

**Ask the Question: The Historiographic Project of Oliver Stone's *JFK***

"What's history? Some people say it's a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire. They say such and such happened. They create, they make it bigger, they make it better. So, what's history?"

-Oliver Stone<sup>1</sup>

"I find your story simply not believable." (Kevin Costner's Jim Garrison)

"Really? What part?" (Joe Pesci's David Ferrie)

-*JFK*

In one of *JFK*'s many exposition-laden sequences, Kevin Costner's Jim Garrison is reading through the Warren Commission testimony of Lee Bowers, an eyewitness to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as a visual "reenactment" of that testimony is depicted on-screen. Frustrated with the investigatory approach of assistant counsel Joseph Ball, Garrison repeats, "Ask the question, ask the question!" What question does Garrison *want* Ball to ask? That's not entirely clear, nor is it particularly important, as Oliver Stone's film is not concerned with presenting a newly unearthed collection of facts as historical record. To suggest Stone knows who actually assassinated the thirty-fifth president of the United States is to ignore the script's *Orient Express*-ness, wherein all relevant parties – the mafia, Jack Ruby, the Cubans, CIA, LBJ – are seemingly implicated. As Pat Dowell posits, "History is *JFK*'s subject as much as, perhaps even more than, a twenty-eight-year-old murder." (Dowell 1992) But one could argue it is historiography, not history, that serves as the film's cinematic project, in both the immateriality of the visual to its narrative construction and its use of Brechtian aesthetics to realize its narrative intention. *JFK* is a critical investigation of what I would

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<sup>1</sup> This quote appears in Richard Grenier's "On the Trail of America's Paranoid Class: Oliver Stone's *JFK*" from *The National Interest* in 1992.

call “historical assemblage,” the process by which facts are collected and constructed into an historical record, and subsequently consumed as “truth.”

In 2003, more than a decade after the release of *JFK*, Dale Banham and Russell Hall published, in *Teaching History*, a pedagogical study on the consumption of history via various media formats. Part of the experiment entailed students engaging *JFK* as an audio-only soundtrack; they merely listened to the words spoken in the film. Banham and Hall found that students “believed *JFK* was a 'documentary' or 'radio broadcast' or, revealingly, a 'political party broadcast'.” (Banham/Hall 2003) This study illustrates that *JFK* is, to put it rather simply, a uniquely word-based film, a cinematic lecture with visual accompaniment. While being semi-eventless, Stone’s epic is dramaturgically framed by events of severe historical consequence. The assassination in Dallas is the narrative’s inciting incident, and the concluding trial of Clay Shaw provides an expositional denouement. But visuals are complementary devices, aiding in the spectator’s consumption of its conspiratorial tapestry, all of which is provided aurally. Stone, and editors Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia, “employ the staccato pacing of commercials and music videos, designed to stimulate a jaded palate and grab attention.” (Dowell 1992) In doing so, they provide an endless stream of visuals that are both essential for the modern filmgoing public and immaterial to the film’s historiographic project. The images are provided to clarify the often-confusing amount of information being disclosed in the words.

It is difficult to refer to these words as dialogue; many are spoken by a single character, without interruption. (The scenes between Garrison and his wife, played by Sissy Spacek, are the film’s only respite from the stacking of conspiratorial, narrative bricks.) The Collected Monologues of *JFK* (coming soon to a community playhouse near you!) are almost entirely exposition and

exposition is Stone's historiographic weapon. In Robert Rosenstone's essay, "*JFK*: Historical Fact/Historical Film," he reckons directly with the challenge of visualizing the historical:

It is not just that most of the data by which we know the past comes from the realm of words and that the filmmaker is always involved in a good deal of translation from one medium to another, attempting to find a visual equivalent for written evidence. It is also that the mainstream historical film is shot through with fiction or invention from smallest of details to largest events... Invention occurs for at least two reasons: the requirements of dramatic structure and the need of camera to fill out the specifics of historical scenes."  
(Rosenstone 1992)

*JFK* has no discernible dramatic structure. It begins with a murder, and concludes with a trial, but one would never confuse Stone's film dramaturgically with an episode of *Matlock*. The most prominent sequences are dramatic re-creations of a speculative historical timeline being assembled by Garrison and his team; most of which are positioned as explicit contradiction to the findings of the Warren Report and are marked themselves by a significant amount of uncertainty by the characters relating them. The Garrison team does not discover facts, they merely "ask the question," and these fictional re-creations are another example of Stone's music video approach, creating complementary imagery to support the words, his conspiratorial song.

The exception to this approach is the film's expansive prologue, establishing the political structures in existence prior to Kennedy's assassination. After a clip of Dwight Eisenhower warning the public of the potential perils of the "Military Industrial Complex," a Martin Sheen-led voiceover informs us of the election of John Kennedy in 1960, showing newsreel footage of he and his wife, while identifying him as the "symbol of the new freedom of the 1960s." As

footage meant to signify the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis is shown, the voiceover informs us that Kennedy “secretly blames the CIA” for these conflicts. When the montage transitions to a discussion of Vietnam, we are told that Kennedy is “rumored to support full withdrawal,” as clips of his “Pax Americana” speech at American University are shown. The imagery from November 22, 1963, includes fictionalized sequences, news footage and material from the Zapruder film, intercut with symbolic imagery of American flags waving in the wind, birds releasing from building rooftops, and Zapruder himself.

This prologue entrenches *JFK* in the docudrama genre, while also reinforcing it as a work of speculative historical fiction. Director Ibolya Fekete refers to the aesthetic strategy of utilizing documentary footage in non-documentary cinema as “fictionalizing” non-fiction elements.<sup>2</sup> Stone may not offer evidence in the film as to *who* killed JFK, but this prologue serves to establish *why* Stone believes he was killed. Marita Sturken argues this prologue is a “combination of conventional docudrama with a political critique of older nationalist narratives that provoked debate about the form of storytelling.” (Sturken 1997) The visuals, until the day of the assassination, are representations of the real, pulled from the sources (news, Zapruder) one would associate with a certain trustworthiness. The voiceover reflects the speculative; “rumored” and “secretly” denote the absence of those details in any existing presidential record. They are what Hayden White might refer to as the “imaginary”:

Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary – realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated. (White 1997)

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<sup>2</sup> This is shared in her interview regarding *Chico* with George Clark and Laurin Federlein in *Kinoeye*, Vol. 2, Issue 4, February 18, 2002.

The documentary footage abutted with a speculative voiceover in this prologue establishes the film's aesthetic model, a blurring of the lines between White's real and imaginary, that Stone will exploit throughout.

The aftermath of the assassination is consumed by Garrison on the television set at Napoleon House in New Orleans, where a large crowd is gathered to monitor the president's condition at Parkland Hospital. From that television, we hear a newsman report that "the bullet entered at the base of the throat." It is a subtle moment in the film but emblemizes this blurring of these aforementioned lines. Almost all conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination originate from the notion of a "kill shot" coming from Kennedy's front, not behind him from the Dallas Book Depository, where Lee Harvey Oswald was said to be positioned on the sixth floor. One could easily ignore this moment, but as Rosenstone suggests, "Even the tiniest sorts of fictions are not unimportant factors. At least, not if history is about the meaning of past events." (Rosenstone 1992) This "tiny" moment in *JFK* is a fiction, but in revealing the detail through the character of an unseen newsman, Stone is presenting it as factual historical moment.

About halfway through the film, Jim Garrison travels to Washington D.C. to meet with a source, a character that identifies himself as Mr. X. This ex-military official, played by Donald Sutherland, outlines the entirety of the military failures on the day of the assassination, punctuating his expositional monologue with a question, "Does it really matter who shot from what rooftop?" Sturken argues "the great flaw of *JFK* as a film is its attempt to answer, rather than to simply expose, the national state of being" (Sturken 1997) but her analysis misses an essential point. *JFK*'s primary cinematic function is not providing an answer to a question that haunts America's national character –

who killed JFK? - but the imploration of a generation thirty years removed from the event to “question” who is charged with the assemblage of information we come to recognize as the historical record. Christopher Sharrett acknowledges the power of Stone’s approach:

No wonder the policy makers and their pundits are insulted by *JFK*. A mere filmmaker dares to poach on their territory, and to trumpet the heresy - which millions now will contemplate - that the History they cherish and construct is no more than a cover story. (Sharrett 1992)

Stone’s film acknowledges that historical narratives do not organically evolve; they are human constructions. The Johnson Administration enlisted Earl Warren and a collection of well-regarded public figures to assemble, for the American public, a record of fact regarding the assassination. Garrison’s conversation with Mr. X is meant to call not only that record into question, but to also question the motivations of the entire chain of command which produced it. If the source of the work cannot be trusted, what does one do with the work’s findings? *JFK*’s historiographic project argues for the American public’s discarding of the entirety of the Warren Report, and thus an acknowledgment of a conspiracy when it comes to the report’s production.

This spectatorial intervention requires the viewer be emotionally dislodged, or in Brechtian terminology, *distanced*, from the particulars of the narrative, while intellectually engaged with the intention of that narrative’s construction. *Rush to Judgment*, the 1967 Emile de Antonio documentary, which offered a full-throated critique of the Warren Commission’s findings, is the ideological precursor to Stone’s film; many of the former’s subjects are featured as characters in the latter. The film stages its critique in what de Antonio calls “a kind of Brechtian cinema”, with attorney Mark Lane directly addressing the viewer in a didactic “theater of fact.” (Kellner/Streibler 2000) *JFK*’s visual

aesthetic does not resemble the spare visual experience of *Judgment*, but it does employ Brechtian (and quasi-Brechtian) devices to challenge the conventions of historical narrative assemblage. Three such methods are worth discussing here: casting, event fetishization, and use of direct address.

Mr. X is meant to be shadowy figure, an anonymous source in the style of Woodward and Bernstein's "Deep Throat." But Mr. X is played by Sutherland in one of the film's many star cameos. Wayne Knight (Newman on *Seinfeld*) and Laurie Metcalf (Aunt Jackie on *Roseanne*) are both on Garrison's legal team and were two of the biggest television stars of the time. Walter Matthau, Jack Lemmon, Ed Asner, Kevin Bacon, John Candy, Sally Kirkland, Lolita Davidovich, and even the real Jim Garrison (as Earl Warren) all appear in one or two-scene sequences that are as distracting as they are entertaining, or as Richard Schechner might suggest, the casting allows a "delightful" experience in allowing the spectator to see the "separate awareness between role and performer." (Schechner 1989) Rosenstone also argues that "a star like Kevin Costner, fresh from his award-winning *Dances with Wolves*, cannot simply disappear into the character of Garrison," (Rosenstone 1992) and placing the real Garrison on-screen seems to erode any attempt to create a suspension of dramatic disbelief. Casting is an essential component of the Brechtian notion of *Verfremdung*, which is most aptly described by Schechner as a "technique for opening a space between role and performer into which spectators may enter, admiring the performer while, say, critically evaluating the actions of the character." (Schechter 1989) Stone constantly reminds his spectator that his film is Hollywood spectacle by filling the screen with iconic Hollywood performers and, in doing so, effectively distances them from the narrative action.

*JFK* concludes as a courtroom drama, the trial of Clay Shaw, but the narrative outcome of the trial is entirely inconsequential. Stone races through the calling of witnesses and their examinations, as Garrison previously admitted to Mr. X that he does not have “much of a case” and the spectator is aware Shaw will not be convicted of the crime. Instead, this sequence is entirely about the presentation of conspiratorial evidence directly *to* the spectator, and that presentation is made in Garrison’s summation, a mixture of the real Garrison’s closing statement in 1969 and the Stone’s speculative propositions.

The centerpiece of this summation is Garrison’s playing of Abraham Zapruder’s 8mm motion picture of the assassination. This was, at the time of trial, the first public showing of the film. It is this sequence where Stone’s film obliges Hayden White’s notion of studying the historical event primarily for its “...inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and distortions,” but he does so through an analysis of the Zapruder film which echoes Michael Turits, via White, likening media replays of tragic events to the endless replays in televised sporting events. (White 1997) Garrison does not only run the Zapruder film for the jury and courtroom attendees. He replays, almost on a loop, the moment where an assassin’s bullet connected with Kennedy’s brain, repeating the motion of the president’s head, “Back, and to the left. Back, and to the left. Back, and to the left.” Stone allows this image to consume the entirety of the screen. It is being replayed for its intended spectator: us.

This fetishization of “the event” became something of a cultural phenomenon at the time, even satirized on an episode of *Seinfeld*, with Wayne Knight comically positioned in the same role. (Fig. 1) The gruesome image of Kennedy’s brain leaving his skull is met with audible gasps by



those in the courtroom, and one would think the same for individuals in movie theaters around the country. Stone wants the spectator shocked by the brutality of the event. But he wants that shock to translate into coherent, tangible action.



*Fig. 1*

At the conclusion of Garrison's closing statement, he delivers his impassioned plea to the jury:

Tennyson wrote, "Authority forgets a dying king." This was never more true than for John F. Kennedy, whose murder was probably one of the most terrible events in the history of our country. We, the people, the jury system sitting in judgement, represent the hope of humanity against government power. In discharging your duty to bring a first conviction in this house of card against Clay Shaw, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." Do not forget...your dying king. Show this world this is still a government "of the people, for the people and by the people." Nothing as long as you live will ever be more important.

In the film's most essential visual moment, the camera then pans back and Garrison, for the first time in the film, directly addresses the camera, "It's up to you." (Fig 2.)



Fig. 2

Stone's use of direct address, an acknowledgement of the existing spectator, assures there is "...no question of creating an illusion that the demonstrators really are these characters." (Brecht 1964) One could argue this moment not only acknowledges the existence of the spectator, but removes the veil of spectatorship altogether, dismantling what Jan Uhde calls the "acceptance of the cinematographic illusion and its identification with the presented action." (Uhde 1974) Direct address makes clear the narrative intention of Stone's courtroom conclusion is not for the spectator to engage with the trope of will-they-or-won't-they convict, as this film well predates Quentin Tarantino's revisionist historical fantasias. Stone intends to convince the spectator of the Warren Report's failings and has presented his evidence, in the guise of the likable and reliable Kevin Costner, directly to them. Now it is up to the viewer to act upon the information they have been provided.

This moment is the film's clearest evocation of its historiographic project. Three hours after that opening prologue, Stone believes he has made his argument not for a new historical record, but for further inquisition of the existing, fraudulent one. As one of the fictional jurors admits in a post-trial media interview, "We believe there was a conspiracy, but whether Clay Shaw was a part of it is another kettle of fish." This mirrors the newsman moment at Napoleon House, as none of the

Shaw trial jurors made such a statement publicly, despite Stone presenting this comment in front of local television cameras. The historiographic project of *JFK* is not merely the recognition of an existing conspiracy, but also the intended consequences of that recognition for the spectator, namely the lighting of an activist spark.

Art Simon, in his book *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film*, writes that “mainstream periodicals like *Newsweek* were somewhat split in their judgment. Although its news writers identified the film as a distortion, its film critic, David Anson, could still praise its dramatic impact and ‘charged” style.’ (Simon 2013) *JFK* is both a dazzling example of the power of cinematic style and a historiographic project of significance. It is not a history lesson; even a semi-close analysis of the narrative would find little new “fact” presented. Returning to the ideas of Hayden White, Stone wants the spectator to consider the possibility that what they understand as real to be potentially imaginary, while acknowledging the fictional imaginary he is presenting in the film as potentially real. In doing so, he seeks to shatter our accepted practices of *historical assemblage*.

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