

BURDEN OF KNOWLEDGE
AN EXPLORATION OF MYTH, HISTORY, AND THE MOTIF
OF LOST INNOCENCE IN THE FILMOGRAPHY
OF OLIVER STONE

by

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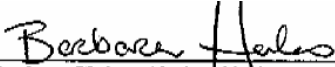
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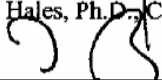
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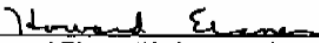
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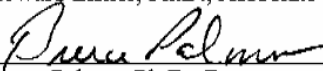
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naijo no ko – Jen Butler

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ABSTRACT

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Joseph Campbell's representative cultural myth is used to analyze the filmography of Oliver Stone. A countermyth, the resulting structural alternative to Campbell's monomyth, is explored. Stone's methodology for conveying the countermyth is demonstrated by applying Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic theories. The concept of lost innocence plays an important role in many narrative traditions, and it is an important motif embedded in the countermyth. The significance of the lost innocence motif is established by considering its cultural and historical importance. Key events in post-World War II America – John Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, and Watergate – are examined as manifestations of a collective search for meaning. Coincident and retrospective critical analyses of Stone's films are explored to determine the ability of the countermyth to effect social change. The countermyth is explored as a search for meaning in the myth, history, and trauma of a generation.

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Chapter I

Introduction

It is not by its history that the mythology of a nation is determined but, conversely, its history is determined by its mythology.

-Ernst Cassirer

It has been said that the cinema lies at the nexus of modern-day American cultural expression. Since its invention a century ago, the motion picture has established itself as one of the most powerful and influential artistic and mass communication mediums ever conceived. Film has the ability to reflect as well as shape society, and has been referred to by many scholars as a modern mythology.

Great filmmakers, like the great artists before them, represent cultural personalities who transcend the medium with which they work. Oliver Stone undoubtedly belongs in the pantheon of the greatest and most influential American filmmakers of the twentieth century. Over a three-decade career, Oliver Stone has emerged as one of American cinema's most successful mythmakers, reflecting (and reflecting upon) an entire generation of Americans. His prolific filmography runs the gamut from critical acclaim to condemnation, box office successes to failures, small independent films to big-budget epics. Throughout it all, Stone has remained a larger-than-life, controversial figure.

Throughout his prolific career, Stone has challenged audiences and critics with controversial narratives and chaotic imagery. *Platoon* premiered in 1986 to raving critical reviews and ushered in a new era of social consciousness acknowledging the gash in the American psyche left by Vietnam. *JFK* took on one of the greatest tragedies in modern history, and, through Stone's eyes, became what one historian called "the most controversial American film of the twentieth

century.”¹ It is in this way that the power of Stone’s films transcends cinema and enters the realm of popular culture. Historians such as Martin Medhurst have called Stone a modern-day D.W. Griffith, identifying him as the “principal chronicler of the spiritual angst of a people.”² Medhurst’s contention is supported by two factors that will be explored by this thesis. The first, what will be referred to as a *countermyth*, and the second, a motif of lost innocence, can be found throughout Stone’s filmmaking career. These touchstones, often overlooked in lieu of the more controversial aspects of Stone’s films, are nonetheless critical to revealing the importance of Stone’s countermythology as a window to the tragedy of Vietnam and the scars of his generation. Therefore, a survey of Oliver Stone’s filmography is clearly crucial to any comprehensive understanding of the last third of the twentieth century.

In order to fully comprehend the countermythology embodied in Oliver Stone’s filmography, one must first consider the mythology that is being opposed. The framework for this discussion is provided by Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. *Hero*, first published in 1949, represented Campbell’s first solo foray into book authorship and established him as the preeminent comparative mythologist of the twentieth century. The work borrowed from James Joyce, Arnold van Gennep, Adolf Bastian, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and others, but was unique in its investigation of a representative mythology with global cultural significance. Campbell interpreted a variety of myths and folk tales from every corner of the world and revealed striking similarities across the spectrum of

¹ Jim Welsh, “*JFK*: The Lesson and Legacy of Vietnam,” in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 227.

² Martin Medhurst, “The Rhetorical Structure of Oliver Stone’s *JFK*,” in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 207.

mythologies. This “monomyth,” as Campbell termed it, forms a universal template that outlines the stages common to heroic tales in every culture. The striking similarities that exist in these mythologies stem from, among other things, what Jung has called “the archetypal images.”³ The realm that all humans enter while sleeping contains various bits of consciousness that, when strung together, constitute the monomyth. From a psychological standpoint, the importance of the monomyth should be obvious, for it is comprised of symbols that are simultaneously universal and powerful. The monomyth contains the crucial elements of both Freud, who emphasizes the journey of the first half of life, and Jung, who focused on the second.⁴

Campbell did not stop at simply describing the monomyth. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* also explored the importance of mythology and the hero’s journey as an operative metaphor for a society. Mythology’s primary role, Campbell argued, is to “supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back.”⁵ Specific retellings of the monomyth can therefore provide important clues about the state of a society. With regards to modern-day Western culture, Campbell added that “it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such spiritual aid.”⁶ Thus the question addressed by this thesis becomes obvious: as the so-called principal chronicler of the angst of a people, what role does Oliver Stone play in creating a mythology for

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 17-18.

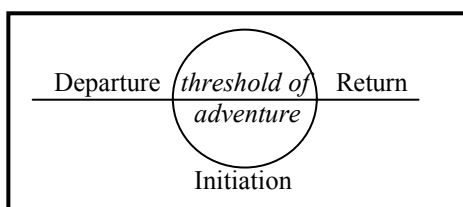
⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

his generation? And might this mythology acknowledge and offer a solution to the spiritual crisis created by the assassination of John Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and Watergate? Throughout Oliver Stone's work we can see a rejection of the mythology of the Establishment (which is tacitly regarded as "truth") in favor of an alternate countermythology. From this standpoint, Stone's countermyth does not offer the spiritual aid Campbell referred to in *Hero*; rather, it is an attempt to characterize the neuroticism he argued has plagued modern man. Stone's use of basic mythological structures to illuminate an area where no mythology exists is an important component of his methodology as a filmmaker. This thesis will analyze *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, and *Nixon* to explore how Stone has chosen to usurp, and in many cases, reverse, the monomyth to create a countermythology that runs across his filmography.

Campbell divided the adventure of the hero into three distinct parts, which can be considered the nuclear unit of the monomyth:



Campbell further divided the three primary components into representative elements and explored a variety of permutations along the hero's journey. It is through the lens of these components that this thesis will begin to analyze the filmography of Oliver Stone in which we can see the monomyth reconstructed and repeated.

Stone's role in American culture as a creator of countermyth will be explored by considering thematic elements common to, and divergent from, Campbell's monomyth. For where the basic element of the monomyth is omitted or altered, Campbell argued such changes speak volumes "for the history and pathology of the example."⁷

A motif of lost innocence is present across Stone's entire filmography, but it is often overlooked in lieu of more obvious discussions of violence or dramatic license. While many critics have identified the concept of lost innocence as exhibited in films like *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, it was often underemphasized in those discussions and completely ignored in others. However, this motif, and the way it is conveyed, is one of the most important aspects of Stone's films. The tumultuous era of Stone's generation began with the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22, 1963, and films such as *JFK* and *Nixon* are imbued with the sense that the assassination symbolized a fundamental change in American society. Although Stone approaches the burden of knowledge gained at the price of lost innocence in a variety of sometimes conflicting ways, it is nonetheless repeated throughout his filmography. Stone's countermythology, the motif of lost innocence, the effect of his films on the audience, and the importance and impact of these ideas in the context of contemporary American history lie at the crux of this thesis.

The relationship between Campbell, Stone, and recent American history requires an understanding of the role of myth in modern society. Philosopher Ernst Cassirer grappled with this very issue for much of his professional life. In his 1944

⁷ Ibid., 38.

work *The Myth of the State*, he considered the question: “why did twentieth-century political life, supposedly as civilized as scientific sophistication, become so barbaric?”⁸ He claimed the answer lay in mythology. Although many had relegated myth to primitive or ancient cultures, Cassirer argued that “it is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity.”⁹ The opportunity arises during crises so severe they tax all other “binding forces of man’s social life.”¹⁰ And whereas the ancient Babylonians had little use for propaganda, modern political leaders could formulate entire mythologies as means to ends.¹¹

In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Carl Jung introduced the idea of “dreaming the myth outward,” where transcendence is achieved when the individual is willing to give up ego identity.¹² This began through the acceptance of the loss of innocence that accompanies a rejection of normative ideals.¹³ Clearly, then, any full understanding of American society of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s must include a detailed analysis of the countermyth and lost innocence motif as exhibited in Oliver Stone’s filmography. The lost innocence motif, found throughout the filmography, serves two purposes. As a purely cinematic element, it exists as part of Stone’s projection of the monomyth. However, it is also a mirror of sorts that allows engagement with, and transference to, the film audience. This is accomplished by the *cine-fist*, namely Sergei

⁸ William Schultz, *Cassirer and Langer on Myth* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 14.

⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 280.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Schultz, *Cassirer and Langer on Myth*, 14.

¹² Susan Mackey-Kallis invoked Jung’s concept in her 1996 book which analyzed Stone’s filmic depiction of America. Susan Mackey-Kallis, *Oliver Stone’s America: Dreaming the Myth Outward* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 8.

¹³ Mackey-Kallis, *Oliver Stone’s America*, 16.

Eisenstein's widely held theory that film is not just an appeal to the senses, but can be an aesthetic vehicle to alter political perceptions and even effect social change.

The thematics of Stone's countermythology are a crucial element of this thesis. Equally important, however, is the method by which the message is conveyed. In considering this question, one may first address the purely aesthetic and technical choices of the filmmaker. However, external elements that exist outside the frame of the film can clearly affect audience reactions and are important to study. How do Oliver Stone's films affect the audience? What significance do they hold in a cultural context? These questions are answered in this thesis by consulting the writings of Sergei Eisenstein. His films and writings resonate to this day and have led many critics and scholars to conclude that Eisenstein was the greatest filmmaker in cinematic history. Two crucial components elucidated by Eisenstein while the cinema was still in its infancy hold the key to unraveling the significance of Stone's filmography in the context of contemporary American history. The "montage of film attractions," a term coined by Eisenstein in a famous 1925 essay, refers to the unique ability of the film medium to create ideas that are larger than the sum of their parts.¹⁴ There are a variety of empirical examples throughout Stone's filmography that demonstrate a mastery of this technique. Secondly, Eisenstein rejected the commonly held notion of the *cine-eye* in favor of a *cine-fist*.¹⁵ It is through the cine-fist that Stone conveys his countermythology, challenges perceptions, incites action, and changes the attitudes of Americans about the most significant symbols of his generation.

¹⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 36.

¹⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 59.

Cassirer declared that “it is not by its history that the mythology of a nation is determined but, conversely, its history is determined by its mythology.”¹⁶ This is the enigma that Oliver Stone has seemingly confronted over the course of his filmmaking career. If the Establishment is committed to constructing a monomythic history of America, then Stone has tasked himself with creating an equally powerful countermyth. Cassirer wrote that to combat political myths, one must “carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the techniques of political myths.”¹⁷ As the adventure of the hero is considered vis-à-vis Stone’s filmography, we will explore how his films employ this tactic to establish a countermyth. The journey will begin with the hero’s departure and Stone’s 1995 historical biopic, *Nixon*.

¹⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 44.

¹⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 296.

Chapter II

The Departure and *Nixon*

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between parties either – but right through the human heart.

-Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The journey described by the monomyth begins with what Campbell called “the departure.” *Nixon*, arguably Stone’s most complicated film to date, provides a countermythic map of the departure. Stone has referred to *Nixon* as his *Godfather II*, a valid comparison in terms of *Nixon*’s narrative structure, story design, and representation of a maturing filmic style.¹ The four-hour film weaves through multiple stories, timelines, flashbacks, and flashbacks within flashbacks. At its core, Stone explores how events that occurred during Richard Nixon’s childhood had a profound effect on his adult life. The departure portion of the monomyth as described by Campbell and applied to *Nixon* resonates through Richard Nixon’s life in politics and is laid bare by Stone’s use of flashbacks.

The discussion of *Nixon* should be framed by its significance as countermyth. In his book *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*, William Ferrell posited that today’s writers and filmmakers have assumed the role of mythmakers in modern society. Thus, the monomyth as described by Campbell in *Hero* has lost none of its significance – it is merely transmitted via newer media. It naturally follows that films that most resonate with audiences are those that create a dialogue with the monomyth. This is precisely why Oliver Stone’s filmography in general, and *Nixon* in particular, is worthy of critical analysis. Rather than use the monomyth to reaffirm societal norms and uphold the mainstream understanding of

¹ Oliver Stone, “Commentary Track,” *Nixon*, special ed. DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (1995; Burbank, Calif: Buena Vista, 2002).

contemporary history, Stone creates a countermyth to attack and subvert these assumptions. The monomyth is used as a vehicle to resonate with the viewer and increase the effectiveness of the message. *Nixon* then becomes what Ferrell termed an “extension of human consciousness, being expressed as hopes and fears through the medium of art – what it means to be human.”²

Campbell began his discussion of the departure with its first event, “the call to adventure.” One of the most common ways in which the adventure begins is with some minor coincidental circumstance: “a blunder – apparently the merest chance – reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood.”³ But is it truly a blunder? Freud, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, explored the idea that many events which first appear to be random are actually governed by impulses welling up from the unconscious.⁴ The impetus for an entire adventure, therefore, can sometimes be provided by a seemingly innocuous event. This is precisely why Campbell noted, “the blunder may amount to the opening of a destiny.”⁵

In *Nixon*, we do not see a traditional call to adventure. Nixon does not stumble upon a supernatural harbinger, a great tree, or a babbling spring. Instead, Stone’s countermythology insists that only through death can Nixon begin his ascent to greatness. Nixon’s call to adventure springs from a scene in the White House. Nixon, in 1972, confides his feelings to H.R. Haldeman while discussing the deaths of John and Robert Kennedy:

² William Ferrell, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology* (Westpoint, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 7.

³ Campbell, *Hero*, 51.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1995).

⁵ Campbell, *Hero*, 51.

NIXON (*V.O.*)

When I saw Bobby Kennedy lying there on the floor, arms stretched out...his eyes staring – I knew then I'd be president. Death paved the way, didn't it? Vietnam, the Kennedys – cleared a path through the wilderness just for me. Over the bodies...Four bodies.⁶

Nixon's cryptic statement, which puzzles Haldeman, has all the makings of Campbell's call to adventure as told by Oliver Stone. Campbell wrote that the hero "may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent,"⁷ which is precisely the mystery Nixon ponders in this scene. However, the question itself is rhetorical: death paved the way for Richard Nixon's ascension. Campbell noted in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that the call to adventure always heralds a "mystery of transfiguration,"⁸ a spiritual awakening that he equates to a dying and a birth. In *Nixon*, Oliver Stone presents a hero called to adventure with four deaths.

Nevertheless, it is still unclear to the viewer whom Nixon is referring to when he says *four* bodies. Whose deaths marked Nixon's call to adventure? The answer can be found in Nixon's childhood, where we find echoes of the deaths of John and Robert Kennedy. Stone provides this crucial piece immediately following the "four bodies" scene. In a harsh black-and-white flashback to 1933, a young Richard Nixon looks on as his brother Harold suffers a coughing fit brought caused by his tuberculosis. It is clear that the dry air of the Arizona sanitarium only serves to make breathing slightly less painful for its residents who do not anticipate lengthy stays. Richard tries to coax his older brother into a chair, but Harold leans

⁶ Oliver Stone, Stephen Rivele, and Christopher Wilkinson, "Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay," in *Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film*, ed. Eric Hamburg (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 183.

⁷ Campbell, *Hero*, 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

on a fence instead. “Hey... You’ll be able to do it now,” Harold pants, “go to law school... Mom and Dad will be able to afford it now.”⁹

In the next shot, Harold lays his head on his brother’s shoulder. His breathing is labored. Richard’s face registers a combination of uneasiness, insecurity, and guilt. Stone adds pathos to the call to adventure that touches on Campbell’s ideas (chance, the blunder), but subsumes them into his countermythology. The traditional call to adventure is certainly undercut by the elements of death and guilt, but the countermythology functions on an historical level as well. Stone reflected on the historical implications of Nixon’s childhood in a 1996 interview when he stated, “we’ve tried to relate his brothers’ deaths and the survivors guilt he felt to the two Kennedys.”¹⁰ Stone contended that the connection between the deaths of Harold and Arthur Nixon and the later violent deaths of John and Robert Kennedy is profound, although it is not something that has been addressed in any history book. But as a motivating factor for Richard Nixon, and as a stepping stone in a mythological sense, this idea cannot be overemphasized. Stone uses the above scene to create a character that the audience can empathize with, countering the historical mythology of Richard Nixon. The “real” historical Nixon, seen as character/caricature in contemporary American society, is made human by Stone.

This curious dialectic – between the character being humanized, and the human as a character – is an important component of Oliver Stone’s countermythology. The mythology of Richard Nixon as a character – the crook, the

⁹ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 184.

¹⁰ Oliver Stone, “Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies,” interview by Mark Carnes, *Cineaste* 22, no. 4 (1996): 34.

madman, the mask – is answered by Stone’s countermythology of a man haunted and motivated by the deaths of his two brothers, echoed by the deaths of John and Robert Kennedy. We are told by Campbell that in the most celebrated call to adventure in the world, the “four signs” signify a point at which the summons to adventure can no longer be denied.¹¹ Four bodies: Richard Nixon’s call to adventure.

The application of Eisenstein’s film theory to *Nixon*’s call to adventure illustrates the importance of the four bodies motif. Eisenstein argued that a successful montage of attractions will “exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience,” ultimately concentrating them in whatever direction the filmmaker dictates.¹² With this in mind, *Nixon*’s “four bodies” scene can be deconstructed into its constituent elements. Richard Nixon refers to his two dead brothers while John and Robert Kennedy are shown in the prime of their lives. Stone then cuts to a quick shot of the last of *Nixon*’s four bodies – Robert Kennedy, lying on the floor of the Ambassador Hotel. The camera follows Richard Nixon across the room where he stares up at the portrait of Lincoln. “Where would we be without death, Abe? Who’s helping us? Is it God or is it Death?” Nixon asks.¹³ The camera intercuts point-of-view shots between these two titans of American history, as if Lincoln might somehow converse with Nixon. The most palpable impact of the scene is that it points the audience toward considering Richard Nixon as a tragic figure rather than a tyrant. It obviously avoids portraying Richard Nixon as a

¹¹ Campbell, *Hero*, 56.

¹² Eisenstein, “The Montage of Film Attractions,” 36.

¹³ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon*: The Annotated Screenplay,” 183. The scene of Nixon speaking to portraits in the White House is not without historical basis. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *The Final Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 395.

Claudius, but *Nixon* is also careful to show the cost of hubris and Nixon's ascension to power.

The cut from the "four bodies" scene to the sanitarium scene is a series of black and white shots depicting a multiplying virus. The duality of the virus – choking the life out of Harold and infecting the highest levels of American power – furthers the connection between Nixon's call to adventure and the four bodies. However, in applying Eisenstein's theory to the touching scene with Harold that follows we can see that Stone's primary goal is to create Richard Nixon as an ultimately empathetic character. Consider Eisenstein's contention that with the montage, "the audience is from the very first placed in a non-neutral attitude situation and sympathizes with one party, identifying itself with that party's actions."¹⁴ The scene with Harold clearly establishes the character of Richard Nixon as one with which the audience can identify and ultimately empathize.

But to what end? For Eisenstein, as Richard Taylor noted, the ultimate goal is always ideological.¹⁵ In the broadest sense of the word, this is exactly what Stone has accomplished: the *idea* being that the audience should empathize with the character of Richard Nixon. The reason for constructing the title character in this manner becomes obvious as the narrative unfolds: Stone's ultimate goal is to bring the audience through the rest of the story and into the darkness with Richard Nixon. This task is made substantially easier if the audience can identify with the character on his journey. *Nixon* therefore denies the traditional view of Richard Nixon as an oversimplified, evil caricature. It also denies an alternate, monomythic

¹⁴ Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions," 44.

¹⁵ Richard Taylor, "Eisenstein: A Soviet Artist," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 4.

oversimplification of a man's rise from obscurity and triumph over adversity. Instead, the countermyth yields a complex figure with psychological depth. The pathos of Nixon's childhood, the four bodies, and *Hero's* malignant agent are woven together in an attempt to break through the façade of a modern mythic figure and engage the viewer on a more personal level. When Richard Nixon looks up at the portrait of John Kennedy hanging in the White House, he reflects, "When they look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are."¹⁶

Thus, the character of Richard Nixon is a mirror for Oliver Stone's generation, and the countermythology of *Nixon* invites the viewer to look into it. But what is reflected in the mirror? What is it that we see when we look at Richard Nixon? One answer in *Nixon* is the loss of innocence of childhood and the effects those traumas hold over us as adults. So much of *Nixon* is focused on the events of Richard Nixon's childhood that it is impossible to deny the motif of lost innocence that permeates the film. Stone's deliberate choice of flashbacks to bookend certain dramatic events not only provide background to the character, but also establish and explain the decisions with which most viewers are already familiar. By couching the evils of the older Richard Nixon in terms of the traumas of the younger Richard Nixon, Stone illustrates the dual potential that exists in us all. "Both of us started this project despising him," stated *Nixon* screenplay coauthor Christopher Wilkinson, "but the more we became exposed to him, the more we knew about him, our contempt was slowly eroded to the point where we more than pitied him, we

¹⁶ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*," 303.

empathized with him.”¹⁷ This sentiment certainly becomes apparent in the screenplay and Hopkins’ portrayal of the president, but it also extends beyond Nixon himself.

Critic Janet Maslin scratched the surface of this idea in her *New York Times* review of *Nixon*. She stated that one of the most compelling aspects of the film was its ability to frame Nixon in terms of “secondary characters who seem like stray parts of his own tortured psyche.”¹⁸ Kissinger, Haldeman, Erlichmann, Dean, Mitchell, Haig, even Hoover – appeared to Maslin as different facets of the same personality. In the end, Maslin argued, each is charged with reflecting upon “how Nixon’s fortunes affect his own fate, not to mention the fate of the nation.”¹⁹ But Maslin did not acknowledge the fact that the power of *Nixon* lies in the extension of this idea beyond the confines of the celluloid itself. Reactions by Richard Nixon’s contemporaries to the film are proof positive that its sphere of influence extended beyond the theater doors. Consider Charles Colson’s response to the film: Nixon’s “one-dimensional portrayal” in a “politicized vision of American history” was intended to “destroy the very character of America.”²⁰ Colson’s public reaction to *Nixon* obviously attests to the power of the film, but it may also imply a more meaningful relationship between Colson and the Nixon character. If Maslin is correct, then Colson’s objection to the film in the *New York Times* was not based on *Nixon*’s portrayal of the embattled president. Rather, it is its portrayal of Colson vis-à-vis Nixon that drove his negative reaction. Unwilling to consider the mirror of

¹⁷ Bernard Weintraub, “Professor Stone Returns to his Presidential Research,” *New York Times*, 17 December 1995, 26.

¹⁸ Janet Maslin, “Stone’s Embrace of a Despised President,” *New York Times*, 20 December 1996, C20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Charles Colson, “When History is Up For Grabs,” *New York Times*, 28 December 1995, A21.

Nixon even twenty years after the events it conveys have occurred, Colson's response seemed to support one of the film's central themes: we all exhibit different facets of the same Richard Nixon personality.

In a review of *Nixon*, author Richard Reeves took offense to the "demented clown" portrayed in the film, but later invoked Kennedy and conceded that "we all create our own truth."²¹ This is the irony embedded in the countermythic call to adventure: the viewer is invited to consider his relationship to Nixon's fortunes and Nixon's fate. In *Nixon*, Stone charges the viewer to let go of perceived differences from the Richard Nixon we thought we knew, and consider how similar we are to the Richard Nixon we never knew. The loss of innocence embodied in the countermythic call to adventure begins *Nixon*'s empathetic portrayal, but it is not until the next element of the monomyth that the true tragedy of Richard Nixon is brought to light.

The next step in the departure sequence of the monomyth is termed "the refusal of the call." Campbell notes that just as sometimes occurs in real life, the hero of the monomyth may choose not to answer the call. In *Nixon*, this actually occurs twice. We are shown in *Nixon* that the call to adventure begins with the death of his two brothers, and this is precisely the time when Richard Nixon's first refusal of the call to adventure is seen. Although it chronologically precedes his ascension to the presidency, Stone chooses to show it in flashback as a counterpoint to the "four bodies" scene. This technique acts as a bridge to take the viewer from the familiar territory of the Nixon White House to the unfamiliar territory of Nixon's early childhood. Like an onion, we can see Nixon's life peeled away by

²¹ Richard Reeves, "Nixon Revisited, By Way of the Creative Camera," *New York Times*, 18 December 1995, 41.

Oliver Stone. *Nixon* attempts to reveal the underlying forces that motivate the hero on his quest. The scene is played in black and white (like all flashbacks to Nixon's early childhood in the film) at what is obviously a wake. Richard's brother Harold has died. Their mother approaches Richard in the parlor:

HANNAH

Something must become of this. It's meant to make us stronger. Thee art stronger than Harold, stronger than Arthur. God has chosen thee to survive.

RICHARD

What about happiness, mother?

HANNAH

You'll find your peace at the center, Richard. Strength in this life, happiness in the next.²²

The scene reflects Stone's opinion on the profound impact of the deaths of Richard Nixon's two brothers, which he expressed in an interview: "I think the death of his two brothers was the key turning point in his life."²³ Stone went on to note the duality in Richard Nixon's life as it later intersected with the violent deaths of two more charismatic brothers. "Surprisingly," Stone stated, "no one in any of the histories that I read has pointed out this duality."²⁴ Therefore, it is obviously no accident that *Nixon*'s psychological portrayal of Richard Nixon contains this countermythic answer to Campbell's monomyth. The scene fades to black, then back into his triumphant appearance at the 1968 Republican National Convention – bookends that symbolize the refusal of the call. The saying "peace at the center," while reflecting Nixon's Quaker roots, seems almost Eastern in its philosophy. If

²² Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "*Nixon*: The Annotated Screenplay," 185-186.

²³ Oliver Stone, "History, Dramatic License, and Larger Historical Truths," interview by Gary Crowduis, *Cineaste* 22, no. 4 (1996): 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

this is Richard Nixon's true call to adventure, then we should consider the words of Joseph Campbell on refusal of the call: "One is harassed, both day and night, by the divine labyrinth of one's own disoriented psyche. The ways to the gates have all been lost: there is no exit."²⁵ The quote is a nearly perfect description of the Richard Nixon Oliver Stone confronts the viewer with in *Nixon*. We have a traditional historical interpretation of Nixon as a man who came from nothing, gained everything, then lost it. Stone's countermythology shows a man who destroyed himself by denying his own quest for peace at the center.

The duality between the events of young Richard Nixon's life and those of the older Nixon is not lost on the filmic character in *Nixon*. Oliver Stone devotes several scenes to the older Richard Nixon reflecting on his youth. In a night scene on the Presidential Yacht *Sequoia*, Nixon stands alone at the bow of the ship. A staff meeting concerning the events at Kent State has just concluded, and John Mitchell approaches Nixon:

NIXON

My brother Harold was about the same age as those kids, John. Tuberculosis got him...It broke my heart when Harold died.

MITCHELL

That was a long time ago.

NIXON (*LOOKING OUT AT THE WATER*)

I think that's when it starts. When you're a kid. The laughs and snubs and slights you get because you're poor or Irish or Jewish or just ugly... So you're lean and mean and you continue to walk the edge of the precipice, because over the years you've become fascinated by how close you can get without falling.²⁶

²⁵ Campbell, *Hero*, 60.

²⁶ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay," 199-200. Nixon's dialogue is a shortened version of a speech appearing in Fawn Brodie's biography of the president. Fawn Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York: Norton, 1981), 25-26.

In Nixon's words we can see the motif of lost innocence played out in the countermyth. Oliver Stone takes the universal condition of lost innocence of youth, maps it onto the mythic figure of Richard Nixon, and creates a narrative where the figure is free to reflect on his own lost innocence. Richard Nixon is one of the defining figures of the twentieth century, and this is certainly a driving factor for *Nixon's* resonance with contemporary American audiences. Stone's treatment of the lost innocence motif in this manner has two primary effects. First, it invites the viewer to acknowledge and reflect upon his own lost innocence. Ferrell noted that this motif, as presented in a film such as *Nixon*, "forms a natural opposition to the mechanization and secularization of contemporary society."²⁷ As a countermyth *Nixon* attempts to restructure the audience's mythological base, open its minds, and initiate "lines of communications through dialogue and discussion."²⁸ The lost innocence motif is clearly an important element of this ongoing dialogue and provides the overall impetus towards an increased spiritual awareness within the viewer. Second, it is a tool to encourage identification with, and an alternate interpretation of, the historical Richard Nixon. Through the film, Stone seems to be saying (as Nixon says in the film) "when we look at Richard Nixon, we see who we are." We are a generation of lost innocence and trauma, *Nixon* indicates, to be both pitied and vilified. It is through the humanization of its lead character that this is accomplished. In a 1996 interview, Stone reflected on the importance of humanizing historical characters:

We all saw those "You Are There" films when we were young and they were very boring. They generally showed history from an awestruck viewpoint. I think that our leaders – the

²⁷ Ferrell, *Literature and Film*, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

Richard Nixons, the John Kennedys – are just like us, and I’ve tried to humanize them in my films.²⁹

In this respect, *Nixon* is unique among all portrayals of Richard Nixon. For, as Oliver Stone noted, despite the vast amount of literature from across the political spectrum, almost no work attempts “to gain a deeper understanding of what the man was thinking and feeling, what kind of human being he was.”³⁰ The role of *Nixon* in delving into Richard Nixon’s character establishes the importance of the film in the pantheon of contemporary American history. *Nixon*’s countermythic elements, such as the refusal of the call, are paramount to establishing its importance.

Campbell noted that the refusal of the call often provides an impetus for a release to be revealed.³¹ The quest for this release is an essential part of Nixon’s character as presented by Stone. Where *Nixon* diverges and creates its countermythology is in its dogged refusal to offer a solution to the issue: Richard Nixon runs for president and wins by a landslide, but finds no solace or release in victory. The tale ends without the initiation or return found in the monomyth: *Nixon* becomes primarily a tale of departure. Richard Nixon is always seeking, always leaving, and never satisfied. He learns nothing in his endeavors and ultimately serves as something of a tragic figure for Stone. Nixon’s journey was seen by Christopher Sharrett as a fruitless quest to be loved. “While this is a little trite,” Sharrett argued, “it gives the film some of its greatest poignancy.”³²

²⁹ Stone, “Past Imperfect,” 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Campbell, *Hero*, 64.

³² Christopher Sharrett, “The Belly of the Beast: Oliver Stone’s *Nixon* and the American Nightmare,” *Cineaste* 22, no. 1 (1996): 5.

Although Sharrett failed to acknowledge the journey itself as the tragedy, his article implies the possibility that the poignancy in the film comes from an apparently fulfilled quest that nonetheless provides no victory to the hero.

Nixon's return from the political grave to become president in 1968 provides an opportunity for Stone to further develop *Nixon's* countermythology vis-à-vis the departure element of the monomyth. First, it raises the question of perspective. The traditional view of *Nixon* as an American tragedy about the rise and fall of a great man is merely one interpretation. Instead, as part of Oliver Stone's countermythology, *Nixon* addresses the fall from greatness by raising the question: was Richard Nixon ever really great? Perhaps *Nixon* is treatise on happiness or his quest for peace at the center. From this perspective, Richard Nixon never departs the kingdom and *Nixon* is essentially the first portion of a story that is incomplete. After his 1960 defeat, Pat begs him to leave politics: "Just think of the girls. They're still young. We never see them. I lost my parents. I don't want them to lose theirs; I don't want them to grow up without a mother and a father."³³ The perception in *Nixon* is that this is the path Richard Nixon should have taken. His decision to reenter politics in spite of Pat's admonition could then be interpreted as his refusal of the call. Consequently, the political accomplishments and downfall of Richard Nixon become secondary to Stone's countermythology of a quest that is nothing more than a refusal to acknowledge one's true destiny. Campbell addressed this idea peripherally in his description of the refusal of the call:

Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a

³³ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*," 124.

victim to be saved...All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration.³⁴

This is essentially the story Oliver Stone tells in *Nixon*, a viewpoint is bolstered by the quote Stone chose to open the film: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”³⁵ The New Testament passage, a fitting tribute to Nixon’s humble Quaker roots, raises the possibility that *Nixon* is less a monomythic American tragedy and more a countermythic tale of the refusal of the call. Film critic Christopher Sharrett touched on this idea peripherally in his review of the film when he stated, “Nixon’s story wasn’t tragic, and Stone doesn’t really think so either.”³⁶ However, at the time of its release, Sharrett’s opinion was in the minority. *Nixon* was considered by most critics to be Stone’s attempt at creating an American tragedy. Consider *New York Times* critic Bernard Weintraub’s review of the film, in which he stated that “Stone has not only refused to demonize Nixon but has tried to create nothing less than a classic tragedy or perhaps his version of *Citizen Kane*.”³⁷

Nixon has invited many comparisons to Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. In “*Citizen Nixon – Oliver Stone’s Wellesian View of a Failed Public Figure*,” author Frank Beaver noted that even at first glance there are a number of stylistic and narrative similarities that exist between the two films.³⁸ Additionally, both films share the same basic goal of unlocking certain truths about misunderstood, enigmatic public figures. Both Welles and Stone shared a certain level of personal

³⁴ Campbell, *Hero*, 59.

³⁵ Matthew 16:26.

³⁶ Sharrett, “Belly of the Beast,” 4.

³⁷ Weintraub, “Professor Stone Returns,” 11.

³⁸ Frank Beaver, “*Citizen Nixon – Oliver Stone’s Wellesian View of a Failed Public Figure*,” in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 276.

contempt for their title characters, but their approaches to the central story varied. Whereas Welles created a detestable character in Charles Foster Kane, Stone went to obvious lengths to make Richard Nixon a nearly sympathetic character. Viewers can more easily identify with Richard Nixon in *Nixon* precisely because of Stone's carefully measured approach to the lost innocence motif. *Nixon*'s accessibility comes from its creation of a metaphor for the unavoidable lost innocence of youth, described by Frank Beaver as a film where "fate abruptly intervenes and casts one, biblically, from innocence into an opportunistic world where achievement ends in sad defeat."³⁹ When the events in young Richard Nixon's life are shown affecting the decisions of the old Richard Nixon, the story becomes more universal and mythic. However, the most critical difference between *Citizen Kane* and *Nixon* has been largely unaddressed by critics: *Nixon* has no Rosebud. As unsettling as the resolution to *Citizen Kane* is, it remains a resolution nonetheless. If *Citizen Kane* reflects an American mythology then *Nixon* is certainly a countermythology. Although the motif of lost innocence is obvious in the film, it goes largely unresolved. Richard Nixon has no Rosebud, no symbol of his lost innocence. Only death: four bodies.

Richard Nixon's life offers much from a traditional storytelling standpoint: a nobody from Whittier, California suffers numerous political defeats until he eventually wins the presidency in a landslide victory. He ends a divisive war, opens China, and attempts to bring the country back from the brink of civil war. From there, history takes over and makes the story even more compelling: Watergate, the man who ordered cover-ups, John Dean's famous "cancer on the presidency"

³⁹ Ibid., 281.

testimony – all elements contributing to a generation’s fundamental distrust in its government. In *Nixon*, Oliver Stone offers a countermyth of a man driven by death, on a quest for peace at the center that he never finds, whose supreme defeat was in his presidential victory. It could be argued that Richard Nixon’s 1968 presidential victory represents the moment in *Nixon* where the man turned away from his path. In *Nixon*, Stone begs the question of an alternate reality: if Richard Nixon retired from politics after his loss to Brown in 1962, would he have completed his journey and found peace at the center? In posing such a provocative question, it is useful to consider the fact that *Nixon*’s lead character is based on an historical figure that resides freshly in the minds of many viewers. John Vickery addressed this idea in his book *Myths and Texts: Strategies of Incorporation and Displacement*. The difficulty facing the artist comes when he creates an identifiable historic character that he also wishes to express as a “mythic personage.”⁴⁰ The result, Vickery noted, is a single character “being rendered as two entities simultaneously – one mythic and the other what can, for lack of a better term, be called realistic.”⁴¹ This character duality is expressed in *Nixon* and parallels the monomythic/countermythic interplay that has already been uncovered. The key characteristics are summarized below:

	Visual Cue	Viewer Recognition	Character Motivation	Viewer Rapport	When they look at me, they see what they are
Campbell’s Monomyth	Old Nixon – Color	Known to the Viewer	Evil Without Driving Motivation (Pure Evil) – Vilified by Viewer	Resentment	
Nixon’s Countermyth	Young Richard – Black and White	Unknown / New to the Viewer	Lost Innocence Motivates Character (Psychological Explanation) – Accepted by Viewer	Empathy / Identifiable	

⁴⁰ John Vickery, *Myths and Texts: Strategies of Incorporation and Displacement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 103.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Nixon functions as an intermediary between these mythic and historical ideals, and Oliver Stone's solution to the realistic/mythic duality lies in resolving the lead character into two components. From a character level, we have already seen Stone's intent to make Richard Nixon empathetic. But Vickery argued that the functional relationship is equally important; i.e., how does the character of Richard Nixon function in the countermyth?

The answer to this question becomes clear when we apply Eisenstein's theory of attractions to *Nixon*. Stone's message to the audience is that Richard Nixon is at the mercy of history and not in charge of it. The idea is conveyed through the interplay between narrative and visual cues. Richard Nixon talks about bold moves and nudging history, he bombs Cambodia and destroys his enemies in America, and he attempts to use Vietnam to drive a wedge between China and Russia. However, the visual construction of the film neutralizes the narrative staging of Nixon as maker of history and depicts him as merely a cog in some machine. Robert Richardson's characteristic pools of light are minimized in the film – at times only the actors' faces are lit. The darkness that surrounds the characters isolates them from one another and minimizes their power. Stone's swirling camera work creates an out-of-control environment as the Oval Office, Nixon's supposed seat of power, is reduced to a blur of disorienting movement. Insert shots of puppet leaders – Diem, Shah Pahlavi, Trujillo – further diminish the perception of Nixon's power. The most obvious contributor to this effect is Stone's use of Nixon's tape player. He intercuts the slowly moving cogs of the tape player

throughout *Nixon*, implying both Nixon's powerlessness and the inevitability of his downfall.

"To be undone by a third rate burglary is a fate of biblical proportions," Kissinger remarks at the end of the film.⁴² And yet this is precisely what happens to Nixon. The inexorable quality of Nixon's fate was touched on by one critic who saw *Nixon* as a film where "fate abruptly intervenes and casts one, biblically, from innocence into an opportunistic world where achievement ends in sad defeat."⁴³

The tragedy of Richard Nixon's first refusal of the call coupled with the powerlessness of his second refusal creates a character with which the audience can identify. To borrow a phrase from Aeschylus, Nixon's *pathos* (suffering) initiates a *mathos* (learning process) in the viewer.

Martin Winkler noted that identification with the protagonist's plight causes an "increase in knowledge and moral insight."⁴⁴ The audience identifies with Nixon because he suffers, and *Nixon* employs effective techniques to show that he is powerless in avoiding his downfall. So what knowledge does Stone want to convey to the viewer? A singular idea emerges from the countermythology of *Nixon*: there is something sinister and powerful lurking in the mythic landscape of America – something even more powerful than a titan like Richard Nixon. This *organism*, for lack of a better word, provided the impetus for the biggest tragedies of Stone's generation. This motif exists throughout Oliver Stone's filmography, but in *Nixon* it is fully developed and given a name: *the Beast*.

⁴² Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "*Nixon*: The Annotated Screenplay," 300.

⁴³ Beaver, "*Citizen Nixon*," 281.

⁴⁴ Martin Winkler, "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*," in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin Winkler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 120.

In an interview, Oliver Stone referred to the Beast as a force “greater than the presidency.”⁴⁵ Stone sees a series of events from Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 to Nixon’s resignation in 1974 as a pattern. *Nixon* represents the culmination of these events with outsider Richard Nixon metaphorically falling on his sword for the very thing he detested: the Establishment. A close scrutiny of *Nixon* reveals the forces responsible for Nixon’s undoing. The imagery – quick inserts of demons, a slimy, reptilian figure, a horse foaming at the mouth, even an undercooked steak oozing blood onto a plate – is in some cases so quick it is almost subliminal in nature. Stone also imbeds textual clues within the script. *Nixon* shows Richard Nixon erasing his taped conversations, resulting in the famous eighteen minute gap. The gap has been a great source of conjecture among historians for years, but Stone speculates Nixon was ruminating on the Beast:

NIXON (V.O. ON TAPE)

...these guys went after Castro. Seven times, ten times... what do you think – people like that, they just give up? They just walk away? Whoever killed Kennedy came from this... this *thing* we created. This Beast... That’s why we can’t let this thing go any farther...⁴⁶

Although Nixon’s words on the gap are purely speculative, Stone also wove historical facts into the narrative to construct the Beast. In a scene at the CIA, Richard Helms reflects on the origins of the Track 2 assassination program: “As you know...that was unique. Not an operation as much as...an organic phenomenon. It

⁴⁵ Stone, “Past Imperfect,” 34.

⁴⁶ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 290. Stone’s speculation is likely based on the numerous CIA attempts to assassinate Castro. The Track 2-Cuba connection under the Kennedy and Nixon administrations is discussed in Warren Hinckle and William Turner, *Deadly Secrets: the CIA-Mafia War Against Castro and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1992), 73-74, 113-119, 349-351.

grew, changed shape, it developed...insatiable, devouring appetites.”⁴⁷ Nixon pondered the nature of the Track 2 program in a discussion with Haldeman: “It was like...it had a life of its own. Like...a kind of ‘beast’ that doesn’t even know it exists. It just eats people when it doesn’t need ‘em anymore.”⁴⁸ This prophetic statement is used by Stone to foretell the downfall of Nixon: with the end of the Vietnam War in sight, Nixon is no longer needed in the White House and the Beast comes in the form of Watergate to consume him. In this manner, *Nixon* functions as a countermythic answer to the myth of Richard Nixon. Nixon the madman, who employed “Stone Age” bombing tactics against North Vietnam and analogous political tactics against his domestic adversaries, is countermythologized as merely a tool of Stone’s Beast. Perhaps the most poignant use of the Beast in *Nixon* is in its relation to the Vietnam War. In a conversation with an anti-war demonstrator, Nixon acknowledges the Beast and his inability to end the war in Vietnam:

YOUNG WOMAN

You don’t want the war. We don’t want the war. The Vietnamese don’t want the war. So why does it go on? What’s the point of being president? You’re powerless.

NIXON

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.

YOUNG WOMAN

It sounds like you’re talking about a wild animal.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 208. For more information on Track 2, consult U.S. Congress, Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975).

⁴⁸ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 181.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

Nixon's reply, "Maybe I am," is telling.⁵⁰ For Stone, it is an opportunity to illustrate the power of the Beast and the inevitability of history. Richard Nixon's inability to stop the war in Vietnam, despite his desire to do so, shows the powerlessness of the president to alter a course of history which has already been determined. Like Sisyphus, Nixon's only consolation is that he can move the stone – but he will never prevail. Pointing the finger at "Nixon the madman" does not satisfy Stone, who fashioned *Nixon* as a warning that forces far more powerful than Richard Nixon were responsible for the devastation of Vietnam. The brutality and bewildering motivations behind the Vietnam War continue to incite debate and perplex historians. When one leftist film critic praised *Nixon* upon its release as "one of the most important American films of the postwar era for the debate it unleashed about American power and its representations in history,"⁵¹ he might well have pointed to this scene as an example. The conversation between Nixon and the young woman is Stone's countermythic attempt to explain the war that shattered his generation. The Beast provides an opportunity to point to something larger than the presidency, larger than the government, even larger than the Establishment. "There are worse things than death," Nixon tells Helms, "there is evil."⁵² If there were a sinister beast moving through contemporary American history, it would make the disturbing senselessness of such evils as the Vietnam War and the assassination of John Kennedy easier to understand. As we consider the final two elements of the departure, we will follow Richard Nixon on his journey into the darkness of the Beast.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Sharrett, "Belly of the Beast," 4.

⁵² Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "*Nixon*: The Annotated Screenplay," 212.

After the monomythic hero takes up the call, he ventures forth to leave behind the confines of his village and familiar world. Campbell called this “the crossing of the first threshold.” This threshold is defined in *Hero* by two general characteristics. First, threshold guardians stand before the door to adventure. These custodians represent the limits of understanding for the hero and bound the world known to him and his society. The second component that defines the threshold as what lies beyond these guardians:

Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe.⁵³

Campbell made clear that the typical person is completely content to remain within the prescribed bounds, rejecting and even fearing the unknown depths beyond the threshold. But where we can see *Nixon*’s distinct countermythology for this particular element lies in the adjective Campbell used to describe what lies beyond: *darkness*. For Campbell, the compelling aspect of Christopher Columbus’ bold historical adventure was found not in that particular visionary, but in the men that followed him. The darkness into which they sailed conjured up nightmarish fears of the “fabled leviathans, mermaids, dragon kings, and other monsters of the deep” that so pervaded the common understanding of the time.⁵⁴ These children of the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria feared the darkness of the unknown, and had to be cajoled and prodded like children into the black veil of the unexplored. But whereas the journey of Columbus broke through the “horizon of the medieval

⁵³ Campbell, *Hero*, 77-78.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

mind,”⁵⁵ the world beyond the threshold in Oliver Stone’s *Nixon* is a sinister one. Campbell’s example makes the point that the threshold can be psychological instead of physical. If this is the case, might the threshold in *Nixon* be Richard Nixon himself? There are a number of clues in the film that raise this possibility. Perhaps the most prevalent signpost for this interpretation lies in its cinematography. Stone’s use of shadows, darkness, and black-and-white film stock help create a visceral psychological portrait that also exists in a physical realm. The darkness of Richard Nixon’s mind is proscribed by specific visual elements that create a countermythic answer to the threshold of the monomyth.

Nixon contains a memorable exchange between Howard Hunt and John Dean that explores the idea of darkness beyond the threshold. The scene is a dramatization; there is no historical evidence indicating the two men actually met. But this fact in itself would seem to further the idea of the countermythological threshold since Stone obviously felt *Nixon*’s narrative required Hunt’s insight into Richard Nixon’s character. He warns John Dean about the darkness beyond the threshold: “John, sooner or later you are going to learn the lesson that has been learned by everyone who has ever gotten close to Richard Nixon. That he is the darkness reaching out for the darkness.”⁵⁶ The description of Richard Nixon as “the darkness reaching out for the darkness” should not be overlooked when reading *Nixon* as countermyth. The threshold, the darkness beyond, and the hero of the adventure are seemingly bound together by Stone. *Nixon*’s threshold is not a boundary to be crossed or challenged; like the Beast, it is an entity in itself that seeks to consume those that even venture near. To Hunt, and arguably to Stone,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 263.

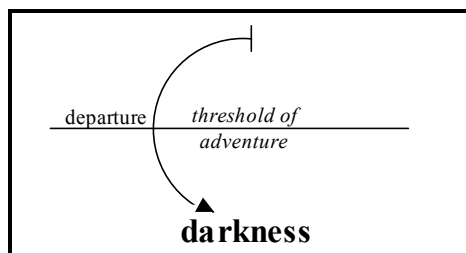
Richard Nixon is a black hole. This countermyth of the threshold is diametrically opposed to Campbell's study of Columbus: where the men of that tale broke the "horizon of the medieval mind" to greater glory, anyone venturing past Richard Nixon's event horizon is destroyed, never to return.

Nixon's answer to the monomyth threshold raises another curious possibility. The countermyth as described in the call / refusal of the call reverses the monomyth and traditional understanding of Richard Nixon. One can view the crossing of the first threshold in precisely the same manner: the threshold is not a fixed point for the hero to cross of his own volition; the threshold (in the form of the Beast) comes to Richard Nixon and ultimately consumes him. Stone carefully constructs Richard Nixon's world, and *Nixon* painstakingly defines its boundaries. In the end, external events threaten him, encroach on his threshold, and destroy him. This does not necessarily represent a problematic interpretation to Campbell, for *Hero* assures us that "though the terrors will recede before a genuine psychological readiness, the overbold adventurer beyond his depth may be shamelessly undone."⁵⁷

We have seen the dialogue Stone develops between his countermyth and the monomyth, but equally important is where this dialogue ends. In *Nixon*, the viewer is confronted with a version of the monomyth that is incomplete. There is no initiation or triumphant return into society. The ending of the film reinforces this idea. We are shown the real Nixon's departure from the White House, which quickly dissolves into his 1994 funeral. A brief voiceover by Stone notes Richard Nixon's marginally successful attempts at reinventing himself as an elder statesman after leaving office, but in essence ex-President Nixon remained an anathema. This

⁵⁷ Campbell, *Hero*, 84.

has tremendous significance from a sociohistorical standpoint: we should recall the earlier idea noted by Campbell in *Hero* that small variations in the monomyth can reveal a tremendous amount of information about the society that tells it. But *Nixon* does not merely reshape the monomyth; it subverts then destroys it. The countermythology of the departure is made more potent by the fact that the narrative slashes out the initiation and return portions of the monomyth. The cycle of adventure that circumscribes the monomyth is altered in such a way that Nixon's journey cannot be reconciled. Here is *Nixon* as a graphical counterpoint to Campbell's cycle of adventure:



Not only does Stone subvert the countermyth to more effectively convey the lost innocence motif, he breaks the cycle of adventure to portray a hero that never returns. This has an added synergistic effect on the viewer, since these elements combine to yield the story of lost innocence and a journey into darkness, never to return.

The crossing of the threshold into darkness is a personal journey in *Nixon*, and is manifested throughout Stone's filmography. In 1996, he stated that the critical difference in *Nixon* is that "at the end of the movie he starts to acknowledge the darkness that is inside himself. He seems to break down that shell of strength,

that warrior shell that he had, and acknowledge that he's lost the way."⁵⁸ In this respect, *Nixon* is an excellent step in the journey through Oliver Stone's filmography. It is fitting that arguably the most significant historical figure of Stone's generation face a personal battle that parallels that of his times. In this respect, Nixon's journey into darkness is a countermythic metaphor for America's journey into the darkness of Vietnam and Watergate. *Nixon* attempts to cast a light into the darkness of Richard Nixon's psyche as well as what Stone termed the "shadow areas of history."⁵⁹ These shadow areas, the *whys* of American history, are a veritable playground for *Nixon* and *JFK*. And while *Nixon* struggles with the ultimate meanings of Vietnam and Watergate, it presents a tightly focused character in Richard Nixon that reveals how and why these events happened. This brings the discussion to the final element in the departure, and the crux of *Nixon* as a countermyth to the contemporary understanding of *Nixon* vis-à-vis Campbell's monomyth.

The final element in the departure portion of the monomyth is what Campbell termed "the belly of the whale." Campbell summarized the events that comprise this section:

The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died.⁶⁰

This succinct description embodies the essence of the belly of the whale portion of the monomyth and shines a spotlight on the most obvious variation *Nixon* takes as

⁵⁸ Stone, "Past Imperfect," 37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Campbell, *Hero*, 90.

part of Oliver Stone's countermythology. The fact that the hero only appears to have died is key, for the monomyth requires that this event merely signify the end of the departure and the transition to the hero's initiation. It is, as Campbell put it, a "life-centering, life-renewing act."⁶¹ The initiation and return follow this incident and are paramount to closing the cycle of adventure circumscribed by the monomyth. Here we can see the countermythology of *Nixon* once again, for Stone presents a hero that actually *does* perish – the whale, as it were, destroys him. The Beast swallows the lead character and is not satisfied until he is destroyed. The life-centering, life-renewing act required by the monomyth is not present. It is in this manner that the physical act of entering the belly of the whale but only appearing to have perished as required by the monomyth is answered by Stone's countermyth.

Another critical point to understanding the implications of the belly of the whale is its context. The notion of entering the whale's belly has been laid bare, but how and why the hero finds himself there is of equal importance. Under what circumstances does this event occur, and what is its ultimate meaning? We know from Campbell's description that the belly of the whale is merely a necessary step for the spiritual rebirth of the hero. In fact, this apparent destruction of the hero is often a required condition for continuing the monomythic journey. Therefore, the last step in the departure often takes the form of a hero passing across the threshold into the belly of the whale for some greater good – an act of self-sacrifice and apparent martyrdom for his family, society, or world. Oliver Stone clearly acknowledges the concept of self-sacrifice in *Nixon*. However, it is subverted to create a vital component of the countermyth: although Richard Nixon is shown

⁶¹ Ibid., 92.

resigning from office, it is not under the auspices of some righteous act. “They need to sacrifice something, y’know, appease the gods of war – Mars, Jupiter,” Nixon remarks to Alexander Haig, “I am that blood, General. I am that sacrifice, in the highest place of all... All leaders must finally be sacrificed.”⁶²

Although *Nixon* contains this nod to the monomyth, the statement is primarily an acknowledgement of the facts. Richard Nixon appears resigned to the inevitable and merely remarks this to Haig. He leaves office not out of a sense of duty or honor, but simply because his resignation is inevitable. Stone noted the ironic aspect of his resignation in an interview when he stated that Nixon hated the Establishment but “like any good Roman,” he fell on his sword for it.⁶³ This is one of two areas where *Nixon* deviates from the symbolic act of self-destruction described by Campbell. Nixon’s resignation is rationalized as the only viable option; he falls on his sword not to sacrifice himself for the sake of the country but to “appease the gods of war.” Nixon’s rationalization extends to the point where his resignation is a bizarre victory over his political enemies. “I’m not a quitter, but I’m not stupid either,” he remarks to Kissinger. “A trial would kill me – that’s what they want. (*with some satisfaction*) But they won’t get it.”⁶⁴ He adds a defiant “Fuck ‘em” as he signs the letter of resignation, consumed by an entity he cannot control. But Stone’s Nixon remains resolute to the end: he takes a measure of grim satisfaction in his resignation, as if he has deprived his enemies of some victory. He does not willingly enter the belly of the whale, and he certainly does not do so under

⁶² Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 302.

⁶³ Stone, “Past Imperfect,” 35. Stone’s statement is not entirely figurative. Woodward and Bernstein’s *The Final Days* notes concerns by Richard Nixon’s inner circle that Nixon might actually commit suicide rather than resign (403-404, 436).

⁶⁴ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 300.

the auspices of self-sacrifice. Nixon does not even acknowledge his resignation from the presidency as the end of his political career. In a way, *Nixon* shows the resignation as a bizarre attempt at self-preservation. “If you resign, you can keep your tapes as a private citizen...you can fight them for years,” Haig tells him.⁶⁵ Richard Nixon’s resignation is his first step in reinventing himself as an elder statesman, something Stone notes in the *Nixon*’s epilogue. One merely needs to travel to the Nixon Presidential Library to see the historical manifestation of Haig’s remark. Although *Nixon* is one of many Oliver Stone films to come under attack for historical revisionism, the Nixon Library is a real-world example of rewriting history in an attempt to create a mythic Richard Nixon.⁶⁶ The lines – between truth and fiction, mythology and countermythology, history and conjecture – all become blurred in *Nixon* and the history of Oliver Stone’s generation.

In a way, this melding of history and mythology in *Nixon* is ideal. Vietnam, Watergate, the Beast, perceptions of government, Nixon’s resignation: these are all elements of the Nixon mythology with which people are familiar. Of course, *Nixon* deals with these historical elements. But for Stone, the departure element of the monomyth is paramount to understanding the countermyth of Richard Nixon. What is his past? What caused him to become the Nixon myth? What events transpired to create him, what forces came together to motivate him, and what powers ultimately conspired to destroy him? The answers to these questions – lost innocence, Nixon’s childhood, the four bodies, the Beast – provide

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁶⁶ Lance Morrow, “A Conjunction of the Past,” *Time*, 30 July 1990, 21. Johann Hari’s delightfully readable, biting critique (complete with Nixon paper dolls) of the Nixon Library asserts that “Orwell’s Ministry of Truth could not have done a better job.” Johann Hari, “Books, Lies and Videotapes,” *New Statesman*, 15 July 2002, 31.

the basis for Stone's countermyth and fundamental meaning to the story. Reading a film such as *Nixon* in this manner is, Ferrell argued, "a viable means to understand human consciousness and the development of human culture."⁶⁷ *Nixon* is about the consequences of hubris, but for Stone it is more important to show the insecurities and traumas that conspired to create that hubris. *Nixon*'s Richard Nixon becomes an amalgam of the historical/mythic Nixon and the melancholic child in the black-and-white world of Whittier, California.

William Ferrell stated that one of the primary purposes of creating myth has remained relatively unchanged throughout history: "they are stories that attempt to provide an understanding of the real world at the time they are conceived."⁶⁸ As such, *Nixon* attempts to provide meaning and understanding to some of the most confusing times in American history. Vietnam, Watergate, civil unrest, assassinations: the traumatic era of Richard Nixon is perhaps made more accessible by Oliver Stone's *Nixon*.

The final key to understanding *Nixon* lies in how the film interfaces with history. First, *Nixon* plays an important role in the pantheon of American cultural and political history. In *Mythistory* author Joseph Mali proposed a historiography that recognizes myth as a story that has passed into and become history.⁶⁹ Stone essentially reverses this idea with his body of work and raises the possibility of history becoming mythic: *Nixon* does not write history so much as it muses on it. To date, *Nixon* has been one of the few films produced that attempts to deconstruct Richard Nixon and analyze the impact of his presidency on contemporary American

⁶⁷ Ferrell, *Literature and Film*, 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁹ Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), xii.

culture. It can also be argued that *Nixon* shines a spotlight on the ideological war and illuminates mythic elements that signify Richard Nixon's term of office – both ideas that historians have largely ignored or greatly underemphasized in the ensuing years. Cassirer contended in *The Myth of the State* that “myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon”⁷⁰ From this perspective, *Nixon*'s countermythology serves as a salvo against what Oliver Stone perceives as the mythology of the Establishment. Recalling Cassirer's warning about the Myth of the State and its ability to construct a nation's history, the mythic struggle between the Establishment and *Nixon*'s countermyth is a high stakes game indeed. *Nixon*'s importance as an historical countermyth becomes readily apparent when we consider Ferrell's theory that “motion pictures of this century will appear in anthropology books of the twenty-fifth century as the myths of the ‘primitive people’ of twentieth-century America.”⁷¹

“The second half of the twentieth century will be remembered as the age of Nixon,” Senator Robert Dole remarked at Richard Nixon's 1995 funeral. If this is truly the case, it is both a blessing and a curse. The countermythology of *Nixon* illuminates the traumas of lost innocence and questions if return is possible when we cross the threshold into the darkness of the Beast. Richard Nixon's final words seem chosen by Stone as a bookend to the New Testament passage that opens the film, leaving us to ponder this very idea.

I could always see where I was going. But it's dark out there.
God, I've always been afraid of the dark...⁷²

⁷⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 282.

⁷¹ Ferrell, *Literature and Film*, 29.

⁷² Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon*: The Annotated Screenplay,” 304.

Chapter III

The Initiation and *JFK*

To sin by silence while others doth protest makes cowards out of men.

-Ella Wheeler Wilcox

In continuing our journey through Campbell's monomyth, it is only fitting that the second part of the hero's journey, "the initiation," be analyzed alongside *JFK*. *JFK* is, if nothing else, the tale of an initiation. It is an initiation for Jim Garrison, its lead character. And it is an initiation for the viewer into an America described by Oliver Stone. We see in *JFK* Oliver Stone's definitive vision of the loss of innocence for a generation and an America changed forever. The dialogue between *JFK* and the initiation aspect of the monomyth will reveal the film's countermythological and historical importance.

1991's *JFK* is arguably Oliver Stone's magnum opus. The film represents a shift in Stone's filmmaking style. The long tracking shots of *Platoon*, *Wall Street*, and *Talk Radio* are replaced by extremely quick shots, jump cuts, and an almost impressionistic editing style. The stylistic conventions of *JFK* are merely the tip of the iceberg, for the film represents the apex of Stone's subject matter. The film challenges nearly every theory regarding the assassination of John F. Kennedy and postulates a sinister conspiracy behind the death of the president that has inexorably altered the American psyche. In *JFK*, Stone created a film that Jim Welsh argued belongs in the company of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*;¹ in short, *JFK* is arguably the most controversial American film of the modern era.² Regardless of any single opinion concerning the events of November 22, 1963, there is no doubt that the murder of John F. Kennedy represents a seminal moment in American history. It is

¹ Welsh, "*JFK: Lesson and Legacy*," 227 (see chap. 1, n. 1).

² Ibid. Welsh stated that *Birth* and *JFK* share the distinction of being "the most controversial American films of the twentieth century."

doubly important, therefore, to explore the cinematic interpretation of the Kennedy assassination by one of the most influential American filmmakers of his era.

Even prior to its release, *JFK* initiated a firestorm of controversy and debate among academics, historians, journalists, filmmakers, politicians, and the American public. Any cursory review of the sheer volume of literature surrounding the film clearly indicates that *JFK* touched a nerve with many Americans. But why? *JFK* was certainly not the first vehicle for raising the possible inaccuracies in the Warren Report. It was not even the first film to postulate a conspiracy behind the assassination of John Kennedy: 1973's *Executive Action* raised many of the same issues as *JFK*, but had no impact on the American cultural landscape. We will gather clues to understanding these issues as we explore the role of *JFK* in Oliver Stone's countermythology and the initiation element of the monomyth.

Perhaps the aspect of the initiation that is most obvious to the average viewer of *JFK* is "the road of trials." This "favorite phase of the myth-adventure," as Campbell termed it, is characterized as a "dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where [the hero] must survive a succession of trials."³ If *JFK* can be mapped onto the initiation, then it is primarily linked to the road of trials. Stylistically, it confronts the viewer with Campbell's dream landscape as its narrative presents the protagonist's succession of trials. *JFK* marks a similar progression for Stone: it represents the beginning of what Daniel Green called a "movement from shattered idealism to utter nihilism."⁴ The massive amount of

³ Campbell, *Hero*, 97.

⁴ Daniel Green, "Natural Born Killers and American Decline," in *The Films of Oliver Stone*, ed. Don Kunz (London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 260.

controversy swirling around the release of *JFK* was arguably a part of Stone's own road of trials, one he continues to traverse today.

JFK's opening sequence, which conveys the hopefulness and upheaval that characterized the early 1960s, serves as an introduction to the road of trials. These first carefully crafted minutes set the tone and are in some ways a microcosm for the remainder of the film. John Williams' score opens with a single drum, sounding like a military procession, which foreshadows Stone's thesis of military involvement that permeates the film. A quote by Ella Wheeler Wilcox opens the film: "To sin by silence when we should protest makes cowards out of men." This statement, which symbolizes Jim Garrison's struggle, is echoed in *JFK*'s coda, which implores the next generation to action. The film's credits roll over President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell speech, in which he noted the prevalence of the military-industrial complex in the Cold War world and warned against its influence over Americans. This curious statement is eerily prophetic of the film's portrayal of the events on November 22, 1963. Stone intertwines film stocks, aspect ratios, and images to achieve a multilayered effect. This technique, commonly used throughout his films, is repeated throughout the complicated storyline of *JFK*. Black-and-white cramped images of early 1960s commercials and events imply an American touchstone of experience, the television. The use of grainy 16mm film stock recalls old newsreels and home movies.⁵ All of these techniques combine to lend *JFK* a sense of authenticity which is vital to retaining believability through its

⁵ Dowell's piece in *Cineaste* provides a more detailed analysis of the cinematic techniques employed by Stone on *JFK*. Pat Dowell, "Last Year at Nuremberg: The Cinematic Strategies of *JFK*," *Cineaste* 19, no. 1 (1992): 10.

various conjectures.⁶ We see in the vivid color images the picture of a vibrant John F. Kennedy and Camelot – symbolic, the narrator notes, of the change and upheaval of the times.

But unlike many films which have depicted John Kennedy as a stalwart, intractable leader of the free world, Stone does not present an idyllic picture of this period. *JFK*'s opening sequence posits that he was a man under enormous internal pressure from hawkish individuals embedded in the American military and intelligence strata. Kennedy is embroiled in turmoil. The Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Laos, and Vietnam presented foreign policy challenges to Kennedy. But Stone argues in *JFK* that those events represented even greater internal threats from the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower had warned about. The use of Kennedy's 1963 speech at American University serves two purposes. First, it lends a clear sense of tragedy to any cursory viewing of the film. *JFK* does not reflect on Kennedy the man, so the brief words proffered by Kennedy the idealist make his death far more poignant. But on a deeper level, Stone uses the hopefulness expressed by Kennedy as an ominous foreshadowing of his own death. The empathetic, global vision so eloquently expressed in his speech poses a direct threat to the hawkish Establishment that saw him as soft on communism. Stone argues in *JFK* that the innocence and idealism of his generation was shattered from within on November 22, 1963.

Williams' foreboding score darkens the image of Kennedy's triumphant arrival into Dallas: the military drum grows louder as the motorcade is shown

⁶ Robert Richardson, who served as Stone's cinematographer for eleven films spanning two decades, noted that the goal of *JFK*'s opening documentary sequence was to establish a "concrete foundation of factual reality." Bob Fisher, "The Whys and Hows of *JFK*," *American Cinematographer* 73, no. 2 (Feb 1992): 45.

leaving the airport. Again, Stone uses the opportunity to play two conflicting ideas against each other. However, as the transition is made to the first frames of the Zapruder film, the images are so iconic that it is impossible to ignore the unavoidable tragedy that will occur seconds later. But Stone does not show the assassination: instead, the screen goes black and we hear the shots, sounding like echoes in a canyon. The final shot of the opening sequence is the haunting image of birds flocking away from the roof of the Texas School Book Depository.

Within the first few minutes of *JFK*, Oliver Stone lays the groundwork for creating a countermyth to common perceptions about the reasons for Kennedy's assassination and its effect on America. The creation of countermythology is common throughout Stone's filmography. It challenges the viewer's "ignorance" by questioning common ideas and invites the audience to gain knowledge of a larger "truth." Stone has drawn much ire, from both ends of the political spectrum, for his contrarian views on some of America's most painful memories. However, an alternative explanation is that the act of continually revisiting such national traumas as Vietnam and the Kennedy assassination calls for the audience to question its assumptions while threatening the status quo and the simplistic innocence that Stone believes characterize those who have not learned the truth.

The dream landscape that Stone imbues *JFK* with is so pervasive and obvious that, ironically, its importance might be overlooked. Jim Garrison embarks on a search for the truth, and *JFK*'s dialectical treatment of historical fact and fiction actually functions as a treatise on America's social mythology. In his article on the rhetorical structure of *JFK*, Martin Medhurst argued that the film is a

mythopoetic discourse that essentially acts as a metaphor for the Adamic myth.⁷ Although the relationship of *JFK* to that particular myth is extratopical to this thesis, Medhurst's conclusions nevertheless aid in understanding *JFK*'s countermythology. *JFK* is not a metaphor for the Adamic myth; rather, it uses monomythic ideals and metaphors to engage the audience. Medhurst noted that emulating Jim Garrison's actions on his road of trials allows the audience to "reconstitute themselves as autonomous individuals, spiritually and politically awake citizens of the *polis* who are equipped for transcending the profane world into which they have fallen, capable of understanding the system of oppression under which they live."⁸

In order to better understand the implications of Medhurst's argument, we must follow *JFK*'s protagonist on his road of trials. Jim's initial investigation into David Ferrie proves fruitless, and it is not until 1967 that the issues surrounding the assassination come to light again. Jim Garrison and Senator Long are onboard a jet discussing the Vietnam War, now in full swing. Garrison wonders aloud if events would be unfolding differently had Kennedy not been assassinated, and Long piques Garrison's interest by noting inconsistencies in the recently released Warren Report. A heavy yellow air hangs over the two men, and dark shadows play across both faces. The sickly environment has a sense of corruption, and the cutaways to scenes in the Justice Department are played in authoritarian blue tints. The film then turns to Jim reading the Warren Report in his den. As he reads the report, he is guided by his instincts as a district attorney – he sees inconsistencies, errors, omissions, and sloppy work. The scene is illuminated in deep red hues and Jim's face is obscured by shadows. In this manner, Stone immerses the viewer in a world that has

⁷ Medhurst, "Rhetorical Structure of *JFK*," 210 (see chap. 1, n. 2).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

fundamentally changed and shows Garrison's descent into a psychological environment reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*.

Although perplexed and disturbed by the problems he sees in the Warren Report, it is not until a flashback dreamscape that Jim begins to comprehend the true extent of the nefarious forces that may have been behind the assassination. Jim wakes up with a start and begins to paint the picture for his wife. "Honey, go back to sleep, please!" she implores him.⁹ Jim's rejoinder, "I've been sleeping for three years!" is telling: in dreaming, he finally wakes up to a new reality.¹⁰

A roundtable scene at a restaurant where Jim's staff discusses facts from the case provides Stone with an opportunity to borrow from another famous mythical tale. Here, he presents exposition revealing some of the most troubling aspects of the assassination. The ease of Oswald's movements to and from Russia, his defection, and the other "Oswalds" that appear before the assassination raise doubts about the conclusions of the Warren Report. "Oswald was no angel, that's clear," Garrison concedes, "but who was he?"¹¹ Jim states the possibility that Oswald was precisely what he claimed to be – a patsy. It is during this scene that Stone presents the possibility of government involvement in the assassination. Although Garrison does not yet posit how the CIA or American intelligence community may be involved, he tells his staff to start thinking on a different level, "like the CIA does."¹² "We're through the looking glass here," Jim tells the staffers,

⁹ Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, "JFK: The Documented Screenplay," in *JFK: The Book of the Film*, ed. Jane Rusconi (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 32.

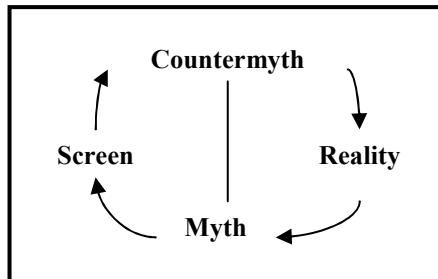
¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

“black is white, and white is black.”¹³ The allusions to Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* cannot be overlooked: here, *JFK* sets reality on its head. If we are to understand the truth, we must be willing to go through the looking glass where black is white and white is black. Here, Stone offers the viewer the opportunity to see how deep the rabbit hole goes.

It is in this manner that the countermythology presented in *JFK* differs from that of *Nixon*. *JFK*’s nightmarish dreamscape transcends the dialogue between myth and countermyth to a dialogue between screen and reality. In a 1992 interview, Stone stated that *JFK* was his answer to the “myth of the Warren Report.”¹⁴ The film provides a vital link between myth and reality by viewing reality as myth and presenting itself as countermyth:



We can begin to understand the significance of this link by considering Campbell’s opinions on modern man. Stripped of the “symbols and spiritual exercises” of the past, Campbell argued that we now must face alone the “psychological dangers” through which earlier generations were guided.¹⁵ “This is our problem as modern,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Oliver Stone, “Clarifying the Conspiracy: an Interview with Oliver Stone,” interview by Gary Crowds, *Cineaste* 19, no. 1 (1992): 26.

¹⁵ Campbell, *Hero*, 104.

‘enlightened’ individuals,” Campbell stated.¹⁶ *JFK* presents us with a similar dilemma, for it brings to the forefront Ernst Cassirer’s theory in *The Myth of the State*. Once Jim journeys through the looking glass, he no longer accepts this myth – the nefarious forces that conspired to kill John Kennedy then become apparent. It is therefore ironic that as Jim gathers the pieces of the puzzle, Stone further isolates him from the viewer. As *JFK* progresses, Stone continues to utilize shadows but adds another striking visual element. Harsh overhead lighting is often used to create reflections in Jim’s glasses, making it impossible to see his eyes and separating him from the viewer. The visual impact of the scene is later mirrored in a scene between Earl Warren and Jack Ruby in which Ruby warns that “a whole new form of government will take over.”¹⁷ The lights reflect off Warren’s glasses while his face is washed out in shadows. The audience cannot see the truth, only its reflections and shadows. The film is awash with the pathos described by Campbell, for Jim is forced to traverse the countermythological landscape constructed by Stone with no spiritual guidance. The film encourages identification with the character, since Jim’s isolation is something with which most audiences can empathize.

From this standpoint, *JFK* can be seen as a reflection of the spiritual crisis facing modern man in America. Bereft of the spirituality of our ancestors, *JFK* threatens the only remaining mythological element left to us: Cassirer’s *Myth of the State*. If the State itself is rotten, *JFK* posits, what hope do we have left? There remains a possibility to return to the course on which humanity traveled. Campbell stated that in order to do this, “one may have to submit somehow to purgation and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stone and Sklar, “*JFK: The Documented Screenplay*,” 61.

surrender. And that is part of our problem: just how to do that.”¹⁸ *JFK* is about a search for truth, and not merely the truth about John Kennedy’s assassination. Revealed at the heart of the film are questions about Oliver Stone’s generation, its relationship with the government, and America’s present condition. If anything, *JFK* is a countermythological springboard to raise questions in the minds of the audience about these ideas. The film’s coda would seem to support this interpretation:

DEDICATED TO THE YOUNG,
IN WHOSE SPIRIT THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH
MARCHES ON¹⁹

JFK implores a continual search for truth – historical, factual, and mythical. In following Jim Garrison’s story, we are presented with an ambiguous treatment of truth and innocence. The realization that Kennedy’s death was a catalyst for the Vietnam War and a fundamental shift in the American power structure is a double-edged sword that is both illuminating and disillusioning. As the story unravels in front of Garrison, numerous references are made to “seeing” and “eyes opening” – the truth behind the assassination of John Kennedy is laid bare, and it is the realization of that truth which strips the believer of his innocence. Martin Medhurst noted that sight is a central metaphor in *JFK*; through Garrison, the audience members “come to see the truth.”²⁰ But for Stone, the innocence of his generation is the price that must be paid for solving the spiritual dilemma raised by Campbell. The road of trials is not just an aspect of *JFK*’s countermythology, but one all seekers of the truth must face as well.

¹⁸ Campbell, *Hero*, 105.

¹⁹ Stone and Sklar, “*JFK*: The Documented Screenplay,” 185.

²⁰ Medhurst, “Rhetorical Structure of *JFK*,” 212.

The next element of the initiation with relevance to the discussion is termed “atonement with the father.” In considering this element we will see a distinct countermythological answer in *JFK* similar to the one presented in *Nixon*. For just as in *Nixon*, *JFK* is a tale of the hero adventure incomplete. Although the initiation maps well onto the countermythology of *JFK*, we must never forget that “the return,” a vital aspect of the hero’s cycle of adventure, is missing. This problem first presents itself in the atonement with the father. The basic idea laid out by Campbell is that the initiation requires the hero to reconcile the ogre aspect of the father, which is a manifestation of his own ego, with a “balanced, more realistic view of the father.”²¹ In doing so, he will achieve atonement/“at-one-ment” with the father who, as the “initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world,”²² ensures the successful continuation of the adventure.

In order to unravel the connection between this element and *JFK*, we must first consider how the film engages to the father figure invoked by Campbell. As the leader of America, John Kennedy is depicted as *JFK*’s father figure. The primary divergence of the film from the monomyth is therefore found in an atonement that is never achieved. “We’ve all become Hamlets in our own country,” Jim reflects, “children of a slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne.”²³ Although the likening of Kennedy to a king has drawn ire from some,²⁴ this father-leader motif is an important concept in the American lexicon. Therefore, it is an important element in *JFK*’s countermythology: there can be no atonement

²¹ Campbell, *Hero*, 130.

²² *Ibid.*, 136.

²³ Stone and Sklar, “*JFK*: The Documented Screenplay,” 176.

²⁴ One leftist critic referred to the “crippling nuttiness” of *JFK*’s “fascist yearning for the ‘father leader’.” Alexander Cockburn, “John and Oliver’s Bogus Adventure,” *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 10 (February 1992): 22-23.

with the father because he has been murdered. And since atonement with the father is critical to continuing the adventure, *JFK* places the viewer in the same situation as *Nixon*: left awash in Stone's countermythological landscape with no resolution possible. Critics such as Martin Medhurst have argued that Garrison is a "second Kennedy" whose struggle is ultimately about "humankind's capacity to restore lost innocence."²⁵ The flaw in interpreting *JFK* in this manner should now be obvious. When we consider *JFK* as a portion of a larger filmography and deconstruct it in terms of the countermyth, the problem faced by Garrison and the audience is that there ultimately is no way to restore lost innocence. Once one ventures down Stone's rabbit hole and glimpses the truth about the larger world of the father, there is no going back.

It is important to decipher how Campbell's larger world of the father pertains to *JFK*. One of the main points of the film is that the assassination of John Kennedy marked a significant change in America that inexorably altered the nation's path. If Kennedy had lived, *JFK* theorizes, the tumultuous events of the decade that followed may never had happened. Consider the conversation Garrison has with Mr. X, a composite character loosely based on Richard Case Nagell and L. Fletcher Prouty:

X

Kennedy wanted to end the Cold War in his second term. He wanted to call off the moon race in favor of cooperation with the Soviets. He signed a treaty with the Soviets to ban nuclear testing, he refused to invade Cuba in '62, and he set out to withdraw from Vietnam. But all that ended on November 22, 1963.²⁶

²⁵ Medhurst, "Rhetorical Structure of *JFK*," 209.

²⁶ Stone and Sklar, "*JFK*: The Documented Screenplay," 112.

This “larger world” described by Mr. X is not a world of the monomyth. It is not the inevitable future that, by virtue of its acknowledgement, will come into existence. Rather, Mr. X paints a picture of a world that *should* have existed. As in *Nixon*, the audience gains a glimpse of the way events should have unfolded. Yet we are nevertheless confronted with the way things really are – the reality of an off-kilter world somehow gone wrong. This philosophy is echoed in *Platoon* when Barnes remarks to his men, “there’s the way things ought to be, and then there’s the way they are.”²⁷ Vietnam, racial conflict, Watergate, social unrest – this is the way things are for Oliver Stone’s generation. And since atonement with the father is impossible, the larger world he represents is similarly unattainable.

Therefore, the real tragedy of *JFK* is not found in the assassination of John Kennedy, but in the inevitable events that followed his death. Campbell’s words seemed prophetic for Oliver Stone’s generation:

For the son who has grown really to know the father, the agonies of the ordeal are readily borne; the world is no longer a vale of tears but a bliss-yielding, perpetual manifestation of the Presence.²⁸

In considering this quote, the father of *JFK* emerges as a more secular idea than we see in Campbell. America’s spiritual crisis is one aspect illuminated by Stone’s countermyth, and the stakes are certainly raised by *JFK*: for if we lack a spiritual path and our father is murdered, what have we left? Stone’s countermyth transforms “atonement with the father” into “estrangement *from* the father.”

²⁷ *Platoon*, special ed. DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (1986; Los Angeles: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2001).

²⁸ Campbell, *Hero*, 148.

JFK illustrates the price to be paid by Stone's generation through the use of Kennedy's own words: in a speech at American University less than five months before he was killed, John Kennedy laid out his vision for his children's generation:

What kind of a peace do I mean, and what kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. We must reexamine our own attitudes toward the Soviet Union... our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet, we all breathe the same air, we all cherish our children's future, and we are all mortal.²⁹

JFK posits that it is this vision of the world that led to Kennedy's assassination.

Therefore, the tragedy of November 22, 1963 as depicted in the film is not only a slain father figure, but society's estrangement from his vision for the future. As Mr. X tells Garrison, "all that ended on November 22, 1963."³⁰ But it did not take *JFK* to make people realize the tragedy of John Kennedy's death. The pragmatic sense of peace he fomented during the height of the Cold War meant that something significant was lost when he was killed. In a way, John Kennedy's assassination destroyed more than just a great man – it destroyed a great leader and a hopeful vision for America's future. In recalling Nixon's monologue to John Kennedy's portrait, we see that the discussion has come full circle: "when they look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are."³¹

"The father is the archetypal enemy," Campbell noted, "hence, too, the irresistible compulsion to make war."³² As Kennedy's vision for a peaceful future

²⁹ This passage represents the abridgement presented in *JFK*'s prologue. The full text of Kennedy's speech can be found in his public papers. John Kennedy, "Commencement Address at American University in Washington: June 10, 1963," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), 459-464.

³⁰ Stone and Sklar, "*JFK: The Documented Screenplay*," 112.

³¹ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, "*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*," 303.

³² Campbell, *Hero*, 155.

expressed at American University faded into the Vietnam War, the very forces that conspired to kill him become apparent through the countermyth. Peter Collier touched on this idea when he remarked that “*JFK* is only superficially about the death of the President.”³³ What died *with* Kennedy is the true point of *JFK*, and as the discussion turns to the next portion of the initiation it is helpful to consider Eric Hamburg’s muse on the tangible sense of loss associated with *JFK*’s estrangement from the father:

Would there have been a Vietnam War if Kennedy had lived? I think not. Would LBJ, and then Richard Nixon, have become presidents of the United States? Probably not. And would the country have been torn by racial discrimination, riots, protests and cynicism toward government in the 1960s as it was after he died? I don’t think so.³⁴

In Roheim’s *War, Crime and the Covenant*, we are told that “whatever is killed becomes the father.”³⁵ *JFK* probes this thought and poses the curious countermythic idea that the father becomes whatever is killed. The countermyth in *JFK* therefore invokes a serious quandary: that John Kennedy’s death, however tragic, was inevitable. The Nixon/Kennedy duality so painstakingly constructed in *Nixon* now takes on a new meaning. If “He could not be allowed to escape *alive*,”³⁶ is the mantra of *JFK*, Richard Nixon’s reflection, “If I’d been president, they never would have killed me,”³⁷ exposes the awful truth of Stone’s countermythology: sinister forces conspire to slay the father-leader of *JFK* who is in turn supplanted by a dark ruler worthy of *Macbeth*. The nation spirals into the abyss of a war that

³³ Peter Collier, “Ollie Uber Alles: Oliver Stone’s Triumph of the Will,” *American Spectator* 25, no. 4 (1992): 29.

³⁴ Eric Hamburg. *JFK, Nixon, Oliver Stone and Me: An Idealist’s Journey from Capitol Hill to Hollywood Hell* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 23.

³⁵ Geza Roheim, *War, Crime, and the Covenant* (Monticello, N.Y.: Medical Journal Press, 1945).

³⁶ Stone and Sklar, “*JFK: The Documented Screenplay*,” 108.

³⁷ Stone, Rivele, and Wilkinson, “*Nixon: The Annotated Screenplay*,” 162.

seemingly defies explanation as the people's inherent trust in benevolent government is eroded forever.

The next element of the initiation, "the apotheosis," is closely tied to Stone's countermythology of the estrangement from the father. It also brings up the idea that we must be cautious when applying Campbell's ideas to Stone's filmography. The spiritual connotation of the term *apotheosis* is arguably lacking in *JFK*. However, if we adopt the idea of the countermyth then an analogue for Campbell's apotheosis can serve as a bridge between the secular and the spiritual environments. In this sense, there may be a number of valuable ideas we can glean from studying the monomythic apotheosis and its relationship with the countermyth.

Apotheosis, while at first glance suggesting a mystical quality, also contains a more secular subtext. Campbell noted the close relationship that exists between myth, psychology, and psychoanalysis, especially in Eastern philosophy.³⁸ There exists a striking similarity, Campbell noted, between the "ancient mythological doctrine of the dynamics of the psyche to the teachings of the modern Freudian school."³⁹ And although Campbell observed that the aims of the two teachings are admittedly "not exactly the same," much can be garnered from analyzing the psychological and historical implications of a mythic element such as the apotheosis. Therefore, the type of analysis that has thus far been conducted should not be kept from being expanded to include the apotheosis, its countermythic manifestation in *JFK*, and its psychological and historical significance. It is hoped that such an analysis will encourage the possibility that, like the great philosopher

³⁸ Campbell, *Hero*, 164.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Campbell invoked, we might “perceive without the same ocean of being that he found within.”⁴⁰

In inviting a different perception on the apotheosis in *JFK*'s countermythology, it might be possible to develop a new linkage between the two. Let us consider the idea of apotheosis from a purely political perspective. One could contend that the most apt and concise description for this “political apotheosis” would be a true globalist. A person that is willing to raze nationalistic, ethnocentric, and other prejudiced notions of community in lieu of a worldview that promotes universal tolerance and humanity arguably seeks a political apotheosis. Campbell seemed to agree with this assessment when he stated that the path of apotheosis is dependant upon us breaking free of “the prejudices of our own provincially ecclesiastical, tribal, or national rendition of the world archetypes.”⁴¹ After doing so, Campbell noted that “we then go forth as knowers, to whom all men are brothers.”⁴² With this in mind, we can see that *JFK* clearly portrays Kennedy as a man seeking a political apotheosis. As such, he was arguably the first truly globalist president of the Cold War era. John Kennedy's vision for America expressed in *JFK*'s opening and the film's central contention that he was killed to prevent that vision from coming to fruition plays a vital role in the countermythic dialogue with the monomyth. “This is the release potential within us all, and which anyone can attain,” stated Campbell.⁴³ Ultimately, this is the hope expressed through the countermyth in *JFK* – that we might comprehend the higher truth of the father and acknowledge the forces that conspired to conceal that truth.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 151.

The debate in *JFK* therefore transcends the question of who shot from what window and instead engages the viewer with a fundamental question about American society. Stone's thesis in *JFK* is that had Kennedy seen reelection in 1964 the Vietnam War never would have happened. Kennedy's globalist vision for peace made him a threat to the Establishment and, as Campbell termed it, its "compulsion to make war."⁴⁴ When we compare this contention with Campbell's analysis of what prevents the apotheosis, the linkage between the two becomes obvious. According to Campbell, the primary barrier to apotheosis is the "local motherly fathers, who project aggression onto the neighbors for their own defense."⁴⁵ This has historical precedence, as Campbell noted, for "the pages of history bountifully illustrate" the results when such figures create "spheres of sympathy and protection" that cause "colonial barbarity and internecine strife."⁴⁶ It is against this background that Eisenhower's warning about the military-industrial complex and John Kennedy's globalist policies take on a new meaning in *JFK*. The countermyth transcends the "conspiracy kook" debate and engages the audience on a wholly different level. The assassination becomes an inevitable result of the conditions described by Campbell.

The next logical step in understanding the countermythic apotheosis in *JFK* is to deconstruct its presentation in the film. It goes without saying that the apotheosis in *JFK*'s countermythology is revealed to the audience through Jim Garrison's eyes. Stone explained in an interview that the character of Garrison is a

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

“metaphoric protagonist.”⁴⁷ The point, Stone noted, was to use the Garrison as a vehicle to shed light on an “area that had been steeped in lies for nearly thirty years.”⁴⁸ The audience is meant to travel with Garrison down the rabbit hole, and as the line between screen and reality becomes blurred, Stone lays bare *JFK*’s political apotheosis. By conveying Kennedy’s vision for the future in *JFK*, Stone is able to depict America’s post-assassination condition as an anti-apotheosis countermyth. The film is therefore not as much about John Kennedy as it is about the Establishment and the true cost of Kennedy’s death: the Vietnam War. To journey down this rabbit hole, the audience must assume a conspiracy. The quandary is then found in the *whys*: why was Kennedy killed, what forces conspired against him, and what was the ultimate price of his death?

In this respect, Stone’s position in *JFK* qualifies as counterhistory as much as it does countermythology. But in an America where nearly three quarters of its citizenry believe a conspiracy was behind the events of November 22, 1963 there is little question that he has, as Andrew Kopkind put it, “recast the idols in the heart of the Temple.”⁴⁹ From this standpoint, *JFK* is clearly one film in a successive attempt by Stone to question what he called “America’s official story.”⁵⁰ Martin Medhurst touched on this idea in the conclusion to his analysis of *JFK*. Although *JFK* uses the conspiracy idea to bring the audience to a state of knowledge, its ideological implications (i.e., military-industrial complex) ultimately form the basis for the

⁴⁷ James Riordan, *Stone: The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (New York: Hyperion, 1995) 355.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Andrew Kopkind, “*JFK*: The Myth,” *Nation*, 20 January 1992, 40. A Gallup poll conducted at the time of *JFK*’s release indicated 73% of the American public believes a conspiracy was behind the assassination. Anne Leibovitz, “Costner in Control,” *Vanity Fair* 55, no. 1 (January 1992), 132.

⁵⁰ Robert Anson, “The Shooting of JFK,” *Esquire*, November 1991, 98.

audience reaction.⁵¹ The film consequently emerges as a template of sorts – a dark, twisted roadmap for understanding the Vietnam War. This idea will have consequences as we discuss the final portion of the initiation, but the significance of Stone’s attempt to provide some meaning to a war that defied meaning is obvious.

We have now reached an important juncture in our discussion of *JFK* as a countermythic response to the initiation. The film features predominantly Stone’s vision of Kennedy’s political apotheosis, but what is its significance? That we glimpse the possibility of a past without the spectre of Vietnam is important to Stone, but it was Susan Mackey-Kallis who noted the impact of a film such as *JFK* on the audience:

Sometimes Stone’s camera is as explosive as a gunshot, designed to startle us out of a naive or politically complacent stupor. At other times it serves as an eviscerating scalpel that leaves us bloodless and drained but somehow better for the cleansing. And often his work weaves a psychedelic love song or Rimbaud-like verse that seduces us, turns us on, and lets us see visions and dream dreams, in turn, of other places, other worlds, other possibilities.⁵²

JFK accomplishes all three of these things. Stylistically it is reminiscent of Eisenstein’s cine-fist. But as a tool for exploring a national tragedy it speaks to what Norman Mailer termed our “national unspoken myth.”⁵³ History is rarely tidy, and neither is *JFK* – in it, the audience is offered a framework for interpreting the assassination but not a solution to its ultimate meaning. In the final analysis, the lesson in *JFK* might well be that tragedies of this magnitude can only be conveyed mythically. But John Kennedy was a president, and he was assassinated – historical

⁵¹ Medhurst, “Rhetorical Structure of *JFK*,” 218.

⁵² Mackey-Kallis, *Oliver Stone’s America*, 1 (see chap. 1, n. 12).

⁵³ Norman Mailer, “Footfalls in the Crypt,” *Vanity Fair* 55, no. 2 (February 1992): 129.

facts that *JFK*, Stone, and ultimately the audience must contend with. Therefore, as the discussion turns to the final element of the initiation, we begin where the apotheosis ends – with the impact of Oliver Stone’s vision in *JFK* on contemporary American history.

It is perhaps fitting that the final event in the initiation portion of the monomyth is what Campbell termed “the ultimate boon.” This seemingly remarkable achievement is generally characterized by the relative ease with which it is accomplished. In contrast to the myriad of challenges and trials that have thus far been thrust upon the hero, the final apotheosis and the seizing of the ultimate boon seems to come with no effort. This is not to say that any person would experience the same ease: Campbell noted that it is precisely this ease that marks the hero as a “superior man, a born king...Where the usual hero would face a test, the elect encounters no delaying obstacle and makes no mistake.”⁵⁴

The ultimate boon is therefore reserved for the hero of the monomyth, illuminated by the ease by which it is ultimately obtained. One obvious idea that emerges when considering the countermythic manifestation of the ultimate boon in *JFK* is its underlying irony. The picture’s title character, the only hero who could achieve the ultimate boon, is killed during the film’s opening credits. But *JFK*’s linkage of myth, countermyth, screen and reality suggests a countermythic ultimate boon:

⁵⁴ Campbell, *Hero*, 173.

		Narrative Goal	Ultimate Boon
Monomyth	John Kennedy (Reflected in the film)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American University speech – vision for political apotheosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve political apotheosis • Alter the Establishment
Countermyth	Jim Garrison (Within the film)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solve the <i>whos</i> of Kennedy’s assassination • Win Clay Shaw trial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevail in court of public opinion • Open eyes of the citizenry to Kennedy’s vision •
	Oliver Stone (External to the film)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the <i>whys</i> of Kennedy’s assassination • Establish Warren Report as myth and create a countermythic answer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide meaning to Vietnam War • Spearhead public discourse on lost innocence of a generation and the subsequent erosion of trust in government

We can therefore see that just as the film casts a shadow onto the world outside, there exists a dichotomy between the ultimate mythic and countermythic ideals embodied in *JFK*. So how is the ultimate boon treated in *JFK*, and what significance does it hold for the audience? The most effective way to address this is to explore each level of the countermythic ultimate boon and determine how the elements are interrelated.

We must first acknowledge that despite being the only person to bring charges in the assassination of John Kennedy, Jim Garrison lost at trial after a very brief deliberation. This fact is reflected in *JFK* as nearly an afterthought. If a guilty verdict in the Clay Shaw case were considered to be the ultimate boon, the countermyth clearly deviates from the monomyth. However, we can find textual clues within the film itself that discredit this contention.

JFK goes to great lengths to describe Jim Garrison's difficulties with building his case. The film depicts the Establishment itself as the primary obstacle in Jim's path: a series of stonewalling, intimidations, and fabrications converge and threaten to tear his case apart. "I don't have much of a case," he admits to Mr. X.⁵⁵ The problems compound until Bill Broussard, a chief investigator for Garrison, turns against the investigation and destroys his files. When coupled with the government's tactics and the death of a key witness, the chances for Garrison's team look weak. "We don't have a *prayer*," one staff member complains.⁵⁶ But to Jim, the act of winning at trial is secondary to a larger goal of opening the public's eyes to what he has seen. In this sense, Garrison's goal in *JFK* parallels that of Oliver Stone: to, as Mr. X puts it, "stir the shitstorm."⁵⁷ This idea is even touched on in the film by Garrison. When he realizes that the efforts to sabotage his case likely will succeed, he addresses his staff:

JIM

This war has two fronts – in the court of law, we hope, against the odds, to nail Clay Shaw on a conspiracy charge. In the court of public opinion, it could take another 25 or 30 years for the truth to come out, but at least we're going to strike the first blow.⁵⁸

Jim's words resonate when we consider an additional aspect of the ultimate boon – what the hero seeks from the gods is "not finally themselves but their grace."⁵⁹ *JFK* permits a glimpse of this grace in John Kennedy's vision for the future. The ultimate boon comes to Garrison in the realization of the price of John Kennedy's

⁵⁵ Stone and Sklar, "*JFK: The Documented Screenplay*," 113.

⁵⁶ The published screenplay differs slightly from the film here: "choice" appears in the script in lieu of the film's "prayer." Ibid., 144.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁹ Campbell, *Hero*, 181.

death. Clearly, the question of who fired from what window is wholly different the question of *why* Kennedy was killed and who was ultimately responsible. The former speaks to a crime, while the latter speaks to the more fundamental issue of our relationship with our government and Cassirer's Myth of the State. The discrepancy is nothing new, for Campbell noted that for the hero the boon is "always scaled to his stature and to the nature of the dominant desire."⁶⁰ With Garrison in *JFK* this becomes a question of perception: is the dominant desire to simply know who killed Kennedy, or is there a more pressing underlying need to understand the whys of that era? This brings us to arguably the biggest scar on the American landscape of Stone's generation: Vietnam. If we follow Garrison down *JFK*'s rabbit hole, the countermythology of *JFK* ultimately leads here. If, as critic Andrew Kopkind suggested, we should accept the Warren Report as a "comforting myth,"⁶¹ then the ultimate boon becomes a much higher stakes game when *JFK* is read as a countermythic response.

The *who* of the assassination is the most disputed and discussed aspect of *JFK*, but it is the *why* that establishes the film's countermythology. Margaret Miles argued that although the cinema seldom offers ready made solutions for societal problems, the power of film is primarily derived from its ability to illuminate societal anxieties.⁶² Therefore, the role of *JFK* in constructing a viable countermyth for post-assassination America cannot be overstated. Garrison's ultimate boon concludes with the ending of the film, in the midst of the Vietnam War. Garrison's goal in *JFK* is to unravel a mystery and say to the public, "there was a conspiracy to

⁶⁰ Ibid., 172.

⁶¹ Kopkind, "*JFK: The Myth*," 41.

⁶² Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Value in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 193.

assassinate the president, these are the conspirators, and as a result we had the Vietnam War.” But *JFK* was released nearly two decades after the end of the war. In a sense, Oliver Stone’s ultimate boon picks up where the film ends. If the Warren Commission Report functions as a mythic stand-in for America’s official story, then the fervent attack levied by *JFK* against it is a countermythic counterstory. Stone goes beyond Garrison by attempting to explain the traumas of his generation, saying in effect “this is *why* these people killed Kennedy, and this is what happened subsequently.” The alienation of the 1970s explored in *Nixon* and *The Doors*, the materialism of the 1980s shown in *Wall Street*, and the nihilistic fury of 1990s films such as *Natural Born Killers* and *Any Given Sunday* all spring from the countermythology of *JFK*. Campbell stated in *Hero* that myth is an instrument “to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realization.”⁶³ Taken as a whole, Stone’s filmography can be interpreted as an attempt to trace America’s lost innocence to November 22, 1963. If the incomprehensible events portrayed in these films served to further erode America’s trust in the Establishment, *JFK*’s countermythology attempts to explain *why* they occurred. This is Stone’s ultimate boon, one he alluded to in 1996 when he questioned historians’ avoidance of certain aspects of history:

I’m just as shocked that responsible historians aren’t asking these questions. Why are historians avoiding these dark areas of American history?⁶⁴

In questioning these dark areas of history, *JFK* attempts to assign some meaning to the national traumas that seemed to defy meaning. Convolutional analyses of how and

⁶³ Campbell, *Hero*, 190.

⁶⁴ Oliver Stone, “Past Imperfect,” 37.

why America became involved in Vietnam do not seem to satisfy Stone. Contrary to some critics' contentions, *JFK* actually offers a far simpler (though arguably less likely) explanation than most history books.

It is likely that any discussion of *JFK*'s validity from a historical standpoint or its value as a cultural signpost will inevitably turn to the controversy it has provoked. We would be remiss to ignore the criticisms that were aimed at Stone and his film, for these criticisms strike at the contention of this thesis that *JFK* is worthy of serious academic discussion. Upon its theatrical release, the main arguments against *JFK* generally fell into two categories. First, critics argued that *JFK* is factually incorrect and misleads its audience concerning what is actually known about the assassination of John Kennedy. One well-documented example of this is found in a group of articles published in the *Washington Post*. Reporter George Lardner wrote a series of editorials in which he refuted ideas presented in an early draft of the script he had obtained.⁶⁵ The second criticism against *JFK* dismissed it as pure propaganda unworthy of serious discussion. For example, Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, likened *JFK* to Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 polemic *Triumph of the Will*.⁶⁶

Some writers saw the severe criticism as indicative of a larger issue. A 1992 *Rolling Stone* essay by Jon Katz argued that *JFK* was the most explosive assault yet by what was termed "New News."⁶⁷ This New News – characterized by

⁶⁵ George Lardner, "On The Set: Dallas in Wonderland," *Washington Post*, 19 May 1991, D1, D4; Oliver Stone, "The Post, George Lardner and My Version of the J.F.K. Assassination," *Washington Post*, 2 June 1991, D3; and George Lardner, "Facts Speak for Themselves but Stone Doesn't Seem to Know Them," *Washington Post*, 2 June 1990, D3.

⁶⁶ Frank Beaver, *Oliver Stone: Wakeup Cinema* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 161. Other critics were just as straightforward: Peter Collier's article, "Ollie Uber Alles: Oliver Stone's *Triumph of the Will*," speaks for itself (see n. 33).

⁶⁷ Jon Katz, "Rock, Rap and Movies Bring You the News," *Rolling Stone*, 5 March 1992, 37.

issue-based themes and a willingness to explore “sometimes frightening undercurrents of American life” – represented a threat to journalism’s old guard.⁶⁸ It was not, as some argued, the lack of traditional journalism to tell the story that prompted the Old News attack on *JFK*: it was the fact that *JFK* told it better. This is precisely what David Ansen alluded to when he wrote of the film, “if history is a battlefield, *JFK* has to be seen as bold attempt to seize the turf for future debate.”⁶⁹ The negative media response to *JFK* was discussed in a *Boston Globe* interview with Danny Schechter, a journalist who made a documentary about *JFK*’s production. He contended that since the film challenged traditional journalistic interpretations of the events surrounding the assassination, Stone was “treading on their turf.”⁷⁰ Schechter speculated that this journalistic response from the major media was magnified by an “institutional guilt complex of not having done the kind of investigative job it could have into the Kennedy assassination.”⁷¹

We must further dissect this argument if we are to judge *JFK*’s worthiness as an historical film. In *Visions of the Past*, author Robert Rosenstone discussed how historical films can function as history while conforming to traditional cinematic conventions. The cinematic form necessitates certain compromises with history: dramatic structure demands that historical filmmakers condense, symbolize, or invent characters or events. The images depicted are always invented but, according to Rosenstone, can still be considered true in that they “carry out the overall meaning of the past which can be verified, documented, or reasonably

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ David Ansen, “What Does Oliver Stone Owe History?” *Newsweek*, 23 December 1991, 50.

⁷⁰ Renee Loth, “Oliver Stone’s *JFK* Reopens Old Wounds,” *Boston Globe*, 22 December 1991, A19.

⁷¹ Ibid.

argued.”⁷² To be considered “historical,” Rosenstone stated that a film must then engage the ideas and issues of this ongoing discourse – a litmus test *JFK* clearly meets. In reading *JFK* as a countermyth, then, the minutiae with which many critics bog down their analysis essentially become irrelevant. Such debates are put into perspective by Mr. X in the film:

X

That’s the real question, isn’t it – “Why?” – the “how” is just “scenery” for the suckers...Oswald, Ruby, Cuba, Mafia, it keeps the people guessing like some kind of parlor game, but it prevents them from asking the most important question – Why? Why was Kennedy killed? Who benefited? Who had the power to cover it up?⁷³

The debate over John Kennedy’s Vietnam policy continues to this day: Errol Morris’ Academy Award winning film *The Fog of War* raises some of the same questions as *JFK*. The documentary is an extended interview with Robert McNamara, who served as Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. In it, McNamara notes Kennedy’s intention to withdraw all troops from Vietnam by 1965, but he is reluctant to speculate whether the plan outlined in National Security Action Memorandum 263 would have come to fruition had Kennedy lived.⁷⁴

With this in mind, the comparisons of *JFK* to propaganda films such as *Triumph of the Will* do not withstand serious scrutiny. In light of modern forensic analysis, the release of government files on the assassination, and works such as Gerald Posner’s *Case Closed*, the lone gunman theory is reemerging as the most

⁷² Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film on our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 128.

⁷³ Stone and Sklar, “*JFK*: The Documented Screenplay,” 110.

⁷⁴ *The Fog of War*, DVD, directed by Errol Morris (Culver City: Sony Pictures Classics, 2003).

popular account of the Kennedy assassination. And yet *JFK* is responsible for stimulating what one historian called “a valuable process of inquiry.”⁷⁵ Few propaganda films demand the disclosure of government documents that will prove or disprove their positions, something *JFK* can claim. Even if one concedes that *JFK* is factually unreliable, it nevertheless tackles some of the most important debates that exist in the discourse of American history. Norman Mailer wrote of *JFK* in 1992:

Let cinematic hyperbole war with the establishment’s skewed reality. At times, bullshit can only be countered by superior bullshit. Stone’s version has, at least, the virtue of its thoroughgoing metaphor.⁷⁶

As heavy handed as Stone’s direction is, Mailer gave him kudos for being the first to tackle the assassination and its impact on America. *JFK* was Stone’s countermythic attempt to provide understanding for his generation’s lost innocence, give meaning to the Vietnam War, and explore the relationship between Americans and their government.

Factual arguments aside, the jury appears to still be out on the crux of the matter: has Stone achieved his ultimate boon? Author Robert Goldberg contended that the most powerful historians of the twentieth century are filmmakers, and thanks to *JFK* “most Americans know of the Kennedy assassination through Oliver Stone’s mind and Oliver Stone’s images.”⁷⁷ What *JFK*’s countermythology ultimately seeks is what Campbell’s monomyth seeks – a higher truth that transcends commonly held beliefs, both within and without the film. Therefore, the

⁷⁵ Frank Beaver, *Oliver Stone: Wakeup Cinema*, 189.

⁷⁶ Mailer, “Footfalls in the Crypt,” 171.

⁷⁷ Robert Goldberg, “The Kennedy Assassination: Beyond Conspiracy,” interview by History Channel, 26 November 2005.

ultimate boon of *JFK* is found in the journey down Oliver Stone's rabbit hole. *JFK* subsumes the traditional debate over the Kennedy assassination and instead prods the audience to achieve Campbell's "ever expanding realization" and glimpse Kennedy's vision of a future that never was, gain an understanding of a war that seemingly defies explanation, and ensure that the search for truth mentioned in the film's coda continues unabated. Stone's influential use of *JFK* as a vehicle for addressing the fundamental ideas noted in this chapter contributes to it being, as Robert Rosenstone suggested, "among the most important works of American history ever to appear on the screen."⁷⁸ *JFK* and *Nixon* are perhaps the best examples in Stone's filmography that consider issues about the Myth of the State, our relationship with that state, the nature of history and the importance of countermythic ideals in contemporary American society. Stone's countermyth is completed by a set of more personal films. Our journey will conclude in perhaps the only way it should: in the mythic landscape of Vietnam as seen through the final portion of the monomyth.

⁷⁸ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 139.

Chapter IV

The Return, *Platoon*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*

And it is not enough to have memories. Only when they have changed into our very blood can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises...

-Rainer Maria Rilke

Oliver Stone was born in 1946 to an investment adviser and a French war bride. He had a privileged upbringing, attended a top prep school and spent summers in France with his mother's family.¹ He dropped out of Yale University after only one semester and went to Saigon to teach English. He soon became bored and joined the merchant marines before making his way back to New York. Urged by his father, Stone went back to Yale. He dropped out midsemester to enlist in the U.S. Army in 1967.² He was assigned to the Air Cavalry, where he spent the first part of his time in a Long Range Reconnaissance Platoon. It was during this time that he met the sergeant who inspired the Elias character in *Platoon*. After receiving a Purple Heart and Bronze Star for valor, Stone was transferred to another outfit where he would meet the Barnes character. Stone ended his Vietnam tour at the end of 1968 and came home a different man. He realized that "combat is totally random. Life is a matter of luck or destiny, take your pick...I was saved for a reason...to write about the experience, maybe. To make a movie about it."³

After returning from Vietnam, Stone enrolled at New York University and blossomed as a filmmaker under the tutelage of Martin Scorsese. It was there that he found a creative outlet for dealing with his Vietnam experiences. His first student film, *Last Year in Vietnam*, was well received in several short film

¹ Michael Carlson, *Oliver Stone* (Trafalgar Square: North Pomfret, 2002), 24.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

festivals.⁴ Even though Stone won an Academy Award for writing *Midnight Express*, he had difficulty convincing American studios to finance a motion picture about his Vietnam experiences. In 1978, he was lined up to write an adaptation of fellow veteran Ron Kovic's biography *Born on the Fourth of July*. With Al Pacino already slated to play Kovic, the film's financing fell through just a few days before principal photography was scheduled to begin.⁵ Stone promised Kovic that "if I get the opportunity, if I'm ever able to break through as a director, I'll come back."⁶ *Platoon*, a screenplay he had penned shortly after graduation, was Oliver Stone's break.

After a British company provided funding 1985, Stone was able to make *Platoon*, the story of his combat experiences in Vietnam. He collected four Oscars for the film, including Best Picture and Best Director. With his stock at its highest point yet, it was only a matter of time until Stone kept his promise to Kovic. Stone reflected on his relationship with Kovic in an interview: "it was as if we had been linked by destiny. Chosen as God's instruments to get a message, a memory out about the war."⁷ Their message, *Born on the Fourth of July*, was released on December 20, 1989. Stone received his second Academy Award for Best Director and was vaulted into a position where he could tackle more controversial films such as *Natural Born Killers*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*. *Platoon* and *Born* are arguably the most personal films of Stone's career; taken together, they represent Oliver Stone's attempt to convey the war he fought in 1967 and the experience of returning home.

⁴ Randy Roberts and David Welky, "A Sacred Mission: Oliver Stone and Vietnam," in *Oliver Stone's USA*, ed. Robert Toplin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 74.

⁵ Oliver Stone, "Oliver Stone and *The Hand*," interview by Bob Martin, *Oliver Stone Interviews*, ed. Charles Silet (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 6.

⁶ Jack Davis, "Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* Experience," in *Oliver Stone's USA*, ed. Robert Toplin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 136.

⁷ Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 145.

We have seen how *JFK* and *Nixon* construe the Vietnam War as an inevitable result of the Beast, but *Platoon* and *Born* are concerned with illustrating the human tragedies caused by the war itself. Through these films, the loss of innocence stemming from the assassination of John Kennedy comes to fruition. It is therefore essential to contextualize them in Stone's countermyth.

Stone's experiences in Vietnam had a profound effect on him politically. They also exacted an emotional toll as he dealt with stateside antiwar sentiment and apathy. "I didn't know how to deal with my own pain at the time," he admitted in an interview, "eventually I took it and wrote the screenplays for *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* relating these experiences."⁸ Making *Platoon* and *Born* proved to be a cathartic experience for Stone; as such, they stand as a testament to his attempt to acknowledge and depict his traumatic Vietnam experience. But there is a deeper meaning embedded in these two films, for they also address the national trauma triggered by Vietnam. Jean Luc Godard once observed that when a good film is also a popular film, it is because of a misunderstanding. By analyzing the discourse between the final portion of the monomyth, "the return," and Stone's countermyth, we will attempt to decipher why *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* resonated with audiences and what role they play in the post-Vietnam War era.

The monomyth requires that the hero return to his community after completing his quest. This crucial final component completes the monomyth outlined by Campbell. But, as Campbell noted, "the responsibility is frequently refused."⁹ Hence, we come to the first element of the return, "the refusal of the

⁸ Oliver Stone, "A Filmmaker's Credo: Some Thoughts on Politics, History, and the Movies," *The Humanist* 56, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 3.

⁹ Campbell, *Hero*, 193.

return.” This element is embedded in the countermythology of *Platoon* and *Born*, but it appears in an alternate form. *Platoon* contains a running dialogue between Chris and the other characters about returning home. The phrase “365 and a wake-up” is used as a countdown to the end of a tour of duty, and Chris’ clique dream about returning home. “All you gotta do,” King tells him, “is get outta here. Then it’s gravy, every day for the rest of your life.”¹⁰ Although this appears to be a direct contradiction to the monomyth, *Platoon* is not really about returning at all. As a tale of an infantryman’s experiences in Vietnam, *Platoon* only touches on the dream of getting back to the world. It is not until the release of *Born* three years later that Stone shows the implications of the Vietnam veteran’s return home.

When considered as a pair, the countermythic equivalent of refusal of the return becomes obvious.¹¹ Chris’ intense desire to leave the hell of Vietnam in *Platoon* is met with the equally intense rejection of Ron Kovic in *Born*. Stone’s own personal experience returning home was expressed in an interview:

For months over there you’d count the days you had left, and then finally it would come, Liberation Day, and you’d be aboard that big Freedom Bird feeling life would never be so happy again. Then WHOOM! Another war, right in your back.¹²

The countermythic “refusal of the hero” seen in *Born* is the filmic manifestation of Stone’s quote. We can understand how this countermythology is conveyed by referring to Eisenstein’s film theory. By applying his montage of film attractions, *Born* can be stylistically deconstructed into three attractions. Kovic’s childhood

¹⁰ *Platoon*, special ed. DVD.

¹¹ Hal Hinson stated that *Born* could easily be called “*Platoon Part II*.” Hal Hinson, “*Born on the Fourth: War, Hammered Home*,” *Washington Post*, 5 January 1990, B1.

¹² Paul Chutkow, “The Private War of Tom Cruise,” *Washington Post*, 17 December 1989, sec. 2, 1.

represents the first of these attractions. His loss of innocence marks the dividing line between the second and third attractions which are visually distinct from one another.

Kovic's childhood – the first attraction in *Born* – is expressed with a unique visual style. Stone uses sweeping crane shots to establish the idyllic setting of 1950s Massapequa. The elements – slow motion, diffusion filters, even Judy Ruskin's precise costuming – create a hometown portrait reminiscent of Norman Rockwell. *Born* represents Stone's first foray into 2.35:1, and he makes full use of the frame. Stuart Klawans claimed that the *mise en scene* is so thickly layered that "the actors almost have to wade through the period detail."¹³ This portion of the film is obviously hyperstylized, and when we consider its role in the countermyth, the reasoning behind Stone's picturesque depiction of Massapequa becomes evident.

Born's second attraction occurs during the Vietnam sequences and Ron's subsequent time in the Bronx V.A. hospital. Stone switches to handheld shots and quick pans to create a disorienting sense of confusion. The harsh outdoor lighting in Vietnam is paralleled by equally harsh lighting in the hospital. The lush color palate in Massapequa is tossed out in favor of muted browns, greens and tans. These earth tones are washed out in Vietnam, and by the time we reach the hospital the film is nearly monochromatic. The harshness of these scenes serves to drive home the reality of Ron's physical situation (he is now paralyzed and will never walk again), but he remains the same idealistic boy that left for Vietnam. Christian

¹³ Stewart Klawans, "Film," *Nation*, 1 January 1990, 29. Critic Pauline Kael, a frequent basher of Stone's films, characterized these initial scenes as "Oliver Stone's vision of Midwestern America in the fifties – clapboard picturesque." Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema: Potency," *New Yorker*, 22 January 1990, 122.

Appy wrote that “*Fourth of July*’s greatest strength lies in its lengthy segments inside the Bronx Veterans Hospital,”¹⁴ but from a character standpoint he could not be more wrong. Despite the deplorable conditions and indifference from the staff, Ron continues to affirm his role as a soldier and support U.S. policy in Vietnam. His attitude in the hospital is the same as it was before he was wounded.

The lynchpin in *Born* comes with Ron’s loss of innocence which is signified by its third attraction. These scenes contain many similar elements to the first section but exist as stylistic opposites. The crane shots are nowhere to be found; in fact, the majority of shots are from a wheelchair perspective. As we follow Ron through his new shrunken world, we experience a sense of constraint that is augmented by the hyperreality we observed before. Stone is able to create a claustrophobia that functions even in 2.35 anamorphic. The Fourth of July parade Ron enjoyed as a child is now peppered with antiwar protesters. Head shops have sprung up along the parade route, and Ron flinches at the sound of firecrackers. The score, which Pauline Kael previously complained swells “like a tidal wave,” takes on a darker, melancholic feel.¹⁵ Even the Mexico scenes function as a parallel to the first attraction; the innocence of the school dance is parlayed into a sweaty brothel.

By applying Eisenstein’s montage theory to *Born*’s three attractions, we can see a metamontage emerge. The goal is to highlight Ron’s loss of innocence by playing the same elements from the first attraction against the third, but significantly distorting them. The visceral quality of Ron’s Vietnam and hospital experiences provides a stylistic bridge between the two: a beach in Vietnam where

¹⁴ Christian Appy, “Vietnam According to Oliver Stone,” *Commonweal* 117, no. 6 (23 March 1990): 188.

¹⁵ Kael, “The Current Cinema: Potency,” 122.

Ron was physically wounded dissolves into a beach in Mexico where Ron reaches his psychological brink.

In viewing *Born* as a series of filmic attractions, the idea of lost innocence it conveys is relatively clear. But what is its function? The purpose of *Born*'s message is found in Eisenstein's cine-fist. In characterizing the cine-eye "art for art's sake" argument as a *denial* of the fundamental essence of art, Eisenstein opened the door for art to act as a "tractor ploughing over the audience's psyche."¹⁶ That *Born*'s cine-fist affected its audience is without question: faintings reported at its screenings attest to that.¹⁷ The viewer identifies with Ron Kovic and invests in his journey, which is ultimately about his loss of innocence and attempt to reconcile his experiences. In *Home From the War*, psychologist Robert Jay Lifton wrote that participation in such groups as Vietnam Veterans Against the War helped veterans heal the psychological trauma of Vietnam.¹⁸ This is precisely what happened to Ron Kovic: he turned his anger into political activism and ultimately found meaning in his experiences. But when *Born* was released in 1989, the Vietnam War was long over. It was too late to act, too late to protest – too late to heal in the way Ron did. But Eisenstein noted that the cine-fist ultimately points to some final ideological motivation.¹⁹ This is the key to unlocking *Born*'s cine-fist: the countermyth and metamontage at the core of its cine-fist creates an opportunity for transference to the audience. Therefore, the ultimate result of the film is that it allows the audience to heal by proxy: by following and empathizing with Ron on his journey, the viewer has a chance to heal in the manner described by Lifton. The

¹⁶ Eisenstein, "Problem of the Materialist Approach," 56 (see chap. 1, n. 15).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Kastor, "Faintings Reported at *Born on the Fourth*," *Washington Post*, 10 January 1990, D1.

¹⁸ Robert Lifton, *Home From The War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 286-295.

¹⁹ Eisenstein, "Problem of the Materialist Approach," 57.

ability of cinema to effect such psychological changes in the viewer has been debated since its earliest incantations, so the question of whether Stone's films achieve this certainly remains open. In the introduction to *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud noted that the majority of Vietnam films made over the last thirty years reflect a "retrospective need for healing."²⁰ And yet in the final analysis, they claim that this healing simply does not work.²¹ Kevin Bowen, author of "Strange Hells," saw the emotional weight of *Platoon* as its greatest strength, but for any perceived change to become real, "the evocation of the conflicting emotions that surround the trauma must move forward toward other articulations."²² Stone himself claimed that the act of making *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* was cathartic,²³ but the ultimate effect of viewing Stone's reconciliation remains debatable. That the spectre of Vietnam appears in subsequent films such as *JFK* and *Nixon*, and continues to appear across his filmography, is telling: Stone may have found some consolation, but the emotional impact of returning from Vietnam still remains.

The interplay between refusal of the return / refusal of the hero is critical to understanding the countermythic return, but it is only the first element in the journey. Campbell noted that just as the hero crossed the threshold into the darkness, he must cross the same threshold to rejoin his society. Why must he cross the threshold to return at all? Campbell answered this question by stating that the ultimate boon, whether runes of wisdom or great treasure, must be brought back to

²⁰ Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, introduction to *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kevin Bowen, "Strange Hells: Hollywood in Search of America's Lost War," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 234.

²³ Stone, "A Filmmaker's Credo," 3.

renew the hero's community.²⁴ The voiceover at the conclusion of *Platoon* provides the impetus for crossing the return threshold. The hero, Chris Taylor, reflects on his duty to return to society:

Those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life.²⁵

Platoon leaves the countermythic crossing to *Born*, which explores the implications of Chris' monologue. When Chris speaks of the obligation to build again, Ron is faced with the more immediate question of *how*. As we cross the countermythic threshold from one world to the next, we will see that there are actually two answers to this question.

The discussion must start with the publishing of Ron Kovic's book, over a decade before *Born on the Fourth of July* was to become a film. John Breslin reviewed Kovic's book and *Friendly Fire*, a work by C.D.B. Bryan, in a 1976 issue of *America*. Bryan's book tells the story of Peg and Gene Mullen, a Midwestern couple whose son Michael had been killed in Vietnam. Although *Friendly Fire* is ostensibly about Peg and Gene's struggle to come to terms with Michael's death, Breslin observed that no amount of research could bring solace to them: "Michael's death – in all its inculpable absurdity – robbed the Mullens of their final grasp at meaning, that somebody had to be responsible."²⁶ This is the first boon to be carried across the countermythic threshold of *Born on the Fourth of July*: Ron's search for meaning in his experiences makes rebuilding feasible. If it is possible to attach some meaning to the emptiness and futility of Vietnam, to discover

²⁴ Campbell, *Hero*, 193.

²⁵ *Platoon*, special ed. DVD.

²⁶ John Breslin, "Vietnam Legacy," *America*, 25 September 1976, 173.

responsibility for the seeming absurdity of an event like Michael Mullens' death, then the world might be rebuilt.

It is perhaps a strange twist of fate that Breslin reviewed both books, for Kovic relates a similar incident in which he accidentally killed a fellow Marine named Billy Wilson. The Wilsons are in the same predicament as the Mullens: "Of course, we never really knew what happened," the mother tells Ron.²⁷ Stone includes Kovic's anecdote, but the screenplay invents a scene where Ron visits Wilson's family. That Stone adds this fictional encounter thirteen years later is telling: as Ron tells the awful truth to Wilson's family, he nonetheless tells the truth. They too believed in the fantasies which Kovic had clung to for so long, and although Kovic's revelation to Wilson's family is painful, author Don Kunz noted that he "strips away the lies that make it easier for parents to sacrifice their sons."²⁸ This is the key to Stone's countermythic threshold – that we must acknowledge the truth *here* in order to find some meaning in the events that happened *there*.

In this way, the scene with Wilson's family is the turning point in the story. It lies at the crux of Ron's rebirth as a political activist, for it represents Ron's acknowledgment of the truth. "While no new political vision is apparent to Kovic," Christopher Sharrett noted, "the film suggests that such a vision is possible only as one dispenses with lies."²⁹ The crane shot that shows Ron leaving Wilson's home is unusual, for *Born* is almost exclusively shot from the wheelchair level after Ron's wounding. But its imagery is more striking than its point of view, for it plays as a

²⁷ *Born on the Fourth of July*, DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (1989; Universal City, Calif.: Universal, 2000).

²⁸ 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 (London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 173.

²⁹ Christopher Sharrett, "Born on the Fourth of July," *Cineaste* 17, no. 4 (1990): 49.

counterpoint to *Platoon*. The ending of that film features an aerial shot of the carnage of war – bodies, craters, wounded men on stretchers, and a giant tree. The tree is bereft of any sign of life, its limbs are broken, its leaves incinerated. But in *Born*, we see a different tree: aged, covered with leaves, and alive, a symbol of Ron’s spiritual rebirth. As the American flag is superimposed over the tree and the first bars of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” begin to play, we realize that Ron has at last crossed the threshold to return home. Don Kunz noted the significance of the scene:

Kovic has begun the process of regaining his manhood, his patriotism, and his life by coming home to admit the truth of what he did in Vietnam, to take responsibility for it, and to communicate that to fellow Americans who must share that responsibility.³⁰

Truth – whether searching for it in *JFK*, telling it in *Nixon*, or living it in *Born on the Fourth of July* – is an important component in Oliver Stone’s countermythology. In a way, it is the ultimate boon in every one of his films – the treasure brought back by the hero for his society. The search for meaning in the experience of Chris Taylor or Ron Kovic is merely the other side of the coin. And as we see in *Born*, not only is telling the truth crucial to discovering the meaning of Vietnam, it aids in *creating* that meaning. The charge of anti-Americanism has been levied against most of Stone’s films, and *Platoon* and *Born* are no exception.³¹ But *Born* is not anti-American: instead, it rejects the lies of blind patriotism that put Ron Kovic in

³⁰ Kunz, “Redefining Masculine Heroism,” 174.

³¹ Richard Eilert’s piece is an excellent example of this sort of criticism. Richard Eilert, “*Born on the Fourth: It’s a Lie*,” *Washington Post*, 6 February 1990, A25.

his wheelchair and Oliver Stone in Vietnam. “I love America,” Ron tells a reporter, but he his sickened by the lies told by its leaders.³²

At the end of *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic has an opportunity to address the 1976 Democratic National Convention. Before wheeling himself onto the stage, a supporter asks what he plans to say. His answer, “I’m just going to tell the truth,”³³ is perhaps the most simple and poignant sign that Ron has crossed the threshold with his ultimate boon. *Platoon* echoes this sentiment when Chris Taylor speaks of rebuilding and teaching others what he has learned. Fifteen years after the release of *Platoon* and thirty years after leaving the jungles of Vietnam, Oliver Stone expressed his hopes for exactly that:

In a sense the American generation that went over there has something to teach the rest of America. Not just the generation that stayed at home but the upcoming generation: their kids, their grandkids. I only hope that the kids that are coming up are smarter than I was, have read a little more history than I did, and can make up their own minds the next time some politician tries to sell them a used war like this.³⁴

For Stone, the lesson of Vietnam can only be learned by unraveling the meaning of the traumas it caused. And the key to that lies in rejecting the lies that persisted, and continue to persist, about why and how the Vietnam War happened.

The two worlds of the monomyth – the hero’s home and his quest-land – are an important aspect of Campbell’s mythic system. This duality is paralleled by the countermyth, where we can see a distinction between “the Nam” and “the World.” As we consider the penultimate event of the return, we will see how

³² *Born on the Fourth of July*, DVD.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Oliver Stone, “Tour of the Inferno,” *Platoon*, special ed. DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (1986; Los Angeles: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2001).

understanding the truth about what happened in the Nam is so important to finding meaning in the World.

The final elements of the return are not steps to be taken by the hero, but signs that his mission is complete and he has returned home at last. The first of these is what Campbell termed “master of both worlds.” The dichotomy we have thus far seen – between the darkness *there* and the familiarity *here* – is disregarded by the hero. Campbell stated that the hero now has the ability to “pass back and forth across the world division – not contaminating the principles of one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other.”³⁵ The defining line between worlds in Stone’s countermyth is obvious: a cursory viewing of *Platoon* or *Born on the Fourth of July* yields numerous references to “the Nam” and “the World.” However, the countermythic expression of master of both worlds is more complex.

At first glance, there appears to be no equivalency between the monomyth and the countermyth. Instead, we see what could be called “master of neither world,” for both Chris Taylor and Ron Kovic must resist being cast into a dark purgatory between the Nam and the World. The opening shot of *Platoon* features Chris leaving the belly of the whale. As he steps out of a C-130 onto a dusty landing strip to see body bags being loaded in his place, he crosses the threshold into the Nam. The difficulty in *Platoon* is that Chris is now thrust into a situation where he cannot function in either world. He stops his fellow soldiers from raping a Vietnamese girl, prompting one to tell him, “you don’t belong in the Nam. This

³⁵ Campbell, *Hero*, 229.

ain't your place at all."³⁶ Yet Taylor's murder of Barnes at the end of the film severs his countermythic link to the World. When Taylor reflects that "we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves," he is pointing out the civil war that fractured his platoon.³⁷ *Platoon* frames the fundamental question about the master of neither world: if Taylor does not belong in the Nam but dissolves his link with the World, is it possible to function in either place?

The answer lies in *Born on the Fourth of July*. The civil war in the Nam depicted by *Platoon* is paralleled by *Born*'s equally destructive civil war in the World. Ron Kovic is in the same situation as Chris Taylor: the reality of Vietnam and the lies he has been told make it impossible for him to function in either world. The barrier is not just psychological, for *Born* contains a protracted sequence in Mexico featuring a host of expatriates in the same position as Ron. Charlie, a fellow disabled veteran, expresses a profane yet simple mantra: "Fuck the states. Nobody cared, nobody gave a shit, I ain't ever going back."³⁸ The problem with Charlie's declaration comes when we consider Campbell's statement that "the sign of the hero's requirement is to knit together his two worlds."³⁹ This is the quandary of *Platoon* and *Born*: with one civil war in the Nam and another in the World, how can the hero hope to become master of either?

We saw the first steps to fulfilling this aspiration earlier: acknowledgement in the World about the truth of the Nam yields a sense of meaning to both worlds. But the key to this element lies in an epiphany, one that the hero must have if he is to become the master of both worlds:

³⁶ *Platoon*, special ed. DVD.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Born on the Fourth of July*, DVD.

³⁹ Campbell, *Hero*, 228.

The hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness; there he accomplishes his adventure, and his return is described as a coming back out of that yonder zone. Nevertheless – and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol – *the two kingdoms are actually one.*⁴⁰

Ron realizes this in *Born*, and it is this realization that explains his transformation. It is not until he realizes the apparent disparities between the Nam and the World are merely illusions that he begins to progress as a character. The possibility of healing is again raised, but here it occurs through different means. For a moment, let us consider the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It can be argued that it embodies Campbell's statement: the American landscape, cut by a large black gash representing the war, on which we can find inscribed the names of men who died as a result of what one author termed "an ideological crisis that polarized the nation."⁴¹ The ritualistic act of visiting and engaging such a memorial is a gesture that Jay Winter claimed extends "beyond the limitations of place and time."⁴² Although we admittedly will never fully comprehend exactly how the healing process occurs, Winter argued that the role of the war memorial in alleviating despair must be considered.⁴³ We have studied the filmic effect on the audience of both *Platoon* and *Born*, and the resemblance to the scenario outlined by Winter is striking. We therefore must also consider the implication of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* as war memorials.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 217 (emphasis mine).

⁴¹ Harry Haines, "'They Were Called and They Went': The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 83.

⁴² Jay Winter, "War Memorials and the Mourning Process," in *Sites of Memory. Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113.

⁴³ Ibid., 116.

When Ron Kovic stated in the epigraph to his book “I am the living death / the memorial day on wheels,” he presented himself as a sort of living memorial to the Vietnam War. As the master of both worlds, Kovic symbolizes the unification of the Nam and the World: his broken body, as the “memorial day on wheels,” is a reminder of the ideological crisis that linked the two worlds. But can a film such as *Platoon* or *Born* fulfill the role of memorial? Judy Lee Kinney addressed this exact idea when she stated that although Vietnam combat films appear to offer an authentic look at the G.I. experience, in reality they subsume the experience into a “larger cultural matrix of meaning.”⁴⁴ This is precisely how films such as *Platoon* or *Born on the Fourth of July* can memorialize the Vietnam War. The importance Stone places on his Vietnam films as warnings to the next generation is a natural offshoot of their role as memorials. “I’m baffled by critics who say that Vietnam is something that should be forgotten,” he stated in an interview, “all those men died for nothing if we forget.”⁴⁵ In this way, *Platoon*’s function mirrors that of the Wall. If, as Haines noted, the Wall “opened the way for the representation of combat and for tentative attempts to assign meaning to the loss of American lives,”⁴⁶ *Platoon* and *Born* serve as the next logical step in the process of finding that meaning. History will ultimately judge the efficacy of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* in constructing a post-Vietnam-era national narrative, but Stone’s attempt to highlight the ideological crisis of Vietnam cannot be overlooked. By melding his

⁴⁴ Judy Kinney, “*Gardens of Stone, Platoon, and Hamburger Hill: Rituals of Remembrance*,” in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 159.

⁴⁵ Oliver Stone, interview by Tom Allen and Tim Rice, *Moviemaker* 12 (March 1995): 2.

⁴⁶ Haines, “Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran,” 92.

memories with the countermythic return, Stone becomes the master of both worlds and offers what Kinney termed a “reconciliation of history with myth.”⁴⁷

Andrew Slade observed that “*only* in a recounting” can traumatic events be “given a meaning, truth value, and context.”⁴⁸ *Platoon*’s unique position as the first Vietnam film to represent extensive combat and dying, and *Born on the Fourth of July*’s status as the first film to address both wars must be acknowledged.⁴⁹ They represent a legitimate attempt by Stone to forge countermyth into “countermemorial.” If film does have the capacity to heal, then *Platoon* and *Born* represent a bold attempt to repair a cultural wound that has persisted in America since the 1960s.

We now reach the end of the journey through the monomyth. The hero has returned from the darkness and is master of both worlds. The final element of the return is the last piece of the monomyth, what Campbell termed “freedom to live.” This is the crux of Stone’s filmography in general, and his Vietnam films in particular. Jim Garrison, Richard Nixon, Chris Taylor, and Ron Kovic all struggle with the same issue: how does one live with the loss of innocence that inevitably accompanies the hero’s quest through Stone’s countermythic landscape? The countermyth is about the ability to withstand what Campbell called “the impact of the world,”⁵⁰ and bring this ultimate boon – this burden of knowledge – to society. Films such as *Platoon* and *Born* are unique in how they address the idea of

⁴⁷ Kinney, “Rituals of Remembrance,” 163.

⁴⁸ Andrew Slade, “*Hiroshima, mon amour*, Trauma, and the Sublime,” in *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, eds. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 177 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ Harry Haines made this claim about *Platoon* in a 1990 analysis of the portrayal of Vietnam veterans in popular culture. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud noted *Born*’s relevance in the introduction to their book on the Vietnam War in American film. Haines, “Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran,” 92; Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 8.

⁵⁰ Campbell, *Hero*, 226.

Vietnam: lost innocence is the price for the countermythic freedom to live. The idea resonates because the countermyth allows these films to, as Eisenstein put it, “plough the audience’s psyche.” *Platoon* and *Born* are ultimately about human frailties, and this is one area where Stone’s countermyth is in complete alignment with the monomyth. Consider Campbell’s reflection on the monomyth:

And yet, if the monomyth is to fulfill its promise, not human failure or superhuman success but human success is what we shall have to be shown.⁵¹

Chris Taylor and Ron Kovic both experience the human success of the monomyth. But in a way, it can be applied to Oliver Stone as well. *Platoon* and *Born* seek the same thing Stone seeks: that we might find meaning in the national trauma that was Vietnam, that we might construct a new national narrative where one has been missing, and that we all might discover freedom to live.

Audiences recognize the brutality and violence of *Platoon* and *Born*, but Stone’s countermyth nonetheless retains an undercurrent of possibility and hopefulness. The optimism expressed by John Kennedy during the prologue of *JFK* is echoed at the end of *Born on the Fourth of July* by Ron Kovic. Our journey through Oliver Stone’s countermyth concludes after Kennedy’s assassination, the downfall of Richard Nixon, and the Vietnam War. As Ron Kovic is wheeled into the light, he reflects on his generation’s return from the countermythic landscape of America:

It’s been a long way for us, but just lately I’ve felt like I’m home. Maybe we’re all home...⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., 207.

⁵² *Born on the Fourth of July*, DVD.

Chapter V

Conclusion

It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal – not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair.

-Joseph Campbell

Any study of myth in modern society should include the cinema. As one of the newest and most influential art forms in recent history, film provides the next logical step for mythic expression. Some mythologists have even argued that film is the only savior for myth in the modern world.¹ But this thesis did not focus solely on myth and countermyth: it addressed the power of Stone's countermyth in modern American society and attempted to unravel its historical importance. Although film contains an extraordinary amount of information about societal beliefs and national concerns, this reservoir of knowledge has remained largely untapped.² This analysis has attempted to mine the information contained in Stone's countermyth and evaluate how it has resonated with American culture.

The countermyth was shown to be a counterpoint to the monomyth, but its importance is also a function of stylistic expression. Sergei Eisenstein's theories were applied to Oliver Stone's films in order to determine how the countermyth is conveyed to the audience. The underlying concept embodied in Eisenstein's approach to film is ideology, a concept that Stone's filmography strongly demonstrates. In the simplest sense, *ideology* implies the conveyance of an idea, and this thesis showed how the theory of montage and the filmic representation of the countermyth work synergistically to create a powerful cine-fist for delivering Stone's message. This *counter-fist* explains why Stone's filmography has impacted

¹ Robert Segal, "Does Myth Have a Future?" in *Myth and Method*, ed. Laurie Patton and Wendy Doniger (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), 88.

² Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), xi.

audiences to a greater degree than many other films: the power of myth and the power of montage work to create an ideology greater than the sum of its parts.

But what ideology is embedded in the countermyth, and what is its cultural significance? We have seen many examples of the countermyth used as a tool to question the sacred cows of the Myth of the Establishment. Whereas *JFK* functions as a countermyth to the myth of the Warren Commission Report, *Nixon* offers a countermyth to the traditional understanding of Richard Nixon as a one-sided warmonger. We have also considered the countermyth expressed by *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. As artistic expressions, the films answer the mythologies embedded in Vietnam films that preceded them – they represent Stone’s attempt to answer the bellicose mythic patterns of *Apocalypse Now* and *Rambo*. The creative impetus behind both films represents Stone’s personal revelation in Vietnam, expressed in a 1996 article:

During my two tours there, I saw firsthand what the people at home were learning in a much more gradual fashion: that the war was a lie – a lie on a scale so massive that I never could have imagined it.³

Therefore, the countermyth highlights the romanticism and folly of the “John Wayne myth” that prompted Stone to enlist and fight in Vietnam.⁴ The ideology embedded in the countermyth represents a largely uphill battle, sometimes attacking beliefs, sometimes reaffirming them, but it always questions these myths of the Establishment.

³ Oliver Stone, “A Filmmaker’s Credo,” 3.

⁴ Dan Butler, “Film-Made Man, Man-Made Film: Myth and Countermyth in John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*,” *Journal of Graduate Liberal Studies* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 62.

Oliver Stone is a cinematic philosopher whose films reflect an era of soul searching. This thesis has shown how the countermyth asks universal questions about guilt and fears that persist in the American consciousness. When we observe Richard Nixon in *Nixon*, we see a more human and complicated character than the mythic Richard Nixon of American history. If *Nixon* is a mirror for the nature of the American character, then the countermyth suggests that America has been plunged into darkness by forces it cannot comprehend. The darkness of Richard Nixon's psyche, Watergate, and the Vietnam War are traced by the countermyth back to November 22, 1963 – the date Oliver Stone's generation lost its innocence. But rather than throw up one's hands at the absence of reason in modern America, *JFK* and *Nixon* postulate an underlying force behind events that seem to defy reason. We see darkness in *Nixon*, but the countermyth hints at what lives there. This "Beast" represents the forces that were responsible for Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, and Nixon's downfall – events that have perplexed the American people for decades. If myth is "the collective desire personified,"⁵ then the mythic war played out across Oliver Stone's filmography is a battle for the hearts and minds of Americans. The Beast is simply an attempt to ascribe meaning to events that seem to defy meaning.

In the epilogue to *American Myth: Legacy of Vietnam*, historian John Hellman stated that the assassination of John Kennedy represented the end of the New Frontier. The most severe and horrifying result of this "lost crusade" is the "enduring trauma of Vietnam."⁶ The countermyth addresses this idea, but where

⁵ Edmond Douffé, *Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du Nord*, quoted in Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 280.

⁶ John Hellman, *American Myth: Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 221.

Hellman saw a lack of national identity, Stone sees something more sinister. The Beast, lurking through the mythic landscape of America, represents the collective nightmare of contemporary American society. The prologue to *JFK* shows Dwight Eisenhower's warning about the influence of the military-industrial complex over the American government and the American way of life. Stone's ideology seizes on this idea – it acknowledges the darkness Hellman noted, but fills it in with the Beast. The countermyth therefore attempts to explain and ascribe meaning to the traumas of Stone's generation. Hellman claimed that “no nation can survive without a myth.”⁷ With this in mind, we can see that the countermyth expressed throughout Oliver Stone's filmography represents a continued struggle over which America will survive: the propagandistic nation in Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* or a realm of citizens free to question the unassailable Myth of the Establishment.

In a sense, this mythic search for meaning in the traumatic historical events of the 1960s is the overarching result of Stone's countermythology. When *Platoon* was released, it was praised for its visceral sense of realism and its attention to detail. “Finally,” many critics and viewers seemed to say, “someone got Vietnam right.” Ironically enough, *JFK* and *Nixon* were attacked for similar reasons, prompting claims that Stone didn't tell the truth about the Kennedy assassination or Watergate. But the power of these films does not lie in their verisimilitude: the countermyth is about assigning *meaning* to the traumatic events of the 1960s. What Stone seeks is a way to produce historical meaning, and from this perspective *JFK* and *Platoon* are cut from the same basic cloth of a higher truth. Telling this truth, unraveling the weight of historical events, healing the wounds of a generation –

⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

Stone attempts this not through verisimilitude or recitation of facts, but through the production of myth and meaning.

“We do not particularly care whether Rip Van Winkle, Kamar al-Zaman, or Jesus Christ ever actually lived,” Campbell said in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “their stories are what concern us.”⁸ When we consider the films addressed throughout this thesis, this is precisely what we see: stories. Campbell noted that historical questions are of secondary importance to the deeper sociological issues embedded in cultural myths.⁹ As we have seen throughout this thesis, focusing on historical minutiae only serves to obfuscate the larger issues of how Stone’s countermyth depicts and resonates with our culture. The search for a higher truth takes on a particular poignancy when we consider Stone’s highly personal Vietnam films. *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* certainly play a role in deconstructing the myth of Vietnam that led Stone to the jungles in 1967. But the films ultimately serve a higher purpose: they act as a memorial, every bit as profound as the Wall. Stone stated in an interview that “all the boys I knew who died – they’d have died for nothing if we hadn’t remembered the war.”¹⁰ *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* serve as a memorial to Stone’s fallen compatriots and a warning to the next generation of Americans about the mythologies that can be constructed to deceive well-intentioned people. They also open the possibility for healing the wounds of Vietnam. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang noted that when properly constructed, films about traumatic events can heal the viewer:

⁸ Campbell, *Hero*, 230.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰ Oliver Stone, “Oliver Stone is Ready to Move on from Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 2 December 1990, 13.

The position of “witness” may open up a space for transformation of the viewer through empathetic identification without vicarious traumatization – an identification which allows the spectator to enter into the victim’s experience through a work’s narration.¹¹

The countermythic power of narration found in *Platoon* and *Born* combined with an effective use of Eisenstein’s montage of attractions increases the ability of Stone’s counter-fist to plough the psyche of the audience. There are likely no better examples of cinematic healing power than Stone’s Vietnam films.

Cassirer told us that “a mythology *always* occurs if a pursuit is dangerous and its issues uncertain.”¹² There may not be a better way to describe the tumultuous events of the 1960s, and Oliver Stone’s filmography attempts to expose the official Myth of the Establishment. But the films also attempt to create a viable alternative to this myth; it is in the countermyth that we see the cultural significance of *JFK*, *Nixon*, *Platoon*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*. These films resonate with audiences because they delve into the *whys* of history. Loss of innocence is the price of such knowledge, but Stone believes that seeking enlightenment is ultimately a worthy endeavor:

The protagonists in my movies go through a crisis of conscience and ultimately achieve some form of enlightenment through the travails of this life. And that, I think, is one of the noblest and enduring themes we have in art, be it movies or any other form. It is the very purpose of our existence.¹³

¹¹ Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, “From Traumatic Paralysis to the Force Field of Modernity,” in *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, eds. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 10.

¹² Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 279 (emphasis mine).

¹³ Stone, “A Filmmaker’s Credo,” 5.

The cultural significance of the countermyth therefore lies not in the creation of a contrarian view of history, but in the quest for a higher truth. The journey – down the rabbit hole of *JFK* and along *Nixon*'s self-described path through the wilderness – ultimately offers a countermythic explanation for Cassirer's uncertain issues in uncertain times.

This thesis has shown the cultural significance of the countermyth, but we must also consider its importance in the context of contemporary American history. Although myth and history have generally been defined antithetically, this notion does not account for the myriad of conditions under which myths are formed or why they persist in every cultural tradition.¹⁴ If we consider the contention that any historical discourse contains an externally-imposed structural meaning that extends beyond the mere facts,¹⁵ the line between history and myth becomes justifiably blurred. This is why Joseph Mali argued that

Modern historiography must deal not only with what actually happened (that is, in common terms, history), nor with what people merely imagined to have happened (myth), but rather with the process in which both affect the production and reproduction of historical meaning (mythistory).¹⁶

As a mythic form in its own right, film is a perfect tool for Mali's process of production and reproduction of historical meaning. The countermythic recasting of historical events we have seen throughout this thesis establishes Oliver Stone as a cinematic philosopher and a modern historian. Shining a light into the shadow areas of history and asking "why" is a hallmark of the countermyth, but its historical

¹⁴ Mali, *Mythistory*, xii (see chap. 2, n. 69).

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 110.

¹⁶ Mali, *Mythistory*, 27.

significance lies in the way it prods others to ask such questions. Stone reflected on the effect his historical films have on an audience: “You want to know more. A movie is like a first draft; it’s something that engages the interest, but it has to work on its own terms.”¹⁷ Films such as *JFK* and *Nixon* are first drafts of a new mythistory in that they function as a starting point toward the further exploration of history.

Oliver Stone’s filmography does not exist in a vacuum; to the contrary, we have seen how the countermyth plays an integral role in the ongoing discourse of American history. One could say that Stone “only does the Sixties,” but such an opinion ignores the fact that the events depicted across his filmography remain relevant to this day. Films such as Errol Morris’ *The Fog of War* and Eugene Jarecki’s *Why We Fight* show that the issues and concerns that comprise the countermyth are still very much alive. The countermyth tells us that the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, and the Vietnam War are not isolated events in history books but templates for the present and future. Harry Haines noted that the intervening years since Vietnam have seen no change in the ideology that justified that war.¹⁸ The countermyth embedded in *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* highlights and opposes this ideology in an attempt to dissuade the viewer from blindly accepting the Myth of the State. The influence of the military-industrial complex over the American way of life elucidated by Eisenhower in *JFK* is arguably more relevant now than when those words were spoken a half century ago. If we apply Cassirer’s theory from *The Myth of the State*, it is entirely possible that

¹⁷ Oliver Stone, “Larger Historical Truths,” 42 (see chap. 2, n. 23).

¹⁸ Haines, “Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran,” 85.

the myths and countermyths surrounding John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and the American character will eventually *become* our history.

The importance of the countermyth in this context becomes obvious when we consider the method of historical analysis employed by this thesis. The mythologies of the post-World War II era – John Wayne, the domino theory, the Establishment – are realized in the countermyth of the 1960s – Ron Kovic, Vietnam, the Beast. But it is not until the 1990s that Oliver Stone’s filmic manifestation of the countermyth comes to fruition. When we consider this thesis as an early twenty-first century rumination on Stone’s filmography, the telescoping effect of analysis becomes obvious: the countermyth is a reflection of 1960s traumas, but it is also a projection of 1990s social angst. This duality is a signpost for historians and mythologists: the countermyth is a manifestation of Oliver Stone’s quest for the truth. The ultimate boon of a higher truth can ultimately only be revealed through the ongoing discourse of history. One can only speculate what future studies of the countermyth might reveal, but the telescoping effect of a 2020 analysis of a 2000s thesis about the 1990s filmic manifestation of 1960s events that reflect the 1940s is intriguing indeed!

One could even extend this localized focus to consider a viewpoint from the twenty-fifth century. We have considered the postulation that motion pictures will be the primary anthropological resource for future historians. If this is true, the events of the 1960s will not be the measuring stick of our culture. Instead, our history will be defined by the retrospective meaning assigned to those events. The countermythic interpretation of Vietnam, John Kennedy’s assassination, and

Richard Nixon's resignation may hold more intrinsic value than the facts surrounding such historical landmarks.

When we read about Achilles and Hector, Gilgamesh, or the tale of An, Ki, and Enlil, we are reading history – the history of a society's collective hopes, fears, and dreams. These tales provide a wealth of knowledge about the ancient Greeks, Babylonians, and Sumerians, ensuring that their civilizations live on to this day. The similarities between the seemingly disparate cultures emerge when we consider the monomythic retelling of the same stories. In this manner, Oliver Stone's countermyth is no different from any other cultural myth. It is a legacy for the future, a window into the spiritual angst of the last third of the twentieth century. The historical conjectures of *JFK* and *Nixon* may be proved false, and *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* might turn out to have no effect on the trauma of Vietnam. But this does not diminish the usefulness of these films for future historians – just as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* provides a window into the cultural milieu of ancient Babylonia, future historians might one day turn to Oliver Stone's countermyth to understand twentieth century America.

For all of recorded history, man has sought to understand the world around him. Although some postmodern thinkers have relegated the world of myth to a more primitive time, we have seen that it is always present in the depths of our collective psyche. The films studied in this thesis create a countermyth that fills the spiritual void left by traumatic events that have scarred America's mythic landscape. The countermyth tells us that although we are tied to the past, we are not bound by it. The burden of knowledge resulting from the quest for a higher truth is the ultimate boon of Oliver Stone's filmography. The countermyth provides us a

means for understanding the darkness of the past, but it also illuminates hope for the future. John Kennedy believed that the problems of the world cannot be solved by those cynics who are bound to the narrow confines of observable reality. “We need men who can dream of things that never were,” he remarked shortly before his death.¹⁹ Throughout his filmic career, Oliver Stone has taken Kennedy’s words to heart. Perhaps the most poignant reflection on Stone’s place as a creative hero of American culture comes from the artist himself:

All I do is dream.²⁰

¹⁹ John Kennedy, speech in Dublin, Ireland, June 28, 1963.

²⁰ Adrian McCoy, “Oliver Stone: Movies Reflect Power of Spirit,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 29 March 1993, D1.

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Appendix A

Oliver Stone's Filmography

Film	Year	Writer	Director	Producer	Total Gross*
<i>Alexander</i>	2004	X	X	X	\$34,297,191
<i>Comandante</i>	2003	X (VO)	X	X	
<i>Any Given Sunday</i>	1999	X	X	X	\$75,530,832
<i>The Corruptor</i>	1999			X	
<i>The Last Days of Kennedy and King</i>	1998			X	
<i>Savior</i>	1998			X	
<i>U-Turn</i>	1997		X		
<i>The People vs. Larry Flynt</i>	1996			X	
<i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i>	1996			X	
<i>Freeway</i>	1996			X	
<i>Evita</i>	1996	X			
<i>Nixon</i>	1995	X	X	X	\$13,668,249
<i>New Age</i>	1994			X	
<i>Natural Born Killers</i>	1994	X	X		\$50,282,766
<i>Joy Luck Club</i>	1993			X	
<i>Heaven and Earth</i>	1993	X	X	X	\$5,840,300
<i>South Central</i>	1992			X	
<i>Zebrahead</i>	1992			X	
<i>JFK</i>	1991	X	X	X	\$70,405,498
<i>The Doors</i>	1991	X	X		\$34,167,219
<i>Iron Maze</i>	1991			X	
<i>Reversal of Fortune</i>	1990			X	
<i>Blue Steel</i>	1990			X	
<i>Born on the Fourth of July</i>	1989	X	X	X	\$70,001,698
<i>Talk Radio</i>	1988	X	X		\$3,468,572
<i>Wall Street</i>	1987	X	X		\$43,848,100
<i>Platoon</i>	1986	X	X		\$137,963,328
<i>Salvador</i>	1986	X	X	X	
<i>8 Million Ways to Die</i>	1986	X			
<i>Year of the Dragon</i>	1985	X			
<i>Scarface</i>	1983	X			
<i>Conan the Barbarian</i>	1982	X			
<i>The Hand</i>	1981	X	X		\$2,000,000
<i>Mad Man of Martinique</i>	1979		X		
<i>Midnight Express</i>	1978	X			
<i>Seizure</i>	1974	X	X		
<i>Sugar Cookies</i>	1973			X	
<i>Love, Death</i>	1972			X	
<i>Last Year in Viet Nam</i>	1971		X		

* The Numbers, "Oliver Stone – Box Office Data," *The Numbers*, <http://www.the-numbers.com/people/directors/OSTON.html>.