

The Elusive Search for 'Truth': Oliver Stone, Postmodernism and History

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have recognised the importance of history in the films of Oliver Stone and have approached him as a filmic 'historian', none have engaged systematically with the historiographical currents present in his films. This paper answers the question, 'is Oliver Stone a postmodernist historian?' by analysing the form, content and context of three of his most popular films: *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *JFK*. It concludes that while the currents of postmodernist theory and culture have had a considerable influence on the way Stone shaped his vision of American history, he is fundamentally a traditional, revisionist 'historian' working in the intellectual mould of the American New Left. His work is ultimately wedded to the concept of arriving at some suppressed or uncovered historical 'truth', even if he recognises that this 'truth' is often chimerical.

KEYWORDS: Oliver Stone, postmodernism, historiography, truth, *JFK*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Rosenstone has argued that because Oliver Stone's films 'have a conscious thesis about the past', his 'engagement [...] with the discourse of history cannot be accidental.' (Rosenstone, 2000: 37) Indeed, the director has made this point clear himself (Crowdus, 2001b: 183-85). However, the current scholarship pertaining to Stone's body of work does not deal with the precise nature of his historiographical engagement with the American past. Such scholarly inactivity originates in the disinclination of most mainstream historians to admit that film can legitimately engage with historiography in anything more than a perfunctory manner. However, Philip Rosen has suggested otherwise by demonstrating that in filmic discourse, a 'sense of explicit historiography [can be] conveyed [...] as diegesis', through the creation of a 'temporal sense of a different past' (Rosen, 2001: 172, 179).

If film can engage with historiography by presenting the viewer with a narrative-based vision of the past, one that is consciously constructed by the filmmaker, then the historical films of Oliver Stone undoubtedly qualify for an in-depth examination of historiographical intent. This paper breaks new ground by bringing Stone's historical vision into conversation with the dominant trend in the historiography of the 1980s and early 1990s: postmodernism. It answers the broad question, 'is Oliver Stone a postmodernist historian?', and in doing so, engages in a method of comparative historiography, one that does not prioritise written historical discourse at the expense of cinematic history, but makes it explicitly clear that historical filmmakers have an important role to play in the construction not just of 'myth and memory', but of history itself. It therefore offers a reconceptualisation of Oliver Stone as a serious historian,

whose historiographical vision should be directly understood in conjunction with that of the historical profession.

Postmodernism is a notoriously slippery term, one that has been to a large extent 'emptied of content' due to considerable over-use in both popular and academic parlance (Novick, 1998: 523-24). However, this paper identifies a core trajectory of postmodern philosophy that runs through the works of Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and Frederic Jameson. The primary elements of this broadly categorised mode of thought are a rejection of meta-narrative as a form of discourse and a rejection of the potential for any notion of objective truth in the social sciences. Throughout the paper, these simplified notions are elaborated upon in some detail in order to conceptualise the effect wrought on American historiography by theories of postmodernism.

Simultaneously, the paper probes the structural and thematic elements of *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *JFK* (1991) in order to position the role of postmodernist historiography within his vision of American history across the broad span of seven years and three films. It is concluded that in certain ways, the overarching structural elements of Stone's historical films are shaped by conscious engagement with postmodernist discourse. However, in terms of the thematic content of his work, Stone is shown to bear far more historiographical semblance to the revisionist historiography that developed during the 1950s and 1960s, in conjunction with the American New Left. Through a brief examination of his films in their broader cultural and historiographical context, this apparent contradiction between relativist form and revisionist content is set against the broader background of the postmodern condition. In conclusion, it is asserted that whilst postmodernist discourse has undoubtedly influenced and augmented the historical career of Oliver Stone, he is by no means a postmodernist historian.

THE FORM: WORKING WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE POSTMODERN

Jean-Francois Lyotard has tersely summed up what he regards to be the most important basis for postmodern thought as a specific 'incredulity toward meta-narratives' (Lyotard, 1973: xxiv.) Furthermore, Frederic Jameson has made the point that 'we are by now far enough along in our consciousness [...] of historicity that we can forget about [...] the evils of totalisation or teleology' (Jameson, 1998b: 73). As such, the notion of history as an explanation of the movement of events through grand and teleological schemes of thought has been rejected. Rather, historical meaning can only be attached to the past in a temporal sense of what it means to its signifier (in this case, the historian). Essentially, 'it can no longer be assumed that the truth of the signifier is guaranteed by some transcendental meaning or prior truth' (Appleby *et al.*, 1994: 215).

The rejection of teleological meta-narrative clearly informs Oliver Stone's histories of American involvement in the Vietnam War. It has been noted that generally speaking, 'the Vietnam warrior's story is one of individual survival, not of group solidarity, still less a battle for discernable ideological or military objectives' (Doherty, 1991: 259). Vietnam films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) and *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), as well as Stone's offerings, are thus seen to reject the

overarching and glorifying narratives of code-era World War Two pictures in a fashion that is typically postmodern (Doherty, 1991: 258).

Such themes are evident in *Platoon*. The film takes as its structure the narrative of a single company of soldiers, and narrows this focus even further, by singling out a primary protagonist in the form of Private Chris Taylor (played by Charlie Sheen). Taylor narrates his own story from his first landing in the jungle near the Cambodian border in September 1967 through to his departure from the war due to injury. What makes the film unique is that Taylor's character is an autobiographical construct on the part of Stone, who has stated that the film was 'based on my own experiences in the 25th infantry in Vietnam, near the Cambodian border in 1967/8' (Floyd, 2001: 13). Indeed, *Platoon's* publicity campaign and eventual box office success were based on its status as the first filmic representation of the Vietnam War to be directed by an ex-serviceman. In this method of presentation it is possible to view a highly specific and subjective structural tactic, one that differs vastly from that of the modernist pursuit of scientifically objective historical enquiry.

Stone's personal involvement in the construction of the story means that he presents a highly selective history, one that privileges the personal experiences of individual soldiers over traditional subjects, such as military tactics and group camaraderie. In this regard, then, the film seems to be responding to the 'semiotic awareness that all signs change meaning with time' (Hutcheon, 1995: 90). Stone presents a military history that rejects a traditional narrative structure for a more personal and emotive one. For example, in the film's numerous battle scenes, the viewer is presented with confusing fragments of the conflict almost solely from Private Taylor's perspective. Far from proving the heroic status of the protagonist and his platoon, these scenes show that the utter confusion of Vietnamese jungle warfare negated any American military superiority, and essentially turned the war into a struggle not for overall victory, but for each individual 'grunt' to stay alive. *Platoon* in this respect fulfils the functions of a postmodernist text: it openly rejects a prevalent meta-narrative and substitutes it with a highly subjective and fragmentary alternative (a technique recommended in Foucault, 1991: 89).

Stone uses similar structural tactics in *Born on the Fourth of July*. The film takes the form of a biopic, focusing on the life of combat-veteran-turned-radical Ron Kovic (played by Tom Cruise). In the opening scenes, the film's protagonist is portrayed as an American youth convinced by Cold War ideology that he should fight for his country against communism. Indeed, he goes as far as openly rejecting his younger brother's developing interest in all things subversive (including the protest songs of a young Bob Dylan). But Stone breaks the grip of this standard ideological position through his presentation of the effects of the Vietnam War on the life of the film's protagonist. Kovic's perceptions of military life as the essence of heroism are shattered by his combat experience in Vietnam, where his injuries leave him paralysed from the waist down. As Marita Sturken has made clear, 'Kovic is the classic noble grunt, whose realisation of the consequences of government lies comes [...] at home, where he is ignored by a country that cannot recognise his losses' (Sturken, 1997: 69).

Here Stone can be seen to be breaking down an official and highly ideological meta-narrative in a manner similar to that in *Platoon*. By contrasting within the film the different and changing cultural attitudes towards the war, he displays the influence of the historiographical point that 'there is no God's eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only various points of view of actual persons reflecting the

various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve' (Putnam, 1981: 49-50). The film can thus be regarded as postmodern inasmuch as it rejects the form of official meta-narrative, and imposes its own alternative; one that is highly emotionally charged, but has no pretensions to omnipotent objectivity.

It is therefore possible to conclude that in both *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone was engaging with the currents of postmodern historical discourse by structuring his films around an obvious rejection of teleological meta-narrative. Indeed, it has been suggested that what all Vietnam films represent 'is primarily a history of fragmentation [...] codified as the wistfully empty reflections of nostalgia' (Corrigan, 1991: 16). Because of their fragmentary and subjective approach to the past, Stone's Vietnam films are excellent examples of this trend. As will be examined below, the films were in many ways projecting *their own* meta-narratives, but in terms of their structural form, they were undoubtedly influenced by the postmodernist desire to reject historical meta-narrative and assert a more fragmentary, personal view of history.

Even more so than his work on the history of the Vietnam War, Stone's film *JFK* functions structurally as a postmodern text. The film consciously engages with the elements of postmodernist theory that radically restructure notions of truth and objectivity in historical practice. Such a trend has been noted by Alan Megill, who has written that in the postmodernist mode of historical explanation, 'discourse creates its own reality' (Megill, 1985: 343). This idea signals a deconstruction of the idea of 'historical truth', and is reinforced by Frank Ankersmit's statement that 'historical interpretations [...] become recognisable [...] through the contrast with *other* interpretations; they are what they are only on the basis of what they are *not*' (Ankersmit, 1989: 142). Historical evidence is therefore seen as entirely discursive: not only is it shaped by the context in which it is formed, but it is also the product of the interpretation undertaken by the historian.

Consequently, texts are seen to have 'multiple meanings', and reading them is understood not only as 'an act of decoding but also of interpretation' (Poster, 1997: 43). It has been argued that knowledge cannot simply be revealed by careful sifting of information, and even that the epistemological existence of 'truth' is fundamentally questionable. As Edward Said made clear in 1978,

the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer (Said, 1978: 272-73).

It is apparent, then, that in the explanation of knowledge put forward in postmodernist historiography, there cannot be a true representation of the 'facts' in an objective or scientific sense. Historical knowledge is therefore viewed as being multi-layered and infinitely complex.

Such notions clearly inform Stone's structural presentation of *JFK*. The film tells the story of Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner), the New Orleans District Attorney who in 1966 headed a controversial enquiry into the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In his arrangement of the story, Stone presents his historical analysis in a number of different filmic media. Indeed, Stone has made such intentions explicit, stating that he 'wanted to use multiple layers because reading the Warren report [\[2\]](#) was like drowning' (Crowdus, 2001a: 102). A good example of this comes in Stone's presentation of the events of the shooting of the president in Dallas on November 22,

1963. In his reconstruction of the incident, he uses three layers of discourse; the Zapruder film (the apparently documentary footage, or primary source), a black and white fictional reconstruction of events, and Garrison's own visits to the crucial locations in Dealey Plaza, Dallas. Each discourse is equally vital in order for the viewer to fully understand Stone's vision of how the president was shot.

The three viewpoints illuminate the fragmentary level of knowledge regarding the events of the assassination. Indeed, Vera Dika has quite correctly put forward the idea that the film creates 'a wall of images that ultimately blocks [the viewer's] access to the real' (Dika, 2003: 223). By fusing fictional, quasi-factual and factual images together, Stone presents a vision of history as 'a rhetorical construction of the historian' (Medhurst, 1993: 140), rather than as an objective illumination of self-explaining 'facts'. This means that the film effectively 'requests the viewer's active engagement in its methodology' (Scott, 2000: 146). In structural terms, then, *JFK* clearly alludes to the fact that the past is ultimately unknowable in any form other than subjective interpretation, and therefore clearly parallels the assertions of postmodernist historiography.

Further examination of the link between this historiography and the structure of the film suggests an additional connection between the two. Hayden White has asked 'how [...] can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures [...] considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an "imaginary" way?' (White, 1987: 57). Such a notion suggests that within the discourse of postmodernism, 'history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation' (White, 1985: 122). Indeed, such theoretical notions have been solidly grounded in the minds of a number of historians, for example Alun Munslow, who has posited that 'the meaning of history as a story comes from a plot, which is imposed, or [...] invented as much as found by the historian' (Munslow, 1997: 11).

Consequently, within this mode of thought, the narrative form of historical discourse means that any scientifically realisable 'truth' is impossible, because the process of writing history is fundamentally imaginative. To this extent, then, Michel Foucault's conception that 'truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power' is relevant (Foucault, 1980: 131). In postmodernist historiography, historical knowledge is essentially an 'invention that masks a will to power' (Appleby *et al.*, 1997: 208). Postmodernism therefore attempts to render historical objectivity, in the traditional sense, non-existent (Novick, 1988: 573).

It has been shown that '*JFK* is encased within the conventions of the traditional detective/crime film, a genre in which a fact-finding hero is drawn into an underworld of wealth, crime and corruption' (Dika, 2003: 221). This is undoubtedly the case, but it is the contention of this paper that Stone subverts this classical form in a manner that is uniquely postmodern. The film is centred on Garrison's quest for the truth of the events of the assassination. Throughout the investigation, the viewer is bombarded by the detective's *own interpretation* of events, one that sits in stark opposition to the conclusions reached by the Warren report. Garrison concludes that Lee Harvey Oswald did not carry out the shooting, and that both the Mafia and CIA were involved in the conspiracy to kill the president. His dramatic speech in the New Orleans courtroom acts as the culmination of his 'final truth' on the matter.

However, the jury in the case against Clay Shaw finds the defendant not guilty on the charges of conspiracy raised by Garrison, a verdict that acts as a repudiation of the

attorney's conspiracy thesis. In doing this, Stone does not reject Garrison's theory, and, as will be discussed below, it is certain that the director would subscribe to it rather than to the 'official' version of events. However, Stone's structuring of the story blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, 'thereby bringing under question the very principle of objectivity as the basis for which one might discriminate between truth [...] and myth' (White, 1996: 19). Stone himself has stated that 'it's important to recognise that [...] history as we know it [...] is shaped [...] for the needs and perceptions' of the generation that writes it (Crowdus, 2001b: 185). In structuring the film, he clearly took on board the notion that all history is narrative in form and contains a certain will to power, and that objectivity is an ultimately illusive goal. Therefore, in terms of its structure, *JFK* operates as an exemplary postmodernist text.

This section has examined some of the structural tactics adopted by Oliver Stone in his presentation of *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *JFK* in order to display the link between his presentation of history and postmodernist historiography. It has been shown that the aim of the director's work on the Vietnam War was a deconstruction of the official meta-narrative of the conflict, and that *JFK* ultimately acts as a postmodernist rejection of objective truth within historical discourse. In terms of their structural form, then, Oliver Stone's historical films can be regarded as working within the boundaries of the postmodern.

THE CONTENT: REVISIONIST, NEW LEFT, CONSPIRACY THEORY

However, it is the contention of this paper that in terms of the thematic content of his films, Oliver Stone's historical vision displays few links to conceptions of postmodernist historiography. Indeed, this section will demonstrate that he engages with the discourse of a divergent historiographical movement: the revisionism of the New Left. It has been established that one of the fundamental aspects of postmodernist historical theory is the rejection of any notion of objective truth in historical enquiry. In contrast to this, Stone has admitted that the starting point for his historical films was the notion that 'there's truth everywhere, but you've got to dig at it' (Crowdus, 2001b: 186). The issue at hand is not merely one of semantics; it must be recognised that the overarching theme of Stone's work is that of a politically informed and polemical quest for an alternative truth, a theme in direct contradiction to the postmodernist historiography detailed above.

This can be demonstrated by a thematic exploration of the films under examination. The tagline for *Platoon* upon its release in 1986 was 'the first casualty of war is innocence'. The film displays the gradual eradication of any innocence on the part of Private Chris Taylor through a number of harrowing incidents. To highlight these incidents, each is played to the soundtrack of William Barber's 'Adagio for Strings'. Taylor's loss of innocence is explicitly portrayed when he steps off a helicopter to the sight of numerous body-bags, as his platoon torches a civilian village, during Sergeant Elias's (played by Willem Dafoe) slow motion death scene, and finally as vast numbers of bodies are thrown into pits in the aftermath of a napalm attack. It is clear that what Stone gives the viewer is 'the ability to see the reality of a bad and cowardly policy' on the part of the American government (Halberstam, 2000: 119). His is a vision of history that is both radical and idealist; he believed he could display the 'truth' on screen.

This is a vision Stone pursued further in *Born on the Fourth of July*. Ron Kovic's brief service time in Vietnam turns him into an 'ostracised, disillusioned paraplegic who turns

against everything he once loved' (McCrisken and Pepper, 2005: 136). That Tom Cruise, the so-called 'all-American hero' and recent star of *Top Gun* (1986), played this character displays the personal degradation caused by a futile war. It has been suggested that the ruinous effects that combat wreaks on the strong, good-looking Kovic overtly questions the outcomes of a supposedly benevolent foreign policy in Vietnam (McCrisken and Pepper, 2005: 136-37). American values are shown by Stone to have been utterly corrupted in the pursuit of an aggressive and self-aggrandising policy, one that causes more harm than good to all of those directly engaged in the war.

A similar technique to that used in *Platoon* is employed to illustrate the overriding thematic concern of *JFK*; that the so-called 'military-industrial complex' was the fundamental cause of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In the opening sequences of the film, President Eisenhower's 1961 farewell address identifying the condition is played with the musical accompaniment of a military drum roll commonly associated with a firing squad. This highly charged piece of percussion is then attached to a number of scenes throughout the film, in order to draw the link between the 'military-industrial complex' and elements of the conspiratorial cover-up. Good examples of this are: during the autopsy on Kennedy's body, at key moments during the reconstruction of the shooting, and as the jury delivers its verdict that Clay Shaw is not guilty of conspiracy. In presenting these themes, Stone's obvious intention is to convince the viewer that his theory of conspiracy surrounding the assassination and its cover-up is factually legitimate, even though it relies heavily on informed speculation.

Such a method of historical practice has little to link it to any theory of postmodernism. Stone has been described as 'a passionate [...] moralist who has found a way to sustain a popular and powerful leftist vision of American life', and it is clearly the case that strong political conviction informs his presentation of American history (Mackey-Kallis, 1996: 14). Indeed, it has been suggested that 'Stone is much like the New Left historians [...] who recognised the need to fill gaps in the American story' (Davis, 2000: 139). It is clear that the parallels between the revisionist historiography initiated in the 1950s and 1960s and Stone's historical vision are significant. It has been suggested that in *Platoon* the director engaged in 'extended anti-war protest' (Doherty, 1991: 264), and in that in *Born on the Fourth of July*, 'the very notion of an exceptional America seems to be under question' (McCrisken and Pepper, 2005: 137). Further to this, Stone himself has stated that in *JFK* he was 'presenting the counter-myth to the myth of the Warren Commission report' (Crowdus, 2001a: 99). Such highly politicised themes are also present in his earlier film *Salvador* (1986). In many ways, then, Stone appears to be performing the function of writing 'history as rebuttal – rebuttal of some position of [...] professional elders', a task taken to be of primary importance by the New Left historians (Ungar, 1967: 1254). By attempting to revise dramatically what he deemed to be an outmoded analysis of history – one rendered useless by its nature as 'official' truth – Stone encouraged that history be 'reread and retold in retrospect through the lens of conspiracy' (Sturken, 1997: 64). As such, his vision parallels that of the radical history propagated by William Appleman Williams, Eugene Genovese, Howard Zinn and many other revisionist historians associated with the New Left.

The thematic elements of Oliver Stone's engagement with the American past clearly relate a unique sense of history. The vision the director creates is a radical alternative to conformist historical discourse, one that adopts a 'decidedly biased and controversial perspective' (Kurtz, 2000: 177). It must therefore be realised that in attempting to impose such a view onto American history, Stone in his own way creates a meta-narrative. However, rather than being one of modernist, Whiggish progress, Stone's

narrative tells the story of the decline of American society since entry into the Vietnam War and the assassination of Kennedy. His films are clear attempts to impose such a discourse onto filmic historiography, and they represent an effort to excavate for the viewer the conspiratorial truth at any cost. As such, it can be concluded that in terms of the thematic content of his work, Stone was clearly influenced more by revisionist, New Left and conspiratorial interpretations of history than by any type of postmodernist discourse.

OLIVER STONE AND THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT

It has been noted that 'paradoxically [...] despite Oliver Stone's acknowledgement that postmodern history may represent a dialogue among many truths, he seems to search in his films for *the truth*' (Mackey-Kallis, 1996: 24). This paper has highlighted and explained the existence of this contradiction by going beyond previous scholars' discussions to contrast the structural and thematic elements of the director's historical films, and has displayed that its fundamental cause is his engagement with divergent modes of historiography. In order to explain this contradiction further, and establish a more unified vision of the effect of postmodernism on Stone's work, this section briefly examines his films in their broad cultural and historiographical context.

Jameson has argued that 'we are *within* the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is impossible', and its pervading influence utterly inescapable (Jameson, 1998a: 29). This form of culture has been characterised as 'commercial postmodernism', a condition in which 'the television screen has become the only reality, where the human body and the televisual machine are all but indistinguishable' (Kaplan, 1988: 4-5). It must be recognised that any notion of cultural postmodernity implies a society where both filmic and televisual images are the most important modes of discourse. This conception of the postmodern cultural context is vital to an understanding of the importance of Oliver Stone as a historian.

It is unquestionable that more people will watch the director's films detailing the events of the Vietnam War or the assassination of Kennedy than will ever read either scholarly or popular books on such subjects. The postmodern cultural condition has therefore thrust Stone into the limelight as a historian in a previously inconceivable manner. This has meant that rather than being able to focus solely on his role as an artist, he has been forced to regard himself at least in part as a serious historian. Such an engagement with scholarly discourse has been displayed in the release of fully footnoted screenplays for both *JFK* and his later film *Nixon* (1995) (Crowdus, 2001a: 103). Therefore, it is clear that the postmodern cultural context that privileges visual over written discourse has significantly influenced the director's historical filmmaking.

It must also be recognised that Stone was operating in the context of radically developing historiography regarding the relationship between film and history. The emergence of postmodernist historiography led to the development of a view amongst a group of historians and theorists that film could legitimately engage with the discourse of history. In 1988 (after the release of *Platoon* but before *Born on the Fourth of July* and *JFK*), Hayden White put forward the notion that 'the historical film draws attention to the extent to which history is a constructed or [...] shaped representation of a reality' (White, 1988: 1195). Similarly, and in the same edition of the *American Historical Review*,

Robert Rosenstone indicated that if 'history does not exist until it is created', then film is a perfectly legitimate method of 'doing' history (Rosenstone, 1988: 1185).

Oliver Stone's role as a historian has therefore been legitimated by contemporary historiographical trends. It has been argued that in his historical films, Stone was 'doing no more than finding a plausible, dramatic way of summarising evidence that [came] from too many sources to depict on screen' (Rosenstone, 1995: 125), and as such was working in a fashion no different to that of the conventional historian. From this unique vision of the role of the historical filmmaker emerged the view that Stone was in fact a serious and credible historian worthy of critical historiographical consideration (Rosenstone, 2000), a theoretical position from which this paper originates. Consequently, it must be recognised that while Stone was not an overtly postmodernist historian, the shift in historiography initiated in the postmodern intellectual context of the late 1980s and early 1990s undoubtedly augmented his image as a legitimate practitioner of American history.

This section has set the contradiction between postmodernist relativity and New Left revisionism that is located at the heart of Oliver Stone's historical films against the background of his broad cultural and historiographical contexts. It has therefore been possible to summarise briefly the considerable impact of the postmodern condition on his historical filmmaking. Although the paradox identified by Susan Mackey Kallis does not disappear when Stone is understood as a product of the postmodern cultural context that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, it is clear that this examination has more solidly grounded the main contention of this paper; that the historical films of Oliver Stone have been considerably influenced in various ways by discourses of postmodernism, even though he is ultimately *not* a postmodernist historian.

CONCLUSION

It has been shown that in a number of ways, the historical films of Oliver Stone engage with and were informed by the intellectual currents of postmodernist historiography. In terms of their formal structure, both *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* reject the meta-narrative of war as a positive force in history, and suggest a more personal and fragmentary method of recounting the past. Furthermore, *JFK* relates a unique sense of history as being unknowable except through fragmentary visions of events in the minds of those involved in the incidents and their historical interpretation. These are methods of presentation that would have been unthinkable without the influence of postmodernist historical theory on the structural filmmaking process.

Conversely, it has also been made clear that, in terms of their thematic content, the films under examination unconsciously engage with a more radical and politically motivated historiography. In attempting to uncover the conspiracies behind the Vietnam War and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Stone imposed an uncompromising and highly politicised vision of history onto the events he analysed; one that explicitly questioned the moral sensibilities of those in power. It must be concluded that this radical political revisionism was the primary concern of the director; his overarching aim was to uncover for the general public the conspiratorial 'truth' behind the most controversial moments in recent American history. In these respects, his engagement with American history was very similar to that of the New Left historians of the 1950s and 1960s.

By examining the cultural and historiographical contexts in which Stone made his historical films, it has been possible to extend an understanding of the influence of postmodernist theory on their creation and reception. It has been shown that the postmodern reliance on filmic and televisual culture for historical information has prompted Stone to take his role as a historian more seriously. It has also been demonstrated that shifts in film theory since the late 1980s have meant that Stone has become accepted in certain parts of the historical profession as a legitimate historian.

However, it must be concluded that Oliver Stone is by no means a *postmodernist* historian. His thematic presentation of history claims for itself a degree of final truth and factuality that is irreconcilable with the epithet. Indeed there is no evidence that the director regarded himself in any way as such. Even so, the role of postmodernist historiography in his historical filmmaking must be recognised as being significant. Not only has it affected the narrative structure of his films, it has played a considerable role in their reception amongst professional historians and the viewing public. As a direct consequence, they have gone on to become some of the most highly praised and important pieces of recent American historical filmmaking.

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NOTES

[1] Nicholas Witham is now a candidate for the degree of Masters by Research in American Studies at the University of Nottingham. He will start a PhD there in September 2008.

[2] The Warren Report was the product of the official government enquiry into the events of the shooting of John F Kennedy, named after the enquiry's head, Chief Justice Earl Warren, and published in 1964. It concluded that Kennedy was shot by a lone assassin, namely Lee Harvey Oswald.

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