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Oliver Stone's *Nixon*

The Rise and Fall of a Political Gangster

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In spite of the increased margin for alternative forms of historiography, historical films are often still judged in the old-fashioned way, on their factual reliability. That this tendency seems to increase as filmmakers take on the recent past is not clearer to anybody than to Oliver Stone. As is commonly known, in the early 1990s his *JFK* – in which he implies that there was a conspiracy behind the murder of John F. Kennedy – provoked heated discussion on the accountability of filmmakers who meddle with the historical past. Both from academic historiography and from the political establishment, Stone faced reproaches of having dealt in a rash manner with the historical facts and, by doing so, of saddling young generations of cinema-goers with a fundamentally incorrect image of a traumatic episode in American history.

This feeling of indignation only grew when Stone, instead of showing repentance and presenting his conspiracy theory as pure artistic speculation, started doggedly answering his critics via numerous interviews and articles (Lardner 1991; Stone 1991).[1] In Stone's view, Kennedy's murder was planned by the military–industrial complex and carried out by the Mafia and fanatical anti-Castro Cubans, with the knowledge of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation). The result was that Stone's opponents doubled their efforts to show that his thesis of a murder conspiracy rested on very shaky ground. It was especially the direct motive that Stone saw behind the conspiracy – Kennedy's supposed intention to bring the military involvement of the United States in Vietnam to an end – that came under heavy attack. It was also held against Stone that, to a large extent, he had taken the narrative framework of his film from *On the Trail of the Assassins* by Jim Garrison. Between 1967 and 1969 this New Orleans district attorney had unsuccessfully tried to have Clay Shaw, a businessman with right-wing leanings, convicted for his alleged part in the Kennedy assassination. Historians were amazed at Stone's naïve faith in Garrison's much criticized

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conspiracy theory; they were also annoyed by his choice of putting forward the district attorney's debatable legal practices, in a Capraesque way, as the heroic crusade of an incorruptible lawyer who was willing to risk both his life and that of his family to bring the truth out into the open.

Nixon: A Revenge?

The storm around *JFK* had hardly died down when Stone announced that he had another film on a postwar American president in the pipeline – *Nixon*. Stone's former opponents reacted immediately. A cartoon in *The New York Times* showed Nixon turning up in the wings of Ford's Theatre as Lincoln's murderer; this was a hint that Stone, the cinematic historian,[2] was preparing another sensational conspiracy theory. Nixon's inner circle did not react well either. Unlike the Kennedy clan – which, for all the fuss around *JFK*, had simply let it all pass – the Nixon family, having read the script, went public with the statement that the sole aim of Stone's planned film was to drag the name of the president and his wife through the mud (Vercammen 1995).

In spite of these negative reactions, Stone had sufficient reason to believe that his new film would not cause a controversy on par with *JFK*'s. In contrast to Kennedy, whose place in the American collective memory had remained basically undisputed for a long time, the hardly charismatic Nixon was at the center of many controversies. Since they had already been widely reported in the press and discussed in numerous historical studies, it wasn't immediately clear how Stone's film could create any additional stir. Moreover, the scale and the reliability of all that had been written about Nixon seemed to be a guarantee that no fresh public scandal would arise. With regard to Watergate, the notorious final act of Nixon's political career, a great deal of reliable information had surfaced over the years, unlike in the Kennedy assassination, where even the most fundamental questions remained unanswered. It was for instance beyond any doubt that Nixon himself had actively assisted in the attempts to sabotage legal proceedings, and that there could only be discussion on the question of how far he was personally involved in the break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. As far as Stone feared a new controversy, it appeared he could easily avoid it by keeping close to the existent Nixon research. At the same time, this would give him the opportunity to exact his revenge as a *cinematic historian*.

This last intention can be already be traced in the script published by Hyperion in Hamburg's *Nixon* at the time the film premiered. To counter every suspicion of irresponsible speculation in advance, the script's first page informs the reader that, this time, Stone had no intention to turn history upside down, as he had in *JFK*:

> There is no intention here to revise history; rather, events have been examined, condensed, and encapsulated based on existing research and dramatic demands. In a few instances where facts are in dispute, the writers have used reasonable speculation arising from the information available. (Hamburg 1995: 83)

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To further stress how much is based on thorough historical research, the script swarms with footnotes in academic style referring to the literature on Nixon. This claim of historical professionalism is furthered by having the screenplay preceded by some dozen essays in which pundits like former members of staff John Dean and Alexander Butterfield, historian Stanley Kutler, journalist Daniel Schorr and politician–diplomat Paul Nitze come up with their vision of Nixon, and especially of his role in the Watergate scandal. A third part of the published script includes a broad collection of relevant Watergate documents. Information could also be found on a CD-ROM, containing more than 70,000 pages of official documents (including reports of trials, transcripts of tapes, correspondence, speeches, memos), a chronology of the most important moments in Nixon's career, biographies of 250 people from his immediate circles, plus numerous photos and video clips. In short, the way in which Stone launched *Nixon* appeared to make it clear that he, once again, wanted to be taken seriously not only as director but also as historian.

A Subtle Portrait?

Critics who had expected Stone's film to demonize Richard Milhous Nixon excessively were faced with disappointment when, following the release of the film, they had no choice but to admit that the director had gone to great lengths to bring a balanced portrait of his main character to the screen. The fact that at the same time he had not hesitated to portray the man's less likeable characteristics was difficult to hold against him, considering all the negative things that had already been said and written about Nixon. In line with the image that most historians and former members of staff portrayed in their studies and memoires, Stone's Nixon appears as a vindictive person, who misuses his presidential powers to settle a series of old scores.[3] Addicted to Washington, though forever doomed to remain an outsider, he doesn't have opponents, but only enemies, who have to be eliminated without mercy. To reach that objective, he is prepared to go as far as violating the principles of constitutional democracy. Himself a victim of his self-created image of the enemy, Stone's Nixon feels he's being attacked by Kennedy democrats, liberal Harvard intellectuals, and Jewish *New York Times* journalists, who hold him responsible for practices they tolerated in the time of his predecessors. Unimpeded by a moral precept, he is unable and unwilling to understand why a third-rate burglary has now overshadowed his accomplishments in the field of foreign policy: "Lyndon bugged! So did Kennedy! FDR cut a deal with Lucky Luciano. Christ, even Ike had a mistress! What's so special about me?"

Unlike most Nixon films,[4] Stone's sketches the portrait of a politician who has sunk very low, but who also has genuine idealism and visionary thinking.[5] We can recognize this balanced approach, among other things, in the acting of Anthony Hopkins, who, unlike earlier Nixon performers, doesn't lapse into caricature or imitation but provides his character with a vulnerability that in reality was seldom

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visible. At some moments, the film even expresses admiration for Nixon and endows him with a certain insight into himself. When the president, on the eve of his resignation, is seen standing in front of Kennedy's White House portrait, summarizing what both of them have meant to the American people ("When they look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are"), Stone lends his character introspective qualities the real Nixon never seemed to have had.

In spite of Stone's balanced view, many critics remained of the opinion that he had still portrayed a far too negative image of the president. Former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger remarked that the real Nixon drank and swore much less than Stone's film would have us believe, and that he never called his wife "buddy." There were also critics all too ready to have a go at what they believed to be Stone's far too speculative approach. Among other things, they had little time for his insinuations regarding the role Nixon apparently played as vice-president in the CIA's plan to murder Castro (a plot that failed for various reasons, although, according to the film, it was later the indirect cause of putting the murder of John F. Kennedy into motion; see, among others, Ambrose 2000). Others pointed out that Stone had disguised how eclectic, not to say opportunist, he had been in the use of his sources. Aside from highly respected studies such as those of Jonathan Aitken, Fred Emery, and Stephen Ambrose, he consulted a great number of less reliable publications. The most striking example was undoubtedly *The Final Days*, the sensationalist report on Nixon's last months in the White House that *Washington Post* journalists Woodward and Bernstein had written on the basis of interviews conducted with some 400 unspecified persons. Stone took from this material the story of Nixon sinking to his knees and praying in the presence of a bewildered Kissinger (Woodward and Bernstein 1976: 469–473).[6] Other reviewers criticized the way in which Stone had allowed himself to be influenced by studies from the *psychohistory* camp – a historical sub-discipline that champions the synthesis of traditional historiography and clinical psychoanalysis and that is described by Lloyd deMause, one of its pioneers, as "the science of historical motivation" (1982: i). Stone retraces Nixon's contorted, emotionally stunted personality to his humble origins in a Quaker family, where a repressive, bigoted mother forced on him a standard of righteousness and godliness that he could never live up to.[7] The insights of psychohistory are also more than recognizable in one of the main conclusions of the film: Nixon failed mainly through the imperfections of his character, and not so much because of external social–political circumstances.

The Interaction between Fact and Fiction

Few critics of historical films appear to realize that the view that a historical film does not meet the demands of traditional historiography is hardly useful as long as

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it is more of a condemning conclusion than a starting point. Nor does there seem to be any noticeable understanding of how counter-productive it is, not to say misleading, whenever it remains implicit that this kind of criticism is itself not free of ideological naïvety or prejudice. The fact that such an ideological substrate was present in the criticism of *Nixon* is manifest most clearly in those articles where Stone was accused once again – after films such as *Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *JFK* – of managing to put the whole American political system in a negative light.[8] Such reactions demonstrated unequivocally that a discussion about the way in which filmmakers represent the past is irrevocably linked to the "political" question as to who in fact has the monopoly on the (re)construction of the past. Filmmaker-historian Daniel Walkowitz, among others, made it clear that the condemnation of Stone's critical approach regarding recent American history has to be seen as a continuation of the lament, loudly vented in the media – namely from the camp of the neo-conservative political establishment – that postmodern, revisionist historians who, ever since the sixties, have been paying increasing attention to racial and social minorities and have been deconstructing the idea of historical objectivity, are misrepresenting the national past in a subjectivist manner (Walkowitz 1998: 46).

Of course it is difficult to deny that many historical films, with their subjective, speculative, and also sometimes provocative approach, are symptomatic of the postmodern doubt and uncertainty of the second half of the twentieth century (Hesling 1999). Exactly because of that, however, the evaluation of such films should not be measured beforehand against a "scientific" norm of historical objectivity and precision. For a meaningful evaluation of historical films, analyzing the way in which they *are* constructed is always a much better starting point than considering the way in which they *should have been made*. On the basis of such a finding, an assessment can then be made of the way these films oscillate between the often ideologically colored need for a stable presentation of the past, based on "true facts," and the refusal of more and more historians to supply such an unambiguous image. What is paramount here – a question that authors like Robert A. Rosenstone have stressed throughout their work – is that fiction can contain valuable and legitimate representations of the past. Whether every element of fiction can be justified historically is of lesser importance. Apart from the question of whether it is possible to make a distinction between "fact" and "fiction," the expressive power of a historical film depends not only on the amount of objective facts that can be tallied, but just as much on the line of reasoning that a director attempts to construct, whether by using fictional elements or not (Walkowitz 1998: 51).

As with all historical films, the relevance of *Nixon* has to be judged against this complex interaction of fact and fiction. By stepping, just like (psycho)biographers, on the thin ice of character analysis, Stone saw himself confronted with questions that many a traditional historian prefers not to answer. Where it is often quite possible to discover what historical persons did or decided, it often proves a lot

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more difficult actually to unearth their underlying motives. It is a fact, for instance, that, when public prosecutor Archibald Cox began considering to requisition the tapes that in the end would lead to the president's downfall, Nixon made the decision not to get rid of them. But the reason why Nixon did not destroy his tapes – a step, many argue, that could have saved his presidency – remains a mystery to this day.[9] In attempting to answer such questions, (psycho)biographers state that they are unwilling to limit themselves to establishing facts; they also dare to breathe new life into them. To indicate that, in order to do this, a certain creativity should be displayed, Ira Bruce Nadel speaks about the transformation of "facts in authorized fictions" (Nadel 1984: viii). A similar process of "fictionalization" occurs in historical films like *Nixon*, in the sense that filmmakers such as Stone often dare to go much further than the average historian in their creative treatment of the past. What they sacrifice to scholarly reliability is won back through the possibility of developing scenarios that, for epistemological–methodological reasons, traditional historiography cannot deploy. Although the apparently scientific aspect of the script makes one suspect otherwise, an analysis of the film shows that Stone, like so many other filmmakers within the biopic genre, aimed to use the possibilities a fictionalizing approach would give him.

Nixon's Subjective Past

The narrative structure of the film in itself makes it clear that Stone opted for a path that not one single traditional historian would have wanted to take. Instead of approaching the Watergate scandal and other crucial moments in Nixon's career as an objective, external reality, Stone in fact started out by asking how his main character had lived through these events himself. *Nixon* is thus not an objective chronology of events, but the inquiry into an "inner reality" that Stone unlocks by using a complex flashback structure. The film opens with a scene that shows how, on June 17, 1972, Nixon's "plumbers" – the team made up of Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy – are making their final preparations for the break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. Of the 73 narrative segments in which the film can be divided, 39 chronologically precede the moment of the Watergate break-in. In two of them the Watergate break-in is actually occurring, while the remaining 32 take place afterwards. The whole narrative spans a period of 69 years: from 1925, when the 12-year-old Richard is reprimanded by his mother for telling a lie, to April 26, 1994 when the former president is buried.

The first scene in which we meet Nixon takes place at the end of 1973, at the high point of the Watergate crisis. He is in the Lincoln Sitting Room of the White House, feverishly checking the recorded conversations with his staff for remarks that could betray the fact that he had sabotaged the Watergate judicial inquiry. Half-numbed by alcohol and tranquillizers, Nixon's thoughts stray back to the

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past: to discussions about the Watergate break-in with his close members of staff Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, Kissinger, and Dean. These memories open into other memories, carrying the viewer further back, to the high and low points of Nixon's political career – and even to traumatic events from his childhood.

It is only in the final narrative segments of the film – when, with the help of his legal staff, Nixon draws up the White House transcripts that he will present to the House Judiciary Committee and to the American people – that the events are portrayed outside this chain of recollections. We find ourselves in the spring of 1974, a few months away from Nixon's resignation.

The way in which the narrative segments are related to each other within this memory structure strengthens the realization that the viewer is dealing with a subjective perception of the past, in particular in the first part of the film, where he has to undergo a barrage of unexpected and temporarily vaguely defined leaps in time. Instead of opting for a single flashback in which the events are presented chronologically, Stone has opted for a model whereby he can, via interlocked memories, span large distances in time. By not following the historical logic of the political events themselves but the subjective logic of Nixon's thoughts, Stone's film clearly indicates that it doesn't wish to be a Rankean report of Nixon's political career, but rather a Freudian interpretation of what went on in his mind.

The Tragic Decline of a Political Gangster

To give shape to Nixon's mental world, Stone calls up narrative frameworks that belong to the core of western literary heritage. Notwithstanding all the historical research, Stone has never concealed that, in the end, he wished to provide *Nixon* with the fatality of a Greek tragedy and the allure of a Shakespearean royal drama. Scenes in which Anthony Hopkins wrestles with his conscience, like Oedipus tormented by inner demons, or limps through the corridors of the White House like a demented Richard III leave little to the imagination in this respect.

Stone's choice of the classical tragedy model appears to be well motivated. To start with, in the purely dramaturgic sense. Just like Agamemnon or Macbeth, Nixon, with all his qualities, is unable to recognize his fatal character flaw. Nixon's *hamartia*, tragic error, manifests itself in a totally perverted image of the enemy that spurs him on, in all his *hybris*, to a fatal violation of the legal process. The fact that, in the eyes of many, the historical Nixon did not have the qualities of a "tragic hero" to justify Stone's narrative model is of little importance.[10] The deciding factor is that Nixon saw himself in that role. Particularly in his foreign policies, he tried to promote an image of himself as a heroic statesman who, in the quest for a grand ideal – détente between the superpowers – dared to reach further than the frontiers of the possible. Here he was probably playing with the comforting thought that heroes such as these, even when they fail, have been able to give the world a noble spectacle. The extent to which Nixon identified with a

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heroic–tragic role is evident from the way in which he opens his memoirs with a quotation from his favorite role model, Theodore Roosevelt:

> It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumphs of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Stone takes up this heroic–tragic self-image not only by opening his script with this Roosevelt quotation, but also by ending the film with words of the same import, namely the speech with which Nixon, once again referring to Roosevelt, took leave of the White House in historical time:

> We sometimes think, when things happen that don't go the right way, we think that when someone dear to us dies, when we lose an election, when we suffer a defeat, that all is ended . . . but that's not true. It is only a beginning, always; because the greatness comes, and you're really tested, when you take some knocks, some disappointments, when sadness comes.

Instead of endorsing Nixon's self-image, however, Stone clearly does his best to undermine it. That can be derived, among other things, from the way in which he gives his political tragedy the contours of a traditional rise-and-fall story. In keeping with the narrative course of the classic gangster film – pre-eminently, the genre that describes the evolution of the protagonist as a cyclic process of rise and fall – Nixon's conquest of the White House is in fact only the prelude to the deeper fall that awaits him afterwards. With this, his career runs exactly contrary to the course, invariably ending in triumph, that the audience had learned, via such classic biopics as *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* or *Edison, The Man*, to associate with great historical figures. Stone obviously understood that, contrary to these positive characters, it was not possible to wrap the career of the political *outlaw* Richard Nixon in the classical rags-to-riches formula. Instead he turned to the genre of the gangster film and its unstable, tragic hero. In the way Warshow has so tellingly described this emblematic figure, it is easy to recognize Stone's Nixon: excessive and arrogant while at the same time lonely and melancholic; surrounded by masses of enemies and yet apparently having no need for love; vehement in what attracts him as well as in what repels him, and because of this capable of losing his control at any moment; never satisfied, and thus ever on the look-out for fresh ground to conquer and for opportunities to stand out among the masses,

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yet ultimately and inevitably en route to his downfall – which means toward an end that will make it clear that his whole life was founded on a misunderstanding (Warshow 1970a).[11] When, at the end of the film, Nixon talks to the portrait of Kennedy, it would appear no accident that his already quoted words are not far removed from those in which Warshow expresses our fascination and, at the same time, our fear of the gangster: "he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become." Via this implicit parallel with the gangster hero, Stone not only manages to place Nixon's heroic self-image in a critical light, but is also able to play upon the dilemma that, according to Warshow, is so wonderfully symbolized by this cinematic archetype: while it's true that failing is a form of dying, success can be no more than bad and dangerous.

As an embodiment of this dilemma, Stone's Nixon also becomes the cinematic reincarnation of Charles Foster Kane, the protagonist of the most archetypal rise-and-fall film ever made. It is no accident that, right from the moment the camera approaches the fence of the White House, Nixon's Xanadu, a number of pretty obvious thematic and stylistic references to Welles's début are in evidence. Just like *Nixon*, *Citizen Kane* deals with the loss of innocence, with lofty ideals, as well as with the corrupting effect of absolute power; and, just like *Citizen Kane*, *Nixon* is a parable about the disastrous consequences of a traumatized childhood, dominated by a loveless mother figure. The ever-returning enigmatic reference to the Bay of Pigs stands as Nixon's Rosebud, a symbol with ultimately just as little explanatory value – because, like Kane, Nixon remains for the most part a puzzle, not least to himself.[12]

The Biblical Symbolism

The more the film progresses, the more it becomes clear that Stone also wanted to give Nixon's arc the aspect of a biblical fall. Even before the first images appear on the screen, this symbolic trajectory is activated by a reference to Matthew: "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" This motif, dominating the psychological logic of the whole film, manifests itself the most in the scenes in which Hannah Milhous, with her unrelenting Quaker morality, plays on the conscience of her son. Just as he does through his cinematic references to the gangster genre, Stone is able to comment on the historical Nixon with the help of biblical symbolism.

The prime example of this use of biblical symbolism is the dramatization of the man's legendary meeting, on the night of May 8, 1970, with a group of young demonstrators at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Nixon's remarkable outing occurred against the background of the fierce student protests that broke out after he had announced, in a televised speech on April 30, 1970, that South Vietnamese and American troops had invaded (in his own words, it was just an "incursion") Cambodia. The riots that erupted on university campuses throughout the country,

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often accompanied by violence, were so fierce that the head of Columbia University felt he had to call it "the most disastrous month of May in the history of American higher education" (Tindall and Shi 1996: 161). Together with the conversation in which Nixon discloses to Haldeman how he, as vice-president, had taken charge of the plot to assassinate Castro, this scene is, according to critics, the one that gives the clearest insight into Stone's naïve view on American history.

In his eclectic use of sources, Stone stages the Lincoln Memorial scene in such a way that, in it, the viewer recognizes both snippets of the version of the incident that a number of students presented to the press the following day and Nixon's own version. According to the dailies, Nixon looked tired and confused during his conversation with the students. One of them, Joan Pelletier from Syracuse University, stated: "I hope it was because he was tired, but most of what he was saying was absurd."[13] Similarly, Stone's Nixon comes across as being confused and awkward, at first not being able to bring up a better subject than Syracuse's football team. When a female student snaps that they didn't come there to talk about sport, the conversation takes a more serious turn.[14] Nixon lets the students see that he understands their protests, and he indicates that, in view of his Quaker background, he shares their pacifist ideals. He tries unsuccessfully to convince his audience that sometimes, however, peace has to be fought for.

When Haldeman, his chief of staff, alerted of the situation, arrives at the Memorial accompanied by a number of Secret Service agents, the scene starts to deviate from both versions. The same female student who had spoken quite harshly to Nixon earlier suddenly throws in his face the question of why he is not able to bring to an end a war that nobody wants:

> You can't stop it, can you? Even if you wanted to. Because it's not you. It's the system. And the system won't let you stop it . . . Then what's the point? What's the point of being president? You're powerless.

Thrown off his balance by this verbal attack, the president splutters feebly:

> No, no. I'm not powerless. Because . . . because I understand the system. I believe I can control it. Maybe not control it totally. But . . . tame it enough to make it do some good.

When the young woman remarks that it is just as if he were talking about a wild animal, Nixon agrees. As he is being hustled away by Haldeman, he stammers confusedly:

> She got it, Bob. A 19-year-old college kid . . . She understood something it's taken me 25 fucking years in politics to understand. The CIA, the Mafia, the Wall Street bastards . . . "The beast." A 19-year-old kid. She understands the nature of "the beast." She called it a wild animal.

Stone himself has always tried to defend his beast metaphor on historical grounds, by pointing out that Nixon was one of the first American presidents whose

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mandate was substantially limited by the demands of the financial world and of the military–industrial complex. According to him, the Lincoln Memorial scene had to make it clear how much Nixon was aware of these limitations and how much he must have felt himself to be the plaything of a "system" that he reckoned he could exploit for his own political goals (Smith 1996: 9). Stone's allusion to the deeply rooted interweaving between the American policy and the military–industrial complex cut, however, very little ice with critics like Ambrose, who labeled the beast metaphor a superficial figure of speech in which outmoded New Left thinking competed for precedence with trendy mythical–religious conspiracy thinking (Ambrose 2000: 206–207). Moreover, it appeared to them to be totally implausible that Nixon saw himself as a victim of the same forces that had caused the downfall of Kennedy in *JFK*.[15]

With all this criticism, the biblical connotations of the beast metaphor went largely unnoticed. Remarkably enough, Stone himself never went into it to any great depth. A glance at the script, however, suffices to make us conclude that it is in fact this line of approach that adds weight to the metaphor. In the script, the beast metaphor is explicitly dealt with in a scene that precedes the Lincoln Memorial segment but that never made it into the film. Together with other material that ended up on the cutting room floor, this scene was later added to the American DVD (digital versatile disc) and video release of *Nixon*. In it we can see how the president makes a surprise visit to the CIA headquarters of Richard Helms, from whom he wants to get some documents concerning the Bay of Pigs affair that could be incriminating for him. Helms, who during their meeting alludes to the fact that Kennedy was murdered from within the CIA because of his disastrous Cuban policy, warns Nixon that his overtures to China could have the same fatal consequences. Helms's hardly subtle threat gives Nixon the feeling (as described in the script) that the beast is suddenly present in the room, which is accentuated in the film's images by a special effect. The eyes of the CIA director turn completely black for a few seconds. To further emphasize his role as an incarnation of Evil, Stone has him recite a passage from Yeats's *The Second Coming*:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> [. . .] and everywhere
> the ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.
> [. . .]
> What rough beast, its hour come round at last
> Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

The Second Coming is generally regarded as a mystic–visionary description of the Apocalypse; it was written in 1921, at a time when World War I was still fresh

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in everyone's memory and communist and fascist totalitarianism were knocking on the door. In a more literal way, the poem points to the appearance of the beast and the second coming of Christ that follows it, as prophesied in the book of Revelation. This end of the world coincides with the Last Judgment, where the soul of every individual is weighed. By making Nixon, in the Lincoln Memorial scene, come to realize how much he has handed himself over to the beast, Stone reactivates the symbolism of the quotation from Matthew given at the beginning of the film. In fact the amazement on Nixon's face refers not only to the unmasking and identification of the "system," but principally to his realization that he, instead of taming the system, is actually losing his soul to it. In this respect the place that the Lincoln Memorial scene occupies within the narrative structure of the film is significant. In the following segments we see how Nixon gives a decisive twist to his deliverance to the devil by setting up a White House Special Investigations Unit to see to it that his re-election campaign runs smoothly and to ensure that "leaks" like Ellsberg's Pentagon Papers would be avoided in the future. It is exactly this fatally wrong move that marks the beginning of a decline that, at the end of the film, runs into what Kissinger describes as "a fate of biblical proportion."

The fact that Stone uses the Lincoln Memorial as location and starting point for this Faustian trajectory likewise allows him to use his biblical symbolism to make a comment on Nixon's self-image. In the fantasies that the real Nixon entertained about his place in American history, Lincoln functioned as a second role model, next to Roosevelt. He was convinced that the way the United States was being ideologically torn apart by the Vietnam War had to be compared to the way in which, under Lincoln, it had been in grave danger of falling apart during the American Civil War. In the footsteps of his famous predecessor, he viewed it as his life's work to preserve unity in his country. Immediately preceding his visit to the Lincoln Memorial in the film, Nixon's last words during the kitchen scene with his servant Manolo Sanchez ("All those kids . . . Why do they hate me so much?") appear to be in keeping with the gesture of the historic Nixon leaving the White House to come into contact with the demonstrators. However, the images that follow make it clear that his visit to the Lincoln Memorial – a monument that thematizes the Union – has to be considered as a homage to Lincoln's example. After arriving, Nixon, ignoring the students hanging around the monument, walks straight up to solemnly contemplate Daniel Chester French's monumental sculpture. Subsequently, during the ensuing discussion with the demonstrators, he tries to defend his Vietnam policy by making an explicit reference to Lincoln's handling of the Civil War. The fact that not one of the students goes along with this comparison says already a lot about Stone's own view of Nixon as a would-be Lincoln. The only person in the film who does recognize Lincoln's qualities in Nixon is his daughter, Julie. However, the irony of the scene in which Stone has her shout pathetically, in an emotional expression of affection, "You're one of the best presidents this country ever had! You've done what Lincoln did. You've brought this country back from civil war!" once more underlines how much,

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according to Stone, Nixon had the wrong image of himself and his times in this respect too.[16]

According to Stone, what Lincoln and Nixon did have in common is not unity, but death. This link is presented for the first time during the third scene in the Lincoln Sitting Room. There Nixon felt most at home, and he regularly withdrew in it to order his thoughts and to set down his policy guidelines on paper. In Stone's film, the Lincoln Sitting Room functions mainly as a hideaway where the president takes refuge, as a wounded animal might do. After having confided to Haldeman, in the preceding scene, that the death of his brothers and of both Kennedys had smoothed his path to the White House, he stands in front of the portrait of Lincoln and asks rhetorically: "How many did you have? Hundreds of thousands . . . Where would we be without death, huh Abe? Who's helping us? Is it God? Or is it . . . Death?" Because Stone once again links both presidents in the Lincoln Memorial scene through death, the beast metaphor takes on an extra dimension. Nixon is surrounded by younger generations, both literally (the demonstrators around him) and figuratively (his dead brothers and the young soldiers from the Civil War and the Vietnam War, present through inserts). Their presence emphasizes the treason he has committed toward the ideal that another son of a Quaker, Thomas Paine, put into words in his pamphlet *Common Sense*, 200 years earlier:

> We have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand.

In the end, it was the constitution of all things that Nixon would violate. And, instead of the heavenly new world that Paine anticipated – a dream that Lincoln had tried to hold intact at a particularly heavy price – a new political climate is revealed under Nixon's new order of the beast. This order is polluted not only by the CIA, the Mafia, and Wall Street (as he himself suggests), but particularly by his own illegal practices: burglaries intended to gather incriminating material against third parties; misuse of government agencies such as the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) and the FBI so as to intimidate tedious opponents; wiretapping of journalists and members of staff; far-reaching thwarting of election campaigns of political rivals; pressure applied on companies to force them to come up with campaign contributions; acceptance of financial contributions from extremely dubious backers; unscrupulous sabotaging of the political decision-making process; and, finally, obstruction of justice.[17]

Within the contradistinction between Paine's "new world" and Nixon's "new order," Kennedy's legacy finds its place. Kennedy is the third president in the film who, besides Roosevelt and Lincoln, figures as a role model. Emphatically as Nixon believes to be able to identify himself with Roosevelt and Lincoln, he is equally

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painfully conscious of the unbridgeable difference between him and Kennedy. It is especially via the comparison between these two contemporary statesmen that the film tries, in a metaphorical way, to express the idea that, in the transition from Camelot to Watergate, American society was stripped of all hope and idealism. The drama of Nixon was therefore not only one of an individual, but also of a nation that allowed him to play such an important political role over a period of nearly thirty years.

Historical and Cinematic Relevance

The aim of the above analysis has been to show that Stone, instead of going for a purely objective, factual treatment of his subject, opted for a more poetic approach, whereby he tried to depict his protagonist as an example of tragic human failure. Whether *Nixon* can thereby be considered "real" history seems of minor importance, if only because such a question suggests that concepts like "historical truth" and "historical knowledge" are epistemologically unproblematic and that outside traditional academic historiography there exists no meaningful way of approaching the past.

The real issue here is that historical films, for better or for worse, do form part of the way we experience the past, and in that process they do lend it some sort of meaning, which (more often than not) is wrapped in a complex, difficult to unravel mix of "fact" and "fiction." This is also the case with *Nixon*, where – in spite of the film's artistic license and use of numerous Shakespearean, biblical, and cinematic references – Stone's dramatized portrait of the president stays so close to existing historical studies that, all in all, it does not deviate fundamentally from the way in which the same character appears to historians like Emery, Ambrose, Reeves, or Summers.

Furthermore, in all their poetic symbolism, historical films also form part of the broader historiographical discourse, and in some cases they can even formulate an explicit comment on it. In *Nixon*, for instance, it is suggested that the president himself is the one who willfully created the infamous 18 ½-minute gap on the tape of June 20, 1972 – the one that records his first White House discussion of the Watergate burglary with Haldeman. By doing this the film explicitly takes position in a debate that has intrigued many historians; some of them have suggested that it was Nixon himself who was to blame for this gap.

And, of course, in discussing the way historical films deal with the past, there's also the question of their social impact. While the Nixon literature created by professional historians only circulates in limited circles, Stone has managed to make a prominent politician from the second half of the twentieth century come alive for millions of cinema-goers. In a socio-cultural climate in which less and less is read and an increasing number of young people appear to be alienated from

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the political process, the contribution that films such as *Nixon* can make to public political debate should not be underestimated.[18]

Finally, in assessing a historical film's treatment of the past, the question of how it relates and compares to other films within the same (sub-)genre needs to be posed. In the present case, this means investigating *Nixon*'s relation to the biographical film – more precisely, the presidential biopic. To a certain extent *Nixon* conforms to conventions of the genre, for instance all attention is centered on the protagonist (there's hardly a scene without Nixon), and the focus continually alternates between the personal and the public sphere. More interesting, however, is the way Stone, in his critical approach toward Nixon, distances himself considerably from the idealized image that Hollywood had sketched of the American presidency. Even though movies, including ones from before World War II, have not refrained from harsh criticism of the political system,[19] it has always been the unwritten law that a president was never attacked personally. Without exception, biopics of the historical presidents made during the hey-day of the studio system were hagiographic and painstakingly avoided every form of criticism, because (among other things) the Hollywood moguls desired to foster their generally excellent relationship with the White House. When, after World War II, the general public came increasingly into contact with the world of politics via television, feature films about historical American presidents slowly but surely disappeared from the silver screen. Hollywood was going through a serious economic crisis during the sixties and first half of the seventies, and it realized all too well that, in the social–political climate of that time, old-fashioned patriotic films with such controversial presidents as Johnson and Nixon or with their colorless successors Ford and Carter would meet with little response from a young, critical, and increasingly better educated cinema audience. Hollywood producers started to concentrate instead on shadier aspects of politics, such as the intrigues in Washington and the nuclear arms race.[20] In these films we see for the first time the American president being handled with somewhat less than the usual respect. However, it wouldn't be until 1976 – by which time Watergate had made the traditional mystification of the presidency completely untenable – that a film depicted a president in an explicitly negative light; and this was *All the President's Men*. However, besides three short documentary excerpts, Nixon doesn't actually appear in this film, and the story concentrates on the journalistic unmasking of evil rather than on an actual analysis of the president's misdeeds. Moreover, the film ended up being an isolated case, since, in spite of fresh political scandals such as the Iran–Contra Affair, in the 1980s Hollywood took great pains, once again, to avoid films that criticized presidents.[21] It was only in the second half of the 1990s, once the Cold War ended and the Clinton scandals had brought a definite end to what aura still surrounded the American presidency, that negative portrayals of presidents surfaced.[22] Yet the presidents depicted in the films of this new wave were fictional; a critical biopic of a real-life American president was yet to come.

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It was only with the making of *Nixon* that a number of characteristics of prewar and postwar political films came together. On the one hand, the film is closely linked to classic presidential biopics such as *Wilson* and *Sunrise at Campobello* – films in which the historical facts and figures also played a central role. On the other hand, we recognize in *Nixon* the critical attitude that took shape in the political films of the sixties and seventies. It is exactly this formula – a critical look at a real-life president – that makes *Nixon* a unique film for the time being.

Notes

1 *JFK: The Book of the Film* includes a chronological overview of the most important reactions and comments concerning *JFK*.
2 Later on, Stone would vehemently deny that he had ever wanted to think of himself as a "cinematic historian" (Rosenstone 2006: 113).
3 For statements from former Nixon staff members, see, among others, Dean (1976), Haldeman (1978, 1994), and Ehrlichman (1982). For a more "impartial" view of Nixon's character, see, among others, Ambrose (1987–1991), Kutler (1992), and Emery (1995). The negative aspects of Nixon's character are also widely discussed in historical studies published in the years following Stone's film. Compare Strober and Strober (1994), Summers (2000), and Reeves (2002).
4 For a comprehensive overview of Nixon films, see Monsell (1998).
5 Stone, however, doesn't go along completely with the remarkable rehabilitation that Nixon enjoyed during the last years of his life. The Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace, opened in Yorba Linda in 1990, was the high point of Nixon's reinstatement. At his funeral four years later, four American presidents came to show their respect. Robert Dole took this opportunity to call the second half of the twentieth century "the Age of Nixon." In a cover story, *Time* (May 2, 1994) portrayed Nixon as someone who, though true to say had failed like no other president before him, had still managed afterwards to build up his image miraculously once again, as the most influential politician of the postwar era.
6 The other sources that Stone called upon do not justify the practically hysterical way in which Nixon crumples up in this scene, crying on the carpet and bemoaning his fate. Nixon himself mentions in his memoirs that he did indeed briefly pray with Kissinger; but he does not talk about an emotional breakdown (Nixon 1990: 1076–1077). According to Kissinger's memoirs, while Nixon did give the impression of being emotionally affected, he appeared to have matters completely under control. Kissinger is, moreover, unsure if in fact they both knelt and prayed (Kissinger 1982: 1207–1210). The two other sources that Stone refers to, Ambrose (1987–1991) and Emery (1995), rely completely on the memoirs of Nixon and Kissinger.
7 The most explicit reference to *psychohistory* in the script concerns Brodie (1981). One year after the release of *Nixon*, V. Volkan, N. Itzkowitz, and A. Dod published their *Richard Nixon. A Psychobiography* (1997). On the basis of an extensive analysis of Nixon's childhood, the authors arrive at conclusions that confirm the close similarity of conception between Stone's film and psychohistory.

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8 See the criticism of Charles Colson (Walkowitz 1998: 44–47). Colson was a former member of staff in the Nixon administration who was given a prison sentence on account of the part he played in the Watergate affair.

9 One can find the most diverse statements being put forward in publications on Nixon. Here is a small selection:

Nixon refrained from breaking the law by destroying official evidence.
He feared that, if he destroyed the tapes, suspicion would fall on him that he really did have something to hide.
He professed that the tapes would eventually work more to his advantage than to his disadvantage.
He kept the tapes to refute, where necessary, false testimonies from his staff.
He believed that, by calling on executive privilege, he could successfully fight Cox's subpoena.
He was afraid that the Secret Service, handling the logistical side of the tapes, was in possession of copies over which he had no control at all.
He wanted to keep the tapes in order to use them as reference in writing his memoirs later.
Nixon didn't feel himself worthy of the presidency and unwittingly wanted the tapes to destroy him.

Historians are still groping in the dark about the motives behind the break-in at the offices of the Democratic National Committee. For instance, it is unclear whether the Watergate burglars were intent on looking for information that could have been damaging for Nixon or (on the contrary) for the democrats in the forthcoming elections.

10 Christopher Sharrett writes: "Dick Nixon wasn't Oedipus [. . .] but small-minded, mendacious, and generally off-putting, regular attempts to rehabilitate his image notwithstanding . . . [He] was the Reichian 'little man' incarnate, a terribly constricted and terrified person who constantly projected his inadequacies onto an Other" (Sharrett 1996: 4).

11 These characteristics put Stone's Nixon in sharp contrast with that other film hero splendidly analyzed by Warshow: the cowboy – determined, honest, and totally in harmony with himself (Warshow 1970b).

12 For a comprehensive comparison between *Nixon* and *Citizen Kane*, see Beaver (1997).

13 "Students unconvinced after Nixon encounter. President ventures out for 5 a.m. visit at Lincoln Memorial." *The Blade* (Toledo, OH), May 10, 1970, p. A1.

14 It emerges from Nixon's memoirs that he was especially frustrated about the way in which the Lincoln Memorial meeting was reported in the press. Even Ehrlichman had spoken to him about the fact that he had stood there talking about sport with students who had traveled hundreds of miles to demonstrate against his policy. To supply the necessary background information to his staff, with a view to possible rectifications in the press, Nixon wrote a memo on May 13 in which he set down in detail his version of what happened (Nixon 1990: 460–466). For that matter, in his memoirs Nixon only cites selectively from his memo to Haldeman. The complete text can be found on *Nixon. The CD-ROM*.

15 Stone was not the first Hollywood director to present Nixon as the plaything of a powerful but invisible "system." In Robert Altman's one-man drama *Secret Honor* (1984),

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Philip Baker Hall's Nixon reminisces about a so-called Committee of One Hundred, a clan of powerbrokers that had helped him into the political saddle and thereafter controlled him. Nixon is so afraid that this committee wants to send him out into the political arena for a third term that he himself creates Watergate, to prevent the democratic principles of the republic from being further undermined. A glimpse at Altman's Committee of One Hundred is to be had in Stone's film too. In 1963 a group of Texan–Cuban businessmen urge Nixon to run again against Kennedy, guaranteeing him victory in the state of Texas.

16 The comparison with Lincoln and his times was a personal fantasy of Nixon's. In studies such as Tom Wells's *The War Within. America's Battle over Vietnam* (1994) never once is a parallel drawn with the period 1860–1865.

17 Summers (2000: 297–309) convincingly demonstrates that Nixon, right before the presidential elections of 1968, sabotaged the coming peace talks between North and South Vietnam. He feared that, in the event that the peace initiatives of President Johnson – who on October 31, 1968 had called for a total halt on the bombing of North Vietnam – would be successful, his own chances of keeping the democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey out of the White House would considerably diminish. Under intense and secret pressure from Nixon, who presumably offered the prospect of better conditions, a few days before the presidential elections the South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu announced that he wouldn't be taking part in the peace talks. Once Nixon had laid his hands on the presidency, the war would continue for four more years, under the motto "peace with honor." During this period more than 20,000 Americans and more than 600,000 Vietnamese soldiers would be killed. Many historians believe that the final peace treaty of 1973 yielded nothing that could not have already been attained in 1969.

18 See also Neve (2001).

19 For instance *Gabriel over the White House* (1933), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *The Great McGinty* (1940).

20 The most prominent examples are *Advise and Consent* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), *The Best Man* (1964), *Fail Safe* (1964), *Seven Days in May* (1964), *The Candidate* (1972), *Executive Action* (1973), *The Parallax View* (1974), *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), and *Winter Kills* (1979).

21 The only critical presidential film from the eighties is Altman's *Secret Honor* (1984). *Missing* (1982), *Power* (1986), *Matewan* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) count among the few critical political films that Hollywood made in the 1980s.

22 The clearest examples are *Absolute Power* (1996), *Wag the Dog* (1997), and *Primary Colors* (1998). That regard for the presidency had reached an all-time low, which nevertheless acted as a strong impulse to develop the desire for a mythical, idealized presidency, can be seen in films such as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Air Force One* (1997).

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