," *American Cinematographer*, October 1994, 52-53.

implicitly countering the possibilities of using the digital manipulation for “dangerous” political purposes in the future, simply by emphasising that the possibilities exist.

Indeed, it could be argued that the filmmakers’ only mistakes were in mis-reading the popular political environment of the time and in having an excessive faith in the political strength of liberalism. The reception and academic response to *Forrest Gump* bears out not only Todd Gitlin’s appraisal of the climate of the culture wars, but also Allison Graham’s application of the death of irony to “straight readings” of *Forrest Gump*. However, the existence of a media-literate, postmodern audience capable of receiving, interpreting and evaluating more than one context at a time seems to have passed “under the radar” of the discourse on the film. An almost Freudian slip appears in the conclusion to Robert Burgoyne’s book. While reiterating that *Forrest Gump* seeks to erase the anti-hegemonic, marginalised histories presented in the other films he examines (among them *Glory* [1989] and *Thunderheart* [1992]), Burgoyne states that despite “refashioning what it takes to be the authentic texture of nation around popular memory evacuated of political meaning... *Forrest Gump* confirms the changes in the national narrative and in the identity of nation that it aggressively seeks to cloak in oblivion.”⁸⁴ In other words, the very presence in the film of the intertextual resonances of other films set in the same period and made in the same discursive time, as well as its own place within the vast intertextual mosaic of cultural memory, problematises any claims about its blanket effect on audiences. Certainly, the

⁸⁴ Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, 121-2.

film can be read as conservative and clearly it was used by conservatives to political effect, but this was not inevitable, nor intended by its makers: this was historically contingent upon the discursive cultural moment of its release.

Chapter Five

Contrasting Histories in the Post-*Gump* Moment: *Apollo 13* and *Nixon*.

In this final chapter I examine *Apollo 13* (1995) and *Nixon* (1995) within the context the aftermath of the success of *Forrest Gump*'s (1994) apparent simplicity, its appropriation by the right, and the general establishment of culture wars discourse on history by 1995. In 1995, the Senate voted to reject the proposed National Standards for United States History following a conservative backlash against their content.¹ Conservatives viewed the attempt by authors of the Standards to present a "warts and all" picture of the American past as denigrating "Western tradition" through "political correctness."² The version of history desired by conservatives was methodologically old-fashioned and privileged uncomplicated notions of American exceptionalism and heroism. In short, to use Robert Hughes' term, the right wanted American history to be "patriotically correct."³

In the first section of this chapter, I argue that this is precisely the kind of history that *Apollo 13* engages in. It presents a decontextualised and uncomplicated vision of American heroism from which the upheaval of the sixties is absent. Its method of presenting history is old-fashioned in that its fidelity to the minutiae of the Apollo 13 mission is exacting enough to satisfy

¹ I provide an overview of the debate over the History Standards in the second section of the introduction to this thesis.

² Gary B. Nash, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teachings of the Past* (Westminster, MD: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 15.

³ Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Warner Books, 1993), 33.

the most particular “historian cop,” but the absence of social and political context closes down the possibilities for broader meaning. An emphasis on historical research was paramount to the publicity of both *Apollo 13* and *Nixon*. However, in the second section of this chapter, I argue that *Nixon* presents the dark side of American political culture of the Vietnam War-era through its version of America’s most controversial President. The film sought, if not to combat the revisionist version of Nixon that had begun to emerge, to at least present a more balanced version of the former president than many would have expected from Stone. In the final section of the chapter I argue that, in contradistinction to *Apollo 13*’s uncomplicated style, *Nixon* features a highly complex visual way to interrogating the mediated nature of history that is, ultimately, unknowable in its full complexity.

I: The Avoidance of History: Apollo 13 and (not) the Sixties.

History may well remember this as the summer when “Apollo 13” was the most popular movie and House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s “To Renew America” topped the best-seller list for books. Is this a coincidence? Is there a connection? What does this say about America today?

Clarence Page.⁴

Apollo 13 was released in the U.S. in the weekend before Independence Day, 1995. Three months after *Forrest Gump* had won six Academy Awards, the film opened at and remained number one at the box office for four weeks and eventually earned \$172 million as the third-highest grossing film of the year. In associating the popularity of *Apollo 13* with that of Gingrich’s manifesto for discovering “the values we have lost,” Clarence Page offers an appropriate précis of the type of history that the film presents.⁵ Its retelling of the heroics of the (overwhelmingly white male) crew and support team of the mission overcoming incredible odds is commensurate with the preferred version of the American past favoured by conservatives during the “history wars”: it reinforces American heroism and exceptionalism and elides the historical blemishes that may complicate its vision. In drawing upon the frontier elements of American myth, Susan Opt reads the Apollo 13 event as a narrative of the “heroic character, and of the embodiment and promotion of American values.”⁶ *Apollo 13* literally carries out the “whitewashing” of all

⁴ Clarence Page, “‘Apollo 13’ Renews America,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, August 1, 1995, B13.

⁵ Newt Gingrich, *To Renew America*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 33.

⁶ Susan K. Opt, “American Frontier Myth and the Flight of Apollo 13: From News Event to Film Event,” *Film & History* 26, nos. 1-4 (1996): 41.

signs of contestation associated with the sixties and for which *Forrest Gump* had been damned. Frank Rich was correct in observing that conservative politicians who had to overlook elements of *Forrest Gump* in order to appropriate it for their position had no such obstacles in the case of *Apollo 13*.⁷ In this section I argue that the film's microscopic focus on the exact details of the mission obfuscated the sociological or political context of the sixties. Its accuracy was fundamental to its marketing and, therefore, its legitimization. I argue that the claiming of *Apollo 13* by those on the both sides of the political spectrum is indicative of the mainstreaming of "traditional values" rhetoric by 1995. Ultimately, I suggest that the vituperative response from the public to those who pointed out historical elisions by the film signal that a collective, documented consensus on the era had been reached.

Media (re)presentations of *Apollo 13* focused almost exclusively on its adherence to the facts of the mission and the lengths to which the filmmakers went to achieve verisimilitude. Accuracy was the key foundation of the marketing campaign for the film and the cooperation between the filmmakers and NASA is explicitly signalled in the subtitle to *The Apollo Adventure*, a tie-in publication: "The Making of the Apollo Space Program and the Movie *Apollo 13*."⁸ Articles in major publications consistently emphasised a devotion to authenticity in: the exact recreation of mission control and the spacecraft;

⁷ Frank Rich, "The Lost Frontier," *New York Times*, July 5, 1995, A21.

⁸ Jeffrey Kluger, *The Apollo Adventure: The Making of the Apollo Space Program and the Movie Apollo 13* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) (my emphasis). Kluger also co-wrote Jim Lovell's account of the Apollo 13 mission, *Lost Moon*, that was reissued as *Apollo 13* to tie-in with the film's release. Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kruger, *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).

the actors' enrolment in "astronaut school"; the on-set advice of experienced astronauts; and the way in which the filmmakers often turned away from the screenplay in favour of the mission transcripts.⁹ The most cited example provided in these pieces was the production's use of NASA's KC-135 aircraft (nicknamed the "vomit comet" in a detail that reporters delighted in repeating) that enabled the simulation of weightlessness. By flying straight up into the sky and then freefalling toward the ground, the KC-135 is able to create twenty-three seconds of zero gravity. The actors and crew went through this process six-hundred times enduring sickness, colleagues vomiting in their hair, and consistent bruising from flying objects that led one crew member to report "I've got scratches all over my back. My wife's gonna wonder what the hell I've been up to."¹⁰ The film's authenticity formed a major part of reviewers' evaluations of the film. Janet Maslin in the *New York Times* and Rita Kempley in *The Washington Post* both referred to the use of the KC-135, while Owen Gleiberman opined that the film showed "history in all its verisimilitude" concluding that Ron Howard had "made a *true* docudrama, maintaining fealty to the tiniest facts."¹¹ In addition to legitimising the film's version of history through reporting such details, these articles suggest the

⁹ See, for example, Richard Corliss, "Hell of a Ride," *Time*, July 3, 1995, 50-3; Patrick Goldstein, "Fly me to the moon," *Premiere*, June 1995, 82-91; Jeff Gordiner, "What appeals to the actor who has everything?" *Entertainment Weekly*, June 23, 1995, 14-20; Malcolm Jones Jr., "Out of This World, Really," *Newsweek*, July 3, 1995, 54-5; Cindy Pearlman, "Space Race," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 25, 1995, Show 1; John Noble Wilford, "When We Were Racing With the Moon," *New York Times*, June 25, 1995, B1.

¹⁰ Gordiner, "What appeals to the actor who has everything?" 17.

¹¹ Janet Maslin, "'Apollo 13,' a Movie for the Fourth of July," *New York Times*, June 30, 1995, C1; Rita Kempley, "'Apollo 13': Liftoff Of a Legend," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1995, D1; Owen Gleiberman, review of *Apollo 13*, *Entertainment Weekly*, June 30, 1995, 79 (my emphasis).

bravery of the filmmakers as correlating with the bravery of those involved in the real mission. Such a correlation further enhances public perception of the heroism of the original astronauts for if the filmmakers were willing to go to such lengths to present their story, then theirs' must be a heroism worth celebrating.

In the popular narrative of the production of *Apollo 13*, Ron Howard (director) and Tom Hanks (lead protagonist) were portrayed as co-*auteurs*. While it had been Howard's idea to use the KC-135 and adhere to the facts of the story as closely as possible, Hanks' encyclopaedic knowledge of the space programme was foregrounded, often at Howard's expense. It is understandable why Hanks would be the focal point of the film's marketing. At that moment he was arguably the biggest and most-beloved star in America, having won consecutive Oscars as Best Actor and starring in four successive box office hits. But it was Hanks' enthusiasm for NASA that was most prominent in the publicity. Hanks, it was reported, could name the crews of many of the Apollo missions and took every opportunity to praise NASA and its astronauts.¹² In his exacting attention to every detail he became the *de facto* "historian cop" of the production, or, as producer Brian Grazer colourfully put it, "Tom was the top cop on the bullshit police."¹³ In fact, Grazer suggested that at some points Hanks' meticulousness led him and

¹² Gordiner, "What appeals to the actor who has everything?" 16. Hanks went on to executive produce, and write and direct several episodes of, the HBO mini-series *From the Earth to the Moon* (1998) that chronicled the Apollo program.

¹³ Goldstein, "Fly me to the moon," 87.

others to want to shout “Push the f---ing button.”¹⁴ Hanks’ extratextual presence combined with his screen persona served to further legitimise the film to audiences. Unlike his performance in *Forrest Gump* where his affected accent and mannerisms clearly signal that he is “acting,” in *Apollo 13* he essentially plays Jim Lovell as himself (or at least the popular image of that self), the “nice guy” everyman with whom audiences empathise.

Absent from this obsession with fidelity, both on the part of the filmmakers and the media’s recycling of minutiae, is any sense of the socio-political context of 1970. Of course this can be attributed to the microscopic focus of the production, but it is important to note the antipathy of the *Apollo 13*’s twin *auteurs* towards the sixties. In contradistinction to Oliver Stone who served in Vietnam and has been obsessed with the era ever since, Ron Howard spent much of the period on studio lots and television screens in the more comfortable Americana of *The Andy Griffith Show*. For Howard, the sixties are remembered as a “hellish time” when there was (understatedly) “a lot of instability and unease among young people” who participated in a “drug culture” of which he was never a part.¹⁵ Likewise, Hanks declared “no affection for the late Sixties whatsoever,” admitting that he was “pretty naïve” and “just figured things were going to hell in a handbag.”¹⁶ It is indicative of the reception afforded the film in the U.S. that these views were expressed in interviews with British newspapers suggesting that, for American

¹⁴ Jones, Jr., “Out of This World,” 54 (elision in original).

¹⁵ Piers Bizoni, “The film director Ron Howard is riding high on the back of *Apollo 13*. But where on earth is he going?” *The Independent*, September 18, 1995, B7.

¹⁶ Deborah Orr, “Lost in Space,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 1995, Weekend 12.

interviewers, the issue of the sixties did not occur or was presumed unnecessary. However, Howard and Hanks' views of the era provides an important context for one of the film's few instances of dramatic licence and its only reference to the counterculture: the representation of Lovell's teenage daughter Barbara. Unlike the invented confrontation between the astronauts over the cause of the explosion, the embellishment of Barbara was not mentioned upon the film's release.¹⁷ In the film's depiction, which was later described by Lovell as "overly dramatised," she is portrayed as a stereotypical teenager who refuses to go the mission control because The Beatles have split up.¹⁸ Dressed in a tie-dyed t-shirt and matching headband she shouts, "I'm never coming out [of my room], I hate Paul." In the film, then, the counterculture is metonymically reduced to a child obsessed with musicians who becomes "a docile young woman restored to the bosom of her family by her father's ordeal."¹⁹

The traditional values and heroism that *Apollo 13* celebrates was predictably praised by conservatives. In a review that also criticised *Pocahontas* (1995) for its "contempt for historical authenticity" and "the shamelessness of its political message," James Bowman appraised *Apollo 13* as the best film of the summer "simply for telling its story straightforwardly."²⁰ The subtext of Bowman's praise is that the film does not

¹⁷ Jack Kroll, "Found in the Stars," *Newsweek*, July 3, 1995, 53.

¹⁸ Jim Lovell and Marion Lovell, "Commentary," *Apollo 13*, special ed. DVD, directed by Ron Howard (1995; Universal City, CA: Universal Home Video, 2005).

¹⁹ John Powers, "The Wrong Stuff," *The Washington Post*, July 9, 1995, G1.

²⁰ James Bowman, "Clueless Kids at the Apollo," *The American Spectator*, September 1995, 61.

try to present a complicated view of the past impaired by the political correctness that he read into *Pocahontas* but, rather, it offers a straightforward tale of heroic Americans. In the *National Review*, John Simon echoed Bowman in concluding that “patriotic viewers” of *Apollo 13*, which he mistakenly claimed opened on July 4, “will get more uplift from it than from a thousand fireworks displays.”²¹ Given his interest in the lure of space exploration, outlined in *To Renew America* as the “spirit of invention and discovery” that illustrated one of the key elements at the “heart of our civilisation,” and his successful appropriation of *Forrest Gump*, it was not surprising that Newt Gingrich commented on the film.²² He thought it an “amazingly wonderful movie” about Americanism and evidence of the remarkable “kind of heroism that Eisenhower described as being held by the young men who landed at Normandy.”²³ It is not surprising that Gingrich here retreats to a prelapsarian moment before the fall of the 1960s to find comparison.

However, unlike the case of *Forrest Gump* where liberal voices failed to claim the film for themselves, *Apollo 13* was appropriated by many, often in explicit opposition to the positions occupied by Gingrich. Several liberal writers took *Apollo 13* as an opportunity to point out the paradox between Gingrich’s praise of the film and his antipathy towards “big government.”²⁴ They saw the heroes of *Apollo 13* as exactly the government workers who

²¹ John Simon, “Spaced Out,” *National Review*, August 28, 1995, 49.

²² Gingrich, “To Renew America,” 34.

²³ Quoted in Martin Walker, “Apollo and Newt,” *Sight and Sound* 5, no. 9 (1995): 7.

²⁴ Jonathan Alter, “The Moral Equivalent of Apollo,” *Newsweek*, July 3, 1995, 56; David Nyhan, “Tale of a government that had the right stuff,” *The Boston Globe*, July 16, 1995, 68.

Gingrich repeatedly bemoaned for ruining the country and whom his policies of state independence and increased private sector responsibility would make redundant. If Gingrich's philosophy had been applied to the space program, Jonathan Alter noted, "Apollo 13 would still be orbiting with three dead astronauts."²⁵ As if having learned from the right's successful appropriation of *Forrest Gump*, it was widely publicised that President Clinton had requested a private screening which was attended by its stars.²⁶ On July 6, at the end of the film's first week of release, Clinton referred to it in a typically conciliatory speech that agreed with many of the right's diagnoses that something was wrong with America, yet rejected their view that the problems were personal and cultural. Although he called attention to the fact that many good things had come from the sixties – advances in civil rights, education, and fighting poverty – he acknowledged the need for family values in support of responsible citizenship. He then expressed his desire to "restore the American Dream and to bring the American people together," and cited "that great line in the wonderful new movie, *Apollo 13*, 'failure is not an option.'"²⁷ While Clinton is certainly claiming the film in support of liberal principles, his acceptance of problems relating to family values is indicative of his move to the centre following the 1994 elections, and clearly marks the way in which traditional notions of America had become dominant by 1995. Clinton continued to associate himself with the film. In late July, Hanks again went to

²⁵ Alter, "The Moral Equivalent of Apollo," 56.

²⁶ Gordiner, "What appeals to the actor who has everything?" 20.

²⁷ Bill Clinton, "Remarks By The President on Responsible Citizenship and the American Community" (speech, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, July 6, 1995), http://clinton1.nara.gov/White_House/EOP/OP/html/book1.html (accessed January 29, 2006).

the White House, this time accompanying Jim Lovell who received the Space Congressional Medal of Honor from the president. Clinton took a further opportunity to invoke the film by observing that, for the millions who had seen it, the line “failure is not an option” had become a “statement of the national purpose we all need as we move toward a new century.”²⁸

Although many on the liberal-left used the film in the service of their positions, others, as illustrated by the comments of Clarence Page with which I began this section, did not recognise *Apollo 13* as useful to their position and, instead, chose to chastise it. Amy Taubin took issue with the film in *The Village Voice*, noting the irony in its foregrounding of the comment by flight director Gene Krantz, “We’ve never lost an American in space and we’re sure as hell not going to lost one on my watch”; this being said while hundreds were dying in Vietnam.²⁹ An excellent example of how such castigations of the film were out of touch with the mood of audiences is the most vituperative published criticism of the film by John Powers in *The Washington Post* and the equally scathing replies to his article in the newspaper’s letters page.³⁰ Powers attacked *Apollo 13* for seemingly being made to tap into the prevailing conservative atmosphere that trumpeted the discontent of angry white males and nostalgia for a falsely homogenous view of the past, celebrating the “paradisiacal America invoked by Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan.”³¹ He

²⁸ Cragg Hines, “The stars on display for Hollywood, NASA,” *The Houston Chronicle*, July 27, 1995, 20.

²⁹ Amy Taubin, “Moonstruck,” *The Village Voice*, July 4, 1995, 54.

³⁰ Powers, “The Wrong Stuff,” G1. Tom D. Crouch of the National Air and Space Museum noted this exchange in his review of the film. Tom D. Crouch, review of *Apollo 13*, *Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (1997): 1180-1.

³¹ Powers, “The Wrong Stuff,” G1.

argued that it presents a “happy, harmonious and lily white” America without a trace of “women’s lib, the civil rights movement or that troublesome war in South East Asia,” and he likened its signophobia (the fear of meaning) to same impulses that led to the erasure of complexity from the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian.³²

The reactions to Powers’ criticisms were immediate and strong. The following week’s letters page in the *Post* contained seven responses to his piece, only one of which was positive but that came from a professed Christian who found the omission of spirituality from the film offensive. Those against Powers all referred to certain elements of the discourses of the culture wars and objected to his reading an “apolitical” film as conservative. One reader sarcastically thanked Powers for clarifying that “we should have let the *white, male, heterosexual* crew of Apollo 13 die in space.”³³ Another suggested that Powers would have been “happier to have seen a few PC touches of ‘realism’” such as Mrs. Lovell complaining that she could have had a “stellar career,” the priest comforting the family “groping at the boy,” or “one of the astronauts struggling with his sexual identity, and for acceptance from his intolerant crew members.”³⁴ Political Correctness was read into Powers’ criticism by a third reader who accused him of inverted racism and sexism against white males and of further polarising society. This reader

³² Ibid. *The American Spectator* reprinted a portion of Power’s review, ironically prefacing it with an introduction that read, “Movie critic John Powers is calmly, steadily, if ploddingly reviewing *Apollo 13*, when visions of Republicans cloud his mind and all hell breaks loose.” *The American Spectator*, “Current Wisdom,” September 1995, 77.

³³ Jefferson Morris, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1995, G2 (my emphasis).

³⁴ Regina LaPierre, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1995, G2.

concluded that he “was not an ‘angry white male’ until I read his review.”³⁵

Others praised the film for authenticity in its portrayal of heroes, suggesting that the reason for its success was that it does not explore the “dark side of infinity,” but shows “real people” who escape disaster by “virtue of all that’s *right* about them” and their support structure.³⁶ Finally, a further reader questioned how a “wonderful movie” that was historically accurate and portrayed “no guns and violence and no explicit sex” could be so popular.³⁷

The crux of all these criticisms of Powers’ review is that audiences responded to *Apollo 13* so enthusiastically because of its purported accuracy, its avoidance of the contested history of the sixties and the culture wars debates over its legacy, and its celebration of heroes without recourse to the violence associated with “Hollywood” at that time. Nevertheless, these responses need not be read conspiratorially; they may simply be expressing a general exhaustion with the perpetual cultural and political discourses about the sixties, or the enjoyment of a technically realistic thrill-ride. In addition, *Apollo 13* was far from guaranteed to be a hit because, fundamentally, it is a highly technical and expensive film about three men stuck in a tin can being helped by jargon-speaking technocrats and is (like *Forrest Gump* before it) also subject to the need to reach as broad an audience as possible. The claiming of the film by Bill Clinton also suggests that it offered political capital to both sides of the political spectrum, and, indeed, a realisation on the

³⁵ Christopher Lapp, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1995, G2.

³⁶ Arla Carroll Tracz, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1995, G2 (my emphasis).

³⁷ Karen Mannes, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1995, G2.

part of liberals that popular culture texts can and must be used in the service of their ideological perspectives. At the end of a period in which a significant number of films had interrogated the sixties and contributed to the negotiation of its meaning within the relay of cultural memory, the avoidance of the era's upheavals in *Apollo 13* need not be seen as erasure but as suggesting that such ground had already been well-trodden and exhausted. This conclusion helps account for the box office success of *Apollo 13* and the financial failure of Oliver Stone's *Nixon*. After all, the space program held magic for Nixon because "it was good for the nation... to have heroes."³⁸ Stone's film, conspicuously, lacks a hero.

³⁸ Quoted in Andrew Chaikin, *A Man on the Moon* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1998), 336.

II: Treading Carefully: Oliver Stone's Presentation of "His" Nixon.

Why would you give Oliver Stone seven dollars of your money?
Richard Nixon, 1991.³⁹

If large groups of Americans avoided Nixon on the 32-cent stamp, I think even larger groups will avoid an \$8 movie ticket.
Letter to the Editor, New York Times, 1995.⁴⁰

This film is a dramatic interpretation of events and characters based on public sources and an incomplete historical record. Some scenes and events are presented as composites or have been hypothesized or condensed.

Nixon's opening legend.

You've got to electrify people with bold moves.
Richard Nixon advocating the bombing of Cambodia in *Nixon*.

Nixon represents an amalgam of the theoretical concerns expressed in Oliver Stone's previous films and across this thesis as a whole. Even without the knowledge that *Nixon* forms the final part of Oliver Stone's ten year, ten film evocation of American histories, it is apparent that the film marks a culmination of Stone's work. *Nixon* encompasses the critical view of American foreign intervention expressed through his Vietnam trilogy and in *Salvador's* (1986) evaluation of US foreign policy in Latin America, but in *Nixon* the dominant perspective is that of the policymakers. Stone presents the anti-war movement and the counterculture as expressed in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *The Doors* (1991), but here seen from the political centre. Where the satire of *Natural Born Killers* (1994) attempted, many have judged

³⁹ Monica Crowley, *Nixon Off the Record: His Candid Commentary on People and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1996), 33. This was Nixon's response to Crowley upon hearing that she'd seen *JFK* upon its release in 1991.

⁴⁰ Sam Garcia, "Nixon, Different Theory," *New York Times*, December 31, 1995, B4.

unsuccessfully, to show the detrimental effect of the media on contemporary American society, *Nixon* shows the detrimental effect of a career's worth of press ridicule on the president in terms of his increasing paranoia and insularity.

In addition to contributing to cinematic representations of the Vietnam War-era, Stone's *Nixon* joins a veritable rogues' gallery of over one-hundred mostly negative mediated "Nixons" as surveyed by Thomas Monsell.⁴¹ It also intervenes in Nixon historiography. Aided in no small way by his own efforts at self-rehabilitation, Richard Nixon's historical image steadily improved from the early 1980s on, with the revisionism that culminated in 1994 with the faux-eulogies delivered at his state funeral (by Bill Clinton and others) and the publication of Joan Hoff's *Nixon Reconsidered*.⁴² It was between these extremes of mostly negative artistic representations and positive historical/news media representations of Nixon that Stone's film emerged. This extreme dichotomy is represented perfectly in that where *Time* magazine called it "the kindest movie Richard Nixon is likely to get," Hoff decried it as a "pornographic representation of an American president" that "perverts history."⁴³ In this section I argue that as a result of the furore over *JFK*, Stone consciously constructed marketing strategies to pre-emptively engage with the

⁴¹ Thomas Monsell, *Nixon on Stage and Screen: The Thirty-Seventh President as Depicted in Films, Television, Plays and Opera* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998). Monsell's exhaustive survey does not include literary Nixons such as Philip Roth's excoriating representation in his novel *Our Gang*.

⁴² Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). For a more detailed mapping of Nixon's rehabilitation see David Greenberg, "Richard the Bleeding Hearted," *Reviews in American History* 30, no. 1 (2002): 158.

⁴³ *Time*, "Dick Nixon, Superstar," December 18, 1995, 21; Joan Hoff, review of *Nixon*, *American Historical Review*, 101, no. 4 (1996): 1173.

expectation of “historian-cop”-type criticism of the film. I contend that the subsequent reception of the film can in some ways be seen to stem from this controlled but misjudged marketing. In my second section on the film, I argue that its visual strategies enable Stone’s reiteration of the dark side of Vietnam-era America to exist in cultural memory alongside, and indeed in opposition to, the more comforting portrait of national unity depicted in *Apollo 13*.

Eric Hamburg’s memoir of his time spent working with Oliver Stone on *Nixon* depicts Stone as paranoid to a Stalinist, or even Nixonian, degree. Having experienced negative advance press attention to *JFK* (1991) as the result of a leaked script, Stone ordered Hamburg to remove all trace of the project from his production offices. But such secrecy could only delay the inevitable.⁴⁴ In March 1995, *Daily Variety* reported that working versions of the *Nixon* script had been circulated by “one of Stone’s enemies,” sparking an immediate debate in the news media over historical authenticity, especially as *Time* magazine emphasised the more controversial elements of the script linking Nixon to assassination attempts on Fidel Castro and John F. Kennedy.⁴⁵ All this occurred before a foot of film had been shot or the shooting script finalised. Indeed, J. Hoberman remarked in his review in the

⁴⁴ Eric Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon, Oliver Stone and Me: An Idealist’s Journey from Capitol Hill to Hollywood Hell* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), 89-91. As illustrated in chapter three of this thesis, the release of Stone’s *JFK* gave rise to one of the most concerted campaigns against a film in the mainstream media. The film was vilified months before it was first shown publicly and Stone, from the back foot, defended the film vigorously and cogently in interviews on television and in print, as well as through the letters pages and op-ed sections of the major American newspapers and their affiliates.

⁴⁵ Susan Mackey-Kallis, *Oliver Stone’s America: Dreaming the Myth Outward* (Oxford: Harper Collins, 1996), 151-2; *Time*, “A sneak peak at Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*,” March 20, 1995, 21.

Village Voice that the film “arrives so thoroughly chewed over by the media, it already seems regurgitated.”⁴⁶

It is not difficult to imagine the type of film expected when one of America’s most out-spoken and controversial directors makes a biography of its most notorious and hated politician. Without having seen the film, William Safire declared the film a “hatchet job,” and Roger Ebert’s anticipation of seeing “Attila the Hun in a suit and tie” can be interpreted as a general representation of expectation.⁴⁷ However, still reeling from attacks on *JFK* and the increasing criticism surrounding *Natural Born Killers* and, in anticipation of further negative press, Stone “wanted to get it right.”⁴⁸ He had embarked on “serious” research for the film in addition to the year that his screenwriters had been working on the script. As well as reading the numerous biographies of Nixon and visiting the Nixon Presidential Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, California, Stone and his team travelled to Washington to speak with many of those involved in the Nixon story and Watergate. Those interviewed included journalists such as Daniel Schorr, and Nixon intimates Alexander Haig, Ron Ziegler and John Ehrlichman. Stone’s Washington interviews led to Alexander Butterfield, former assistant to the

⁴⁶ J. Hoberman, “Bugging Out,” *The Village Voice*, December 26, 1995, *Nixon* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁴⁷ William Safire, “The Way It Really Was Not,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1995, A15; Roger Ebert, “Oliver Stone Finds the Humanity in *Nixon*,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 17, 1995, C1. In addition, Frank Rich reported attending a dinner party in Washington where “though no one there had yet seen *Nixon*, everyone already had a condemnatory opinion.” Frank Rich, “Springtime for Nixon,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1995, A23.

⁴⁸ Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon*, 139. *Nixon*’s production took place against the backdrop of a concerted campaign against *Natural Born Killers* which brought together a wide anti-movie violence coalition that included Bob Dole and John Grisham.

President, and John Dean, former Special Counsel to the President, being recruited to the production as on-set technical advisers. The production notes released with the film proudly foreground a list of interviewees and assert that the meticulous attention to detail of the production design of previous Stone films was continued through *Nixon*.⁴⁹ The set design included “exact re-creation(s)... so amazingly authentic” that Butterfield was “amazed, dumbfounded” by White House sets in which “everything was to scale and precisely as I remembered it... I was honestly transported back in time to the early ’70s.”⁵⁰ This clear foregrounding of attempts at authenticity, combined with the display of the steadfastness of the research on Nixon and the kudos of having White House intimates as advisors, played a central part in attempts to avoid criticism of *Nixon*’s historical veracity.

The theme of steadfast research was continued in other areas of *Nixon*’s marketing. The by then standard tie-in soundtrack album was given a new marketing twist by becoming one of the first “enhanced-CD” releases.⁵¹ The disc contains a CD-ROM section that offers stills, cast and crew information, a trailer for the film, and video interviews with John Williams

⁴⁹ *Nixon: Production Notes* (Burbank, CA: Hollywood Pictures, 1995), 18. The production notes do not list John Ehrlichman as a participant, possibly due to a threatened legal action on his part, but Hamburg’s account of the research for the film attests to his participation. See Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon*, 139-158.

⁵⁰ *Nixon: Production Notes*, 25. Butterfield attested to the verisimilitude of the production design in a number of interviews given in support of the film. See, for example, Jay Horning, “Butterfield doomed Nixon, but helps bring him to movie life,” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 10, 1995, A7.

⁵¹ John Williams, *Nixon: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Burbank, California: Hollywood Records, 1995). Despite being nominated for an Oscar, John Williams’ soundtrack only sold 5,000 copies. Charles Bermant, “On a Disk, ‘Nixon’ faces the music,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1996, <http://is.gseis.ucla.edu/impac/t/w96/News/News11/0325track.html> (accessed September 9, 2004).

and Oliver Stone on their collaboration.⁵² However, the crucial supporting document for the film – publicly at least – was a companion book that contained the annotated screenplay of the film, Watergate documents and tape transcripts, essays by the film’s writers, journalists, historians as well as, perhaps unwisely, a conspiracy expert.⁵³ Stone had released an annotated screenplay *after* the release of *JFK*, but in the case of *Nixon* decided to do so beforehand to explain “in depth what we combined, condensed and collapsed.”⁵⁴ The clear purpose of much of this promotional material was to function as a pre-emptive defence against his image as a “rapist of history” misleading the impressionable. Stone’s conclusion to the production notes declares a hope that *Nixon* “will inspire debate and independent thinking.” The introduction to the published screenplay echoes this sentiment, hoping that the film “will spur the curiosity of its viewers to read more about Nixon, to explore recent American history, to educate themselves further.”⁵⁵ This “educational” concern was directly addressed to public schools through the distribution of a *Nixon* study guide, a “show and sell” tactic that had become a standard promotional tool in this period.⁵⁶

⁵² The disc also offers a preview of an affiliated *Graphix Zone* CD-ROM biographical project on Richard Nixon offering a plethora of historical documents, interviews, essays, internet hyperlinks, and an interactive version of the film’s screenplay. The CD-ROM project was not very successful commercially. Having not been able to obtain a copy I am unable to judge whether this is due to quality or, as Eric Hamburg suggests, that CD-ROMs were a dying art form. Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon*, 172-3.

⁵³ Eric Hamburg, ed., *Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

⁵⁴ Oliver Stone, “Stone on Stone’s Image (As Presented by Some Historians),” in *Oliver Stone’s USA: Film, History and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 45.

⁵⁵ Hamburg, *Nixon*, p. xiii.

⁵⁶ Peter Finn, “Study Guides Let Hollywood Play Show and Sell,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1996, A1.

Coinciding with the release of *Nixon* was the première of the television movie *Kissinger and Nixon* (1995).⁵⁷ Indeed, December 1995 seemed to be Nixon month on American television, thereby providing a broader extra-diegetic context of familiarity for prospective American viewers of the film.⁵⁸ Stone appeared on *Dateline NBC*, *Good Morning America*, and was interviewed by Dan Rather on *The CBS Evening News*. John Dean and Alexander Haig debated the film on *This Week with David Brinkley*.⁵⁹ The History Channel broadcast a round-table discussion of the film (including Stone, Anthony Hopkins and several historians) which was followed by its documentary *The Real Richard Nixon*.⁶⁰ PBS repeated its three-hour *American Experience* documentary on Nixon.⁶¹ During these appearances, Stone was careful to admit that historical material had been condensed and scenes hypothesised, especially those that took place behind closed doors. He was keen to assert that he was engaging in “dramatic history,” or as he told Charlie Rose, “I’m doing something between entertainment and fact.”⁶² Some critics

⁵⁷ *Kissinger and Nixon* premiered on cable network TNT on 10 December, but was rebroadcast on the 20 December, the day of *Nixon*’s release. See Richard Reeves, “Nixon Revisited by Way of the Creative Camera,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1995, H1.

⁵⁸ *Nixon* also impacted on other non-print media in December 1995. Several video documentaries on Nixon’s life were released and reviewed that month, while Stone also participated in a ‘Nixothon’ on the Los Angeles public radio station KPFK. The event was billed as a “three-day marathon of news documentary, drama, comedy and musical programming focusing on Nixon’s ‘real life and times.’” See Peter M. Nichols, “Home Video,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1995, D17; “Real Nixon on Home Video,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, December 20, 1995, D3; “New Year’s, Nixon Style,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1995, *Nixon* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁵⁹ Casey Marcus, “Nixon aides clash over accuracy of new film,” *Hobart Mercury*, December 26, 1995.

⁶⁰ Howard Rosenberg, “‘Nixon’ Plays Its Share of Dirty Tricks on History,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1995, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² “The Charlie Rose Show,” 19 December 1995, Disc 2, *Nixon*, special ed. DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (1995; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2002). An edition of

were welcoming of what they saw as a more mellow Stone, less like the “ham-fisted propagandist” of previous years, even going so far as to joke about the emergence of a “New Stone” being like the “New Nixon” of 1968.⁶³

Nixon garnered Stone some of his most positive op-ed and magazine articles for years, including an extremely positive cover story in *Newsweek*.⁶⁴ Readers were advised to “prepare for a surprise” because Stone had found “complexity, ambiguity and even a measure of restraint.”⁶⁵ The article closed by paraphrasing Nixon’s famous farewell of 1962, “you won’t have Stone to kick around” and noting Stone’s apparent empathy with Nixon as a fellow “endangered outsider.”⁶⁶ These sentiments were echoed by Bernie Weinraub’s favourable report on the film that depicted Stone as frightened, still scarred by criticism of *JFK*, anxious to assert his identification with Nixon, and to avoid critical damnation of the film.⁶⁷ Positive articles by John Powers and Bob Woodward in *The Washington Post* were perhaps to be expected given the *Post*’s renown regarding Watergate, but Weinraub’s positive piece in *The New York Times* is worth noting given the notorious relationship between Stone and that publication.⁶⁸ However, there were still relapses to the paranoia synonymous with the “old” Stone. Discussing his right to interpret history,

Rose’s show broadcast a few days earlier had featured four critics debating the film, including vociferous Stone-hater Richard Reeves.

⁶³ John Powers, “The New Stone Age,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1995, G1.

⁶⁴ Stryker McGuire and David Ansen, “Stone Nixon,” *Newsweek*, January 8, 1996, 38-45.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁷ Bernie Weinraub, “Professor Stone Resumes His Presidential Research,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1995, H11.

⁶⁸ Bob Woodward, “The Newest Nixon: Stone’s Fiction Reveals Truths,” *The Washington Post*, December 24, 1995, G1; Powers, “New Stone Age,” G1; Stone writes that “the editorial page of the *New York Times* has refused to print any column or letter of rebuttal that I have written since 1991, thereby allowing me to be easily misunderstood and set up as a straw man with a conspiratorial mind-set.” Stone, “Stone on Stone’s Image,” 43.

Stone is quoted as saying “history is not agreed upon... there is no official history. The CIA is a secret. The country is in many ways a secret to its own citizens.”⁶⁹ In addition, Stone’s former recklessness was recycled in a comment regarding the misdirection of student protests against the invasion of Cambodia: “if you want to protest, let’s get a sniperscope and do Nixon.”⁷⁰

In his promotion of *Nixon*, with an emphasis on careful research and a conscious avoidance of the “cinematic historian” tag in favour of being called a “dramatic historian,” Stone won over many in the “establishment” media. However, as John Ehrlichman noted, Stone was arguably attempting to have it both ways in that he declared “the movie is not ‘history,’ but his book is tricked up to appear to be a scholarly work.”⁷¹ In contrast to its intended purpose to stymie criticism of the film, the published screenplay provided pre-release points of attack for Nixon’s defenders. Regardless of the obvious absence of the cinematic visuals in “reading” a film on the page, the released screenplay is not a direct representation of the film as released, but a reprint of the shooting script that contains many controversial scenes *and* profanities that were excised from the final cut.⁷² The published screenplay is very different in tone to the finished film, a point well illustrated through the quotation used in the opening section of the *Newsweek* cover story: “We never

⁶⁹ Weinraub, “Professor Stone,” H26.

⁷⁰ Elaine Dutka, “Nixon Family Blasts Oliver Stone Over Movie on President’s Life,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1995, 24. This comment came from an interview Stone had given in 1987, but it is clear that, in the perpetual present of the media, this comment could be recycled and used against Stone regarding *Nixon* (as it was here by the Nixon family).

⁷¹ John Ehrlichman, “‘Nixon’ vs. Nixon,” *Newsweek*, January 8, 1996, 46.

⁷² It should be noted that the shooting script was not even an accurate representation of the script used on the set. This had been rewritten after the rehearsal period that preceded shooting.

got our side of the story out Al. People've forgotten. I mean: 'Fuck you, Mr President, fuck you, Tricia, fuck you Julie!'"⁷³ This can only have served to discourage the more conservative reader who might otherwise have seen the film given the generally positive nature of the *Newsweek* story.

This oversight provided additional ammunition for those already working to discredit the film.⁷⁴ The Nixon Presidential Library carried out a strong campaign against *Nixon* including full-page ads in the *Los Angeles Times* opposing their "three-dimensional reality" to Stone's "commercial fiction," urging readers "if you prefer facts to fantasy, come to Yorba Linda."⁷⁵ Certainly the Library's representation of Nixon would jar with almost any other, but the context for their attack is provided by the published screenplay, through the inclusion of an essay by historian Stanley Kutler contemptuously dismissing the Library's museum for its Orwellian revision of history.⁷⁶ John Taylor, the executive director of the Library, consulted lawyers in May 1995 having obtained copies of the script. Having been told that there were no grounds for a libel suit given that the Nixons were dead, he passed on the script to John Ehrlichman and Richard Helms and urged them to sue.⁷⁷ The Library refrained from commenting publicly until the eve of the film's release when they issued ads and a press statement on behalf of Nixon's

⁷³ McGuire and Ansen, "Stone Nixon," 39.

⁷⁴ William Safire, "A Dose of Conspiracy Theory," *New York Times*, November 5, 1995, 11; Safire, "The Way," 11. Safire, a former advisor and speechwriter in the Nixon White House, used his columns on unrelated subjects in *The New York Times* to subtly inject anti-Stone and anti-*Nixon* sentiment in advance of the film's release.

⁷⁵ Karen Dean, "Citizen Dick, Nobody's Nixon," *Metro Magazine* 109 (1997), 30; Richard Roeper, "History Gets Tricky At the Nixon Library," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 28, 1995, 11.

⁷⁶ Stanley I. Kutler, "Richard Nixon: Man and Monument," in *Nixon* (see note 53), 43-49.

⁷⁷ John Taylor, "Nixon on the Rocks," *The American Spectator*, March 1996, 22.

daughters, Julie and Tricia, which noted that, having not seen the film, their criticisms were based on the screenplay. They declared *Nixon* to be a “character assassination” that “concocted imaginary scenes... calculated solely and maliciously to defame and degrade President and Mrs. Nixon’s memories in the mind of the American public.”⁷⁸ Bob Woodward perceptively notes that this statement is magnificently Nixonian in its insistence that it is “still, and always, ‘they’ [who] want to destroy Nixon.”⁷⁹ Bizarrely, given that the film was released by Touchstone Pictures, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Pictures, Walt’s daughter Diane Disney Miller publicly apologised to Tricia and Julie calling the film a “disturbing distortion of history.”⁸⁰

The published screenplay also provided fuel for the criticisms of the historian Stephen E. Ambrose, the author of a widely respected trilogy of Nixon biographies, who made himself readily available to the press to point out the faults that he saw in the film (based again solely on the screenplay).⁸¹ Ambrose appeared on television disparaging the film. He told *USA Today* that the screenplay’s footnotes cite him saying “the exact opposite” of what he had written, and later dismissed the annotated screenplay as “a peacock-like

⁷⁸ Bernie Weinraub, “Nixon Family Assails Stone Film as Distortion,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1995, C18. Stone directly addressed these criticisms on *Dateline NBC* by stating that he hoped the Nixons “would acknowledge their father the way he may have been seen by others and maybe move on to another understanding or a deeper understanding of their own father.” Judy Brennan, “Stone Ponders Martin Luther King Film,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1995, *Nixon* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷⁹ Woodward, “The Newest Nixon,” G1.

⁸⁰ Ann Gerhart, “No Raves From the Nixons,” *The Washington Post*, December 20, 1995, C3.

⁸¹ It is possible that there was a self-publicity motive in Ambrose’s complaints to get himself known in Hollywood. His *Band of Brothers* books deifying the heroics of the “Greatest Generation” became the basis of the HBO mini-series of the same name and he became the main adviser and authenticating publicity voice for Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

display of phony scholarship.”⁸² The standard “historian-cop” objections are expressed by Ambrose. Despite noting the film’s opening legend acknowledging composite scenes and hypothesising, he decries the creation of scenes that did not occur and the invention of dialogue. He dismantles the film’s implication of Nixon in the Kennedy assassination (by way of his involvement in plots by the CIA to kill Castro) and its assertions regarding “the Beast,” a metaphor for the underlying “system” of dark forces of American Cold War politics. It is clear that the ferocity of Ambrose’s criticism would have been somewhat stymied if the screenplay had not been published. The original screenplay’s references to “the Beast” – which had been intended to appear phantasmagorically on screen – were virtually eliminated from the final film and the assertion of Nixon’s involvement in the Kennedy assassination is more deeply contextualised by the visual nature of film than when isolated on the printed page. Other excesses that bear the brunt of Ambrose’s criticism include Nixon’s drinking in the film and the aforementioned frequency of swearing. It is significant that the source of these criticisms is the published screenplay rather than the finished film, a

⁸² Rosenberg, “Nixon Plays Its Share of Dirty Tricks on History,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1995, *Nixon* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA; Stephen E. Ambrose, “The Nixon Inside Stone’s Head,” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 1996, C3. This piece in *The Washington Post* provides a template for Ambrose’s coruscating dismissal of the film in his review of the screenplay in the *Journal of American History*, the “factual” objections of which formed the basis of Joan Hoff’s review in the *American Historical Review*. Stephen E. Ambrose, review of *Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film*, *Journal of American History* 82, no. 4 (1996): 1530-1533.

production through which Stone modifies the excesses of the script, and which reflects his ability to “rewrite” in the editing room.⁸³

Criticisms of the film also came from members of the Nixon White House. John Ehrlichman was bitter (“it’s made-up stuff and it’s very cruel”) and the most negative sections of his *Newsweek* piece were reprinted in other publications.⁸⁴ Alexander Haig called the film “a vicious attack,” and former Treasury Secretary William Simon labelled it “a despicable fairy tale.”⁸⁵ Curiously, the *International Herald Tribune* saw it of note that the Reverend Billy Graham would not be seeing the film because, as a friend of Richard and Pat, “he wants to remember them as they really were.”⁸⁶ Charles Colson contextualised his criticism of the film within the right’s culture war bugbear of postmodernism. He assessed *Nixon* as “not merely historical revisionism. It is deconstructionism applied to American democracy... and unfortunately [Stone] is unlikely to be called to account by most historians, because our academic history departments have themselves caved in to deconstructionism.”⁸⁷ As one of the last to pass judgement on the film, Henry Kissinger criticised Stone for depicting Nixon as “a disturbed personality

⁸³ “Rewriting” in the editing room was essential given that the published script as shot would have translated into a four-and-a-half hour film. Many scenes were reinserted into the film for an extended video/laserdisc release (then eventually DVD). The “director’s cut” ran 45 minutes longer than the theatrical version but maintained its less excessive tone.

⁸⁴ Dutka, “Nixon Family,” 24; *International Herald Tribune*, “People,” January 3, 1996, 20. Ehrlichman’s comment was originally made on *The Late Late Show With Tom Snyder* in late-November and based on the script only. Having seen the film he said it “wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it would be.” *Los Angeles Times*, “Ehrlichman Revises ‘Nixon’ Criticism,” January 3, 1996, *Nixon* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁸⁵ Chris Salewicz, *Oliver Stone: The Making of His Movies* (London: Orion, 1997), 112.

⁸⁶ *International Herald Tribune*, “People,” December 28, 1995, 18.

⁸⁷ Charles Colson, “When history is up for grabs,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1995, A21. In this article Colson refers to a key figure in the “history wars,” historian Eugene Genovese.

frequently inebriated... as a grotesque.”⁸⁸ He questioned how the film could hope to be accurate when its technical advisors, Dean and Butterfield, had been peripheral figures in the Nixon White House. Oddly, Paul Sorvino reported that Kissinger, who he plays in the film, told him the film was “an accurate representation of the tragedy of Richard Nixon,” before adding that “of course, it made me look like a major slimeball.”⁸⁹ This last statement reflects a wider suspicion of the history film. Regardless of whether the portrayal is fair or accurate, the verisimilitude of the presentation of the past on the screen threatens to become the definitive word on Nixon, therefore his defenders *had* to decry it. Ehrlichman epitomises these fears through his concern that the “history-*manqué* [of Stone’s film] may become a cultural Cliffs Notes [*sic.*] to the Nixon era.”⁹⁰ However, these criticisms rarely took account of the film itself or its visual strategies, oversights that make their concerns for the audience, though influential, somewhat redundant.

⁸⁸ Henry Kissinger, “Stone’s Nixon,” *The Washington Post*, January 24, 1996, A19.

⁸⁹ Army Archerd, “She wrote home on Sun,” *Variety*, December 21, 1995, *Nixon* files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA.

⁹⁰ Ehrlichman, “‘Nixon’ vs. Nixon,” 46.

III: Nixon's Visual Style and the Fantasy of History.

Stylistically, *Nixon* is a refining of Stone's controversial cut-and-paste collage technique that he and his regular cinematographer Robert Richardson had been developing since *Born on the Fourth of July*.⁹¹ The much-vaunted criticism that Stone used *MTV*-style visuals to deny any possibility of critical distance on the part of the viewer was intrinsic to many criticisms of *JFK*. Indeed, one critic hyperventilated that *JFK* was "the cinematic equivalent of rape."⁹² Even those who were supportive of the film's project observed an awkward tension "between the film's formal innovations and its explicit aim to articulate a narrative of national cohesion."⁹³ The history film can elicit a powerful feeling of having been present at the events depicted. Marita Sturken has referred to this effect as "the fantasy of history," that is the fantasy not only of knowing, or of "having been there," but also of truly knowing what happened.⁹⁴ However, in its honing of Stone and Richardson's experimental style, *Nixon* eschews any pretence of knowing what happened; it does not aim for narrative cohesion, but flaunts the questionability inherent in its status as a historical narrative. The film has also been read as representing more than the culmination of Stone's personal technique: Gavin Smith saw *Nixon* as

⁹¹ Although it was in *JFK* that the manipulation of film form, through the constant changing of film stocks and fast editing, became an integral part of a Stone film and conspicuous both to the spectator and to the critic. It provided a point of attack for critics who noted that the stylistic overload removed the ability of the viewer to tell fact from fiction.

⁹² Peter Collier, "Ollie Uber Alles," *The American Spectator*, April 1992, 29.

⁹³ Robert Burgoyne, "Modernism and the Narrative of Nation in *JFK*," in *The Persistence of History: cinema, television and the modernist event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (London: Routledge, 1996), 113.

⁹⁴ Marita Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 70-71.

“composed from the fragments of a century of film technique,” from Soviet montage to *Forrest Gump*-style digital compositing by way of newsreels and Wellesian *mise-en-scène*.⁹⁵

References to Orson Welles appeared in many reviews of *Nixon*, with particular attention drawn to the film’s structural parallels with *Citizen Kane* (1941).⁹⁶ Roger Ebert saw *Nixon* as “flavoured by the greatest biography in American film history,” noting several allusions to *Citizen Kane* in the use of a newsreel to cover the protagonist’s public life, the scene in which Richard and Pat share an inharmonious dinner at a long dining table, and the early image of a foreboding White House on a stormy night echoing the vision of Xanadu in *Citizen Kane*’s opening shot.⁹⁷ However, Ebert is mistaken in identifying the famous eighteen-and-a-half minute gap in one of the President’s tapes as being *Nixon*’s “Rosebud.”⁹⁸ Although clearly concerned with interrogating Nixon’s psychological make-up, *Nixon* is not overtly intent upon identifying a moment or event in Nixon’s life as the cause of his pathology; rather, it seeks to build a more complex picture of decline.⁹⁹ It is

⁹⁵ Gavin Smith, “The Dark Side,” *Sight and Sound* 6, no. 3 (March 1996): 6.

⁹⁶ The parallels are most exhaustively examined by Frank E. Beaver, “‘Citizen Nixon’ – Oliver Stone’s Wellesian View of a Failed Public Figure,” in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1997), 275-284.

⁹⁷ Roger Ebert, review of *Nixon*, *Chicago Sun Times*, December 20, 1995, 45. The slippage between “true” and fictional biography is of note here.

⁹⁸ Complicating the intertextual referents further, Stone told Ebert that in his film “Rosebud” was the “McGuffin,” Alfred Hitchcock’s term for whatever sparks the action of a film’s plot but eventually, if at all, is revealed to be irrelevant. Ebert, “Oliver Stone Finds the Humanity,” C1.

⁹⁹ It has been noted that there are two broad groups of critical response to *Citizen Kane*’s “Rosebud” device, of which *Nixon* is more closely aligned with the second: “One position is that the puzzle of ‘Rosebud’ has a specific meaning that can be identified to solve the mystery of Charles Foster Kane’s life. The other position is that the enigma of human beings is far too intricate and complex to be reduced to such a simple explanation.” Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 20-21. Indeed, the narrative of *Citizen Kane*

most likely that Stone's quoting of *Citizen Kane* is cinematic shorthand, indicating to the audience the biographical ambitions of the film; because *Nixon* certainly does not echo *Kane*'s grand investigative structure or polyphony of voices.

The most important influence on Stone's depiction of Nixon was historian Fawn Brodie's *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*.¹⁰⁰ Brodie's book is a "provocative psychohistory" that traces elements of Nixon's behaviour back to his childhood experiences.¹⁰¹ To a certain extent, *Nixon* mirrors this "psycho-historical" approach by inviting itself to be read subjectively, as if focalised through Nixon's perspective. The film opens with a deadpan recreation of an educational film for salesmen being watched by the group of "plumbers" as they prepare to enter the Watergate building. The instructor in the film within the film advises, "always look 'em in the eye, nothing sells like sincerity," as if to remind us not only of the increasingly performative nature of politics as the twentieth century wore on, but also that the subject of the film was the subject of a book called *The Selling of the President*.¹⁰² As the credits continue, having encountered the Xanadu-esque White House exterior, we follow Alexander Haig down the corridors of power

better encapsulates Oliver Stone's research for the film which saw him traipsing around the country seeking insight from those who knew Nixon.

¹⁰⁰ Fawn Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981); Eric Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon*, 182. Brodie lectured at UCLA and was renowned for several controversial biographies of figures as diverse as Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. She was much criticised by other historians for her "psychohistories."

¹⁰¹ Robert Brent Toplin, "Introduction," in *Oliver Stone's USA* (see note 54), 16. Bob Woodward was overheard at the film's premiere remarking that "I guess everybody gets the psychoanalyst they deserve, and Nixon got Oliver Stone." Maureen Dowd, "Nix Nixon – Tricky Pix," *New York Times*, December 21, 1995, A29.

¹⁰² Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

shaken by the Watergate fallout, as the major headlines of the investigations are rendered optically in the frame and through snatches of news reports on the soundtrack. When Haig leaves, having delivered a number of requested tapes, we are left with a bitter Nixon listening to the incriminating and embarrassing evidence of his past. Having used this framing device to refresh the audience as to the rough chronology of Watergate, the film descends into a chronologically complex series of flashbacks of recorded history and bitter memory. Richard Nixon is the (presumably unreliable) narrator and his flashbacks constitute the central sequences of the film until it returns to the minutiae of the Watergate scandal at its conclusion.

The scenes of Nixon's childhood are filmed with a conventional use of black and white to evoke pastness in the subjective narrative prism. Brief scenes of his early years are grainy and faded like quasi-home movies, often shot with a hand-cranked camera to give a staccato, unsteady feeling and to suggest that the representations are questionable – as if Nixon himself is struggling to remember (or forget). The extended flashbacks to his Yorba Linda youth are filmed in high-contrast black and white giving the scenes a nostalgic context, especially in the Rockwell-esque *mise-en-scène* signifying an idealised “American” past. However, the scenes also have a steely, harsh feel that reflects the strictness of Nixon's childhood and the tragedy of his brothers' deaths. Therefore, the film gives the sense of Nixon's idealisation of his childhood, consolidated by his continual nostalgic references to “the poorest lemon ranch in California,” and trips to his “father's woodshed” later

in the film/his life. The film signals the detrimental effects of his early years, especially his idealising of his mother's saintliness, on his future character.

Stone's signature technique, which takes the viewer out of the film's diegetic world and into a more subjective perspective, has been labelled "vertical editing" by the filmmaker.¹⁰³ *Nixon* often works in this way. For example, during Nixon's 1973 summit with Brezhnev, Stone's film dissolves from their conversation to a distracted Nixon imagining John Dean informing prosecutors of the Watergate machinations (which, indeed, Dean was doing at that historical moment). The technique also provides insights into Nixon's pettiness. A prime example comes during a meeting in the Oval Office when Nixon belittles Kissinger in front of his inner circle. Stone cuts to a distorted Nixon roaring like a caged lion, literalising a small victory as we feel Watergate begin to overwhelm his Presidency and spiral out of his control. Late in the film, we are shown a terrifying glimpse into his subconscious as Nixon lies on a hospital bed writhing under the weight of hundreds of reels of tape, seemingly consumed by them as was his presidency. That much of the film is focalised through Nixon may explain why Nixon-haters saw the film as being too sympathetic to the man and why tragedy is brought to the fore in the telling of a life that brought tragedy on itself. Nevertheless, it should be noted the decision to cast Anthony Hopkins (an internationally acclaimed actor) as Nixon encourages audiences to empathise more easily with Nixon, especially given the decision to eschew the use of make-up that might replicate one of the most mimicked faces in American political mythology. The decision to

¹⁰³ "Deleted Scenes," Disc 2, *Nixon*, special ed. DVD (see note 62).

avoid a descent into caricature also signals to the audience that Hopkins is an actor playing Nixon, and that this is fictional film not a direct window into the past.

Nixon's use of stock footage, another of Stone's stylistic trademarks, can also be used to support a subjective reading of the film as playing out in Nixon's own mind. If read as a series of Nixon's recollections, the film's frequent quotation of news footage can be seen as background noise to his memories. A startling example of this strategy is provided in the scene in which Nixon goes on a lone trip in the early hours to the Lincoln Memorial to "rap" with the protestors sleeping there. As Nixon climbs the steps to the memorial, footage of combat in Vietnam is front-projected to provide the background to the shot, thereby metonymically rendering the wider context not only of the confrontation that follows, but also of Vietnam hovering like a spectre over his presidency until Watergate took its place.

Gavin Smith observes that *Nixon* portrays a "displaced Nixon, endlessly fabricated and disassembled by history-making cameras and microphones in an era of mass media and his own paranoia."¹⁰⁴ The film successfully illustrates how media representations of Nixon and his own paranoia are inter-perpetuating. His self-destructive response to the media only encourages the media's negative portrayal which becomes a central motif of his political career. *Nixon* illustrates this antagonistic relationship with the media as representative of the "Eastern establishment," and links the centrality of his relationship to the press to his downfall, given that a central question

¹⁰⁴ Smith, "The Dark Side," 7.

when evaluating Nixon's presidency is whether any other President would have been hounded out of office over Watergate. Nixon's speech delivered in 1962, following his defeat in the election for governor of California, summarises this clash concisely. In what he declared to be his last press conference, Nixon accused the press of having "a lot of fun" with him since the Hiss case and of giving him "the shaft." This scene concludes with a cacophony of flashbulbs and questions that blend on the soundtrack to give the impression of a firing squad. The film thereby exemplifies a relationship so hostile that later we see Nixon visibly taken aback when he is applauded by the press corps on Air Force One returning from China. In the film, the 1962 press conference is followed by the "March-of-Time" newsreel that serves as Nixon's "political obituary," tracing his rise from fresh-faced Congressman to Vice-President and failed presidential candidate. However, through reference to his dirty election strategy, the Hiss case, and his part in the HUAC hearings, the film also shows the vicious side of his character, the side that turned him into a *bête-noir* for much of the liberal media. Perhaps Stone is fascinated by the media's vilification of Nixon because it reflects his own troubled relationship with the press.

The final line spoken by the narrator of the "March-of-Time" section of the film – "We never knew who Richard Nixon really was, and now that he is gone we never will" – reiterates Stone's fascination with Nixon's media image. Historical footage enhances the subjective portrait of Nixon, but also serves as a counter-point to Nixon's paranoid interpretation of *everything* as

being about, or an attack on, himself.¹⁰⁵ In 1995, the image of Nixon as a liberal was prevalent in political columns following the rehabilitative project of revisionist historians and the quasi-absolution that was his funeral.¹⁰⁶ Robert Sklar described *JFK* as an “assault against social amnesia,” a comment that can usefully be applied to *Nixon*, in that Stone reaffirms the images of the shadier side of the “Age of Nixon” in the cultural memory.¹⁰⁷ As much as the film empathises with Nixon, it uses regular montage sequences to emphasise central elements of the zeitgeist that Nixon either does not understand or misinterprets. For example, while Nixon accepts the Presidential nomination from the 1968 Republican convention, with a (composite) speech setting out the general concept of the “silent majority,” Stone oneirically juxtaposes cheering delegates with images of George Wallace, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panthers and footage of civil unrest, thereby literalising a divided country. One masterful optical effect sees the crowd of delegates in front of Nixon dissolve into a line of marching riot police, symbolising his inability, or unwillingness, to attempt to communicate with those elements desiring social change. At the tail end of the twentieth century when healing and forgetting are the main effects of the catharsis that Marita Sturken sees as central to the

¹⁰⁵ Woodward, “The Newest Nixon,” G1. While acknowledging many factual errors in Stone’s interpretation, Woodward proposes that Stone is correct in that “each meeting and encounter, each speech and fragment is all about self,” concluding that Nixon used the American Presidency as his therapy, to find himself. Debateable as his conclusion may be, Woodward does give credence to Stone’s psycho-historical approach.

¹⁰⁶ Greenberg, “Richard the Bleeding Hearted,” 158.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994), 365; Speaking at Nixon’s funeral, Bob Dole asserted that the second half of the twentieth century will be remembered as “the Age of Nixon.” Stone uses this footage as part of *Nixon*’s coda.

history film, *Nixon* demands that we not forget the divisions of the past through its re-igniting of divisive “flashbulb” memory images.¹⁰⁸

In *Nixon*, Oliver Stone utilises his quasi-trademarked cinematic techniques of vertically edited subjectivity and the manipulation of stock footage to attempt to interrogate the psyche of Richard Nixon. Stone specifically juxtaposes his insights with media representations of Nixon, acknowledging the antagonistic nature of the Nixon-media relationship and the importance of remembering the broader contexts of the Nixon era. However, a further effect of Stone’s style is to signify the “constructed” nature of both the film and of much of what we “know” about recent history. This is especially pertinent given the sheer profusion of both real and created media content in the film and its foregrounding of the very devices of memory recording: the film opens with the sound of a movie projector; the audience is thrown into the tortured layers of Nixon’s psyche by the mechanism of a tape recorder; the multiple film stocks used in the film imitate the “real” newsreels and television cameras, as well as the character’s imaginings. Stone has noted that:

The style of my films is ambivalent and shifting. I make people aware that they are watching a movie... [*Nixon*] calls attention to itself as a means of looking at history – shifting styles, such as the use of black and white and color, and viewing people from offbeat angles. You might see Nixon saying something in a shot that didn’t match. His lips are out of sync, and his facial expression implies something completely different from what is being heard. Or we might throw out five staccato images that add up to a contradictory portrait of the man. In such ways, we make you aware that you are watching a movie. We

¹⁰⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 89.

don't pretend that this is reality as in a conventional historical drama.¹⁰⁹

This “constructedness” is perhaps best represented in the film during the montage sequences that mostly feature stock footage. These sequences provide a chronological referent for the audience during the increasingly chaotic narration of Nixon's memory. In using fictional-news reports and newscasters' voiceovers, *Nixon* makes overt the postmodern acknowledgment that the past can only be known through its representations, that what we are seeing was constructed, written, shot, edited. The “March-of-Time” newsreel sequence serves to underline this constructedness by alluding to the cinematic meta-text of *Citizen Kane*. Using newsreel in itself calls attention to different forms of filmic construction since such representations of news were redundant by the 1960s when television had taken hold as the main visual news source.¹¹⁰

As well as using anachronisms and allusions to the meta-text of cinematic biography, Stone utilises a more recent referent during the newsreel sequence to signify the “imaginary” status of film. In layering the “real” of archive footage with images created for the film, Stone would appear to invite the central criticisms levelled at *JFK*, that he manipulated sacred documentary images and mixed them with fiction to such an extent that audiences could not identify what was real from what was fiction. Such paternal concern for the

¹⁰⁹ Stone, “Stone on Stone's Image,” 53. This is very much the reflective, “mature” Stone talking.

¹¹⁰ Hamburg, *Nixon*, 137, n65. Interestingly, the “March of Time” sequence is based on ABC television programme, *The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon*, that was broadcast five days after Nixon's 1962 defeat.

passive audience is stymied when *Nixon* is considered alongside *Forrest Gump*. Amidst the archival footage in the newsreel section, Stone has doctored footage so that the audience witnesses a digitally inserted Anthony Hopkins participating in the famous kitchen debate with Khrushchev and standing on the victory podium with Eisenhower. If these scenes had been re-enactments, with actors playing all the parts, the verisimilitude of the historical drama would have been maintained. Also, the grainy style of *Nixon*'s insertions evokes those scenes in *Forrest Gump* in which Forrest interacts with central figures of the same historical period in overtly fictionalised ways. This punctures any allusion to realism. This intertextual relation did not escape the attention of film critics at the time of *Nixon*'s release. J. Hoberman, for example, noted that "Hopkins is repeatedly *gumped* into historical events."¹¹¹ In quoting *Forrest Gump*'s visual bricolage, Stone underlines the ultimate fantasy of his take on Nixon.¹¹²

In *Nixon*, Oliver Stone represents the past while acknowledging the ultimate impossibility of such a project by foregrounding the film's "inventedness." In much the same way as its subject was so hyper-aware of his place in history that he consistently referred to himself in the third person, as if narrating his memoirs to the White House taping system, *Nixon* exudes a self-consciousness about its existence as *a* history. Jose Arroyo has noted that

¹¹¹ Hoberman, "Bugging Out," (my emphasis).

¹¹² *Forrest Gump*'s digital manipulation of the archive is discussed in depth in chapter four. Interestingly, John Powers creatively extends the link between Nixon and Gump: "At his smallest, [Nixon] seems little more than Forrest Gump's sordid alter ego, a small-town overachiever who wanders through American history breaking faith with those closest to him and betraying the chocolate-box precepts he'd learned from his mother." Powers, "The New Stone Age," G1.

Nixon's collage effect "simulates a collective memory of American culture of the period that, in the realm of fiction, easily passes as history."¹¹³ But, *Nixon* is aware that it is part of a broader, changing portrait of Nixon in the cultural memory; it is intent on pointing out the irrelevance of reductive factual criticism, and certainly has no intention of "passing" as history.

Bob Woodward concluded his evaluation of *Nixon* by suggesting that a stronger ending was available. Woodward ends with a quotation from the final page of one of Richard Nixon's many autobiographies, *RN* (1978), in which Nixon describes the scene inside the helicopter as he left the White House for the last time: "The blades began to turn... There were no tears left. I leaned my head back against the seat and closed my eyes. I heard Pat saying to no one in particular, 'It's so sad. It's so sad.'"¹¹⁴ This alternative conclusion to the film, especially given the empathetic portrayals by Anthony Hopkins and Joan Allen, would certainly increase the dramatic pathos of Stone's finale. Instead, Stone cuts from Hopkins' Nixon delivering the farewell speech to the White House staff, to the real Richard Nixon boarding the getaway helicopter in 1974, and then to television footage of Nixon's funeral in 1994. Stone's decision to remove the audience from the imaginary diegetic world of the drama and propel them into the real world is far more consistent with the film's project. Where *Malcolm X* concludes with images of Nelson Mandela to emphasise Malcolm's continuing relevance through bringing the audience back into the present, Stone uses still fresh television images of Nixon's

¹¹³ Jose Arroyo, review of *Nixon*, *Sight and Sound* 6, no. 3 (1996): 49.

¹¹⁴ Woodward, "The Newest Nixon," G1.

funeral to hand over the interpretive baton to the audience. Stone himself reads the closing narration that recounts the deaths of the Nixons, while reiterating that the film is based on an incomplete historical record that is, to some degree, due to Richard Nixon's lifelong battle to protect his White House tapes. The effect is that the audience is urged into a reading position consistent with the type of postmodern spectatorship that is aware of the rules of representation, for "viewers who recognize that the movie is a subjective version of the past, created through shots put together by some agent."¹¹⁵

Oliver Stone's attempt to publicise *Nixon* as his own interpretation of the life of the former President is expressed in the visual style and content of the film. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the publication of the annotated screenplay drew the focus away from the visual and aural totality of the film. There is certainly some credence in John Ehrlichman's earlier assertion that there is a tension between Stone's claim that the film is not history and the screenplay "tricked up to appear to be a scholarly work."¹¹⁶ Such artistic inconsistency and licence *must* be seen as less objectionable to the critic when the very process of invention is flaunted, as it is in *Nixon*, thereby providing the audience with valuable lessons about the questionable nature of the verisimilitude of the historical film.

The wider intertextual relay of discourses surrounding the release of *Nixon* goes some way to stymie the criticisms directed at the film by the "historian-cops." Their concern for the effects that digressions from factual

¹¹⁵ Janet Staiger, "Cinematic Shots: The Narration of Violence," in *The Persistence of History* (see note 93), 52.

¹¹⁶ Ehrlichman, "'Nixon' vs. Nixon," 46.

fidelity have on audiences assume that viewers are encountering the film in isolation from other knowledge of its subject. Even if we accept assertions of a post-literate culture – in which people can read, but choose not to, receiving their information from other sources of media – the plethora of television debates and documentaries that surrounded the release of *Nixon* offered plenty of perspectives from which viewers might contest and negotiate with the film's representation. *Nixon* does not present a hermetically sealed version of history with tidy narrative closure. It opens up many pertinent epistemological questions about the pursuit of history, of what we can know and represent about the past. As Thomas Oliphant notes, "Stone offers suggestions, not documentary answers. The purpose is to shake you up – the best kind of subversion – not to brainwash."¹¹⁷ The hullabaloo surrounding *Nixon*'s release glossed over its simplest lesson. As Stone told Charlie Rose: "It is *a* Nixon. We never said this is a definitive Nixon."¹¹⁸

When the Academy Award nominations were announced in February 1996 commentators expressed surprise that *Nixon* was only acknowledged in four categories and was omitted from the Best Picture and Best Director categories.¹¹⁹ In contrast, *Apollo 13* received nine nominations, including Best Picture, for which its competition included *Babe* (1995), *Braveheart* (1995), *Il Postino* (1995), and *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). It was the first year since

¹¹⁷ Thomas Oliphant, "Now it's *Nixon* to kick around," *The Boston Globe*, December 31, 1995, 85.

¹¹⁸ "The Charlie Rose Show," December 19, 1995 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁹ Bernie Weinraub, "Oscar Nominations Are Just One Surprise After Another," *New York Times*, February 14, 1996, C11.

1985 in which four of the five nominees for best film were not R-rated and, therefore, regarded as suitable for “family” consumption. The nominations were seen as a response to politicians and commentators who had been rallying against the nefarious influence of Hollywood’s products throughout the culture wars. An executive at Universal Pictures, the distributors of *Apollo 13*, revealed that these criticisms had led to a climate in which “all of us card-carrying liberals feel under attack.”¹²⁰ The film that received the most nominations (ten) and won the Oscar for Best Picture, *Braveheart*, reflected the prevailing conservative mood. Despite being notorious for its historical distortions and its subsequent appropriation by the Ku Klux Klan, its traditional notions of heroism in the face of tyranny led three Republican presidential hopefuls to cite it as their favourite film of the year: for Pat Buchanan, *Braveheart* “was a Buchanan.”¹²¹

In addition to their successful thwarting of the History Standards for schools and planned Smithsonian exhibition on the complicated history of Enola Gay, the critical, industrial, and popular success of *Apollo 13* and *Braveheart* signalled a victory for the right’s preferred brand of history. Notwithstanding the unanimous critical praise it received, the box office failure of *Nixon* effectively ended Oliver Stone’s ability to interrogate the sixties. His plans to begin shooting *Memphis*, a biopic of Dr. Martin Luther

¹²⁰ Quoted in Jim Impoco and Monika Guttman, “Hollywood: Right Face,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 15, 1995, 69.

¹²¹ Diane Roberts, “Your Clan or Ours?” *The Oxford American*, September-October 1999, 24-30; Thom Geier, “At last, film fare for conservatives,” *U.S. News and World Report*, February 26, 1996, 10. Buchanan’s celebration of *Braveheart* is especially telling given that he had publicly criticised *Born on the Fourth of July*, a film politically at odds with his position, for its historical inaccuracies and yet overlooked the more profound liberties with truth taken in *Braveheart*.

King, Jr., in April 1996 were halted by *Nixon*'s failure. More generally, Hollywood turned away from excavating the sixties and the era passed from the immediate concerns of the cultural memory. The lack of possible interest in the most divisive period in recent American history is perhaps encapsulated best by a letter to *The Washington Post*. The contributor opined that, "It's true audiences are 'issued out,' tired of being divided, tired of being told they are victims, tired of being shamed and blamed."¹²² Thus, at the end of the most heated culture wars, the right's uncomplicated kind of consensus history was perceived to be the order of the day.

¹²² Regina LaPierre, letter to the editor, G1.

Coda

In this thesis I have applied concepts associated with memory studies and the principles of intertextual relay to a range of American productions released between 1987 and 1995. These films are united in being representations of social and historical details of American culture in the Vietnam War-era. Through my close analyses of the films and, in order to reflect on their reception and resonance, I have built a cumulative picture of intertextual relay establishing its full complexity. Much of the originality of this thesis, therefore, lies in my systematic focus on providing as comprehensive a context as possible for understanding not only the films but also the discursive “noise” surrounding their release. There are, of course, limitations to such an approach, especially when the focus is on smaller films, both industrially and in terms of their popular success, for when a film appears on such a limited scale it is naturally less discussed in the broader culture. In addition, the ephemeral nature of television and radio broadcasts clearly limits the extent to which discussions of films within the visual media can be retrieved and scrutinised. However, in opening chapters of this thesis the combined analyses of promotional materials, responses in the popular press, and the films themselves reveal a remarkably cohesive representation of returning veterans and the legacies of “radical” culture despite their limited releases and profiles. Such a cumulative approach enables a deeper comprehension of the possible readings available to audiences far beyond the particular film text and also provides additional context for analysing the boldness of, and the strength of

the reaction to, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). The third chapter foregrounds the use the traditionally conservative genre of the biopic by filmmakers to assert lives with meanings that run counter to the “preferred” notions of American history of the cultural right. The industrial and popular discourses surrounding these films, particularly the substantial public clashes over and around *JFK* (1991) and *Malcolm X* (1992), provoked a renewed interest in their subjects beyond the individual text that clearly impacted upon their importance to the cultural memory of the 1960s. The cumulative picture of the sixties communicated throughout the opening and biopic chapters provides a renewed context for considering the much-maligned *Forrest Gump* (1994). Together with the complex intertextual relay of *Gump*’s promotion and (political) reception, this broader context enables a more enlightened evaluation of the film beyond the conservative label with which it has been typically branded, facilitating a deeper understanding of its polysemy as a multifaceted text open to more than one reading. The final chapter chronicles the reception of *Apollo 13* (1995) and *Nixon* (1995) in order to demonstrate an exhaustion on the part of audiences with more complex and contrary representations, both visually and in terms of views of history, and an embrace of more traditional notions of American heroism in the post-Gump, pro-Gingrich environment.

The importance and success of all of these chapters is in their consideration of the industrial, political, and social contexts of films in order to provide interpretive frameworks that are as complete as possible and within

which audiences encounter representations of history on the screen. All the chapters enable an evaluation of cinema's impact on cultural memory that far exceeds that which is possible through the analysis of a single film text. This methodological approach has facilitated the study of this group of films firmly within the discursive moment of their production (the culture wars), the circulating (promotional) larger media discourses that accompany them, and the always already circulating notions of their subjects, in order to demonstrate how the consumption of popular films becomes part of a vast intertextual mosaic of remembering and forgetting that is constantly redefining, and reimagining, the past.

The process of the cultural negotiation of collective memory is, of course, continuous. Therefore, I conclude my analysis with some observations on the continuing political and industrial patterns of development which have occurred since the period of my primary focus (1987-1995). I will briefly summarise some key trends in what Hollywood has done with American history as it relates to the changing political climate since 1995. The re-election of Bill Clinton in 1996 came as little surprise. Although he had been labelled a "counterculture McGovernik" by Newt Gingrich when the GOP took the House and Senate in 1994, the Contract with America had proved too extreme for the majority and Clinton's decisive move towards the centre, along with the thriving economy, had assured his re-election. However, as his second term became mired in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, a consummate "values" controversy, the culture wars underwent a period of cooling –

multiculturalism had survived. Hollywood reflected this cooling off when Best Picture Oscars were awarded to *The English Patient* (1996), *Titanic* (1997), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998): films set comfortably, as well as romantically, in the distant past. Steven Spielberg's paean to the "Greatest Generation," *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), was the most successful historical film of the period in commercial *and* critical terms. The sixties, it seemed, had begun to fade from the cultural memory.

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 reawakened many of the polarising issues of the culture wars, however, and while I wish to avoid a simplistic red state-blue state dichotomy, the tenor of public discourse in America was combative. The 1960s began to be re-asserted in popular cultural productions with the release of films such as *Ali* (2001) and the Academy Award-nominated *The Weather Underground* (2000). It was the decision by the Bush administration to invade Iraq, however, that most clearly evoked the spectre of the 1960s. The parallels between Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Vietnam War were raised almost from the outset of the intervention, and became more apposite as American soldiers increasingly found themselves in a comparable quagmire until Bush became resigned to the comparison in August 2007. The documentary *Sir! No Sir!* (2005) reasserted the hitherto repressed memory of the GI Movement to end the Vietnam War. Its makers expressed an explicit intention that the history they were re-presenting had an

influence on troops fighting in Iraq, setting up a feature on the film's website where visitors could "Buy *Sir! No Sir!* for a Soldier" in service there.¹

In protesting the foreign policy of the Bush administration, "Hollywood Liberalism" was evident again as figures like Michael Moore, Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon and Martin Sheen began to lead marches and to speak out against the war, prompting inevitable criticism from the right. In contradistinction to the absence of representations of the Vietnam War while it was in progress, there are a number of films due for release in the later months of 2007 that take the Iraq War as their subject, in addition to the large number of documentaries that have already been theatrically released and widely discussed. Spielberg, whose *Saving Private Ryan* is the epitome of consensus history, returned to the theme of the Second World War, but with different emphases, producing Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), and its "companion film," *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). *Flags of Our Fathers* subverts expectations of generational worship to explicitly indict the political manipulation of soldiers by those in power. *Letters from Iwo Jima* presents a sympathetically humanist portrayal of the "enemy," released at a time when the U.S. is involved in a polarising war. Between the two films Eastwood shows several of the "same" events through the eyes of both American and Japanese soldiers. At the time of writing, it is reported that Spielberg plans to direct *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, based on the infamous prosecution of the leaders of the demonstrations outside the Democratic National Convention in 1968, from a script by Aaron Sorkin who created the liberal fantasy President

¹ www.sirnosir.com (accessed January 22, 2007).

in *The West Wing*.² It is also reported that Oliver Stone, having surprised conservatives with a remarkably uncontroversial *World Trade Center* (2006), is to return to the theme of the Vietnam War. He will direct Bruce Willis in *Pinkville* which will follow the investigation into the My Lai massacre.³ The pattern I identify suggests that Hollywood's intervention in and interpretation of particular historical moments is indeed cyclical.

The examples above will afford further investigation of many of the ideas I have advanced in this thesis. The process by which the critic reads memory studies and intertextual relay into the meaning of a film or films is itself contingent upon the historical and temporal position of the critic. I have elaborated on existing readings of the films I selected and my own readings will also shift in currency. However, this thesis identifies particular tools which may be used to make sense of some of the myriad ways in which a group of films may be understood to engage with, and contribute to, history in a specific, discursive era. Such patterns are usefully explored with reference to identifying shifts in cultural memory, documenting shifts in the understanding of particular histories, and exploring the intertextual shifts that exemplify how films might be read or understood by their audiences. The diversity of perspectives represented in my study foreground a fundamental aspect of postmodern thought: that grand narratives are not only deceptive, but they falsely create the idea of uncontested or absolute truths. It is not my purpose to suggest that any of my chosen films or any developments since the period

² Michael Fleming and Pamela McLintock, "Sorkin inks deal with DreamWorks," *Daily Variety*, July 13, 2007, 2.

³ Michael Fleming, "A return to 'Nam,'" *Daily Variety*, August 28, 2007, 1.

on which I have focused might be reducible to any grand narrative. However, the films are testimony to the power of cinema to interpret, revision, shape, augment, and even “answer” particular questions raised in historical discourse. They do not reduce history, especially if we read them through the multifarious possibilities reflected in memory studies and ideas of intertextual relay. Rather, the films exist and negotiate their meanings within the cultural memory. This thesis does not constitute a straight-forward defence of historical film. It is, rather, an attempt to show how films contribute to historical dialogues that are as complex as history itself.

Bibliography

The newspaper and magazine articles, editorials, features and all other ephemera and multimedia detailed throughout the thesis are the result of extensive work in the archives of: the Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; The British Film Institute National Library, London; and the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA.

The extent of my research makes it impossible to list all consulted texts. However, all works cited are detailed in the footnotes within the thesis.

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