

**PUBLIC POLITICS/PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY:  
A TALE OF TWO SIXTIES IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA, 1986-  
1994**



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## Introduction

“There is a major time-warp going on here” declared filmmaker Oliver Stone in February 1991. “We all feel the 60’s are coming back.”<sup>1</sup> Published shortly before the theatrical release of his latest motion picture, *The Doors*, Stone’s comment certainly reflected his own interest in the 1960s. He had, up to this point, represented the 60s in three films: the Vietnam War dramas *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and, most recently, a biopic of rock and roll star Jim Morrison, *The Doors* (1991). He was also about to begin shooting a film exploring the “truth” behind President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, *JFK* (released in December 1991). Yet, as the above quotation shows, Stone was emboldened enough to shed the first-person singular pronoun. Not “*I* feel the 60’s are coming back” but “we;” not even a specific we, but “we all.” The filmmaker was promoting himself and his films as harbingers of a 60s revival that he believed to be consuming late 20<sup>th</sup> century American politics and culture.

Stone’s claims were not unwarranted. As a number of cultural studies scholars and political scientists have noted, a heated public debate over the legacy of the 1960s, or “Sixties,” raged in the public sphere throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The period receiving so much attention from politicians, journalists, musicians, filmmakers and television programmers was not defined by a strict 1960-69 timeframe. Rather, the Sixties in question was an “agglomeration ... of cultural elements, political meanings, and other associations” retrospectively attached to this temporal period.<sup>3</sup> The Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the emergence of second wave feminism, the counterculture: phenomena such as these, according to many historians, took shape in the 1940s and 50s and/or spilled over into the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Chutkow, “Oliver Stone and *The Doors*: Obsession Meets the Obsessed,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1991, p. H1.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Meta Mendel-Reyes, *Reclaiming Democracy: The Sixties in Politics and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 69-103; Eleanor Townsley, “The Sixties’ Trope,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 18, no. 6 (2001), pp. 99-123; Bernard Von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 207, n1.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, David Farber (ed.), *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Mark Hamilton-Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Maurice

In public debates of the 1980s and 90s they were nevertheless frequently grouped, for good or for ill, beneath a single banner – the Sixties.<sup>5</sup> The very term became a discursive battleground; an appellative armoury loaded with political significance. In recounting the past many public figures were also looking to the future. Could demonising the feminist movement lead to stricter abortion laws? Would an attack on the counterculture warrant a return to “old-fashioned family values”? The era was reclaimed as a rallying point for arbiters of various political persuasions. “The sixties, I have come to believe, are something of a political Rorschach test” wrote essayist and author Joseph Epstein in 1988:

Tell me what you think of that period and I shall tell you what your politics are. Tell me that you think the period both good and bad, with much to be said for and against it, and you are, whether you know it or not, a liberal. Tell me that you think the sixties a banner time for American life ... and you are doubtless a radical. Tell me that you think the sixties a time of horrendous dislocation, a disaster nearly averted ... your views, friend, are close to mine and I am pleased to meet you.<sup>6</sup>

Epstein’s “friends” in this context were politically conservative commentators and politicians (the article from which the above quotation is taken appeared in a collection of articles that attacked the Sixties as “a malignant period of American history”).<sup>7</sup> As Daniel Marcus and others note, diatribes against hippies, feminists, and social policies introduced in the 1960s, such as affirmative action and

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Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Tom Shachtman, *Decade of Shocks: Dallas to Watergate, 1963-1974* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995); Barbara Tischler, *Sights on the Sixties* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). For an overview on 1960s historiography, see Andrew Hunt, “When Did the Sixties Happen?: Searching for New Directions,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Fall 1999), pp. 147-62.

<sup>5</sup> Stating precisely what years constitute “the Sixties” is not an easy task. It really depends on what is being discussed. For the purposes of this thesis I follow Von Bothmer in identifying the period approximately spanning 1960-1974 as the timeframe subjected to the most debate. *Framing the Sixties*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Epstein, “A Virtucrat Remembers,” in John H. Bunzel (ed.), *Political Passages: Journeys of Change Through Two Decades, 1968-1988* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> John Downton Hazlett, *My Generation: Collective Autobiography and Identity Politics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 128.

public school busing, were common currency for Republican politicians and their political allies of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8</sup> To make so clean a distinction – as Epstein does – between liberal and conservative opinion is, as I suggest in the following pages, somewhat crude. It nevertheless indicates the symbolic import placed upon any representation of this era. To celebrate, or to condemn, the Sixties was to nail one’s political flag to the mast; and politicians were by no means the only participants in this very public fracas.

This thesis is a history of Hollywood cinema’s contribution to the Sixties debate during the years 1986-1994.<sup>9</sup> It explores, through discussion of a number of Sixties representations, the interconnections between film, politics and public memory of the 1980s and 1990s. Marcus’ important study provides only cursory references to cinema.<sup>10</sup> Yet an examination of the masses of journalistic and political discourse that surrounded many of Hollywood’s Sixties films indicates that they were no minor players in the public sphere. Indeed, they offered the opportunity for the articulation of public memories within the film texts themselves and in promotion and reception materials. For this reason, Hollywood representations of the Sixties served as prominent discursive tools, used by filmmakers and public commentators, in high-profile attempts to shape memories of America’s recent past and to shape the country’s political future. By examining a group of films – in terms of each film’s respective production history, script development, and content and themes, as well as its promotion campaigns and US popular critical reception – I provide a multi-layered analysis of those historical conditions that informed the ways

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 1-5; Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, pp. 43-49, 181-186; Townsley, “The Sixties,” pp. 104-109; Von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties*, pp. 28-130.

<sup>9</sup> Here a brief note is required: having nearly completed the writing of this thesis, I came across James Amos Burton’s excellent thesis “Film, History and Cultural Memory: Cinematic Representations of Vietnam Era America During the Culture Wars, 1987-1995” (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2007). Had I encountered it earlier, I would have sustained a far more consistent dialogue with his findings than has been possible at this late stage. While there are significant differences between my work and Burton’s in terms of methodologies used and conclusions drawn, Burton’s use of the 1980s and 90s culture wars as a rubric under which to examine cinematic representations of the Sixties, his analysis of reception materials, and even some of his film choices have pre-empted my own study. Our discussions of *Forrest Gump* in particular, while not identical, share some similarities. Chapter Five’s analysis of *Forrest Gump* has, therefore, made every effort to highlight where Burton and I have reached similar conclusions. Were I to pursue this research further, I would devote more space to highlighting its intersection with and digressions from Burton’s argument.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus briefly mentions every film examined in this thesis, but provides little in the way of textual, production, promotion or reception analysis.

in which filmmakers shaped political content and of those conditions which influenced the ways in which each of the films operated in the public sphere.

Given the thesis' focus on multiple stages of a filmic life-cycle – production, promotion and reception – I have limited my in-depth analysis to five high-profile and commercially successful pictures released during the years 1986-1994: *Platoon* (1986), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *JFK* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Forrest Gump* (1994). The first four each deal with a prominent event or movement from the Sixties: *Platoon* with Vietnam, *Dirty Dancing* with women's liberation, *JFK* with the Kennedy assassination, *Malcolm X* with the African-American freedom struggle. *Gump* covers a wealth of Sixties phenomena from the counterculture and Vietnam to the civil rights and anti-war movements, encapsulating several subjects of importance to the Sixties debate. So small a film corpus does, of course, limit the amount that can be said about the numerous other historical portrayals produced between 1986 and 1994.<sup>11</sup> I do not claim to be offering a comprehensive survey of Hollywood's filmic output at this time. What the thesis does provide, however, is a multi-dimensional and innovative critical re-evaluation of five very familiar and much-discussed historical films. The new perspectives opened up through a detailed focus on production (especially script development), promotion and reception revise our understanding of these five films and shed light on the ways in which historical films, and films more generally, are politically shaped and re-shaped as they travel from script to screen.

There are several reasons why I selected *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* over other prominent cinematic representations released during this eight year period. Firstly, in order to demonstrate the new insights and alternative interpretations that can be drawn from my methodological approach, I wanted to study films that had already been the subject of much academic debate. With the exception of *Dirty Dancing*, all of my choices have become staples in historical film studies. *Dirty Dancing* is an important addition to

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<sup>11</sup> The years 1986-1994 are notable for a proliferation of numerous high-profile Sixties films, such as the Vietnam War pictures *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Gardens of Stone* (1987), *Casualties of War* (1988), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Heaven and Earth* (1993); biopics *The Doors* (1991), *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993), *Ruby* (1992), *Hoffa* (1992); dramas about the civil rights movement *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Heart of Dixie* (1989), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1994); and films and feature documentaries about the counterculture and anti-war movement such as *1969* (1988) and *Berkeley in the 60s* (1989).



this corpus, for it is a rare female-centred Sixties film, one which was shaped, like the other four, so as to enter into high-profile debates on the recent American past. Its absence in academic analyses of historical films is, I will argue, an oversight on the part of historical film studies, where male-centred Sixties features have been privileged over those focusing on women. *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* were, and continue to be, extremely prominent in popular and scholarly debates and offer tantalising subject matter for a thesis that seeks to challenge existing ideas regarding the production and reception of Hollywood political and historical portrayals.

Yet, this reasoning alone does not justify the omission of several extremely familiar Sixties films. For example, in a thesis dealing with civil rights representations, where, one might ask, is *Mississippi Burning* (1988)? Surely, the Alan Parker directed portrayal of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer is as prominent in debates about cinematic history as is *Malcolm X*. The omission of films such as *Mississippi Burning* introduces the thesis' second control; namely, the exclusive focus on a particular generation of American screenwriters and directors that were young men and women during the Sixties. Members of what this thesis will call "The Sixties Generation" (discussed later in the introduction), were born, and spent their formative years in America. All of the screenwriters and directors, and many of the actors, involved in the production of these films were in their teens and twenties in the Sixties. Their creative work of the 1980s and 1990s suggests that they were influenced by similar political, cultural and philosophical developments of their youth. My thesis demonstrates the manner in which filmmakers of the Sixties generation constructed their films so as to speak to their generational peers particularly, and fellow Americans more generally. For this reason British director Alan Parker does not fit the criteria, nor does British director Brian Gibson (director of Tina Turner biopic, *What's Love Got to Do With It*). Similarly, screenwriter and director Stanley Kubrick (Vietnam film, *Full Metal Jacket*) is not discussed at length because of his age (b. 1928).

Thirdly, all five films examined in this thesis were the most commercially successful films to engage with their respective issue or issues in this eight-year

period.<sup>12</sup> While I am aware that the success of these films at the box-office does not necessarily make them the most important films of the period (and each of the films will certainly be located within a broader cinematic context), such commercial success, coupled with intense media coverage, does suggest them to be significant representatives of Hollywood's attempts to make meaning of the Sixties. I should reiterate here that when I say "Hollywood" I mean strictly Hollywood *cinema*. Another study devoted to non-theatrical (television, video etc) representations of the Sixties during the years 1986-1994 would raise an entirely new set of questions regarding the era's political legacy and, indeed, the individuals and events felt worthy of visual commemoration (a subject I return to briefly in the thesis' conclusion). Certainly, it would seem to me that television programmes throughout the 1980s and 1990s gave air time to issues and events largely ignored by mainstream Hollywood cinema (the private lives of real, but non-famous individuals and a greater focus on the lives of women, for example; subjects discussed in Chapter Two and the Conclusion). To do full justice to this medium's output would, however, require another thesis, and for this reason – while television and video releases receive brief mentions – I concentrate on films given theatrical releases. Indeed, my thesis is less a study of the multitudinous Sixties discourses present in popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s (à la Daniel Marcus) than a select analysis of a small number of filmic touchstones.<sup>13</sup> As discussed below, I am less concerned with being comprehensive than with utilising a new methodological approach in order to revise and augment existing perspectives on the production and reception of Hollywood historical films. The methodology utilised here might serve as a foundation upon which future research on other Sixties representations could build. For this reason, and while I address briefly issues surrounding other cultural productions, the following five chapters focus primarily upon the stated five films.

My film selection was thus premised upon a consideration of each film's prominence in popular debates at the time of its theatrical release, its place within academic writings on historical films, and the creative personnel involved in the

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<sup>12</sup> The domestic (US) box-office takings for the five films are as follows: *Platoon*, \$164 million; *Dirty Dancing*, \$63 million; *JFK*, \$78 million; *Malcolm X*, \$45 million; *Forrest Gump*, \$329 million. [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) (Accessed May 2009). All further box office figures and statistics are taken from this website.

<sup>13</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years*.

production, promotion and reception. *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* are five high-profile American motion pictures, produced by Americans who had been young during the Sixties – and, often, had participated in events and movements of this period. Furthermore, on their theatrical releases, these films were discussed at length by other American public commentators and even at times entered into political debates on the “meaning” of the Sixties for contemporary America.

Finally, the films selected transcend a singular genre, cycle, or film type. Included in the corpus is a war film (*Platoon*), a woman’s film/musical (*Dirty Dancing*), a crime/detective film (*JFK*), a biopic (*Malcolm X*) and a comedy/historical drama (*Forrest Gump*). Both *Platoon* and *Dirty Dancing* were low-budget, independently financed pictures, made by people with a relatively low status within the film industry (Stone and *Dirty Dancing* screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein and director Emile Ardolino were as yet reasonably unknown to the general public). *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* were medium-to-big budget pictures, funded by a major studio, made by established filmmakers and featuring star performers. In selecting a corpus not limited by genre, by budget or by any single filmmaker, I demonstrate how certain ideas, attitudes and formal and stylistic qualities are present across Hollywood’s Sixties films. Indeed, while Oliver Stone might be considered the most obvious subject in an analysis of 1980s and 1990s representations of the Sixties (and I devote two chapters to analysis of his output), this thesis illuminates the marked similarities in the development and production of a group of diverse films made by various filmmakers of a similar age and political outlook. All five films are notable for a shared engagement with certain political and philosophical issues that pervade their production, promotion and reception. And it is to these issues that I now turn.

This thesis contends that *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X*, and *Forrest Gump* became nuclei around which circled two themes fundamental to broader public debates on America’s recent past. References to events, movements and persons of the Sixties appeared in a cluster of discourses present in the 1980s and 1990s public sphere, which were concerned, firstly, with the Sixties’ impact on America as a nation. How had America changed in the Sixties’ wake? Was American society more egalitarian and democratic because of the Sixties; or, had the

nation been irrevocably damaged because of events associated with this era? Secondly, these discourses addressed the Sixties' psychological legacy. The era's impact on the private lives and psychologies of certain individuals and groups – Vietnam veterans and feminists, for example – figured centrally in public debates. Here the Sixties was framed as of import not just to American society in general, but to personal mind-sets. It is the project of this thesis to highlight the ways in which Hollywood cinema politically framed the Sixties on a social and psychological level, and, by extension, to illuminate the central role played by the film industry in public debate on this most contested of eras.

My examination contributes to a body of film scholarship which examines American cinema's representation of the Sixties. A number of thought-provoking studies have explored *Platoon*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* in particular and their contribution toward public memory of this era.<sup>14</sup> Many of these examinations also make claims about the films' ideological address (that *Forrest Gump* is a politically conservative demonisation of the Sixties, for example).<sup>15</sup> While my thesis is informed by this previous academic work, the questions I ask and the methodologies I use allow me to offer a new perspective on these much discussed films. Combining textual analysis with an examination of script development, promotion and reception, I explore the interaction between film text and historical context at various points on each film's journey from script to screen. The drive to intervene in broader public discussion of the Sixties has, I argue, guided much of the

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<sup>14</sup> A fuller list of references is provided in the following five chapters. However, for particularly insightful analyses of films such as *JFK* and *Forrest Gump* as well as Stone's second Vietnam film *Born on the Fourth of July* see Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), pp. 88-103, 104-119, 57-87; and Burgoyne, "Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film," in Paul Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 220-236. For *Platoon* and 1980s Vietnam films in general see Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 96-121. For *JFK* see Robert A. Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," *American Historical Review*, vol. 97, no. 2 (1992), pp. 506-511; Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas," *History and Theory*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 1997), pp. 64-79; Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modernist Event* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 17-38. For *Malcolm X* see Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 129-144; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 197-204.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, pp. 104-119; Thomas B. Byers, "History Re-membered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminist Masculinity and the Burial of the Counterculture," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 419-444; Jennifer Hyland Wang, "A Struggle of Contending Stories: Race, Gender and Political Memory in *Forrest Gump*," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 92-115.

content and themes of the five films upon which this thesis focuses. My analysis of script development builds upon academic studies such as Robert Burgoyne's *Film Nation* and Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories*, which locate Hollywood films such as *Platoon* and *Forrest Gump* within public memory of the 1980s and 1990s. However, whereas Burgoyne and Sturken focus on the finished film texts, I reveal the constant shaping and re-shaping of script content over a period of several years, and the historical conditions that may have informed the script development process. Comparing early drafts of *Platoon* (1984, 1985 and February 1986), *Dirty Dancing* (1985), *JFK* (January 1991 and April 1991), *Malcolm X* (1991) and *Forrest Gump* (1992) with the finished products allows me to outline how particular strategies – relating to the construction of political and historical content – were repeatedly mobilised by those involved in the production of each film, and also, by extension, to offer some commentary on Hollywood cinema's broader political operations at this time.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, I expand existing scholarship on Hollywood's Sixties films by providing extensive analyses of the five films' promotion and critical reception.<sup>17</sup> Examining each film's promotional campaign within its historical context, I illuminate the diverse strategies employed by marketers in the framing and re-framing of their products' political and historical representations and how these strategies were informed by existing discursive practices present at the time of each film's release. My analysis of reception materials considers the ways in which each film was "used" by various political and cultural arbiters in public discussions of the Sixties, and identifies the interpretive frames within which these films were debated, celebrated and/or criticised. Importantly, a focus on critical reception will also argue that certain taste, race and gender related debates enabled some films to become enshrined in the national body politic (*Platoon*, *JFK* and *Forrest Gump*)

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<sup>16</sup> Dated draft scripts are fully referenced in the following five chapters. I provide details of each script's availability in the Bibliography.

<sup>17</sup> The majority of the above noted scholarship provides close textual analysis, but does not address in any great detail these films' promotion or reception. Jennifer Hyland-Wang's study of *Forrest Gump*'s reception and Janet Staiger's and Barbie Zelizer's examinations of *JFK*'s reception, are notable exceptions. Where relevant, I build upon these works while also, by drawing on a range of previously unexamined materials, question and complicate some of their interpretations. See Staiger, "Cinematic Shots: The Narration of Violence," in Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 210-228; Wang, "A Struggle of Contending Stories," pp. 92-115; Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 201-214.

while other films, though still receiving critical attention, were not incorporated into debates on the Sixties to the same degree (*Dirty Dancing* and *Malcolm X*). This thesis is also, therefore, an attempt to explore the conditions within the public sphere that lead to some films achieving a significant political status while others are marginalised.

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My examination addresses two themes throughout: public politics and personal authenticity. To explain briefly (and this is expanded later in the introduction), public politics refers to the way in which events and movements from the Sixties were discussed, in the 1980s and 1990s, as being of national consequence. This is the Sixties debated on a macro level. For example, the Vietnam War and JFK's assassination were touted as events that transformed America. Personal authenticity – though still very much a part of public debate – refers, on the other hand, to a transformation of the self. Authenticity, as I use the term, denotes intellectual and/or spiritual growth; an inward journey; a search for one's inner being. Such a search is commonly associated with young men and women of the Sixties, whose consciousness-raising sessions, experiments with New Age religions, and dabbling in drugs in the hope of learning something about their own psychologies or souls have become at once instantly recognisable iconography of the era and the butt of many a satirical quip. Nevertheless, I contend that, in the 1980s and 1990s, personal authenticity persisted as a discursive phenomenon, with various individuals and groups claiming themselves as authentic, only to have such claims contested by others. Who had the “deepest” Sixties experience? Who *really* got to the heart of the era? Such questions were integral to the promotion and legitimatisation of Sixties memories in the public sphere.

Of course, one cannot place clear boundaries between public politics and personal authenticity; arguments over the Sixties frequently revert to claims of the positive or negative impact that key events, political legislations and social movements had on people's personal lives, and even their psychological well-being. Yet I argue that these films shared an approach to their historical material in which abstract political “issues” were treated in one way, while the impact of the Sixties on

individual lives was treated in another. Discussion of both public politics and personal authenticity dominated public debates on the Sixties and, I argue, provides significant insight into the filmmakers' production strategies and the interpretive frames within which *Platoon* and company were understood.

In terms of public politics, those prominently involved in the production of *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* were politically committed liberals.<sup>18</sup> However, all five films were produced and released at a time not only when public debate was divided on the legacy of the Sixties, but also when vociferous anti-Sixties conservatives claimed to be speaking for substantial numbers of ordinary Americans. What have come to be known as the "culture wars" ravaged the public sphere throughout the 1980s and 1990s as conservative and liberal commentators (or, as they are called in James Davison Hunter's classic study, "orthodox" and "progressive" commentators) argued over issues such as abortion, feminism, homosexuality and multiculturalism.<sup>19</sup> Many of these issues rose to prominence in the Sixties, and it is therefore unsurprising that, as Sharon Monteith puts it, the era has "been buffeted about on a sea of culture wars, in the media as well as in the academe, and its legacy continues to be debated."<sup>20</sup> That the culture wars were the province of a political and media elite, and not of the far less polarised and moderate American public, is a point I return to in the conclusion.<sup>21</sup> However, it is this elite debate that serves as the discursive framework within which I examine *Platoon et al's* production and reception. Although the culture wars did not serve to indicate the concerns of the American public as a whole, they were nevertheless prominent in the organisation of public life. Public debate in the 1980s and 1990s

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<sup>18</sup> In using the phrase "prominently involved" I am not making claims of auteur-like omnipotence. John Caldwell illuminates the multitudinous interactions between creative and managerial personnel that facilitate the development and production of any film. I do believe, however, that it is fair to say that those who wrote the scripts for, directed and produced these films, and those who were particularly visible in these films' promotional campaigns, played a significant part in the shaping of political content. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarised America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006); Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Viking, 1998).

was understood by many political, cultural and some academic commentators to be in the throes of a culture war.<sup>22</sup>

Screenwriters Oliver Stone (*Platoon*, *JFK*), Eleanor Bergstein (*Dirty Dancing*), Zachary Sklar (*JFK*), Spike Lee (*Malcolm X*) and Eric Roth (*Forrest Gump*) took note of these conflicts. To avoid alienating either side of the culture war, the filmmakers modified their scripts. Comparing early drafts with the finished films, I argue that material which could be viewed as being too left-wing or liberal was often altered so as to be more ambiguous, or else removed altogether. In this way *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* were all constructed as politically diverse texts. This was done to maximise public engagement, for issues such as the Vietnam War and the feminist movement were framed in the public sphere as conflicts. Each film was constructed as a miniature culture war unto itself.

Stephen Prince argues that most films of the 1980s were made to be “ideologically diverse,” in the hope of maximising commercial success.<sup>23</sup> An analysis of script development substantiates this argument, and also highlights how these films were written and re-written so as to intersect with the ebb and flow of public debate. Promotional materials offer a similar range of politically diverse renditions of the Sixties.<sup>24</sup> Posters, trailers, production notes and interviews with cast and crew members produced a variety of conflicting Sixties narratives which further served to diversify political “meaning.”

Yet while all five films are characterised by a multifarious approach to public politics, they nevertheless betray their filmmakers’ liberal political outlooks in one prominent way: the representation of personal authenticity. All highlight the Sixties’ positive impact on the lives of their protagonists. *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*,

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Hunter, *Culture Wars*; Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Prince, *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992), pp. 40-41; Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989: History of the American Cinema, Volume 10* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 315.

<sup>24</sup> I here muddy the distinction made by Richard Dyer between promotion (materials produced by the film industry with the express intention of selling a picture) and publicity (text that “does not appear to be” deliberately produced to sell a picture). This is because I argue that these films were produced in the hope that large amounts of media attention would constitute a free promotional campaign. Because they were constructed as attempts to enter public debate, publicity as opposed to promotion was needed to add an air of “importance” to these productions. As Dyer notes, “in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, [publicity] seems more ‘authentic’.” See Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 60-61.



*Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* chart their central protagonists' intellectual and/or spiritual growth as these protagonists overcome ideological conflicts and incorporate political and cultural transformations of the Sixties into their everyday lives. According to these films, a search for authenticity goes hand in hand with forging progressive communal relationships and even, in some cases, with collective political protest. The central character's personal maturation is given an activist edge (albeit rendered in different degrees); acting as a reminder that, as the feminist movement's slogan put it, "the personal is political." Chris Taylor (*Platoon*), Baby Houseman (*Dirty Dancing*), Jim Garrison (*JFK*), Malcolm X (*Malcolm X*) and Forrest Gump (*Gump*) gain authenticity by becoming human proponents of the positive political, philosophical and moral attitudes that these films argue are integral elements of the Sixties' legacy. Discussions of personal authenticity and in particular of exactly who should be considered as "authentic" representatives of America's Sixties experience played a key role in debates of the 1980s and 1990s. The filmmakers drew upon these debates, and attempted to portray protagonists whose authenticity would be sanctioned and celebrated in the public sphere.

The concept of authenticity is a slippery one, and the following pages provide a clearer sense of how I will mobilise and interrogate the term throughout the thesis. My contention, however, is that Hollywood's Sixties films represented public politics from both liberal and conservative perspectives. A narrative emphasising personal authenticity ploughs through such ideological divides and stresses the Sixties' positive impact upon individuals. The public politics/personal authenticity template was critical to the production and reception of *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump*. And, while further research is required to ascertain how this template is used in current cinema, I suspect that it continues and will continue to inform Hollywood's engagement with the Sixties debate, so long as this era is framed as a "culture war" in the public sphere.

In order to adequately expand and explain this argument, I present in the next section the theoretical framework within which I will be analysing these historical films. I follow this with a discussion of "the Sixties" as a conceptual category and an examination of how the Sixties relates to what I term "public memory" of the 1980s and 90s. Here I insert the era into the context of broader culture wars conflicts. Finally, I provide a breakdown of the thesis' five chapters.

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In this thesis, I apply an interdisciplinary methodology, which combines facets of historical film studies, memory studies and reception studies, to the group of five films that I refer to throughout as “historical films.” Over the past twenty or so years, historical film studies has increasingly considered the ways in which film offers new perspectives on the past and can actively contribute to debates amongst professional historians. Memory studies, on the other hand, locates films more precisely within the broader social context of their release and thus “[draws] attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present.”<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that there is any consensus regarding the distinction between history and memory as epistemological concepts. Pierre Nora’s 1989 claim that history and memory “appear now to be in fundamental opposition” is much disputed.<sup>26</sup> Nora argues that memory, whether individual or collective, is malleable, providing a way of forever interpreting and re-interpreting the past through the lens of the present. For Nora, memory is constantly evolving and susceptible to manipulation by different groups at specific points in time. Conversely, history, in Nora’s view, is a professional discipline, set in its ways, unbendable – not open to challenge or reappraisal.<sup>27</sup> Many scholars question Nora’s distinction and suggest that the relationship between history and memory is complex and, as Marita Sturken puts it, “entangled.”<sup>28</sup> Memory may be a popularised, less “legitimate” version of history, but, then again, neither forms of telling and making sense of the past are invulnerable to interpretation and re-writing.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, two reasonably distinct bodies of film scholarship have emerged on these subjects and it is thus necessary to highlight how my work seeks to straddle and synthesise the two approaches.

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Grainge, “Introduction,” in Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 3-5; Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997), p. 5; Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, pp. 47-48.

The historians and film scholars Robert Rosenstone, Robert Brent Toplin, Natalie Zemon Davis, Leger Grindon, William Guynn, Hayden White and Robert Burgoyne have each developed valuable new approaches to textually analysing historical films.<sup>30</sup> While their approaches differ, they have spearheaded a reappraisal of historical films which avoids simple charges of historical distortion or disingenuousness. Instead, they offer nuanced accounts of the ways that certain films and filmmakers can, in Rosenstone's words, "intersect with, comment upon, and add something to the larger discourse of history out of which they grow and to which they speak."<sup>31</sup> Both Rosenstone and Hayden White have argued for the use of a new set of critical tools in the study of non-written forms of history. They both contend that historical films have the capacity to offer valuable representations of the past and even to challenge traditional (written) forms of historiography. Filmic discourse, or "historiophoty," as White terms it, should be examined on its own terms. White argues for a focus on formal features such as mise en scene, editing, characterisation and narrative. "Sequences of shots and the use of montage or close-ups," argues White, "can be made to predicate quite as effectively as phrases, sentences, or sequences in spoken or written discourse."<sup>32</sup> Rosenstone's discussion of formal and stylistic conventions – the tendency (at least in what he terms "mainstream dramas"), to compress historical discourse into a brief narrative, to condense several historical players into composite characters, to emotionalise history, to focus upon individual stories as opposed to large populations, and to convey masses of information visually rather than through words – is similarly valuable, offering, as it does, a taxonomy of analytical considerations.<sup>33</sup>

The focus upon individuals that "serve to exemplify larger historical themes" is a subject examined in detail throughout the thesis.<sup>34</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis' and

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<sup>30</sup> Burgoyne, *Film Nation*; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); William Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (London: Pearson, 2006); Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 93, no. 5 (December 1988), p. 1196. See also Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History on to Film," *American Historical Review*, vol. 93, no. 5 (December 1988), p. 1177.

<sup>33</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, pp. 36-48.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 14; Toplin, *Reel History*, pp. 36-41.

Leger Grindon's work has been particularly useful in considering the ways in which filmmakers seek to imbue individual characters and private relationships with broader social and political resonance. For example, in her discussion of Stanley Kubrick's gladiatorial epic *Spartacus* (1960), Davis suggests that the portrayal of personal relationships and slave marriages was "not a mere sentimental touch but the representation of a form of slave resistance."<sup>35</sup> Such representations serve to illuminate hierarchical and political structures that were in place during Roman times, describing how those at the bottom sought to challenge the self-granted authority of their "superiors." Similarly, Grindon's discussion of Warren Beatty's biopic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century left-wing radical John Reed, *Reds* (1980), claims that historical commentary is located within the relationship between its films' central protagonists Reed (Beatty) and Louise Bryant (Diane Keaton). Grindon argues that the film uses this relationship to sketch allegorically the story of the rise and demise of the 1960s New Left (with which Beatty was involved).<sup>36</sup> In line with Davis and Grindon, I maintain that treating the personal as political is central to understanding the nature of Hollywood's representations of the Sixties.

The effort made during script development to provide a sustained examination of Sixties political and personal transformation indicates that all of the filmmakers examined in this thesis were "artists for whom history matters."<sup>37</sup> This statement is an incentive to explore the complex developmental processes through which each film was produced. In this respect, I am in agreement with J.E. Smyth when she proposes that, with regard to the historical film, the script serves as the foundation upon which all cinematic representations are constructed.<sup>38</sup> In her rigorous examination of the production of classical Hollywood historical films, Smyth argues against the tendency to treat classical Hollywood history merely as diverting entertainment. She examines production histories of a number of pictures made between 1931 and 1942 and argues that a small group of producers, screenwriters and directors attempted to produce serious and critical interpretations of the past.<sup>39</sup> Unlike Smyth, I do not have the benefit of access to studio

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<sup>35</sup> Davis, *Slaves*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Grindon, *Shadows*, p. 190.

<sup>37</sup> Davis, *Slaves*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> J.E. Smyth, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Smyth, *Reconstructing*, p. 24.

correspondences and memos. I do, however, draw together a range of materials: unpublished scripts, published interviews and my own correspondences with filmmakers, previous cinematic and literary works and biographies. In doing so, I am able to offer considerable analysis of the complex developmental strategies that were mobilised by filmmakers interested in producing historically resonant pictures.

It is at this point, however, that I also begin to depart from Rosenstone, Davis and other scholars of historical films. Focusing primarily on the film text, they seem concerned with what it can offer to the professional historian. This leads to a rather prescriptive selection process when it comes to defining the historical film. A staunch defender of Oliver Stone's work Rosenstone may be,<sup>40</sup> but one would have to speculate that he would not include, for instance, *Dirty Dancing* in his pantheon of serious historical films. It would probably be classified as an example of what he has termed "costume drama": films that do not engage with history, but simply use history as a backdrop to tell far-fetched, fantastic love or adventure stories.<sup>41</sup> A privileging of the film text leads to the making of certain value judgements; if a film does not seem to offer something of value to the historian – and for Rosenstone this more often than not means adopting an experimental, self-conscious visual and narrative structure – then it is not granted the same status.<sup>42</sup> Yet some of the most watched and discussed films with historical content are those that are charged with outright fantasy and fabrication. Placing *Dirty Dancing* within its broader production context demonstrates the filmmakers' investment in saying something important about history.

My thesis promotes script analysis as key to understanding historical films. I argue that an examination of the additions, omissions and alterations made by screenwriters during the drafting stage can provide evidence of how mainstream Hollywood filmmakers that want to say something serious about history and politics, but who also want to maintain a prominent status within an industry that does not look kindly on commercial failure, balance and negotiate these conflicting

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<sup>40</sup> See Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (April 1992), pp. 506-511; and Rosenstone, "Oliver Stone as Historian," in Robert Brent Toplin (ed.), *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History and Controversy* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2000), pp. 26-39.

<sup>41</sup> Rosenstone, "Introduction," in Rosenstone (ed.), *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

imperatives. Such analysis is intended to highlight the ways in which textual content does not emerge *ex nihilo* from the mind of a creative “genius”, but, rather, is the product of historically specific industrial, economic and cultural power relations and conflicts: art vs. commerce, convention vs. innovation, studio control vs. artistic freedom. In different ways, scholars such as John Caldwell, David Hesmondhalgh and Gianluca Sergi have endeavoured to place creativity (or artistry) – screenwriting, directing, sound design, for example – within its historical, industrial and economic context.<sup>43</sup> That is to say, all three avoid treating prominent creative personnel as artistic geniuses (or auteurs) with a singular uncompromising vision. But nor do they suggest commercial filmmakers to be entirely controlled by economic considerations, and thus little more than hired hands for Hollywood’s business interests. Rather, Caldwell, Hesmondhalgh and Sergi nuance our understandings of creative practitioners, or, in Hesmondhalgh’s words, “symbol creators,” by elucidating how they innovate within certain economic, cultural and technological structures.<sup>44</sup> Filmmakers in these accounts are artists, but artists aware of the controls exerted on their chosen profession.

Caldwell refers to the idea of the “industrial auteur” and the “screenplay-as-business-plan.”<sup>45</sup> He takes to task the idea that, in an industry devoted to profit margins, there is any such thing as an “auteur” in the traditional sense of the word (i.e. as creative genius, or plucky maverick fighting the “establishment”). Instead, he explains how scripts are often the product of careful negotiations between creative and executive personnel, the intention being to minimise production costs and maximise potential revenue.<sup>46</sup> My thesis argues that this view toward the screenwriter goes some way to understanding the political and historical content present in each of the five films’ scripts. Political content was, to some extent, compromised in order to avoid alienating conservative audiences (and thus losing potential revenue). To provide two brief examples: screenwriter Oliver Stone removed from *Platoon* some material which would have suggested the film to be supportive of the anti-Vietnam War movement; Spike Lee shaped his *Malcolm X*

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<sup>43</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*; David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (London: SAGE, 2002); Gianluca Sergi, *The Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Hesmondhalgh, *Cultural Industries*, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, p. 232.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 232-239.

script so as to curb some of the more controversial aspects of Malcolm X's personality. Stone and Lee, in particular, are, in popular and academic writings, often described as having a rather ambivalent relationship with Hollywood. They have been the subject of many auteurist studies, which assert their creative autonomy and/or describe them as mavericks at war with the Hollywood establishment.<sup>47</sup> While this thesis emphasises the artistic contributions made by both during scripting and shooting, it does so with a constant eye on the negotiations made as the film travels from script to screen. Regardless of their own public statements and media constructed personas, analysis of script development indicates that both made some compromises with regard to their films' political content. For *JFK* this actually meant inserting a conservative interpretation of the Sixties as counterbalance to the film's liberal take on the era. Changes such as these suggest a shrewd understanding of how to "sell" a political film to Hollywood, and to the American public more generally. By not treating Stone and Lee as unencumbered auteurs but as cultural practitioners with strong political views, but also a strong sense of how the film business operates, my thesis locates these filmmakers within broader trends in Hollywood cinema of the 1980s. Indeed, I argue that *Platoon*, *JFK* and *Malcolm X* were constructed in a similar manner to less discussed (at least in terms of politics) films such as *Dirty Dancing*, and pictures usually argued to be conservative in their outlook such as *Forrest Gump*. All of the screenwriters examined here share the same investment in balancing their liberal political views with economic considerations. Certain compromises and concessions were made during script development. These concessions, I argue, were influenced by broader political and cultural developments of the 1980s and 1990s.

Readers may find the following five chapters' analysis skewed somewhat toward promoting the role of the screenwriter in producing political and historical content. This thesis argues that the screenwriter is as, if not *more*, important than the director when it comes to shaping a film's content and themes. While directors can

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Frank Beaver, *Oliver Stone: Wakeup Cinema* (New York: Twayne, 1994); Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* (Oxford: Roundhouse, 1995); Susan McKay Kallis, *Oliver Stone's America: Dreaming the Myth Outward* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996); Don Kunz (ed.), *The Films of Oliver Stone* (London: Scarecrow, 1997); Spike Lee, David Lee and Terry McMillan, *Five for Five: The Films of Spike Lee* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1991); Alex Patterson, *Spike Lee* (London: Abacus, 1993); Mark Reid, *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Toplin (ed.), *Oliver Stone's USA*.

visually enhance certain ideas present in the script – as was the case with *Dirty Dancing*'s director Emile Ardolino and *Forrest Gump*'s director Robert Zemeckis – and even suggest and/or enforce changes, the script is central to understanding political intention. Both Stone and Lee were involved in writing and directing their films, and thus take centre stage in Chapters One, Three and Four. On the other hand, Ardolino and Zemeckis joined their respective projects once at least one draft script had already been completed. I therefore devote substantial portions of Chapters Two and Five to analysing the contributions made by screenwriters Eleanor Bergstein and Eric Roth. With respect to the former, I contend that *Dirty Dancing* was shaped, discussed and debated as a Bergstein film, and therefore Chapter Two devotes more space to a consideration of Bergstein's role than to the director, Ardolino. This thesis therefore treats the screenwriter not so much as auteur, but as primary shaper of political and historical content, whose contribution is significantly influenced by the context in which they are writing.

Secondly, the textual analysis offered by Rosenstone and company does not do justice to the roles films play in debates taking place in the public sphere. Examining promotion and reception materials provides evidence of the ways in which cinema is used at a specific point in time. In this respect, I am indebted to Marnie Hughes-Warrington's study *History Goes to the Movies*. Hughes-Warrington argues that "[what] makes a film historical ... is its location in a timebound network of discussions – more or less explicit – on what history is and what it is for."<sup>48</sup> Hughes-Warrington's call to examine historical films within a "timebound" moment, not to mention her emphasis on social context and extra-textual materials,<sup>49</sup> suggests a move toward synthesising historical film studies with broader reception-based approaches to film.

Spending one chapter on each film, I begin by locating production history within shifting public debates on the Sixties. Through analysis of script development and comparisons of draft scripts with the finished film, I offer commentary on the creative decisions made by screenwriters with respect to their film's political and historical content, and the broader public discourses that may have informed these decisions. Part Two of each chapter examines promotional materials, suggesting

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<sup>48</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 191.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.



ways in which historical representation and political address are complicated through diverse marketing strategies. Barbara Klinger, Rick Altman and Thomas Austin have all argued that distributors, in order to reduce the risk of commercial failure, avoid marketing films in any singular way.<sup>50</sup> For example, Klinger suggests that “the goal of promotion is to produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make the film resonate as extensively as possible in the social sphere in order to maximize its audience.”<sup>51</sup> Building upon the work of these three film scholars, I argue that the marketing campaigns for all five films constituted “dispersible text[s]”<sup>52</sup> that promoted their representations of the Sixties and, by extension, their politics in a variety of ways. As the following chapters demonstrate, studios and filmmakers employed marketing campaigns that isolated certain scenes, sequences, characters in order to invite multiple political interpretations.

Each chapter analyses a range of marketing materials: posters, trailers, press kits, interviews, newspaper articles. I examine in detail the promotional posters for *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK* and *Forrest Gump*, for they contain several unique visual signifiers that speak directly to the political context into which they appeared, and also serve as an ideal starting point for an analysis of the themes present in other marketing materials. As one of the most replicated materials of a marketing campaign, the poster is one of the key pieces of epiphenomena through which marketers can communicate particular ideas to a wide audience. I argue that these four films’ posters mobilise a range of visual signifiers designed to evoke various debates circulating within the public sphere. In his analysis of the poster marketing of 1970s blaxploitation films, Jon Kraszewski notes the complex and sometimes contradictory ways that a simple promotional image – whether found in a poster or a newspaper advertisement – can mediate complex and sometimes contradictory issues and ideas. Kraszewski argues that promotional images for films such as *Dr Black*, *Mr. Hyde* (1976) and *Black Caesar* (1973) spoke directly to 1970s political debates on Black Nationalism, the rise of a black middle class, black inner city life and

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<sup>50</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 57; Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Barbara Klinger, “Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-19.

<sup>51</sup> Klinger, “Digressions,” p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> I here borrow Austin’s phrase, which he in turn adapted from Klinger. Austin, *Hollywood, Hype*, pp. 29-30.

racism.<sup>53</sup> That these advertisements could, according to Kraszewski, “articulate black class relationships and anxiety” indicates the power and political weight that can be invested in a single striking image.<sup>54</sup> I build upon this work and argue that the posters that accompanied the release of *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, and *Forrest Gump* contained referents to a whole range of Sixties-related discourses. The *Dirty Dancing* poster, for example, spoke to 1980s debates in which, for some cultural commentators, women’s liberation had been evacuated of its politics and reduced to wanton consumption; in one striking image, the *JFK* poster gestured toward much publicised Sixties narratives in which the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was heralded as a political and cultural watershed in American history. All four of these films’ posters introduced a number of key themes that become staples in other promotion and, later, reception materials. *Malcolm X*’s poster – which featured a large “X” symbol against a black background – is treated less as a standalone artefact than as part of a mass marketing phenomenon (the X could, after all, be found adorning everything from tee-shirts to baseball caps to key rings in the lead up to the film’s release). For this reason I do not analyse the poster in the same detail as is the case with the other four films. Rather, I analyse the “X” itself as a political and cultural brand, one that is transferred across an entire range of products and debates. In general, my analysis of marketing materials illuminates the way in which each new piece of promotional epiphenomena had the potential to enhance a film’s political status in public debates and to invite diverse interpretations of each film’s Sixties portrayal. In this way I am building upon the previous script analysis, demonstrating the continued efforts to shape, re-shape and, sometimes, entirely alter a film’s political “meaning” in the run-up to, and during, its release. Certain textual elements were foregrounded, others marginalised, in attempts to re-align films with public debates on Sixties politics and culture that had sometimes shifted, evolved or, as was the case with *Forrest Gump*, substantially altered in the time it took these films to travel from script to screen.

Finally, I examine the manner in which each of the five films was interpreted and appropriated within the public sphere. As Janet Staiger notes, a film’s reception

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<sup>53</sup> Jon Kraszewski, “Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre’s Advertisements,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 50 (Fall 2002), pp. 48-61.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54.

is always influenced by the political, social and cultural contexts into which it is released. As Staiger puts it:

the range of interpretations is constrained by numerous factors such as language, ideologies, personal goals for the experience, conditions of reception, self-identities related to class, gender, race, age, and ethnicity, and so forth – including the contemporary critical methods readers have been taught.<sup>55</sup>

These “interpretive frames,” I suggest, influenced both the dominant politically-informed interpretations of the five films examined extensively in this thesis, and the level of visibility that each film achieved in the public sphere. Furthermore, as Barbara Klinger argued in her analysis of the critical reception of film director Douglas Sirk’s oeuvre, public responses to films are liable to change over time.<sup>56</sup> While I do not, like Klinger, expand my analysis to cover fifteen- or twenty-year retrospective criticism of the five films, I do highlight how discursive shifts, even within the space of a few months, could influence the ways in which these films were publicly understood.

This thesis therefore adopts a methodology that treats the five films examined as multi-textual phenomena. I provide a wide-ranging analysis, which illuminates the historical conditions that informed both filmmakers’ creative decisions and public commentators’ interpretive strategies. I should reiterate here that this does not mean a complete rejection of the film text itself. Rather, it is an attempt to synthesise close textual analysis with an understanding of the contextual factors that influenced its construction and its reception. Keith M. Johnston has recently coined the term “unified analysis” as encapsulating a form of filmic analysis which places the text “within a network of historical information ... [as] an aid to discern and identify potential textual meaning.”<sup>57</sup> Johnston’s focus is the film trailer, but his principles are relevant to my analysis. Like Johnston, I believe that “[a]nalyzing text and context together creates a more potent reading and understanding of the different

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<sup>55</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>57</sup> Keith M. Johnston, *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2009), p. 11.

textual strata, while moving from text to context and back means that the historical network continually informs and aids textual analysis.’’<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, in my analysis of reception materials I highlight the ways in which textual content – certain scenes and sequences – was assimilated into broader social discourses concerned with publicly commemorating the recent American past.

Synthesising so diverse an array of methodological approaches is useful for the very reason that it highlights the dialectical quality of film production and reception. From the moment it is conceived, to its script development, to its theatrical release, to its critical dissection, a film, to borrow Ernest Mathijs’ phrase, is “traffic”; it is a discursive construction that operates within shifting historical frames.<sup>59</sup> Each of the five chapters contained within this thesis is split into three sections. Part one illuminates the key public debates on subjects such as the Vietnam War, feminism and civil rights, which influenced the way in which the film was produced and discussed. Part two focuses on the film’s production history and script development. Part three examines promotional campaigns and critical reception. This methodology not only demonstrates the ways in which one film was interpreted by a variety of different arbiters at different points in time, but also allows me to provide clear and concrete parallels, and important differences, between each of the film’s respective production histories, promotional campaigns and critical reception. In other words, I demonstrate how script-writing strategies for seemingly diverse films like *Platoon* and *Dirty Dancing* actually shared many similarities in terms of the ways that each film’s political content was shaped and altered. Following the films through production and reception also allows me to highlight the manner in which each of the stages of a film’s journey from script to screen are interconnected; ideas in circulation at the time of a film’s production feed into the script, which are revised and altered in promotional materials and, again, in critical reception. Therefore, by breaking down the chapters in this way I am not claiming that production, promotion and reception are isolated processes. Certainly, it is clear that themes introduced in scripts and promotional materials were replicated and debated during each film’s critical reception. Often, filmmakers and other public commentators (critics, politicians etc) are in dialogue with the same political and

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<sup>58</sup> Johnston, *Coming Soon*, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Ernest Mathijs, “Bad Reputations: the Reception of ‘Trash’ Cinema,” *Screen*, vol. 46, no. 4 (Winter, 2005), p. 472.

cultural debates and, indeed, with each other, during production and reception. Oliver Stone, for example, consistently responded publicly to other critics and commentators during *JFK*'s production stage and during its theatrical release. Mathijs is right to question film studies' tendency to treat production, promotion and reception as discreet phenomena, which can be distinguished by neat chronological periods and/or by unique industrial, commercial or critical imperatives. Indeed, Mathijs' notion of the "reception trajectory" emphasises the need to consider all stages of a film's production and reception as fluid and evolving processes. Like Mathijs, my study offers "an integrated view of specific discourses operating in particular situations (synchronically) and as processes over time (diachronically), all analysed as types of 'talk' about film".<sup>60</sup> Such an approach is concerned with treating a film as a discursive battleground; various individuals and groups (filmmakers, marketers, critics and politicians, for example) utilise differing strategies to "forge meaning."<sup>61</sup> I highlight how the shifting tone of political and cultural debate, and those involved in these debates, contributed to the construction fed into each film's script development, promotional campaign and popular critical reception. For example, we will see how, in 1992, *Forrest Gump*'s script development was heavily influenced by one discursive framework within which a reasonably positive, liberal version of the Sixties dominated the public sphere. However, in 1994, developments within the political arena led to marketers and public commentators putting a new spin on the film's textual content and declaring *Forrest Gump* to be a politically conservative demonization of the Sixties. This thesis reveals how a popular film, regardless of its filmmakers' intent, is often declared to be to symbolic of the political *zeitgeist* (i.e. the political complexities contained within *Forrest Gump*'s representation were elided, and the film was declared symbolic of a Republican revival). Throughout the next five chapters I pay close attention to the changing circumstances of a film's production, promotion and reception, and how these changes may influence the ways in which it is discussed, categorised and understood. My mixing of textual analysis and promotion and reception studies is therefore also sensitive to the ways in which interpretation and meaning is never set in stone, but is fluid and capricious. In this way my thesis builds on Mathijs' work, but also

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<sup>60</sup> Mathijs', "Bad Reputations," p. 452.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

emphasises the extent to which screenwriters, as well as critics and commentators, operate within, and sometimes change their scripts in line with, evolving social discourses and historical frames. This combined methodology of script development, promotional materials and reception as a means of studying Hollywood's Sixties films is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind, and has the potential to shed new light on Hollywood's relationship to broader political debates.

In order to illuminate which discourses shaped understandings of the films and with whom these discourses resonated, it is necessary to explain how the films intersected with broader trends relating to public memory of the 1980s and 1990s.

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I define public memory as a vast network of political and cultural statements – newspaper articles, films, television programmes, politicians' speeches, public memorials – contributing to debates and conflicts over the past. While scholars have mobilised such terms as “collective”, “cultural”, “social” and “popular” in reference to memorial practices taking place in the public sphere, I use the term “public,” partly because I draw upon a range of scholarly works in which different terms are used, and partly in order to clarify that it is not my intention to pass comment on individuals' private memories of the Sixties.

Critics such as Fredric Jameson offer extremely pessimistic accounts of memory. For Jameson, modern society is stuck in a perpetual present. The culture industries pump out meaningless nostalgia sound-bites, intended to encourage consumption and hinder serious political engagement. Thus, the “nostalgia film” is, in Jameson's view, a sad symptom of an apathetic, apolitical society unable to face its past.<sup>62</sup> Other thinkers have, however, provided less condemnatory accounts of memory. And it is from these works that I take my lead.

Primary influences upon my approach to the subject of memory are: Daniel Marcus' conception of the Fifties and Sixties in public memory; Marita Sturken's work on what she terms “cultural memory”; George Lipsitz's examination of “collective memory”; and Alison Landsberg's notion of the “prosthetic memory.”

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<sup>62</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in John Belton (ed.), *Movies and Mass Culture* (London: Athlone, 1996), pp. 185-202.

These scholars provide the critical tools with which I work throughout the thesis. Some play a larger role in particular chapters (Sturken, for example, has written on Vietnam commemoration and is therefore a key source upon which I draw when I examine *Platoon* in Chapter One). I make no claims to revising existing understandings of what is meant by public memory or how public memory functions. Rather, at this stage, I wish simply to outline pertinent ideas from the aforementioned critics so as to provide a meaningful framework within which to consider the implications of my arguments.

Marcus, Sturken and Lipsitz conceive memory as a “field of negotiation” and as an “active, engaging process of making meaning.”<sup>63</sup> Their works stress memory’s dialogic nature. Writing on popular music, Lipsitz emphasises that every cultural artefact should be considered “part of collective historical memory and continuing social dialogue.”<sup>64</sup> For Lipsitz even the most mainstream – apparently reactionary – of, cultural texts may be open to oppositional or “counter” memories. Discussing collective remembrance, Lipsitz found that the television programme, *Mama* (1949-1957), whose sentimentalised and all-white representation of the family was hardly a barometer for everyday familial relationships, still offered diverse audiences an opportunity to reflect on their own relationships, and to “arbitrate the tensions facing them and to negotiate utopian endings.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, for Lipsitz, media artefacts do not produce homogenous memories: the interpretations that they generate are predicated on dialogue taking place between viewers and, significantly for this thesis, between public commentators.

Interpretation is, however, never infinite; there are certain factors upon which production and reception of any cultural artefact rely. Marcus highlights the power relationships that characterise the production and dissemination of public memory and how diverse groups and individuals “vie for public attention and acceptance; the ability of a group to establish its memory as a widely held ‘public memory’ is a key act of social power.” Furthermore, argues Marcus, “[b]y establishing its memory as relevant to the wider polity, a group succeeds in placing its interests on the national

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<sup>63</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 259.

<sup>64</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis and London, 1990), p. 107.

<sup>65</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, pp. 80-81.

agenda.”<sup>66</sup> A variety of groups and institutions can promote, validate and/or discredit any particular memory. Memory can therefore be viewed as a struggle for prominence and legitimacy. As Sturken puts it, “the process of cultural memory is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings.”<sup>67</sup> Studying the mnemonic practices present at any given juncture can reveal not only what event is being remembered and how, but also the political and social hierarchies that govern whose memories are officially sanctioned and legitimated.

As is the case for both Marcus and Sturken, my analysis is methodologically informed by Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault calls for historical studies that position singular artefacts within broader networks of debate, which he calls “discursive formations.” A discursive formation emerges “[w]henver one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations).”<sup>68</sup> Much like Marcus’ discussion of public memory, Foucault argues that, although their precise origins are often impossible to locate, discursive formations go through a similar process of rise to prominence, validation and, eventually, institutionalisation.<sup>69</sup> As I later suggest, discussions of the Sixties, which rose to prominence in the late 1970s, might be seen as a discursive formation which became institutionalised as the 1980s progressed. By extension, the Sixties debate was operating within a larger discursive formation – the culture wars. In Foucault’s terms, these webs of discourse serve both as forums within which conflict and contestation takes place, and as a kind of epistemological police, shaping both the production and the reception of any given statement (a speech act, an image, a television programme, a film, etc.).<sup>70</sup> Examining the content of these discursive formations can suggest the rules and conventions that lead to certain statements gaining prominence and others being marginalised. This conception of memory is central to understanding the production, promotion and reception of *Platoon et al.* Key creative personnel involved in these films sought to position themselves as

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<sup>66</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 41.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.



“legitimate” chroniclers of the Sixties. Such efforts required them to mould script content, and construct a public persona for themselves, that encapsulated dominant discursive practices present in public spheres during the 1980s and 1990s. But, as my examination of reception materials demonstrates, these dominant discursive practices also ensured that only three of the films examined in this thesis were successful at entering the national Sixties debate.

Finally, reception materials indicate that all five films acted, for some public commentators, as what Alison Landsberg calls a “prosthetic memory.” Landsberg argues that mainstream cultural institutions, including Hollywood, are capable of providing memories of events or phenomena that an individual may not have experienced physically. When a film represents political or social injustices of the past, it can, she suggests, “produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender.”<sup>71</sup> Films can therefore positively alter the ways in which one interacts with other people, groups and institutions. Furthermore, as Landsberg notes, the 1980s and 1990s saw an explosion of interest in “experiential” histories: reconstructions of the past that encouraged a feeling of having experienced the historical event. The construction of personal authenticity in *Platoon et al* is bound up with this longing for an “authentic” experience – “Americans’ widespread desire to live history.”<sup>72</sup> By combining representation of specific historical events with a more generalised representation of emotional and intellectual development, the five films examined in this thesis offered some viewers the opportunity to revisit the Sixties, and to “attach themselves to pasts they did not live.”<sup>73</sup> The representations of the Sixties present in all five films inspired diverse public commentators to recount their own memories of the Sixties and, like the characters that join Forrest Gump on his bench, to present their own versions of the recent American past. To differing degrees then, each film attempted to encourage communal reminiscence of the Sixties, and some even promoted communal political activism.

A combination of the methodologies offered in historical film, memory, and reception studies provides the framework within which the five films are examined.

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<sup>71</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Communication* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

The films' political and historical content, however, needs to be understood as mediating, in complex ways, discourses that were circulating in public channels at the time of their production, promotion and reception. It is to these discourses that I now turn attention.

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It is fruitful to consider the “Sixties” (as a political concept) and the broader culture wars as interlinked, dependent phenomena that emerged in the 1960s, escalated in the late 1970s and became institutionalised in the 1980s. Coined by James Davison Hunter in 1991, the term culture war essentially defined what he saw as an increasingly prominent public conflict between conservative (orthodox) and liberal (progressive) commentators. Taking place in political rhetoric, cultural criticism and scholarly monographs, the culture war was a debate “over fundamentally different conceptions of moral authority, over different ideas and beliefs about truth, the good, obligation to one another, the nature of community.” It was “expressed as a clash over national life itself.”<sup>74</sup> While the terms “conservative” and “liberal” excite different connotations depending upon the issues at stake, I follow Hunter in using the terms in reference to two conflicting perspectives on America’s social and moral mores. Thus a conservative is recognised as somebody who reacts negatively to such issues as abortion, gay rights and women’s rights, artistic freedom and the role of federal government with regard to social spending, while championing American militarism abroad and “traditional” Christian family values. Broadly speaking, a liberal appears to offer the opposite perspective.

Though the term “culture war” did not enter common parlance until the early 1990s, various events of the 1960s and early 1970s are cited as catalysts for a growing divisiveness in public political discourse. Hunter initially traces the roots of the 1980s and 90s culture wars to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Debates within the major religions – Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism – between moderates or progressives and traditionalists led to a univocal religious voice being fragmented. From the late 1960s, a number of factors combined to deepen these divisions. The emergence of politically active “special agenda” religious organisations,

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<sup>74</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, pp. 49-50.

campaigning for conservative and for progressive causes, weakened denominational ties further.<sup>75</sup> In addition, some people began to identify themselves as non-religious instead associating themselves with different identity groups including ethnic minorities, women, and gays. Campaigns for, and against, women's equality, civil rights, religious reform, and the Vietnam War preoccupied both religious and secular interest groups from the late 1960s onward. A broader "counterculture" of the late 1960s is often cited as the progenitor of the 1980s and 1990s culture wars.<sup>76</sup> The counterculture on the one hand refers to hippies, feminists, civil rights activists and anti-war protestors who were challenging traditionally-held beliefs with regard to the role of America's political, social and institutional structures like the government, the military, the family, and the university.

However, what should also be noted is that, in terms of public debate, the 1960s also saw the rise of a noisy New Right moment with similar intentions to attack state institutions. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin suggest that the respective administrations of President Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon were attacked from both the Left and the Right throughout the decade.<sup>77</sup> The rise of a New Right throughout the 1960s was something conveniently forgotten by anti-Sixties conservatives of the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, it is particularly ironic that the political and moral decline that President Ronald Reagan and his political allies identified as a product of the Sixties was, in the early 1960s, actually seen by many conservative commentators to have been a product of the post-war New Deal consensus of the 1940s and 1950s. So it was that economic and cultural conservatives joined forces throughout the 1960s to combat the big government programs and civil rights legislations of the post-World War II era, which they believed had brought about America's downfall. The angry rhetoric so central both to Senator George Wallace's bid for Republican nomination in the 1968 presidential election, and to Ronald Reagan's run for California governor in 1966 – and the success such rhetoric brought – further limned the idea of a nation divided.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, pp. 67-106.

<sup>76</sup> Irene Taviss Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, p. 206.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236-240.

Given these much-publicised divides, it is no wonder that by the 1960s' end a host of public commentators of diverse political persuasions were declaring the decade to have instigated ruptures and divides. "The centre cannot hold" (a line from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming") became a popular rallying cry, incorporated into the public lamentations of everyone from Joan Didion to President Richard Nixon.<sup>79</sup> In 1969, *Time* magazine declared that "the bright promise that began the '60s turned to confusion and near despair as the decade ended."<sup>80</sup> In this account, student protestors and civil rights campaigners had begun the decade full of hope for a better future. Everything unravelled as it progressed. What quickly would become standard political and cultural touchstones of the era are mentioned: hippies, political protest, assassinations and Vietnam. The early 1960s were already being remembered as a halcyon period of history: hope and optimism eloquently articulated in Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" speech, the dashing, charismatic president John F. Kennedy and a politically galvanised generation of young men and women ready to change society for the better. Then came Vietnam, then came race riots in northern cities, then came violent radicals. In popular folklore, America was being brought to its knees; descending into political chaos.

At this time, and in later years, public discussion of the Sixties was boiled down to a standard collection of events, public figures and iconography. Sociologist Fred Davis has argued that, in popular memory, the imbuing of particular periods with symbolic import can be seen as a widespread desire to understand history as a narrative. Decades are often discussed less as strict chronological entities than as eras defined by a "spirit" or tone. This "decade labelling" foregrounds particular themes that transcend ten-year timeframes and instead serve a generalising epistemological function, commenting as much upon the present as the past.<sup>81</sup> It is thus that the Sixties quickly became imbued with its own spirit and tone. For many commentators of the 1960s, and in future (1970s, 1980s and 1990s) debate, this meant highlighting conflict: political, social and generational ruptures.

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<sup>79</sup> See Joan Didion, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" [1967], in Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1974), pp. 78-110; Anon, "What a Year!" *Time*, August 30, 1968, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com) (Accessed May 2008); Associated Press, "Nixon's and Finch's Views on Students," *New York Times*, March 23, 1969, p. 54.

<sup>80</sup> Anon, "From the '60s to the '70s: Dissent and Discovery," *Time*, December 19, 1969, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com) (Accessed May 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Fred Davis, "Decade Labelling: The Play of Collective Memory and Narrative Plot," *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1984), pp. 15-24.

William L. O’Neill took up the “centre cannot hold” motif in an early history of the 1960s. Published in 1971, O’Neill’s book, entitled *Coming Apart*, claimed that America’s “coming apart” began somewhere around 1965. Praising the early incarnations of diverse groups such as the counterculture, the New Left and the civil rights movement, O’Neill charts a positive version of the era’s political and social movements until the “young radicals failed themselves by giving way to unrestrained emotionalism.”<sup>82</sup> O’Neill’s book was in many ways an early version of the “good sixties/bad sixties” or “declension hypothesis” that appeared in popular autobiographies written in the 1980s by former Sixties activists such as Todd Gitlin and Tom Hayden. For these commentators, the left-wing student movements such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began the era with noble intentions and achieved a great deal. They ended it, however, in disarray, as younger, less disciplined and more violent radicals joined their ranks.<sup>83</sup> Other commentators of the early 1970s provided differing narratives of downfall. For example, the author and journalist Hunter S. Thompson lamented the counterculture’s demise in his novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). Pining for San Francisco in the mid-1960s – a time when “we were riding high on the crest of a beautiful wave” – Thompson resignedly ponders the “place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.”<sup>84</sup> He settles on 1968 and Richard Nixon’s election to the presidency as the beginnings of a national “downer.”<sup>85</sup> As America moved into the 1970s the very recent past was already being constructed in terms verging on the mythic. Quite what rough beast had slouched into the national body politic was a subject addressed by countless public commentators of the 70s and beyond.

If the Sixties and the culture wars were emerging as prominent conceptual categories in the 1960s and early 1970s, the late 70s saw both further encroach on the mainstream of political debate. In the late 1970s, the rise to prominence of New Right organisations such as the Moral Majority and the Heritage Foundation,

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<sup>82</sup> William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960’s* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> For discussion of the “declension hypothesis” see Rick Perlstein, “Who Owns the Sixties? The Opening of a Scholarly Generation Gap,” *Lingua Franca*, vol. 6, no. 4 (May/June 1996), <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9605/sixties.html> (Accessed April 2008).

<sup>84</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream* (London: Harper Perrenial [1971] 2005), p. 68.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

together with high-profile campaigns such as Anita Bryant's 1977 attempts to repeal gay rights legislation in Florida, intensified these conflicts. New Right organisations gained a strong support base because of an "explosive growth of evangelical Protestant churches ... determined to protect traditional values."<sup>86</sup> Much of their ire was directed at the Sixties. The Sixties were treated not as a chronologically demarcated decade (the early 1970s could also now be included in these late 1970s invectives) but rather as the root of what they considered as destructive forces in American society: hippies, the anti-war movement, women's and gay rights.

The New Right claimed that America's political and moral disintegration was brought about by an unholy liberal alliance running riot from college campuses to the White House.<sup>87</sup> Philip Jenkins goes so far as to suggest that 1975 marked the emergence in public debates of what he terms an "anti sixties" rhetoric, which began a period of large-scale assaults on the era's liberalisations. Conservatives claimed that increasing permissiveness with respect to sexual conduct led to the breakdown of the family unit, to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, even to paedophilia. Liberal reforms in the penal system during the 1960s and early 70s, it was argued, were responsible for a rise in violent crime. Welfare reforms, for such commentators, had not helped the poor but plunged the country into a domestic economic crisis. On the global stage, détente with the Soviet Union had diminished the nation's strength and left it impotent against the worldwide spread of communism.<sup>88</sup>

In the late 1970s, it was particularly easy to chart a Sixties disaster narrative. Historians of the 1970s assert that the second half of the decade was (in public debates) often defined in terms of pessimism, cynicism, and national "malaise." Robert M. Collins cites a struggling economy, America's Vietnam experience and the Watergate scandal as having contributed to a public sphere characterised by national self-doubt. Fears that despite (or because of) the transformations of the Sixties, people were less prosperous, that individual freedoms had been curtailed by big-government social policies and that Vietnam had embarrassed America on the global stage were rampant.<sup>89</sup> With the discourse of pessimism and malaise

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<sup>86</sup> Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 173.

<sup>87</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, pp. 36-41.

<sup>88</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-23.

<sup>89</sup> Collins, *Transforming America*, pp. 7-27.

dominating much national debate, many claims-makers, conservatives in particular, sought a root for America's demise in the Sixties. This kind of debate intensified in the 1980s, beginning with Ronald Reagan's first Presidential election campaign.

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According to Daniel Marcus, it was Reagan's election in 1980 that established the Sixties conflict as central to mainstream political discourse. A host of competing voices sought to "generate useable narratives" of post-World War II American history, within which the Sixties was key.<sup>90</sup> Many public commentators hoped that by controlling the past they might have some say in America's future. Events of the Sixties served to facilitate America's "thinking out loud about itself."<sup>91</sup>

Notions of a "good Sixties" and a "bad Sixties" defined public debate. First there were attacks on the "bad" Sixties from Republican politicians and other conservative commentators. As Marcus points out, for conservatives the 1950s/Fifties and Sixties came to stand as polar opposites. The Fifties represented the high-point of post-war America, when economic prosperity and social stability assured the nation's place at the pinnacle of the global hierarchy. According to conservatives, the Sixties changed everything; suddenly the nation fell apart. The growth of radicalised groups such as the anti-war, feminist and civil rights movements infected America with an "un-American" mindset. The counterculture's promotion of free-love destroyed America's moral fabric and eroded traditional Fifties values.

A memorial narrative espoused by conservatives was thus standardised: "1950s normality, 1960s deviance and trauma, 1970s hangover and stagnation, and 1980s [if you voted Republican] return to health and glory."<sup>92</sup> Such a historical narrative was used by the Republicans for distinctly political ends. In the 1984 and 1988 presidential election campaigns, Democratic candidates Walter Mondale (1984) and Michael Dukakis (1988) were linked by Republicans to this negative version of the Sixties. For example, in the 1988 election Republican Candidate

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<sup>90</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 1. See also Von Bothmer, *Framing*, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Shudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How we Remember, Forget and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>92</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 165.

George H. W. Bush declared that much of the Democratic leadership was “a remnant of the 60s, the new left, those campus radicals grown old, the peace marchers and the nuclear freeze activists.”<sup>93</sup> Reagan, Bush and their peers promoted themselves as being in opposition to these enemies of the “people”. The Republicans announced themselves to be anti-Sixties warriors, saviours come to bring the country back to its former (Fifties) glory. For conservative commentators, it was developments that unfolded in the late 1960s and early 1970s – government social policies, the growing anti-war, feminist and gay rights movements, the Black Panthers and the counterculture – that received criticism. In other words, the late 1960s and early 1970s were “the Sixties.” As Bernard Von Bothmer points out, the years 1960-1963, or the Kennedy era, were actually celebrated by Reagan as a golden, prelapsarian age of conservative economic reform and aggressive Cold War policy. Much like the liberal version of the Sixties (examined below), the early Sixties were the “good Sixties.”<sup>94</sup> In conservative chronology, however, the early 1960s were represented more as an extension to the 1950s rather than as the dawn of a new age of positive social transformation.

Both Marcus and Von Bothmer point out that, in terms of political discourse, the Sixties debate was throughout the 1980s dominated by Republicans. It was not until 1992 and Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign that Democrats were successful at re-interpreting the Sixties in line with their own ideological agendas.<sup>95</sup> The mid-to-late 1980s are, however, significant for a number of developments that opened the public sphere to diverse political interpretations of the Sixties, including those articulated by filmmakers. First, there was growing public dissatisfaction with the Reagan administration. Secondly, there was a “heating up” of the culture wars, and, particularly of conflicts over works produced by creative individuals and historians. Thirdly, the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise to public prominence of the generation that had grown up in the Sixties. All three of these factors would influence the production, promotion and reception of the five film’s examined in this thesis.

Jenkins refers to 1986, the year of *Platoon*’s release, as another turning point in political history. Events of 1986 and early 1987 saw the Reagan administration

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<sup>93</sup> Gerald M. Boyd, “Despite Vows to be ‘Gentler’ Bush Stays on Attack,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1988, p. A10.

<sup>94</sup> Von Bothmer, *Framing*, pp. 45-59.

<sup>95</sup> Von Bothmer, *Framing*, p. 156; Marcus, *Happy Days*, pp. 88-91, 150-170.



suffer a number of setbacks, which led many commentators to question the expediency of its tub-thumping rhetoric (including that levelled against the Sixties). In November 1986, the Democrats retook the US Senate in the mid-term elections. And soon thereafter, the Iran Contra scandal broke, which revealed that the Reagan government had secretly sold weapons to Iran (a country they had also demonised throughout the decade) and funnelled the proceeds into the funding of the Contra rebels of Nicaragua. The stock market crash of 1987 served as the nail in the coffin for the Reagan administration.<sup>96</sup>

Marcus and Collins identify a number of other factors that contributed to “a public questioning of the political, economic and social direction of the nation.”<sup>97</sup> Scandals centred on the prominent televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart made the Christian Right’s attempts to stand as moral guardians seem increasingly questionable. The deregulation of Savings and Loans associations in the 1980s, and the corruption and financial disarray that followed, also were blamed on the Reagan administration in some quarters.<sup>98</sup> In many ways, such developments offered those with a view of the Sixties different from that offered by Reagan and his allies the opportunity to launch a counter-offensive in the Sixties debate.<sup>99</sup> This does not mean that there were not a range of Sixties pop-cultural representations prior to 1986; rather that those who sought to enter into political discourse and challenge Reagan and his allies occupied a more prominent position in the public sphere.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, Hollywood’s intervention into the Sixties debate was not concerned with perpetuating Reagan’s and Bush’s rhetoric.

“Reaganite Entertainment” has become a kind of shorthand for (usually commercially successful) pictures of the 1980s and 90s that betray a conservative political outlook.<sup>101</sup> Certainly, films such as *Dirty Dancing* and *Forrest Gump* have

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<sup>96</sup> Jenkins, *Nightmares*, pp. 272-291.

<sup>97</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 119.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121; Collins, *Transforming America*, pp. 83-87.

<sup>99</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 119.

<sup>100</sup> As is noted in the following chapters, Sixties-set films, or filmic discussions of the era’s legacy, had been produced in reasonably large numbers since the late 1970s. A few examples are *American Graffiti* (1973), *Cooley High* (1975), *Coming Home* (1977), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1977), *Animal House* (1978), *The Wanderers* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *A Small Circle of Friends* (1980), *Four Friends* (1981), *The Big Chill* (1983), *Baby It’s You* (1983) and *The Outsiders* (1983).

<sup>101</sup> The term “Reaganite entertainment” was coined by Andrew Britton in 1986, and has since gained much currency in film scholarship. It has become associated with a conservative mode of filmmaking that seeks to restore “traditional” beliefs in the home, the family and patriarchal authority. For Robin

been examined under this rubric.<sup>102</sup> To use this term in this thesis, however, would be misleading. Firstly, its use would suggest that filmmakers and marketers were attempting to, and were received as, parroting Reagan's political line – which they were not. Secondly, it would characterise, in simple political terms, a group of films that, as noted above, were ideologically complex. *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* were part of a pop-cultural landscape in which a diverse range of historical narratives competed. Many of these artefacts were produced by people with an investment in the Sixties as the years of their youth; a time when they came of age, politically and morally.

For people of what we might call the “Sixties Generation” – a cohort made up of those born roughly between the late 1930s and late 1950s – the Sixties was the period in which they first either participated in, or were old enough to be aware of, events of national consequence. Some of the key promulgators of popular culture's Sixties narratives in the 1980s were people involved in political organisations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Prominent SDS members, Todd Gitlin (b. 1938) and Tom Hayden (b. 1939), both published high-profile autobiographies in the 1980s. Both books speak positively of the early 1960s as a time when organised resistance to the establishment led to social change, while at the same time charting a downward trajectory as of 1968.<sup>103</sup> Their “good sixties”/“bad sixties” split thus emerges five years after Reagan and the conservatives 1963 watershed (noted

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Wood, Reaganite cinema is a cinema of reassurance, a reaction against the tumultuous events of the 1970s – Watergate and Vietnam, for example – not to mention the European-influenced, ideologically complex Hollywood “art” cinema of the seventies, offered by directors such as Arthur Penn, Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese. By the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, filmmakers such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, according to Wood, provided a return to traditional values and traditional film genres in such blockbusters as the *Star Wars* trilogy, *ET* and *Indiana Jones*. Reaganite cinema has been discussed as involving “a nostalgic return to the past,” and especially the 1950s. John Belton writes that many films of this ilk enable “audiences to go back in time in an attempt to recover the small-town, affluent American paradise of the Eisenhower era, before ... the demise of both the family and the community began to erode the American dream.” See Andrew Britton, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment,” *Movie* vol. 31, no. 32 (1984), pp. 1-40; John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (London: McGraw Hill, 1994), p. 325; Robin Wood, “Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era,” in Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 162-188.

<sup>102</sup> Alan Nadel, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 202-210; Chris Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 111-118.

<sup>103</sup> For a discussion of these narratives see John Downton-Hazlett's book on the generational biography, *My Generation*, pp. 177-196 and Mendel-Reyes, *Reclaiming Democracy*, pp. 77-83.

above). Gitlin and Hayden, however, view the early Sixties not as a Fifties hangover but as the dawn of a new age, one which promised progressive political activism and an upheaval of unjust political and social structures. 1968 signifies an “implosion”, as the “Old Guard” watched helplessly while younger radicals destroyed, with violence and arrogance the New Left’s credibility and effectiveness.<sup>104</sup>

Other older members of the Sixties generation, such as David Horowitz (1939) and Peter Collier (1939), had, by the 1980s, turned conservative and rejected the Sixties as a horrendous historical disjuncture during which reckless youths (a group in which they place themselves) destroyed America’s moral fabric. Horowitz and Collier also wrote autobiographical sketches, which charted a dawning realisation that left-wing activism and radical politics were destroying their country.<sup>105</sup> Like Gitlin and Hayden, they reserved particular scorn for the late 1960s (post 1968). However, for Horowitz and Collier, the very foundations upon which the New Left was built were a sham. They were the dangerous dreams of pampered, ignorant, middle-class youths whose “lives were absorbed in efforts to replace an ‘unjust’ society with one that was better” but never considered whether “their efforts might actually make things worse.”<sup>106</sup>

As the 1980s progressed, older members of the Sixties generation were joined in the public sphere in increasing numbers by those born in the late 1940s and 50s – the oldest of the demographic known as the baby boomers. In its broadest terms, the baby boom lasted from 1945/46 to 1964. Some 78 million babies were born during these years, and, by the early 1990s, boomers accounted for 40 percent of the adult population.<sup>107</sup> But those born at the tail end of this period were not old enough to remember clearly, let alone participate in, events of the Sixties. Steve Gillon breaks the demographic into two sections: “Boomers” and “Shadow Boomers.” The former are those who were born between 1945 and 1957 and “grew up with rock and roll, the *Mickey Mouse Club*, prosperity ... the idealism of John F. Kennedy, and the social struggles of the 1960s.” The latter, those born between 1958

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<sup>104</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 381.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts on the Sixties* (New York: Summit Books, 1990).

<sup>106</sup> David Horowitz, “Letter to a Political Friend,” in Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, p. 327.

<sup>107</sup> Cheryl Russell, *The Master Trend: How the Baby Boom Generation is Remaking America* (New York: Plenum Press, 1993), p. 8.

and 1964, “confronted a world of oil embargos ... Watergate, sideburns and disco balls.”<sup>108</sup> It is the first cohort, the “Boomers” with which I am concerned. Many of those involved in the production of *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* were of this demographic. Furthermore, the films became catalysts for early baby boomer critics and commentators to publicly reflect upon their own memories of the Sixties.

Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott demonstrate how events of the 1960s – the Vietnam War and the Kennedy assassination, for example – impacted heavily baby boomer’s memories.<sup>109</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s 1998 survey also found that older boomers drew upon memories of the Sixties. It was “a pretty tumultuous time, and it had in a lot of ways a liberalizing effect on me” said one 45-year-old participant. Another participant stated that “The sixties to mid-seventies was a traumatic time for me.”<sup>110</sup> By the early 1990s baby boomers had gained greater power in institutions such as the government and the media, providing them with a greater voice within the public sphere.<sup>111</sup> And throughout the 1990s their spending power increased making them a prime target market for advertisers.<sup>112</sup> The majority of the filmmakers and producers examined here fall into this boomer demographic.<sup>113</sup> A number of baby-boom film and television directors, producers and writers, such as those behind *Running on Empty* (1988), *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), *Family Ties* (1982-1989) and *thirtysomething* (1987-1991), also contributed Sixties representations, or discussions of the era’s legacy, to this pop-cultural potpourri. Furthermore, these cultural productions became catalysts for Sixties generation critics and commentators to publicly reflect upon their own memories of the Sixties. Such films and television programmes offered less explicitly condemnatory interpretations of the Sixties and, I would argue, began to

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<sup>108</sup> Steve Gillon, *Boomer Nation The Largest and Richest Generation Ever and How It Changed America* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 14.

<sup>109</sup> Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, “Generations and Collective Memories,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 (June 1989), pp. 359-381.

<sup>110</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 52-53, 70, 77.

<sup>111</sup> Gillon, *Boomer Nation*, p. 245.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 246-47.

<sup>113</sup> Directors include Oliver Stone (*Platoon* and *JFK*), b. 1946, Spike Lee (*Malcolm X*), b. 1957, and Robert Zemeckis (*Forrest Gump*), b. 1952. Screenwriters include Stone, Lee and the writer of *Forrest Gump*, Eric Roth, b. 1945. The screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein and the director Emile Ardolino (*Dirty Dancing*) were born in 1938 and 1943, respectively, making them a part of the broader Sixties generation.

pave the way for political rhetoric of a less critical bent, which emerged in the early 1990s. The Sixties-laced 1992 presidential campaign of baby boomer Bill Clinton was very much part of a broader pop-culture reply to years of Republican demonisation.

Certainly, conflict between liberal and conservative versions of the Sixties was ever-present during the years 1986-1994. This conflict was particularly characteristic of the political sphere. The election in 1992 of Bill Clinton, the first baby boomer president, was viewed by many in the media as a turning point in politics: the Sixties generation was finally in the White House. While the conservative “bad sixties” had some presence throughout the election year, it was subordinated to Clinton’s softer, liberalised version, which celebrated certain aspects of the era’s positive and energising impact on America. Yet the Republican reclamation of Congress in 1994 (led by another member of the Sixties generation, Newt Gingrich) complicated any notion of a unified “Sixties generation” and reawakened the “bad” Sixties with a vengeance. These few years, then, constituted a period of heightened ideological tension in which interpretations of the Sixties were as capricious as they were multitudinous.

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The heating up of the culture wars and, in particular, of the debates on artistic freedom and history provided further ammunition for a high-profile war over cinematic representation. From the “art wars” of the late 1980s to the “history wars” of the early 90s, the period 1986-1994 saw debate on history and artistic representation reach fever pitch.<sup>114</sup> The political Right, infuriated by what it saw as the “trivialisation of intellectual life,” a dismissal of canonised American history, and a rise in immoral/blasphemous works of art, did battle with a political Left influenced by postmodern theory, which questioned the very traditions and standards to which the former clung.<sup>115</sup> Debates between these two camps over multicultural

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<sup>114</sup> Richard Jenson, “The Culture Wars 1965-1995: A Historian’s Map,” *Journal of Social History: Fall 95 Supplement*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Fall 1995), pp. 19-32.

<sup>115</sup> James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush vs. Gore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 255; Collins, *Transforming America*, p. 173.

syllabi, historical standards, artistic freedom and so-called “political correctness” were prevalent throughout the period in which *Platoon et al* were released.

Education, in particular, was a hot-bed of discontent for conservatives and liberals. In 1986, protestors demonstrated against Stanford University’s undergraduate module on “Western Culture.” The absence of non-Western thinkers and the privileging of white men over women and minorities in this module provoked a campaign to modify its content or to scrap it completely. By 1988, the original module had been scrapped and replaced with one which emphasised diversity and inclusiveness.<sup>116</sup> This conflict was but one of many public spats that occurred in the years 1986-1994. Conservative critics such as Allen Bloom (1987), and Dinesh D’Souza (1991) raged against a liberalised university system introduced in the 1960s that, in its desperate attempts to become politically correct and placate ethnic minorities and women calling for greater diversity, they argued had ended up scrapping important and classic works of western literature and philosophy.<sup>117</sup> Richard Jenson notes that in the early 1990s a number of conservative intellectuals were attacking what they viewed as an over-emphasis on “political correctness” and multiculturalism on college campuses. For conservatives, “multiculturalism in practice was an attack on dead white men and western civilization in general,” and its critics “were systematically silenced as politically incorrect.”<sup>118</sup> Todd Gitlin discusses the “textbook battles” in early 1990s California. Again, conflicts between liberals and conservatives over how much focus should be given to white American men and how much should be accorded to ethnic minorities and women were prevalent.<sup>119</sup>

At the same time various interest groups launched high-profile assaults against public historical exhibitions and against artistic freedoms. In the late 1980s, there were campaigns against the National Endowments of the Arts (NEA) funding of controversial artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andreas Serrano, whose

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<sup>116</sup> Collins, *Transforming America*, p. 180.

<sup>117</sup> Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), esp pp. 313-335; Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

<sup>118</sup> Jenson, “The Culture Wars,” pp. 21-22.

<sup>119</sup> Gitlin, *Twilight*, pp. 7-36.

homoerotic and/or blasphemous works were castigated by conservatives.<sup>120</sup>

Meanwhile, organisations that policed the content of popular music, such as the Parents' Music Resource Center (established 1985), crusaded against songs that they deemed celebrated "the most gruesome violence, coupled with explicit messages that sadomasochism is the essence of sex."<sup>121</sup> Historical exhibitions organised by the Smithsonian Institution, such as 1991's "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920" and 1995's "Enola Gay," – named after the plane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima – also caused uproar amongst conservatives who felt that there was too much attention being paid to the exploitation of Native Americans, and to American wrongdoing (the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima), and not enough attention being paid to American heroism.<sup>122</sup>

Film too became a battleground on which campaigners with both orthodox and progressive attitudes argued over morality and politics. Charles Lyons charts the explosion of activist fervour in the years 1980-1995. Protests against cinematic representations of violence against women in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), negative Asian American stereotypes in *Year of the Dragon* (1985), a blasphemous view of Jesus Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and negative portrayals of homosexuals in *Cruising*, *Windows* (both 1980) and *Basic Instinct* (1992) were but a few of the high-profile controversies. Lyons contends that this fifteen-year period was notable for the intertwining of cinema and culture wars conflicts. The attempts made by politicians on both the Right and the Left to censor certain Hollywood productions, was part of a broader national "conflict over sex, race, family values and homosexuality" taking place in the public sphere.<sup>123</sup> For example, the conservative film critic Michael Medved argued in his 1992 bestseller *Hollywood vs. America* that Hollywood was suffering from a "crisis of values." "It's not 'mediocrity and escapism' that leaves audiences cold", argued Medved, "but sleaze and self-indulgence."<sup>124</sup> Certainly, for conservative critics, a number of the films examined in this thesis were representative of a Hollywood "loony left" that

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<sup>120</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, pp. 231, 247-249.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Hunter, *Culture Wars*, p. 228.

<sup>122</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, p. 262.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), p. 186. See also Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, pp. 341-369.

<sup>124</sup> Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), p. 10.

conservatives considered to be out of touch with the needs and values of ordinary Americans.<sup>125</sup>

With both film and history at the forefront of the late 1980s and 1990s culture wars, the stage was set for *Platoon et al* to play a central part in public debate. As Sixties representations, the films were of immediate relevance to the above-noted conflicts, all of which were understood as having their roots in the Sixties. Gitlin observes that for conservative culture warriors: “the subversives of the Left [were] back, Sixties radicals all.” They had “burrowed into the Modern Language Association, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the English Department at Duke, the black studies department at the City College of New York, the Whitney Museum, the Smithsonian Institution.”<sup>126</sup> Right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh fretted in 1993 that a shady “sixties gang” had co-opted “our major cultural institutions ... the arts, the press, the entertainment industry, the universities, the schools, the libraries, the foundations, etc.”<sup>127</sup> As Mike Wallace notes, Limbaugh and others were particularly terrified of what this liberal “sixties gang” was going to do to American history.<sup>128</sup>

A combination of political, cultural and generational conflicts and debates therefore provided the historical conditions for these films’ incursion into the public sphere. Yet public memory of the Sixties was not simply a matter of competing stories. Pivotal to public memory of the era were the questions: whose story is legitimate? Who should we believe? And who experienced the “real” Sixties and thus deserves public attention and discussion? Such questions were part of a conflict over who had experienced the Sixties most deeply and who might deserve to be described as “authentic.”

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In a thesis that purports to be examining “historical films” it may seem strange that I have used the word “authentic” in connection to a rather ambiguous concept related

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<sup>125</sup> Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, p. 33.

<sup>126</sup> Gitlin, *Twilight*, p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Mike Wallace, “The Battle of the Enola Gay,” reprinted in Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 292.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 292-309.



to individual philosophies and spiritual betterment, rather than in connection with ideas of factual verisimilitude. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word authentic is used to describe something which is “first hand,” “original,” “possessing original or inherent authority.” An authentic object is “entitled to acceptance or belief, as being in accordance with fact, or as stating fact, reliable, trustworthy [and] of established credit.” Works of art, historical records and other artefacts have long been the subject of debates over authenticity. Here, however, I am concerned with how this term is applied to the self. Charles Lindholm argues that “the dominant trope for personal authenticity in America is emotivism – the notion that feeling is the most potent and real aspect of the self.”<sup>129</sup> Authenticity of this kind could be achieved either through introspection and soul searching or through being spontaneous, demonstrating “freedom and expressivity.”<sup>130</sup> Either way, a search for authenticity is a search for a higher intellectual or spiritual plain. Gaining authenticity means one has somehow broken free of restraints placed on oneself and gained an inner wisdom to which the conformist, inauthentic person is not privy. The filmmakers involved in *Platoon et al*'s production were, I argue, heavily invested in promoting the Sixties as a period in which many people sought a positive, politically progressive, intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. And, furthermore, numerous critics and commentators addressed this theme in public discussions of the films, either commending the films' and filmmakers as bearers of this positive version of authenticity, or dismissing the same films and filmmakers as somehow inauthentic.

The importance of personal authenticity to debates on the Sixties is unsurprising; a search for authentic lifestyles became increasingly prominent throughout the era. I am not arguing here that philosophical notions of personal authenticity began at this time; both Lionel Trilling and Jacob Gollomb cite 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers and writers such as the American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and the early existential philosopher Soren Aabye Kierkegaard as champions of a version of personal authenticity.<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, discussions around authenticity and the search for authentic lifestyles were, in the late 1950s and 1960s

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<sup>129</sup> Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 65.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>131</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (Routledge: London and New York, 1995).

and beyond, widespread, particularly amongst young middle-class Americans. Social studies began to criticise the grey conformity of middle-class existence in the 1950s. For example, David Riesman and William H. Whyte lamented the loss of rugged individualism and personal expression in books such as *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Organization Man*.<sup>132</sup> As David Steigerwald explains, “Riesman argued that Americans had become ‘other directed’ conformists ... who measured their self worth according to the opinions of others rather than personal or traditional moral goals.”<sup>133</sup> Individual creativity had been curbed, these writers claimed, as Americans sought refuge in the bland, conformist environments of large corporations and suburban living. Concurrently, Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg became, in Andrew Marwick’s words, a “national sensation.” Kerouac’s *On the Road*, which told the story of a young man’s madcap dash across America in search of spiritual fulfilment, was popular with the young middle-classes. The philosophy of the Beat writers was defined by “a rejection of materialistic values and [a search] for a deeper meaning in life.”<sup>134</sup>

The 1950s and 1960s also saw existentialist thought, especially Albert Camus’s writings, become popular amongst young university students. Golomb argues that the search for personal authenticity was an intrinsic part of both of these authors’ novels and essays.<sup>135</sup> Prominent Sixties New Left activists Todd Gitlin and Tom Hayden write of being influenced by these works.<sup>136</sup> Given that Gitlin and Hayden also became deeply involved in political activism throughout the 1960s, such statements raise a philosophical quandary that has interested scholars of personal authenticity: does a search for personal authenticity come at the expense of a social conscience (a search for personal fulfilment may be seen as a rather selfish act), or can it be combined with a progressive political and communal philosophy? It is a debate of relevance to my thesis and I therefore offer an – admittedly succinct – overview.

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<sup>132</sup> David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (London: Yale University Press, 1950); William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Penguin, [1956] 1960).

<sup>133</sup> Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, p. 6.

<sup>134</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>135</sup> Golomb, *In Search*.

<sup>136</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 31; Hayden, *Reunion*, p. 39.

Golomb is at pains to stress personal authenticity's positive dimension. He believes that the authenticity promoted in existential works called for "an ongoing life of significant actions."<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that "the very attempt to become authentic, expresses courageous determination not to despair or to yield to the powerful processes of levelling, objectification and depersonalization."<sup>138</sup> While a search for personal authenticity may require a rejection of certain social and moral codes and conventions present at any given time, it does not require a rejection of, or an escape from, society itself. Rather, self-improvement (a search for authenticity) means going out into the world and committing positive acts; it can even mean an attempt to change society for the better. This positive notion of authenticity informed numerous political and social movements of the Sixties and beyond. Doug Rossinow notes how the work of Camus and Sartre, as well as that of Christian existentialists such as Paul Tillich, was influential on the New Left. A combination of a search for social justice – characteristic, in the early Sixties, of the civil rights movement, and, later on, of anti-Vietnam protests and the feminist movement – and a search for personal authenticity defined, according to Rossinow, the New Left agenda. Thus, "Political action was taken not just for instrumental purposes but because this was the path to authenticity."<sup>139</sup> Consider, for example, the SDS's 1962 manifesto *The Port Huron Statement* and its calls for activists to find "a meaning in life that is personally authentic."<sup>140</sup> It was hoped that political protest would serve to form "an island of integrity and vitality in a debased, lifeless land."<sup>141</sup> Members of the New Left were attempting to break the shackles placed on society and themselves at the time. The women's liberation movement's infamous slogan, "The Personal is Political" explicitly combined political protest with personal authenticity. As Sara Evans points out, many of the movement's vanguard had been involved in New Left politics throughout the 1960s but had left groups such as the SDS and SNCC because the rampant misogyny of many of the male members had seemed incompatible with their aims. Yet the philosophies underpinning the women's

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<sup>137</sup> Golomb, *In Search*, p. 201.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>139</sup> Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 77.

<sup>140</sup> SDS, "The Port Huron Statement." Reprinted in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds.), *Takin' it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 54.

<sup>141</sup> Rossinow, *Authenticity*, p. 19.

movement – political activism and personal fulfilment – were very much influenced by the New Left.<sup>142</sup> According to Rossinow, SDS, SNCC and the feminist movement defined their authenticity against what they viewed to be an oppressive, conformist, patriarchal capitalist culture in which individuals were subordinated to big business.<sup>143</sup> Young activists fought for groups alienated by mainstream, capitalist, American society such as the poor, African-Americans and women while, at the same time, hoping that this struggle would relieve their own inner alienation and put them in touch with their “real” selves.

Personal authenticity was not just the province of left-wing radicals. Two years before the SDS drafted *Port Huron* the conservative group Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) drafted their own manifesto, *The Sharon Statement*. A short document which railed against welfare payments and big government and championed a tough foreign policy, *The Sharon Statement*, for all its differences to *Port Huron*, was couched in spiritualistic rhetoric similar to that found in the SDS document. “[F]oremost among the transcendent values,” it declared, “is the individual’s use of his God-given free will, whence derives his right to be free from the restrictions of arbitrary force.”<sup>144</sup> Once again, political action is linked to personal expression and/or freedom. Those not directly involved in political activism found other methods by which to seek authenticity. Michael Kazin and Maurice Isserman note the popularity of new age religions and, toward the end of the era, the rise of Evangelical Christianity suggested a desire amongst Americans to pursue a life that was personally authentic. A seeking of “personal, therapeutic routes to the divine” was prominent amongst baby boomers.<sup>145</sup> Providing a broad overview of this phenomenon, Philip Jenkins notes that the “quest for personal authenticity encompassed sexual liberation, spiritual exploration, and quite likely experimentation with drugs.”<sup>146</sup> It would seem that a person’s life choices were linked in with some kind of transcendental search for the inner “true” self. Sam Binkley demonstrates the ongoing influence of countercultural authenticity on middle-class society throughout the 1970s: “[T]he explosive qualities first celebrated

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<sup>142</sup> Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>143</sup> Rossinow, *Authenticity*, pp. 323-326.

<sup>144</sup> YAF, “The Sharon Statement,” in Bloom and Breines (eds), *Takin’ it to the Streets*, p. 290.

<sup>145</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, p. 259.

<sup>146</sup> Jenkins, *Nightmares*, p. 3.

in Haight Ashbury and in the culture of LSD were soon linked to doctrines of personal growth and ... were [in the 1970s] transformed into a regular and regulated mode of life.”<sup>147</sup> Binkley’s sympathetic account of 1970s counterculture authenticity stresses the positive social relationships and caring communities that emerged amongst those who adopted organic diets, pursued New Age body therapies, prioritised concern for the environment in their commercial endeavours, and discussed openly and with others their emotional, spiritual, and sexual needs. Whether at a hippie commune, through political activism or self-help groups, or in religious organisations and cults, Americans of various political persuasions were seemingly on a “journey to the interior.”<sup>148</sup>

If participants viewed these practices as authentic in the 1960s and 1970s, the re-articulation and revising in the 1980s of what constituted authentic Sixties lifestyles substantiates Richard Peterson’s argument that authenticity is never a fixed phenomenon. It is a “socially agreed upon construct,” argues Peterson, a process that relies on a continual negotiation between producers and consumers.<sup>149</sup> Peterson’s study focuses on the shifting notion of what constituted “authentic” country music at different points in history. He points out that what is considered an authentic country style at one juncture would not have been thought so at another (Hank Williams has been thought of authentic from the 1950s to the present, for example, but would not have been in the 1920s and 1930s). Powerful interests like industry executives, journalists, critics and commentators are responsible for shaping contemporaneous notions of authenticity. As Peterson puts it, authenticity “is renegotiated in a continual political struggle in which the goal of each contending interest is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity.”<sup>150</sup>

It is worth briefly considering here, the other, more negative interpretation of personal authenticity, for, in the 1980s, many of the groups and individuals who considered themselves as having gained (or were in the process of gaining) authenticity in the 1960s and early 1970s, were in retrospect accused of being inauthentic. As far back as the early 1960s, Theodore Adorno had begun to question

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<sup>147</sup> Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>148</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 426.

<sup>149</sup> Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

the politics of personal authenticity. In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, his devastating attack on existentialist philosophers, particularly Martin Heidegger, Adorno claimed that notions of authenticity were a dangerous mystification of the historical and institutional forces that enslave humanity. The turn inward, the focus on the self as the key to the successful negotiation of a moral and socially responsible society, displayed a blithe ignorance toward those outside political and economic forces that confined and sublimated citizens. Writing on 1960s Germany, Adorno identified a “jargon” of existentialist-like buzz-words that had transcended academic circles to become part of everyday parlance: “existential,” “encounter,” “genuine dialogue”.<sup>151</sup> Such phrases sought to make real the mystical; to tell people that some kind of transcendental personal experience was possible, even while economic structures continued to ensure inequality and oppression. As Trent Schroyer notes, Adorno claimed that “the jargon [of authenticity] shares with modern advertising the ideological circularity of pretending to make present, in pure expressivity, an idealized form that is devoid of content.”<sup>152</sup> Authenticity therefore becomes a retreat from, not an engagement with, the real world. Thus, counter to Golomb, Adorno claims: “As it runs in the jargon: suffering, evil and death are to be accepted, not to be changed.”<sup>153</sup>

This alternative view of personal authenticity provides a useful entry point into considering the ways in which personal authenticity has been appropriated and discussed in 1980s public debates. The 1980s saw attempts on the part of various political interests to define what it was that made a Sixties person authentic. Throughout the 1980s, a common complaint was that many of the young people of the Sixties – those who had claimed themselves to be authentic – had in some way “sold out.” In his 1987 book Todd Gitlin lamented the movement post-1970 away from countercultural collective political action and towards self-indulgence of many of his New Left contemporaries, suggesting that the “sea change from politics to personal salvation and cultivation of personal relations ... gave movement men, at the turn of the decade, a way to cope with women’s liberation.” This explosion of ex-activists organising male consciousness raising sessions and complaining about

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<sup>151</sup> Theodore Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Trans Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge, 1973).

<sup>152</sup> Trent Schroyer, “Forward,” in Adorno, *Jargon*, p. xiv.

<sup>153</sup> Adorno, *Jargon*, p. 65.

their social status was thus part of the emergence of a broader backlash against the feminist movement that continued into the 1980s (discussed in Chapter Two). He also suggests that, across the board, this movement inwards “was a holding action, a way of soothing wounds and greasing our withdrawal from politics.”<sup>154</sup> The New Left in general found itself to be the subject of much criticism. They were the Yuppies turned Yuppies; “*J’accuse*” turned “Jacuzzi.”<sup>155</sup>

Of course, for some 1980s commentators, members of the New Left or the hippie counterculture never were authentic to begin with. Conservative spokespeople found a convenient way of combining political assault on the Sixties with the existential framing of “undesirable” individuals in the phrase “the permissive society.” Barbara Ehrenreich notes how the word “permissive” became prominent in public discourse in the 1950s in conservative attacks on gentler more liberal child-raising practices, which they believed had led to a generation of weak young men. However, by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, “layers of different meanings had built an extraordinarily evocative power into the notion of permissiveness. Anything could be *permissive*: a person, a class, a society, a policy, a form of behaviour.”<sup>156</sup> Thus were the exploits of hippies, anti-war protestors, and left-wing activists attacked in the 1980s as negative symptoms of a permissive society. The lifestyles and psychologies of the poor, who benefitted from the expansion of the welfare state – linked back, by conservatives, to the mid 1960s and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society – were also said to have been damaged by the Sixties. In 1986, for example, President Ronald Reagan spoke of the “allure of the permissive society.” His reference points were the loose morality of the hippie counterculture and the expansion of the welfare state under President Johnson in the mid 1960s. With regard to the latter, Reagan declared that “[w]e must escape this spider’s web of dependency.” And, tying welfare in with the druggy counterculture, Reagan invoked Franklin Roosevelt’s description of aid to the poor as “a narcotic ... a destroyer of the soul.”<sup>157</sup> In one fell swoop, Reagan accused the Sixties of destroying American society and destroying Americans’ souls.

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<sup>154</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 427.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>156</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), p. 169.

<sup>157</sup> Anon, “State of the Union: Reagan Reports to the Nation,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1986, p. A1.

The New Left also found itself subjected to retrospective assault by former members. In a late-1980s account of the members of late-Sixties protest movements, conservative commentator (and ex New Left activist) Peter Collier snarled: “these radicals were right more often than they were wrong, we are told, but whether they were right or wrong is almost irrelevant because they were above all *authentic*” (emphasis in original).<sup>158</sup> For Collier, such people – and he would include his 1960s self among them – were the height of in-authenticity. Collier and his conservative companion David Horowitz chart their own personal narratives in ways which would seem to suggest that their positive personal transformation occurs not during the Sixties, but during the late 1970s and 1980s, when they finally turned their backs on left-wing activism for good.<sup>159</sup>

It is particularly notable that John Downton Hazlett, who examines a number of Sixties autobiographies published in the 1980s – such as Gitlin’s Hayden’s, Horowitz and Collier’s – suggests that they all take a very similar form. However the Sixties are constructed the impact upon the person is the same: “Once I was lost, but now I am found.”<sup>160</sup> It is, in other words, a standard religious conversion narrative. Gitlin, Hayden, Horowitz and Collier promoted themselves as having gained, through their experiences in the Sixties, a certain wisdom and self-knowledge. These commentators placed themselves in direct opposition to those whom they perceived to be in-authentic: their political foes. This autobiographical structure, identified by Hazlett, might, I suggest, be applied to broader political and cultural renditions of the Sixties that were expressed in the public sphere during the 1980s and 1990s. While not all of the films examined in this thesis are autobiographical, they do feature a central protagonist whose life is impacted irrevocably by events of the Sixties. Indeed, I contend that Hollywood cinema contributed to public sphere discourses in which multiple versions of Sixties authenticity were produced and contested. Individuals who were not previously associated with personal authenticity – such as Vietnam veterans – were ascribed this quality retrospectively. Other individuals and groups – feminists, New Left activists, Black Panthers and hippies – were the subjects of fierce conflict and debate.

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<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Downton-Hazlett, *My Generation*, p. 135.

<sup>159</sup> Horowitz, “Letter to a Political Friend,” pp. 327-332 and Collier, “Something Happened to me Yesterday,” pp. 297-305. Both in Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*.

<sup>160</sup> Downton-Hazlett, *My Generation*, p. 199.



The following five chapters argue that the filmmakers involved in the writing of the five films sought to imbue their central protagonists with a positive version of personal authenticity (one viewed as being of benefit to American society).

*Platoon*'s Chris Taylor finds a "life that is personally authentic" by adopting and incorporating philosophies associated with the Sixties counterculture and anti-war movement into his own life. Baby Houseman experiences an authentic awakening as she applies feminist principles to her family relationships and romantic encounters. Even characters such as *JFK*'s Jim Garrison and *Malcolm X*'s eponymous hero – whose youths are long past – are depicted as having experienced a similar authentic coming-of-age. Indeed, it is my contention that screenwriters Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar (*JFK*) and Spike Lee (*Malcolm X*) script these protagonists so that Garrison and Malcolm X become metaphorical representatives of a Sixties generation-like quest for personal authenticity. Garrison becomes symbolic of a fictive master narrative, oft recounted by the Sixties generation in the 1980s and 1990s, which declared the Kennedy assassination to be a revelatory moment for a whole generation of young men and women. With the shots heard in Dealey Plaza, goes the narrative promoted by Sixties generation commentators, innocence was lost, and this generation politically and personally "grew up." Though forty-three years old at the time of the assassination, Garrison's character – as it appears in *JFK* – is declared to have embarked upon this same narrative of political and personal growth.

Similarly, the manner in which *Malcolm X* was constructed during script development indicates that Spike Lee also attempted to inject this black political activist's personal story with tropes and themes associated with the Sixties generation, and its coming-of-age against the backdrop of the era's transformations. In many ways the personal authenticity narratives – infused as they are with a decidedly liberal take on Sixties political and cultural transformation – allow the screenwriters to express their own political views on the era. While, as noted above, the scripts' treatment of issues and events debated publicly – the Vietnam War, abortion, the counterculture, for example – was made ambiguous and contradictory, the impact of Sixties transformations on individual lives is presented in an unambiguously positive light. This aspect of the scripts moves beyond the idea of the "screenplay as business plan" and afforded a group of liberal filmmakers the opportunity to allow their political viewpoints a freer reign. In these five films, the

gaining of personal authenticity is a direct affront to conservative denunciations of the Sixties. Chris Taylor, Baby Houseman, Jim Garrison, Malcolm X and Forrest Gump are all presented as beneficiaries of liberal Sixties transformation. They are also depicted as individuals that other Americans can celebrate, learn from and even try to emulate. However, when the films finally reached cinema screens, not all of these characters' experiences were accorded the same political and historical significance. Taylor, Gump and Garrison were received critically as characters from whom America could learn, characters who could inspire, characters who could be easily said to be authentic. *Dirty Dancing's* Baby Houseman and *Malcolm X's* eponymous hero were not received with the same widespread approbation. This thesis contends that, in public debates of the 1980s and 1990s, the personal authenticity narrative so prominent amongst commentators of the Sixties generation was largely associated with white, middle-class men. The gendering and whitening of such a narrative is an extremely problematic feature of liberal Sixties commemoration, one which is discussed in detail during chapters Two and Four. While liberal political and cultural commentators sought to challenge Reagan and his allies' Sixties-bashing, many did so rather selectively. Women's and African Americans' contribution to political transformation was sidelined, while the white middle-class male became synecdoche of the Sixties' positive legacy.

This thesis thus rejects portraying Sixties remembrance as dominated by any single, or simple, political voice. Instead I highlight the conflicting and contradictory discourses that operated around the subject of personal authenticity, while also noting the ideological forces that ensured that – amongst liberals and conservatives alike – Sixties representations and discussions were as conspicuous in terms of their absences, exclusions and omissions as they were by their actual content. Female and black-centred films, it would seem, were not accorded the same significance as those featuring males during the years 1986-1994. The public debates surrounding *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X*, and *Forrest Gump* revealed how white men were invested with a quasi-talismanic status in Sixties remembrance, while at the same time the political significance attached to anyone else's authentic

awakening remained, to borrow Sheila Robowtham's phrase, "hidden from history."<sup>161</sup>

The chapters which follow offer an analysis of five high-profile Hollywood Sixties films conducted within the framework of public politics/personal authenticity. Each of the five chapters follows a similar structure. I begin by analysing the film's production history and script development within public debates on the Sixties. After comparing draft scripts with the released film, I turn toward a promotion and reception study. Here I draw upon a range of materials. Promotional posters and trailers are examined, as are interviews, reviews and articles printed in newspapers and magazines.

Chapter One provides an analysis of *Platoon*'s production, promotion and reception history (1976-1986/7). During script development, Stone cut much material that could have been deemed a liberal denunciation of the war. Nevertheless, the film provided a liberal representation of the Sixties through the main narrative arc – central protagonist Chris Taylor's personal development. A reception study highlights the prominent reading strategies mobilised by critics and commentators, suggesting reasons why this film was considered a "worthy" representation not just of the Vietnam War, but of America's Sixties in general.

Chapter Two examines *Dirty Dancing*. In terms of story, central protagonist and politics, this film acts as the female equivalent to *Platoon*. Analysing a 1985 draft script and the finished film, I highlight the parallels in terms of narrative structure, themes and political outlook between *Dirty Dancing* and Stone's Vietnam drama. I then explore promotion and reception and consider why, given these parallels, *Dirty Dancing* did not make so large an impact on Sixties debates. Prominent discourses of the 1980s that served to marginalise late 60s/early 70s women's liberation meant that *Dirty Dancing* would be ignored in the public sphere, despite having (it seems) an immense impact upon female viewers across America.

Chapter Three's study of *JFK* examines the film's adaptation from source novel (Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*) to screenplay. Exploring the processes of adaptation and script development, I suggest that this film was constructed as a metaphor for the Sixties generation's intellectual and spiritual

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<sup>161</sup> Sheila Robowtham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973).

awakening in the Sixties. *JFK*'s political representation of public events – in particular the Kennedy assassination – is diverse, offering the opportunity to read both of liberal and conservative interpretation of post-assassination America. Nevertheless, this film's central protagonist is represented as embarking on a quest for personal authenticity, which, as with *Platoon* and *Dirty Dancing*, promotes a form of progressive political activism. Examining promotion and reception, I highlight how *JFK* became a locus around which circulated a debate on the validity of the “conspiracy theory” as a useful political concept, and its relationship to Sixties politics and culture.

Chapter Four, focuses on *Malcolm X*, and reiterates the importance of examining the process of adaption from script to screen. As with *JFK*, this film's representation of public politics was constructed so as to invite a range of interpretations, and a narrative stressing protagonist Malcolm X's gaining of personal authenticity was strengthened. However, while *JFK* was received as an event of national importance, *Malcolm X* was received in a rather different manner. While the film received enormous amounts of mainstream coverage during production (more so than *JFK*, even) its post-release reception was muted. This, I argue, was because Malcolm X's role in the civil rights movement was framed as a topic of direct relevance to African-Americans, but not to American society in general.

Chapter Five examines *Forrest Gump*. *Gump*'s production and release straddle a particularly transformative period within the public Sixties debate. When *Forest Gump* was being written in 1992, a prominent, positive narrative of the era was being promoted by presidential candidate Bill Clinton; however, by the time the film was released, in 1994, conservative commentators had retaken the driving seat and were promoting a negative version of the Sixties. This chapter highlights how changes to the source novel (Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump*, 1986) and script suggest that the filmmakers were attempting to align their picture with a Clintonite version of the Sixties (in terms of public politics and personal authenticity). Furthermore, *Forrest Gump*'s eponymous protagonist is imbued with a version of countercultural authenticity criticised by conservatives, and the film provides a number of challenges to social conservatives' beliefs. My examination of the film's

reception suggests reasons as to why, despite these changes, the film was appropriated by conservatives as a complete and utter demonisation of the Sixties.

This thesis is an attempt to examine the roles played by filmmakers, films and public commentators in the shaping of public memory at a particular point in time. It offers an analysis of five high-profile representations of the Sixties, demonstrating the similar strategies mobilised by filmmakers in the construction of their Sixties narratives. It also highlights the manner in which a film's history is "used" by diverse arbiters in conflicts over the past. Finally, it considers the impact of social context upon these films' visibility in the public sphere.

## Chapter One

### **“The Enemy was in Us”: *Platoon* and Sixties Commemoration**

January 1968: A young private in the United States army, Oliver Stone, is wounded for the second time in Vietnam. While he recuperates in a military hospital, North Vietnamese troops launch the largest attack yet on American forces: the Tet Offensive. Thousands of Vietnamese and American soldiers are killed and Stone's old battalion is decimated. After one more tour of duty, Stone returns to America, and enrolls on a filmmaking course at New York University.<sup>162</sup> Eight years later he writes the first draft of a picture he titles “The Platoon” (1976).

May 1986: Stone, now a filmmaker, finally gets to shoot what has come to be called, simply, *Platoon*. Based in part on his own memories of combat, *Platoon* tells the story of a young soldier, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), and his experiences fighting in the war. Across its US theatrical run, the film achieved critical and commercial success and generated a firestorm of media debate. Receiving sustained coverage in major news outlets – an image from the film even adorned the front page of *Time* magazine – *Platoon* established Stone as one of Hollywood's most high-profile and controversial filmmakers.<sup>163</sup>

Eighteen years separate Stone's tour of duty and *Platoon*'s December 1986 release. The film's journey from script to screen spanned a decade. Within that time, the Vietnam War was enshrined in public memory as one of the most tragic and most controversial events of America's recent past. Discussions of the external enemy, the North Vietnamese, were quickly subordinated to broader questions regarding Vietnam's internal impact. The war became an overarching metaphor for all that was wrong with America in the late 1960s and early 1970s (a period sometimes referred to as the “Vietnam era”). As Arnold Isaacs put it, “Vietnam became the era's most powerful symbol of damaged ideals and the loss of trust, unity, shared myths, and common values ... Vietnam gave visible shape to the great cultural changes sweeping over American society, defining, more than any other event, the era and its

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<sup>162</sup> Randy Roberts and David Welky, “A Sacred Mission: Oliver Stone and Vietnam,” in Robert Brent Toplin (ed.), *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History and Controversy* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2000), pp. 71-74.

<sup>163</sup> *Time*, January 27, 1987.

pains.”<sup>164</sup> Young vs. old, liberal vs. conservative, pro- vs. anti-war, middle- vs. working-class: through the prism of Vietnam was refracted an image of America at war with itself. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Vietnam War ostensibly ended. Yet, out of its ashes marched a legion of American culture warriors, whose political remonstrations and personal reminiscences ensured that Vietnam was guaranteed a prominent place in public debates throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. What had the war done to America? What had it done to Americans? Whose story should be believed? *Platoon* was produced and received in the shadow of such debates.

This chapter examines the representation of public politics and personal authenticity in and around *Platoon*. I build upon and contribute to a substantial body of academic work that has located this film within broader public memory of the Vietnam War. Much of this work has been concerned with debunking claims to “realism” made by Stone and public commentators, and notes the numerous fictional and melodramatic elements incorporated into *Platoon*’s narrative.<sup>165</sup> Others have explored its political content, arguing that the film avoids taking a stance on the war because it fails to locate it within broader historical and political tensions or because it fails to provide any substantial representation of the Vietnamese.<sup>166</sup> While I do not set out to dispute the final point – *Platoon* does not adequately commemorate Vietnamese involvement in the war – I do seek to dissect, and to some extent unravel, the other arguments. Breaking the film down into three stages – production, promotion and reception – I demonstrate the extent to which Stone and public commentators sought to imbue *Platoon* with political and historical resonance for America. The film was constructed as a historical commentary on the Sixties, one

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<sup>164</sup> Arnold Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>165</sup> Judy Lee Kinney, “Gardens of Stone, Platoon, and Hamburger Hill: Ritual and Remembrance,” in Michael Anderegg (ed.), *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 159-164; Thomas Prasch, “Platoon and the Mythology of Realism,” in William J. Searle (ed.), *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1988), pp. 195-215; Tony Williams, “Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in mid-1980s Vietnam Movies,” in Anderegg (ed.), *Inventing Vietnam*, pp. 114-139.

<sup>166</sup> Harry W. Haines, “‘They Were Called and They Went’: The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran,” in Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 93-96; Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 6; Prince, *Visions of Empire*, pp. 137-151; John Storey, “The Articulation of Memory and Desire: From Vietnam to the War in the Persian Gulf,” in Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film*, pp. 99-119; Clyde Taylor, “The Colonialist Subtext in *Platoon*,” in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi*, pp. 171-174.

designed to resonate with critics and commentators alike. I offer analysis of the conditions that informed the film's political and historical content, and those conditions driving its rise to public prominence.

The chapter is broken into three sections. Part one locates *Platoon's* production history and Oliver Stone's public persona within debates spanning the years 1976-1982.<sup>167</sup> I highlight the intersection of Stone's public persona and Hollywood cinema in general with two prominent strands of Vietnam-related discourse: the war's impact on American politics and foreign policy, and its impact on individual psychologies. The chapter's second section examines changes made to the *Platoon* script between 1984 and its release in 1986 within shifting public debates on the war and the Sixties. Comparing 1984, 1985 and 1986 draft scripts with the finished film, I argue that certain scenes and statements which could be read as an explicit liberal interpretation of the Vietnam War were cut or curtailed. However, at the same time, I argue that Stone infused an increased amount of political and historical commentary on the Sixties into Chris Taylor's personal narrative. Taylor's intellectual and spiritual development, his gaining of personal authenticity, is informed by principles associated with the counterculture and anti-war movement. And, furthermore, Taylor's personal "quest" runs hand-in-hand with an – albeit incomplete – attempt to consign certain negative political and militaristic tendencies present in American culture to the dustbin of history. In this way, *Platoon* was shaped into a liberal commentary on the Sixties. "The enemy was in us", Taylor declares at the film's conclusion. Such a realisation completes his attainment of personal authenticity. His failure to entirely diffuse this "enemy" acted as a call to others to continue where he left off.

Finally, I examine the film's promotion and reception, suggesting reasons for the predominant reading strategies that greeted *Platoon* on its US theatrical release. I argue that part of the film's success at stimulating debate was that its representation of public politics and personal authenticity chimed with the views of numerous other commentators and acted as a canvas upon which they traced a broader national "coming-of-age" narrative.

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<sup>167</sup> A February 1986 draft of the script notes it was first written in 1976. See Oliver Stone, *The Platoon*, February 1986 (Available at the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts, New York). See also Richard Corliss, "Platoon: Vietnam the Way it Really Was, On Film," *Time*, January 26, 1987, p. 44.



## ***Platoon* in production, 1976-1982**

*Platoon* was a project some ten years in the making. Stone wrote the first draft of the script in 1976. Producer Martin Bregman expressed an interest. Bregman attempted to obtain funding for it, but apparently was rejected by all the major studios.<sup>168</sup> In retrospect, Hollywood rejection has been viewed as part of a broader trend in which the Vietnam War was virtually ignored in political and cultural discourse at this time.<sup>169</sup> The writers of popular and, sometimes, scholarly works have claimed that it was not until the 1980s and the erection of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 and *Platoon*'s release (1986), that the silence on Vietnam was finally lifted. Indeed, the Memorial and *Platoon* are at times placed side-by-side as significant factors in the gradual "coming-to-terms" with the war. "The Vietnam [Veterans] Memorial was one gate our country had to pass through" said veteran John Wheeler in 1987, "*Platoon* is another."<sup>170</sup> Here was, according to one of the first scholarly books to examine *Platoon*, "the first real cinematic step taken by Hollywood in coming to terms with the truth about Vietnam."<sup>171</sup>

To place *Platoon* at the forefront of Hollywood's attempts to represent the "real" Vietnam is rather misleading. It was not that the film industry, or for that matter American media and political claims-makers, had gone silent on the war. Rather, *Platoon* was the first Vietnam film to successfully capitalise on shifts in public debate over the war. In order to chronicle these shifts, and the creative choices made by Stone during the writing process, it is important to place script development within a precise historical context, one which complicates simple notions of a Vietnam-mute 1970s public sphere. At this time, there emerged a Vietnam debate concerned with the war's impact on national politics and on individual psychology.

The idea that 1970s America went silent on Vietnam might be seen as symptomatic of popular accounts of the "Seventies" more generally. As Philip Jenkins points out, "[i]t almost seems as if American history, wearied after the daily

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<sup>168</sup> Stephen Lavington, *Oliver Stone* (London: Virgin Books, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>169</sup> Peter Ehrenhaus and Richard Morris, "Epilogue: Forms of Remembering, Forms of Forgetting," in Ehrenhaus and Morris (eds), *Cultural Legacies of Vietnam: Uses of the Past in the Present* (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), pp. 225-226; Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, p. 70; Kinney, "Ritual and Remembrance," p. 154.

<sup>170</sup> Richard Corliss, "*Platoon*," p. 45.

<sup>171</sup> Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam* (London: Praeger, 1988), p. 137.

stresses of the 1960s, took a seven year vacation after Nixon resigned.”<sup>172</sup> With the end of the Watergate affair and Richard Nixon’s resignation, Americans apparently retired from public politics and went silent on issues of national importance. In such accounts, the mid-to-late 1970s is looked back upon dismissively as an era of vapid popular culture, during which the American people became less interested in changing society than with narcissistic self-interest. It was, to borrow two well known epithets, the “Me Decade,” one defined by a widespread “culture of narcissism.”<sup>173</sup>

Jenkins, on the other hand, depicts the late 1970s as a period of intense political conflict, which had a powerful impact upon future public discourse. Views toward the Vietnam War and its impact on US foreign policy were but one prominent subject of discussion. The war quickly became the “prism through which all arguments for or against the use of U.S. military power must ultimately pass.”<sup>174</sup> For different reasons, conservatives and liberals wanted to portray Vietnam as a debacle. Conservatives argued the war to have been, as Ronald Reagan put it in 1980, a “noble cause,” one which was only lost because a weak government had bowed to the demands of the liberal media and reckless, radical anti-war protestors. Liberals argued Vietnam to have been an immoral war in which America should never have been involved in the first place.

Events of the 1970s ensured that debates on Vietnam and foreign policy remained prominent in the public sphere. The early-to-mid 1970s counted embarrassment after embarrassment befalling the United States on the world stage. Vietnam’s “peace with honor” program, which saw the last US troops exiting the country in 1973, had failed to please liberals who believed that the war should have ended years earlier. Nor did it please conservatives, who were convinced that a US victory would have been assured had the US government pushed for greater force to be applied in Indochina. 1973 also saw the Yom Kippur War, which threatened the existence of Israel and, since America had close ties to Israel, suggested that anti-

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<sup>172</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>173</sup> Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York*, August 23, 1976. Reprinted at <http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/> (Accessed June 2009); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978).

<sup>174</sup> Robert J. McMahon, “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002), p. 172.

western forces were willing to challenge America's global dominance. In 1975, the Palestine Liberation Organisation achieved observer status in the United Nations and, the same year, Zionism was declared a form of racism at the UN General Assembly.<sup>175</sup> Some conservative commentators felt that the American government itself was helping to destroy the country's international standing. Presidents Nixon and Carter's policy of détente with the Soviet Union caused some onlookers to believe that capitalism had lost its economic and moral superiority over communism. Conservatives claimed that the US was cow-towing to Russian demands, and that, even though nuclear disarmament was the supposed intention, the USSR was actually winning the arms race. One commentator announced that "Détente means ultimate Soviet military superiority over the West."<sup>176</sup>

US dominance was being challenged across the world. With its weakened global status there was a fear that the West "would be politically and militarily castrated."<sup>177</sup> With Vietnam asserted as a loss of American prestige, the war was heavily associated with a broader Sixties disaster narrative. A war apparently embarked upon so as to maintain, or even to raise American esteem and prosperity, ended in the early 1970s with complete chaos – a vanquished nation. For conservatives, lamenting America's failure in Vietnam went hand in hand with attacks on domestic decline, as if both could be traced back to events of the Sixties.<sup>178</sup> As Daniel Marcus puts it "conservatives linked American defeat in Vietnam to liberal control of the federal government and the unruly Sixties counterculture."<sup>179</sup> Various aspects of the "bad" Sixties were bundled into conservative discussions of Vietnam: a liberal government more interested in spending on welfare and affirmative action programs than in increasing military strength, and a radical left-wing counterculture that challenged America's moral crusade against communism. For conservatives, the Sixties needed to be reversed if America was to sit once more at the top of the world.

While conservatives sounded the war drums against a weak foreign policy and détente, liberals attacked American arrogance for entering Vietnam in the first

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<sup>175</sup> Jenkins, *Nightmares*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>176</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>179</sup> Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 49.

place. If anything, Stone began to write *Platoon* when America was largely anti-war.<sup>180</sup> 1976 was an election year and Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter pledged a blanket “pardon” for all draft evaders and military deserters if he were elected commander and chief.<sup>181</sup> This well-publicised announcement was viewed in some quarters as an acceptance that the war was a mistake. Such a belief was bolstered by Carter’s own criticisms of “the ‘intellectual and moral poverty’ of American policy in Vietnam.”<sup>182</sup> Anti-Vietnam sentiment meant that Ronald Reagan’s later attempts in 1980 to describe the war as a “noble cause” were considered ill-advised for a presidential hopeful and were discussed as a possible threat to his presidential aspirations.<sup>183</sup> Throughout the 1970s there was strong anti-war sentiment across the United States and, particularly, it would seem, amongst Vietnam veterans. Contrary to later 1980s discourse, Vietnam veterans played a significant role in the anti-war movement.<sup>184</sup> H. Bruce Franklin argues that anti-war sentiment was often more prominent amongst Vietnam veterans than it was amongst college-educated youths (the group usually associated with the anti-war movement). Thousands of veterans had joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War, thousands had deserted during conscription (far more than avoided the draft), and many became involved in anti-war activism in Europe.<sup>185</sup>

At the same time as conservatives and liberals battled it out over the morality of Vietnam, others were combining political commentary with an examination of the war’s impact on individual psychologies. What would become officially recognised by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 as “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) had its roots in early 1970s media discussions of Vietnam.<sup>186</sup> PTSD was used to describe a host of mental ailments from flashbacks, blackouts, shakes, to bursts of anger from which veterans suffered upon their return to America.

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<sup>180</sup> In terms of public opinion, American people have consistently doubted the war’s morality. Most opinion polls show that, since the 1970s, far more people have been anti- than pro-Vietnam. See Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), pp. 13-14.

<sup>181</sup> Hal Bruno, “Carter Meets the Questions,” *Newsweek*, February 2, 1976, p. 18.

<sup>182</sup> Hagopian, *The Vietnam War*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>183</sup> Hendrick Smith, “Reagan’s Campaign Shifts Tactics and Moves to Curb Misstatements,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1980, p. A18.

<sup>184</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 106.

<sup>185</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), pp. 59-66. See also Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, pp. 27-48.

<sup>186</sup> Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, p. 102.

The notion of Vietnam having destroyed veterans' characters was ever-present throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

In 1976, several Vietnam memoirs were published, which merged a sharp critique of American involvement in the war with narratives that explored its effect on individual veterans. Charles Durden's *No Bugles, No Drums* was received as a part comic, part tragic, *Catch 22*-like chronicle of the lives of "grunts" in Vietnam.<sup>187</sup> Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* recounts the experiences of a veteran seriously wounded in Vietnam and his conversion to anti-war spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War. An angry invective against the powers that sent young men to die for their country, *Born on the Fourth of July* jumps backward and forward in time, ending with a pitiful memory of childhood as Kovic lays seriously injured on the battlefield.<sup>188</sup> Black humour and/or rage defined these anti-war texts as it would the following year's *Dispatches* (1977), Michael Herr's darkly comic piece of New Journalism that chronicled the experiences of soldiers in Vietnam.<sup>189</sup> By 1984, the writer C.D.B. Bryan could argue that the standard Vietnam novel, "charts the gradual deterioration of order, the disintegration of idealism, the breakdown of character, the alienation from those at home, and, finally, the loss of all sensibility save the will to survive."<sup>190</sup> Bryan's emphasis on "alienation" is apposite, for it speaks to the existential framing of the Vietnam veteran throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. As Doug Rossinow notes, alienation for many in the Sixties represented the polar opposite of authenticity. The alienated person was disconnected from society and did not, or could not, take an active role in political and social life.<sup>191</sup> While many veterans, like Kovic, *had* re-entered society, begun new lives, and even involved themselves in communal political protest against the war, the growing stereotype of the alienated veteran persisted in a wealth of cultural texts, nowhere more clearly than in those emerging from Hollywood.

Stone would of course eventually make Kovic's novel into the film *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) (hereafter *Born*). He had bought the rights and written a

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<sup>187</sup> Kim Willensen, "Catch 23," *Newsweek*, August 9, 1976, p. 72.

<sup>188</sup> Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (London: Corgi [1976] 1990), pp. 168-172.

<sup>189</sup> Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1977).

<sup>190</sup> C. D. B. Bryan, "Barely Suppressed Screams: Getting a Bead on Vietnam War Literature," *Harpers*, June 1984. Quoted in Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, p. 19.

<sup>191</sup> Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 4-6.

draft script by 1978. At this stage, according to Stone, the film was going to end on a note of anger. It was to conclude at the 1972 Republican convention with Kovic being beaten by police.<sup>192</sup> This is certainly not the manner in which the completed film consummated its veteran narrative. By 1989, *Born*'s timeline would extend to include the 1976 Democratic convention. Stone rearranged the flashback structure found in Kovic's novel into a linear narrative. The film ends with Kovic (Tom Cruise) announcing optimistically that he "finally thinks [he's] come home." In the 1970s, the funding for *Born* fell through at the last moment, but it is interesting to note how, at this stage, the film was set to conclude on a similar dark and depressing note to the aforementioned novels and public debates over the war. Had it been made in 1978 *Born* would have been a narrative that stressed alienation, without a hopeful homecoming.

That there was even a chance of *Born* making it to the big screen is testament to high-ranking Hollywood insiders' willingness to engage with Vietnam in the 1970s. As Jerry Lembcke points out, the film industry adopted a relatively constant approach to the war throughout the 1970s. Lembcke contends that both *Coming Home* (1977) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), two high-profile, Academy Award winning Vietnam films of the late 1970s, essentially continued the veteran "coming home narrative" that had been used in films for some years previous.<sup>193</sup> While many studies of the Vietnam War film posit a break between early 1970s representations of veterans and later, post 1978, Vietnam war films,<sup>194</sup> Lembecke notes the similarities between films of the late 1970s and those of the early 1970s and 1960s. What were *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* but extended reinterpretations of the impact of the war upon veterans, a theme that had featured prominently in such diverse films as *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), *Welcome Home Soldier Boys* (1972) and *Taxi Driver* (1976)? These films all focused upon "veterans and their coming home experiences."<sup>195</sup> To differing degrees they presented Veterans as emotionally

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<sup>192</sup> James Riordan, *Stone: The Controversies, Excesses and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (London: Aurum Press, 1996), p. 276.

<sup>193</sup> Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, p. 161.

<sup>194</sup> Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University press, 1998), pp. 58-105; George Dionisopoulos, "Images of the Warrior Returned: Vietnam Veterans in Popular American Film" in Morris and Ehrenhaus (eds), *Cultural Legacies of Vietnam*, pp. 80-98.

<sup>195</sup> Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, p. 148.

scarred, alienated individuals who possessed a tendency toward violence and/or self-destruction.<sup>196</sup>

It should also be noted that films like *Coming Home* were in production well before 1977. Preparations for this film began as early as 1973.<sup>197</sup> In 1976, Francis Ford Coppola also began shooting the first film since John Wayne's conservative celebration of the American military prowess *The Green Berets* (1968) to be set entirely in Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now*.<sup>198</sup> Stone was therefore writing the first draft of his *Platoon* script at a time when several similar books and films already had been released, or were being produced. In these texts – novels, films and media debates – the war's impact upon veterans was shown to be physically and psychologically devastating.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the few references to Stone in the mainstream American press create an image of a slightly-crazed, angst-ridden, alienated figure, uncannily similar to the deranged veterans presented on-screen. After winning Golden Globe and Academy Awards for his screenplay for *Midnight Express* (1978), he was reported to have given a garbled speech in which he stated that “the U.S. is putting people in jail for being high.” In exasperation, the film's director, Alan Parker, called Stone “very bright, very well-meaning and very boring.”<sup>199</sup> Other reports focused on his morbid love for injecting into his screenplays the most brutal of violence.<sup>200</sup> With films such as *Midnight Express*, *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Scarface* (1983), under his belt, Stone was associated with extreme violence bordering on anarchy. His public persona almost acted as a mirror for larger cultural debates surrounding the Vietnam veteran.

While promoting his second attempt at directing, *The Hand* (1981), Stone turned Vietnam commentator and made direct reference to PTSD. “I don't think the Vietnam story's been told”, he informed the *New York Times* in 1981: “Vietnam

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<sup>196</sup> Rick Berg, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, p. 46.

<sup>197</sup> Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, p. 163.

<sup>198</sup> Peter Cowie, *Coppola: A Biography* (New York, 1994) p. 122. Two other less high-profile Vietnam-set pictures were also released in the late 1970s: *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) and *The Boys in Company C* (1978).

<sup>199</sup> Lee Grant, “Golden Globe Show Staged,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1979, p. E7.

<sup>200</sup> Lee Grant, “David Sheehan: The View from the Mountain Top,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1979, p. L6.

messed a lot of guys up [be]cause it put us out of step with our own generation.”<sup>201</sup> The film’s representation of an artist who loses his hand during a freak accident and ends up killing his wife was actually promoted by the director as an engagement with the plight of Vietnam veterans. As Stone continued in the *New York Times* interview, “I’ve been lucky. I can write. But what about the guys who couldn’t express it? ... That’s what *The Hand* is about. That unconscious state, that time you do something you’re not even aware of?”<sup>202</sup> Here Stone was offering readers of this interview an alternative way in which to frame their readings of *The Hand*. Vietnam does not even make an appearance in the film itself, but the psychologically disturbed protagonist is linked to the broader phenomenon of PTSD, which had by 1981 become an umbrella term for any psychological disorder afflicting Vietnam veterans.<sup>203</sup> It would not be the last time that this filmmaker matched his rhetoric to the ebb and flow of political discourse.

Stone’s comments reflected Hollywood’s continued investment in depicting psychologically scarred Vietnam veterans in the 1980s. The year after *The Hand*’s release appeared *First Blood* (1982), in which Vietnam veteran John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) embarks upon a nihilistic rampage around a small Oregon town. Subjected to unfair and sadistic treatment at the hands of the police, army and government, the representation of John Rambo in *First Blood* is much in keeping with the disturbed and nihilistic 1970s veteran raging against “the system.”<sup>204</sup> The following year, *The Big Chill* (1983) featured a Vietnam veteran, Nick Carlton (William Hurt) whose war experiences have led to his inability to forge romantic or sexual relationships with women. *The Big Chill*’s representation of Nick follows *Coming Home* in providing a veteran figure designed to evoke sympathy as opposed to the nihilistic portrayals of the *Taxi Driver* and *First Blood* ilk. Nevertheless, psychological and emotional wounds become Carlton’s defining traits.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s there were thus two prominent debates circulating around Vietnam and the Vietnam veteran. Firstly, there was the

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<sup>201</sup> Chris Chase, “At the Movies,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1981, p. C8.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. C8.

<sup>203</sup> Lembcke, *Spitting Image*, pp. 101-126.

<sup>204</sup> Indeed, Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich and Sharon Monteith contend that the Rambo trilogy (1982, 1985, 1988) presented an attack on government bureaucracy and corruption and not, as is commonly argued, a conservative attack on anti-war sentiment. See Grainge, Jancovich and Monteith, *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 485-486.



question of “why were we in Vietnam?” Secondly, there was the issue of the psychological toll that Vietnam exerted upon those Americans that had fought there. Vietnam, it seemed, had torn apart America’s moral and psychological fabric. Attempting to sew together these tears would be a project undertaken in the 1980s by politicians, media commentators and, indeed, by Oliver Stone, when in 1984 he returned to his *Platoon* script.

### **Public Politics/Personal Authenticity: *Platoon* from Script to Screen**

Various reports suggest that Stone attempted to obtain funding and military assistance for *Platoon* in 1984, and in 1985 when British company Hemdale agreed to fund it to the tune of \$6 million.<sup>205</sup> At the same time, script changes made between 1984 and 1986 intersected with the shifting focus of the public debate on the Vietnam War. The following pages chart these changes and locate them within a mid-1980s political and cultural landscape. Up until 1985, *Platoon* was to conclude with a short voiceover from central protagonist Chris Taylor (eventually played by Charlie Sheen). In 1986, however, Stone extended this voiceover and added a rather different mood to the film’s conclusion. The differences between the two voice-overs are significant because they resonate with the shifting direction taken by the Vietnam debate as America moved into the mid-1980s:

Chris [Taylor] Voiceover [1984 and 1985 drafts]: I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves – And the enemy was in us ... The war is over for me now, but it will always be there – the rest of my days. As I am sure Elias will be – fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called possession of my soul ... There are times since I have felt like a child born of those two fathers.<sup>206</sup>

Chris Voiceover [finished film]: [everything as above, but the voiceover continues...] But be that as it may, those of us that 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.

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<sup>205</sup> Salewicz, *Oliver Stone*, p. 38; Jack Anderson and Dan Van Atta, “Why the Military Didn’t Like *Platoon*,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 1987, p. C7.

<sup>206</sup> Oliver Stone, *The Platoon* (June 1984), p. 103; *The Platoon* (April 1985), p. 119.

The additional lines of dialogue have a rather ambiguous ring. What should surviving veterans “teach” those that did not fight? What “goodness and meaning” can come from an experience in Vietnam? These words are, however, conspicuous by virtue of their positivity. The voiceover looks to the future, suggesting the possibility of conversion for the Vietnam veteran, from physically and emotionally scarred to teacher, to someone who can reconcile his harrowing experiences and put them to good use. Stone’s coda was part of a general cultural trend that would “reproduce Vietnam veterans as signs of ideological certainty and continuity,” figures around which the nation could rally.<sup>207</sup>

By the mid-1980s public discussion of the figure of the Vietnam veteran – by which I mean the veteran image constructed in debates as opposed to actual veterans – was prominent and overwhelmingly positive as several key events symbolically “welcomed them home.” By the time Stone had returned to the *Platoon* project, many of these events already had occurred. As early as the tail end of the 1970s, Jimmy Carter was speaking frequently on the need to honour those who fought this most unpopular of wars, particularly toward the end of his tenure.<sup>208</sup> This changed perspective toward the veteran became even more pronounced after the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. *Platoon*’s Chris Taylor’s calls to “build again” might almost be seen to associate *Platoon* directly with the Memorial’s construction (as if the film was continuing the Memorial’s attempts to reconstruct and rehabilitate the veteran). Keith Beattie has suggested that the Memorial, which was located in Washington D.C., began a “valorization” of the Vietnam veteran. By 1989, 143 memorials to the war in Vietnam and its veterans had been built or were under construction in the United States.<sup>209</sup> Running in tandem with these events was the prominent role Vietnam veterans played in educating young people about the war. In 1987, one survey estimated that there were 420 Vietnam War courses on university campuses compared to only two dozen a few years earlier. Common were reports of veterans leading in-class discussions – “teaching others what [they] know”

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<sup>207</sup> Haines, “The Vietnam Veteran,” p. 94.

<sup>208</sup> McMahon, “Contested Memory,” pp. 167-168.

<sup>209</sup> Beattie, *The Scar*, p. 92.

as Taylor's voiceover put it.<sup>210</sup> Within public debate the veteran was promoted as a "figure of wisdom and truth."<sup>211</sup>

The "homecoming parade," the veteran as teacher and as "figure of wisdom and truth" – it is clear why Stone may have been encouraged to complement the film's closing voiceover with the above noted additional sentences. Taylor, like the Vietnam veteran in 1980s debates, speaks of an optimistic homecoming, an opportunity to rebuild his life and to teach others. Such developments also reconfigured the veteran's psychological standing in the public sphere. "It's the first time in 12 years I haven't felt like an alien", said one veteran during the Memorial's 1982 dedication.<sup>212</sup> "It's time that Vietnam veterans take their rightful place in our history along with other heroes who put their lives on the line for our country", announced Reagan.<sup>213</sup> Veteran experience was increasingly equated, not with pathological behaviour, but with heroism, and with a profound sense of having experienced the war authentically. Of all people, it was the figure of the Vietnam veteran that could "find a goodness and meaning to this life."

In order to assert the veteran as authentic, however, a very particular public image was crafted. Veterans were separated from the anti-war movement, within which they were prominent participants, and were instead reconstructed as apolitical victims of Sixties politics and culture. The integrity of the veteran's character, the authenticity of his/her experiences was premised upon the idea that s/he possessed no political outlook; the veteran experienced the real Vietnam in part because it was not clouded by ideological concerns. "What was wrong, and what was right/It didn't matter in the thick of the fight", went pop-star Billy Joel's paean to the veteran "Goodnight Saigon" (1982). Such a sentiment was echoed around the public sphere. An apolitical veteran allowed for an apolitical debate; it allowed, as Melvin Maddocks of *The Christian Science Monitor* put it, "[for] the original question, 'Why Are We in Vietnam?' ... [to be] replaced." Instead, discussion could focus

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<sup>210</sup> Robert Marquand, "Vietnam Makes a Campus Comeback – Still Divisive After All These Years," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 10, 1987, p. 1.

<sup>211</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 86.

<sup>212</sup> Quoted in Hagopian, *The Vietnam War*, p. 150.

<sup>213</sup> Hagopian, *The Vietnam War*, p. 164.

upon “What happened to the human beings we rather casually sent there to fight for reasons that so soon came under doubt?”<sup>214</sup>

This is not to say that politics were completely erased from these debates. Rather, the Vietnam veteran’s politics were erased. Various arguments advanced by conservative commentators in the 1980s – the idea that veterans had been spat at by anti-war protestors during the Sixties; the notion that thousands of veterans were still being held as prisoners in Vietnam – used the veteran’s apolitical victim status to further an ideological agenda.<sup>215</sup> According to Jerry Lembcke and H. Bruce Franklin, there is an extreme paucity of evidence to substantiate either of these claims. Rather, they worked as useful rhetorical bludgeons for conservatives hoping to demonise the Sixties anti-war movement and communist states in order that they could push for more aggressive foreign policy initiatives.<sup>216</sup> Conservatives used the veteran as what John Storey calls an “enabling memory”, one designed to prepare Americans for the next international incursion.<sup>217</sup> Hagopian provides a pertinent example of this phenomenon. President Reagan’s speech on his first visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in November 1984 managed to slip in a call for tough foreign policy in Central America under the ostensible banner of national reconciliation and healing. Within one pronouncement he combined these two themes: “it’s time we moved on, in unity and with resolve, with the resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace.”<sup>218</sup> Reconciliation, “moving on” here became an implicit rallying call: Let’s get over Vietnam and go and fight another war.<sup>219</sup> It is clear that healing did not always mean de-politicisation; it meant placing the veteran above politics, while simultaneously using his talismanic image to convey one’s own ideological viewpoint.

Given that he had already co-written and directed, *Salvador* (1986), a film which depicted American diplomats attached to the Reagan administration as

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<sup>214</sup> Melvin Maddocks, “Vietnam: the Different War – and the Same,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 11, 1987, p. 21.

<sup>215</sup> The *Missing in Action* series (1984, 1985 and 1988) build from the idea that thousands of men were still being held prisoner in Vietnam. Benjamin Braddock (Chuck Norris) returns to Vietnam in order to save these men.

<sup>216</sup> See Lembcke’s *The Spitting Image* for a discussion of the “spat upon veteran” myth. For the Missing in Action (MIA) myth see H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>217</sup> John Storey, “The Articulation of Memory and Desire,” p. 99.

<sup>218</sup> Quoted in Hagopian, *The Vietnam War*, p. 189.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

opportunistic profiteers intent on supporting a corrupt right-wing military dictatorship in El Salvador, it is perhaps unsurprising that Stone's idea of the "authentic" Vietnam veteran digressed markedly from that promoted by Reagan. His authentic veteran, Chris Taylor, would incorporate attributes associated with the counterculture and the anti-war movement of the era. While Stone avoided making too definitive a statement on the morality of the Vietnam War, in Taylor's search for personal authenticity was a liberal interpretation of the Sixties.

It is notable that during *Platoon's* development stages, comments made in the trade press suggested, in line with public debate, that the film would avoid taking an explicit stance on the morality of the war. In 1985, Stone declared *Platoon* to be an "autobiographical story based on experiences I had over there in 1967-68 ... A *Red Badge of Courage* Situation."<sup>220</sup> No mention was made of the political stance it would take toward Vietnam. He did not identify *Platoon* with previous Vietnam film or literature, but, rather, with Stephen Crane's American Civil War-set novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). In this way, *Platoon* was promoted as a "timeless" story of combat, as opposed to one anchored to a specific historical period. The same year, *Platoon's* producer Arnold Kopelson announced that *Platoon* was being made at "an intensely patriotic time" and that the audience was therefore ready for a war film "not stylized a la *Apocalypse Now* or concerned with the home-front effect like *The Deer Hunter* ... twelve years after American withdrawal."<sup>221</sup> Kopelson suggested that *Platoon* would not be an anti-war, anti-American production, but a "realistic" representation and one that would capitalise upon patriotic sentiment.

Such statements were indicative of broader film industry discussions of Vietnam. While Stone was writing and shooting *Platoon*, a number of other filmmakers were attempting to produce similar pictures. In early 1985, John Carabestos, a Vietnam veteran and screenwriter was trying to obtain funding for his script, *Hamburger Hill*, a film described in the *Los Angeles Times* as having "no political statement about the war." Carabestos said it was to be a "bloody simple" story about men that fought in Vietnam.<sup>222</sup> In the summer of 1986, Francis Ford

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<sup>220</sup> Todd McCarthy, "Stone to Lens Hemdale's *Platoon*, Recanting Vietnam Experiences," *Variety*, February 26, 1986, p. 34.

<sup>221</sup> Anon., "Stone to Helm Own *Platoon* Script for Film Packages Intl," *Variety*, March 20, 1985, p. 26.

<sup>222</sup> Jay Shabutt, "Proposed Vietnam Film: A Real Battle Written by a Veteran," *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 1985, p. F10.

Coppola was shooting his film about soldiers stationed stateside during the war, *Gardens of Stone*. Coppola had managed to obtain military assistance by informing the military that his new film would be nothing like *Apocalypse Now*. In August 1986, producer Michael Levy called *Gardens of Stone* a “pro-military, anti-war film.”<sup>223</sup> The vagueness of this statement defined Hollywood’s general reticence to approach the war from any definite ideological standpoint.

Changes to *Platoon*’s script soon followed these statements. Stone pruned material that would suggest he was making or had made a liberal denunciation of the war. The most significant changes centre on Taylor’s relationship to the film’s two sergeants: Sergeant Barnes (played eventually by Tom Berenger) and Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe). This relationship is central to the film’s narrative; it provides the foundations upon which *Platoon*’s engagement with public politics and personal authenticity are built.

Barnes and Elias are Taylor’s symbolic father figures. Susan Jeffords argues that this male triumvirate acts as *Platoon*’s alternative and exclusionary family structure. For Jeffords, Taylor’s relationship with these two sergeants suggests an attempt to meditate not just on war but on “life” from an exclusively male point of view. Taylor adopts and incorporates into his person both masculine and feminine traits – represented by Barnes and Elias respectively – and thus erases the need for women. “[M]eaning to this life,’ Taylor’s final desire, is to be found only within the frame of men”, writes Jeffords.<sup>224</sup> I would add to this that *Platoon*’s all-male community serves as the crucible within which the meaning of the Sixties is contested and negotiated. As this chapter and following chapters suggest, in public debate, the dual concerns of public politics and personal experience seemed most easily synthesised in discussion of white middle class men’s experiences of the Sixties. Chapter Two in particular highlights how *Dirty Dancing* (1987), a film that essentially focuses on the same issues as *Platoon*, but from a female point of view, did not have the same impact on the public sphere. This is evidence, I contend, of broader gender inequalities existing in Sixties commemoration of the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>223</sup> Peter S. Canellos, “Coppola’s *Gardens of Sorrow*,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1986, p. G1.

<sup>224</sup> Susan Jeffords, “Reproducing Fathers: Gender and the Vietnam War in U.S. Culture,” in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi*, p. 210, pp. 207-210.

In the completed version of *Platoon*, debate on Vietnam's morality is, to recall Robert Rosenstone's terminology, compressed, into Elias and Barnes' conflict.<sup>225</sup> Elias is sceptical toward the war and its objectives. Midway through the film, Taylor asks him if he believes in the war. Elias replies: "in 65 maybe, but now [1968] no." Barnes, on the other hand, "believes in what he is doing." Elias sits on the liberal side of political debate. He is also coded as a representative of the Sixties hippie counterculture. During an early scene at base camp, the film cuts between his dope-smoking-Motown-listening posse known as the "Heads," and Barnes' beer-drinking-country-music-loving group the "Juicers" (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). It is Taylor's first experience of marijuana, and Elias inducts him into the world of the Heads by blowing smoke down the barrel of a rifle into the young private's mouth. Elias' action emphasises his non-conformist attitude. It is almost evocative of the iconic image of a hippie placing flowers in a gun barrel, denoting a similar irreverence toward military codes and decorum. Elias is associated with a Sixties-esque revolt against organised codes and conventions.



Figure 1.1: Taylor inducted into the world of the Heads.

<sup>225</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film: History on Film/Film on History: Concepts, Theories and Practice* (Harlow; Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 39.



Figure 1.2: Barnes and the Juicers.

Stone did, however, make some concessions with regard to Elias' political representation. This sergeant is the film's moral core and, had he made an explicit anti-war statement, it would be far simpler to read *Platoon* as a liberal anti-war production. Elias initially did make such a statement. From 1984 until at least February 1986, Stone had Elias attack the conservative belief in a righteous war by uttering during a private conversation with Taylor, the following dialogue:

The only decent thing I can see coming out of here are the survivors – hundreds of thousands of guys like you Taylor going back to every little town in the country knowing something about what it's like to take life and what that can do to a person's soul ... killing is cheap, the cheapest thing I know, and when some drunk like [Sergeant] O'Neill starts glorifying it, you're gonna puke all over him and when the politicians start selling you a used war all over again, you're gonna say go fuck yourself cause you know and when you know it deep down there, you know it till you die.<sup>226</sup>

Elias speaks of a “used war” that has been “sold” to naïve soldiers by callous politicians. The political establishment is equated to salesmen, the war is suggested as a vehicle for nothing but its financial gain, and the Vietnam veteran should be protesting any further military incursions and teaching others not to answer their

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<sup>226</sup> Stone, *The Platoon*, (1984), p. 54; *The Platoon*, (1985), p. 66; *The Platoon*, (February 1986), p. 68.



country's call. In this scene, Elias combines a critique of the capitalist system that sent young people to die for their country with a demand for anti-war activism. The veteran's post-war role is to tell the government to "go fuck [themselves]." The removal of this statement cuts much of Elias' political agency. This was the only passage that called for soldiers actively to refuse to serve their country. It is also the only critique of the system that made the war possible. Its erasure from the script removes the most explicitly liberal condemnation of the morality of the Vietnam War.

On the other hand, however, Stone also removed the only explicit reference (and denunciation) of the anti-war movement. The scene in question was present until 1985 and featured Rhah (played in the finished film by Francesco Quinn) and Lerner (Johnny Depp). Speaking of his last visit to America, Lerner complains that "I was home on leave ... and everybody's just worried 'bout making money, watching football games on television, fuck the war". He continues with his gripe: "my sister says 'why you going over there to kill people ...'" It is halfway through this sentence that Rhah interjects: "Baaa! Fuck it, they sold us out – so what."<sup>227</sup> Lerner's sister's questioning of the morality of the war was thus rhetorically associated with the anti-war movement attacking the veteran. The movement "sold [veterans] out." The figure of the "spat upon veteran", invoked in the scene, was prominent in 1980s conservative discourse and, as Lembcke notes, in Vietnam-set films such as *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987) and *Hamburger Hill* (1987).<sup>228</sup> Stone, however, removed this content. Thus, Elias' critique of the war is removed, but so too is a conservative demonization of the anti-war movement.

Rather than advising Taylor on how to view politically the Vietnam War, Elias becomes the young private's spiritual guide. In this respect, it is significant that Elias is visually associated with a cohort much despised by conservative culture warriors: the hippie counterculture. Early scripts highlight Stone's desire to present Elias as a Jim Morrison-like countercultural figure. Originally *Platoon* was to feature a scene in which a group of soldiers discuss Elias' back-story. The sergeant apparently moved from Arizona to Los Angeles, married a woman who "blew all his

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<sup>227</sup> Stone, *The Platoon* (1985), p. 64.

<sup>228</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, p. 160.

bread – LSD, gurus ... and then she turns him into the cops on a drug rap.”<sup>229</sup> He is forced to come to Vietnam or face prison. Elias here is given a far greater Sixties specificity, he has clearly been living the hippie lifestyle in Los Angeles before arriving in Vietnam. In the finished film, Elias’ countercultural sensibilities are conveyed solely through visual cues: dope smoking, irreverence toward the military (noted above). In doing so, Stone is perhaps again taking the edge off of his representation; Elias loses some of his direct counterculture connections, while still maintaining an earthy, natural, free-spirited character.

Elias’ politics are toned down and his spirituality emphasised. At the same time, something very similar happens to the character of Barnes. Barnes hints at the standard conservative views toward Vietnam. After a fight in a Vietnamese village, he compares Elias to the snivelling politicians back in America “who want us to fight with one hand tied behind our balls.” This line evokes Ronald Reagan’s retrospective claim that Lyndon Johnson’s government made soldiers “fight with one hand tied behind them.”<sup>230</sup> Barnes is thus implied to be of similar mind to conservative critics of Vietnam. Alongside his pro-war disposition, Barnes stands opposed to Elias on another count. He is a leader under whom any kind of personal integrity cannot flourish. In direct contrast to Elias’ association with nature and spirituality, Barnes is presented as a believer in hyper-efficiency and mechanical adherence to military codes. He describes the platoon as a machine; “when the machine breaks down, we all break down”, he says. Barnes is the inauthentic soldier. He tells Taylor and company that “I’ve got no fight with a man does what he’s told.” There is, however, no space for personal choice, or personal conscience, in Barnes’ mind.

Barnes is representative of the conformist America from which Taylor wanted to escape. In an early voiceover, which is presented in draft scripts and in the finished film, Taylor presented his reasons for volunteering for combat. “First mum and dad didn’t want me to come here, they wanted me to be just like them: respectable, hardworking, a little house, a family” intones Taylor, adding:

They drove me crazy with their God-damned world ... I guess I’ve always been sheltered and special, I just want to be anonymous like everybody else. Do my share for my

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<sup>229</sup> Stone, *The Platoon* (1985), p. 63.

<sup>230</sup> Gary Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents At Home* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 356.

country, live up to what Grandpa did in the first war, and Dad did in the second. Well here I am, anonymous alright, with guys nobody really cares about ... The bottom of the barrel ... Maybe from down here I can start up again, be something I can be proud of without having to be a fake human being.

The first point to note here is Taylor's reference to the world he has left behind. It is an – albeit brief – disavowal of the clichéd Fifties suburban dream. This “God damned world” of house, job, and family is associated with superficiality and insincerity. Like Barnes, this world is mechanical and inauthentic. Vietnam becomes an alternative space, in which Taylor has the opportunity to rediscover himself. Taylor arrives in Vietnam an idealist – a “crusader” as he is described later in the film – determined to find some kind of self-fulfilment by fighting alongside the poor and disenfranchised. He is referred to in script directions as “an urban transplant,” a member of the white middle-class, a former college student, come to assist those less economically well-off than he.<sup>231</sup> The way in which Taylor's middle-class, privileged, status is emphasised throughout the film is significant. He is not representative of Vietnam veterans in general, most of whom were from the working classes. In many ways, the kinds of Sixties experiences associated with Taylor were representative of those linked to a broader middle-class experience of the Sixties. His searching for authenticity amongst the working classes and African Americans was certainly suggested to be widespread amongst white middle-class liberals of the era.<sup>232</sup> Historian Alice Echols notes the New Left's romanticising of the working class. Left-wing student radicals, she argues, “shared an antimaterialist stance and a desire to transcend their class through downward mobility.”<sup>233</sup> Furthermore, Taylor's dalliances with the counterculture were very much the province of America's middle-class throughout the late 1960s and 1970s (discussed in the thesis' introduction). Taylor's story was constructed as representative of a broader middle-class Sixties experience, which likely heightened its resonance in a public sphere in

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<sup>231</sup> Stone, *The Platoon* (1985), p. 2.

<sup>232</sup> Rossinow, *Authenticity*, p. 164.

<sup>233</sup> Echols, *Shaky Ground*, p. 68.

which media and political elites were largely from, and attempted to speak to, this demographic.<sup>234</sup>

Notably, in a 1984 draft of *Platoon*'s script, Stone even had Taylor tie race and poverty together explicitly in the same voiceover. Here it reads: "Well here I am – anonymous, with men nobody really cares about – the lowest of the low, the poor, the black ... the unwanted of our society."<sup>235</sup> In a draft completed in April 1985 some of the black soldiers discuss racial injustice, with one of them commenting that there "ain't no justice round here, you break your ass for de white man." Another replies: "politics, man, politics. We always getting fucked around here."<sup>236</sup> In the completed film, the second of these quotes – "politics, man, politics" – is applied not just to African-American soldiers, but to soldiers more generally, black and white. The refrain is repeated twice, by a black soldier, Francis (Corey Glover), and a white soldier Crawford (Chris Pederson). Issues of race become secondary to presenting, as in public debate, a less specific "Vietnam veteran" as the oppressed class. The one character that expresses sentiments in the vein of the Black Panthers and other radical African-American activists, Junior (Reggie Johnson), is portrayed as a whiney duplicitous coward. His moral and political agency is thus erased. As later chapters note in more detail, in Hollywood's Sixties films it would seem that issues pertaining to race and racism are often cut from early draft scripts in favour of emphasising a white, middle-class coming-of-age story.

To return to the above passage, the other side of Taylor's personality is, at this stage very much in keeping with Barnes' political outlook. He wants to "do [his] share for [his] country," and thus still believes that the war is justified. On one hand, he longs for adventure, something new, but on the other hand he is a product of a strict 1950s upbringing where memories of the "good war" (World War II), and anti-communist sentiment filled him with a strong sense of duty to the old ideals and orthodoxies of his parents' generation. On arriving in Vietnam, he believes that joining the army and fighting communism will help him escape a conformist

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<sup>234</sup> For example, S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda S. Lichter conducted surveys in 1979 and 1980 of what they term the "media elite", and by this they mean journalists from major news publications and television programmes. They found that "most were raised in upper-middle class homes". See Lichter, Rothman and Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>235</sup> Stone, *The Platoon* (1984), p. 13.

<sup>236</sup> Stone, *The Platoon* (1985), p. 11.

mechanical society. This is, however, until he meets the ultimate fighting machine: Sergeant Barnes.

Barnes is representative of the very ideals and values Taylor wished to escape. He reigns with an iron rod; the people over whom Barnes seems to have had the greatest influence, O'Neill (John C. McGinley) and Bunny (Kevin Dillon), are depicted as either sycophantic cowards or mentally unstable killers. The one African-American soldier that consorts with Barnes' cadre, Junior, is represented as an outcast, never invited to join in card games or drinking sessions. He is tolerated for his antipathy toward Elias and the "Heads," but he is not welcomed into this alternative community. The one character vaguely coded as Jewish, Lieutenant Wolfe (Mark Moses), is subjected to anti-Semitic jokes when he attempts to join them: "what are you saving up to be? Jewish?", mocks O'Neill. Barnes' microcosmic society is in many ways "The Fifties" as viewed from the perspective of liberal commentators: a time of conformity, hyper-militarism and exclusionary practices.

It is thus particularly telling that Stone added an extra scene to the script in 1986. It features Taylor killing Barnes in cold blood. The scene appears after the final battle and just before the end credits. Barnes has already murdered Elias, thus expunging the liberal Sixties representative from *Platoon's* final third. Previously, the film was to finish with Barnes' accidental death, killed by American napalm.<sup>237</sup> With this extra scene, however, comes an expanded commentary on Taylor's personal development and, by extension, on the Sixties. Visuals and editing at this juncture suggest that Stone and his crew were deliberately attempting to invest *Platoon's* final moments with a sense of unreality (see Figures 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5). This is not the "realistic" or "grunt's eye view" of combat that is present throughout much of the film: Barnes' eyes glow a devilish red as he viciously attacks Taylor; the young private's life is saved only after an enormous explosion knocks he and Barnes unconscious. An abrupt cut follows. The scene then fades back in, but we are now watching events unfold in black and white. Colour only drains back into the film when Taylor regains consciousness, suggesting that *mise en scene* is no longer a window on "reality" but a reflection of Taylor's state of mind. The unexpected appearance of a deer, not to mention the intense light in which the battlefield is now

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<sup>237</sup> Stone, *The Platoon* (1985), p. 114.

bathed, move *Platoon* into a semi-imaginary world. Taylor slowly approaches Barnes, and, ignoring the sergeant's calls for medical aid, executes him. Given the distinctly surreal atmosphere within which this act takes place, Taylor's killing of Barnes could be construed as having taken place in Taylor's mind rather than being literally performed. It is a psychological act, the destruction of negative values and attitudes that Barnes literally embodied, but that also existed within Taylor's own psyche. It is the consummation of Taylor's journey to authenticity. Yet, on a symbolic level, it is also an attempt to dispatch everything liberal commentators suggested was wrong with pre-Sixties America: a militaristic, conformist culture bereft of political and personal freedoms and lacking in social equality. In killing Barnes Taylor hopes to jettison America's inauthentic Fifties and simultaneously complete his own intellectual and spiritual coming-of-age.



Figure 1.3: Colour slowly drains back into *Platoon*.



Figure 1.4: Full colour returns.



Figure 1.5: Barnes' execution.

Taylor's final voiceover, however, indicates that Barnes' negative influence may not have been completely erased. It exists within Taylor, "fighting for possession of [his] soul." Many have read the killing of Barnes as an act of existential incorporation. Taylor has murdered Barnes in a manner similar to this sergeant's cold-blooded dispatching of Elias. Taylor thus adopts Barnes' icy efficiency and slaughters him; Taylor "becomes" Barnes.<sup>238</sup> Yet, it would seem to me that the raising of Barnes' ghost during this closing voiceover is more a warning that his malign influence is yet to be fully evacuated from Taylor and, by extension, from American politics and society. Taylor, who has clearly sided with Elias throughout the film, has also borne witness to the tragic and catastrophic impact of Barnes' actions and philosophies. Taylor's journey of self-discovery has revealed an urge to violence and murder inherent in his society: "the enemy [Barnes] was in us." His killing of Barnes suggests that Taylor finally takes an active anti-war stance and attempts to destroy the militaristic culture that *Platoon* argues prevailed in Fifties America. In a sense, then, the film has celebrated the Sixties by suggesting that the era's liberal movements – anti-war and counterculture – went some way to uncovering these festering social and cultural defects. Taylor does not say that the

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<sup>238</sup> Jeffords, "Reproducing Fathers," p. 209; Michael Klein, "Historical Memory, Film and the Vietnam Era," in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi*, p. 27.

enemy was in “me” but in “us” – his personal epiphany is finally broadened out to be of national consequence. And yet the Sixties did not completely eradicate Barnes; rather, it began to chip away at the roots of his philosophies. Taylor’s comment that “the enemy was in us” recognizes the potency of Barnes’ way of thinking and calls for a struggle against its ongoing influence.

I would, therefore, question the common reading that suggests *Platoon* is bereft of historical and social context or commentary. A number of film scholars have read *Platoon* as essentially a regurgitation of standard war narratives. Its *bildungsroman*, or young man’s journey from innocence to experience, narrative is a “hackneyed” trope of literary and filmic combat representations.<sup>239</sup> In Michael Klein’s view, “*Platoon* erases the context of the war from historical memory” and instead foregrounds “an American soldier’s myopic perspective on the morality of several decontextualised moments of combat”.<sup>240</sup> I argue that a focus on the individual does not necessarily mean a complete absence of social context or political engagement. Certainly, some explicit political statements were cut from early scripts, but Chris Taylor’s search for authenticity would seem to me tied up intrinsically with a form of historical commentary and, furthermore, is a call to re-examine political and personal perspectives on the era.

### **From Vietnam to the Sixties: Promotion and Reception**

Discussion of *Platoon* in promotion and reception materials focused on two subjects: the film’s political content (if any) and its authenticity. With regards to the latter, there was a great deal of slippage, often within the same articles, between the term’s realist connotations (i.e. did *Platoon* provide an accurate representation of the military in Vietnam) and authenticity in its more spiritual sense (i.e. *Platoon* as depiction of an individual’s personal development). Throughout its theatrical release, *Platoon* was promoted and received as a catalyst for unleashing a variety of political and personal reflections on the Sixties. In many ways the film worked both to fan the flames of political discord, and to simultaneously offer many public commentators the opportunity to make meaning of their own recent histories. If there was some

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<sup>239</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 100.

<sup>240</sup> Michael Klein, “Historical Memory, Film and the Vietnam Era,” in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi*, pp. 28-29.



disagreement between liberal and conservative commentators with regards to *Platoon's* political representation of the Vietnam War, the film nevertheless brought together Vietnam veterans and non-combatants alike in a communal dialogue on the legacy of the Sixties and the era's impact on public and private life.

In keeping with 1980s public debate, *Platoon's* theatrical poster (Figure 1.6) suggested the film to be ideologically ambiguous in its representation of the war. The poster featured what was an iconic image associated with the Vietnam veteran: a helmet emblazoned with slogans. The front cover to Michael Herr's 1977 novel *Dispatches* originally featured the words "Hell Sucks" and a hippie peace sign plastered on a helmet. The poster used to promote the 1978 film *The Boys in Company C* (fig 1.7) also included a helmet emblazoned with a peace sign and accompanied by the tagline "to keep their sanity in an insane war they had to be crazy." *Platoon's* poster features the words "When I die, bury me upside down so the world can kiss my ..." These lines appear just beneath the film's tagline: "the first casualty of war is innocence." A tiny peace sign dangles on the side of the helmet. Accompanying the peace sign is the above noted bile-filled assault on "the world." Anger is not directed at anybody or anything in particular, but at everything: a call for peace is somewhat displaced by a call for conflict.

*Platoon's* poster follows the political ambiguity of posters that accompanied the release of many late-1970s Vietnam films. *The Boys in Company C* poster stresses the war's "insanity" over any claims to its rightness or wrongness. Its prominent images of two guns and a guitar are evocative of both the military and the counterculture, yet there is no sense of any particular political affiliation. Looking at their posters, one could be forgiven for thinking that *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* (figures 1.8, 1.9 and 1.10) are not about Vietnam at all. *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* use blurred, shadowy images that barely suggest that they are war films, let alone Vietnam War films. *Coming Home* features its two stars, Jane Fonda and Jon Voight locked in a loving embrace, and a tagline: "A man who believed in war. A man who believed in nothing. And a woman who believed in both of them." Presumably, the "man who believed in nothing" was Luke (Voight), which is interesting in itself, for it suggests the reticence at this time to state a character to be anti-war (surely a viable reading of Luke's stance on Vietnam). The *Coming Home* poster does, however, stress the possibility that

reconciliation can take place (by way of Jane Fonda's character).<sup>241</sup> *Platoon* seems more intent on heightening conflict; its dark colours, its face off between anger and pacifism (the hippie peace sign and violent diatribe against the world) and its statement "the first casualty of war is innocence" – all suggest an attempt to inspire discussion and debate, but without declaring any explicit political bias.

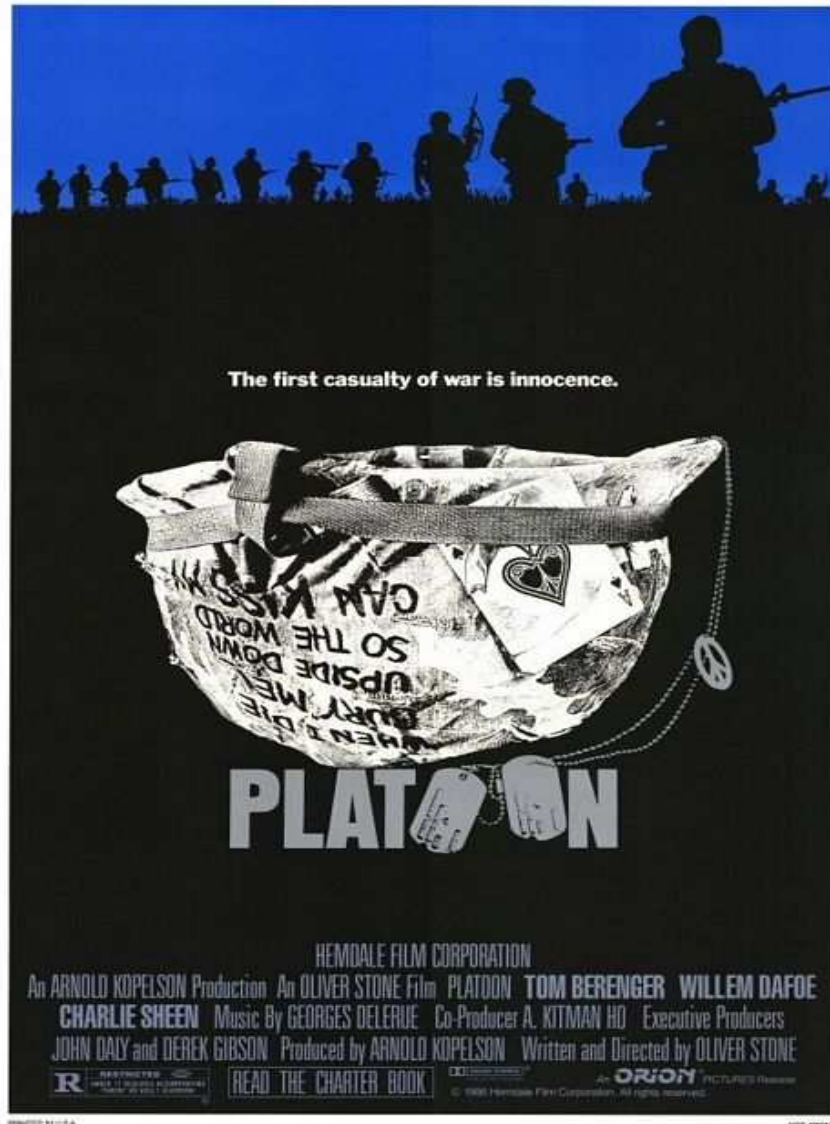


Figure 1.6: *Platoon*'s promotional poster.

<sup>241</sup> Scholarship on films such as *Coming Home* and *Apocalypse Now* often suggests that these films are rather schizophrenic with regards to political representation. The former may celebrate an anti-war veteran, but nevertheless regurgitates the conservative cliché of anti-war protestor spitting at veterans. The latter's mythic structure and existential hero has been argued to display "ambivalence" toward the politics and morality of Vietnam. See Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, pp. 144-182; Frank P. Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar film," in Dittmar and Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi*, pp. 145-158.

# THE BOYS IN COMPANY C

To keep their sanity in an insane war,  
they had to be crazy.



COLUMBIA PICTURES PRESENTS A GOLDEN HARVEST Production  
"THE BOYS IN COMPANY C" STAN SHAW ANDREW STEVENS  
JAMES CANNING MICHAEL LEMBECK CRAIG WASSON  
SCOTT HYLANDS JAMES WHITMORE, JR. NOBLE WILLINGHAM  
SANTOS MORALES DREW MICHAELS  
RAYMOND CHOW RICK NATKIN SIDNEY J. FURIE  
ANDRE MORGAN SIDNEY J. FURIE

Figure 1.7: Promotional poster for *The Boys in Company C*.

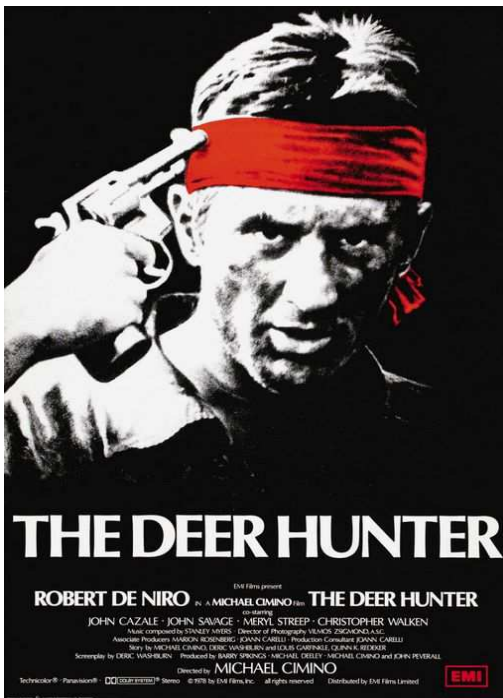
A MAN WHO BELIEVED IN WAR.  
A MAN WHO BELIEVED IN NOTHING.  
AND A WOMAN WHO BELIEVED IN BOTH OF THEM.



A Jerome Hellman Production  
A Hal Ashby Film  
Jane Fonda  
Jon Voight Bruce Dern  
"Coming Home"

Screenplay by Waldo Salt and Robert C. Jones Story by Nancy Dowd  
Director of Photography Haskell Wexler Associate Producer Bruce Gilbert  
Produced by Jerome Hellman Directed by Hal Ashby

Figure 1.8: Promotional poster for *Coming Home*.



# THE DEER HUNTER

ROBERT DE NIRO MICHAEL CIMINO THE DEER HUNTER  
JOHN CAZALE JOHN SAVAGE MERYL STREEP CHRISTOPHER WALKEN  
MUSIC COMPOSED BY STANLEY ARBES DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY VIKTOR ZSICHONDI A.S.C.  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS HANSON BERNBERG GAVIN CAGELL PRODUCER CONSULTANT JONAN CARLUCCI  
WRITTEN BY MICHAEL CIMINO DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY VIKTOR ZSICHONDI EDITOR GABRIELE GUZZI EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS  
SCREENPLAY BY DEBBY WOODBURN PRODUCED BY BRADY SPENCER MICHAEL GIBBY JAMES H. HANCOCK AND JOHN FERRALL  
DIRECTED BY MICHAEL CIMINO  
TECHNICAL: PARASONIC DIGITAL SOUND SYSTEM © 1978 BY EMI FILMS, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. DISTRIBUTED BY EMI FILMS LIMITED EMI

Figure 1.9: Promotional poster for *The Deer Hunter*.



# Apocalypse Now

FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA PRESENTS  
MARLON BRANDO ROBERT DUALI MARTIN SHEEN APOCALYPSE NOW  
FREDERIC FORREST ALBERT HALL SAMPSON LARRY FISHBURN DENNIS HOPFER  
DIRECTED BY FRANCIS COPPOLA  
WRITTEN BY JOHN HILLIS PRODUCED BY FRANCIS COPPOLA EDITED BY MICHAEL HERTZ  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS FRED REEDS GARY FREDERICKSON TOM SPRENGER  
PRODUCED BY WALTER MURPHY EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DEAN SHELKERS RIC HARO MANN  
SCREENPLAY BY WALTER MURPHY DIRECTED BY FRANCIS COPPOLA  
TECHNICAL: PARASONIC DIGITAL SOUND SYSTEM © 1979 BY FRANCIS COPPOLA AN OPEN JET PRODUCTION

Figure 1.10: Promotional poster for *Apocalypse Now*.

Given the ideologically diverse content (discussed earlier) and a promotional poster that sought to obscure/mystify its political stance, it is unsurprising that a number of reviewers and commentators announced that *Platoon* was either apolitical, or open to numerous contradictory interpretations. After comparing it to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Rita Kempley of the *Washington Post* argued that “Stone doesn’t preach. He just remembers.”<sup>242</sup> Pauline Kael criticised the lack of serious engagement with “what the war was about.” Politics was conceived “strictly in terms of what these American infantrymen went through.”<sup>243</sup> Another reviewer claimed that “*Platoon* wisely eschews arguments about the rightness or wrongness of Vietnam ... It leaves the audience to grapple with such thoughts”.<sup>244</sup> Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* wrote that “there are no great issues here ... it’s about fighting for anonymous pieces of jungle.”<sup>245</sup> Other critics suggested the film was simply a conglomeration of numerous political views on the war. *Time* magazine’s Richard Corliss declared:

The army of Rambo-maniacs will love the picture because it delivers more bang for the buck: all those yellow folks blow up real good. Aging lefties can see the film as a demonstration of war’s inhuman futility. Graybeards on the right may call it a tribute to our fighting men ... The intelligentsia can credit *Platoon* with expressing Stone’s grand themes of comradeship and betrayal.<sup>246</sup>

*Platoon* was thus concluded to be a film that would resonate with diverse audiences, regardless of political persuasion. Corliss’ comments intimated that this film could be appropriated by spokespeople of the Left and the Right. However, with regards to the film’s stance on Vietnam, it quickly became clear that *Platoon* was going to be adopted and celebrated primarily by liberal commentators. In early 1987, one critic suggested that the film was “evidence of the cultural collapse of Reaganism.” Noting the then-recent Iran Contra and Wall Street insider trading scandals, he claimed

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<sup>242</sup> Rita Kempley, “*Platoon*: Awesome Requiem,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 1987, p. W17.

<sup>243</sup> Pauline Kael, “*Platoon*,” *New Yorker*, January 12, 1987, p. 95.

<sup>244</sup> Myra MacPherson, “*Platoon*, Echoing the Voices of Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1987, p. G1.

<sup>245</sup> Vincent Canby, “*Platoon* Finds New Life in the Old War Movie,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1987, p. H21.

<sup>246</sup> Corliss, “*Platoon*,” p. 48.

*Platoon* to be symptomatic of a liberal counteroffensive against Reagan's "Rambo illusion."<sup>247</sup> Another commentator used the film as an excuse to lament the Reagan administration's aggressive and conservative policies. "What movie did the war lovers in Congress see?" he asked. The answer he provided was, inevitably, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* "the emotional core of Reagan foreign policy." The corrective to what this commentator believed to be *Rambo*'s conservatism was *Platoon*.<sup>248</sup>

Once *Platoon* was released, Stone moved away from his earlier apolitical stance (noted above) and attempted to capitalise on anti-Reagan sentiment. "I hope this film might make us think twice about ever fighting another war", he informed the *New York Daily News*. This comment appeared just after he had complained that right-wing commentators had attacked *Platoon* for "disgracing the military".<sup>249</sup> Conservative commentator, Charles Krauthammer announced *Platoon*'s representation to be a "classic anti-war technique." For Krauthammer, the film simply stated that all war was a waste of human life; it did not celebrate its "good" features: "sacrifice, values, purpose."<sup>250</sup> Writing in the *Washington Times*, John Podhoretz criticised *Platoon* as "one of the most repellent movies ever made in this country."<sup>251</sup> According to R. Emmett Tyrell Jr., *Platoon* was a complete left-wing assault on Vietnam: "apparently the war is to continue as a province off-limits to those who disagree with the protestors' fantasies of noble Vietnamese communists and depraved Americans."<sup>252</sup>

Some liberal film critics who chose to read the film politically came to a similar conclusion. J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* described *Platoon* as "left-wing pulp." He viewed it as "a gritty corrective to the fantasies of bellicose non-combatants [director of *Red Dawn* (1984) John] Milius and [*Rambo* star Sylvester] Stallone."<sup>253</sup> At the same time Hoberman also comments upon *Platoon*'s seeming lack of historical specificity. "*Platoon* achieves a timeless quality", wrote

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<sup>247</sup> Michael Kinsey, "From *Rambo* to *Platoon*," *Washington Post*, February 18, 1987, p. A19.

<sup>248</sup> Richard Cohen, "The Nightmare of *Platoon*," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1987, p. A21.

<sup>249</sup> Alan Mirabella, "Just Surprise Me, Okay?" *New York Daily News*, March 25, 1987, Extra, p. 9. See also Roger Ebert, "Going for the Pain, Passion & Raw Energy," *New York Post*, December 20, 1986, p. 16.

<sup>250</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "*Platoon* Chic," *Washington Post*, February 20, 1987, p. A19.

<sup>251</sup> Quoted in Corliss, "*Platoon*," p. 46.

<sup>252</sup> R. Emmett Tyrell Jr., "*Platoon*: Another Fantasy," *Washington Post*, April 7, 1987, p. A17.

<sup>253</sup> J. Hoberman, "At War with Ourselves," *Village Voice*, December 23, 1986, p. 79. See also Sheila Benson, "*Platoon*: It's War at Ground Zero," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1986, p. F1.

Hoberman.<sup>254</sup> Dave Kehr of the *Chicago Tribune* believed that *Platoon* engaged with Vietnam on a political level “in evoking the forces that have sent these men – largely poor, uneducated, and from minority backgrounds – to fight a war they only dimly understand.”<sup>255</sup> Liberal responses, however, were on the whole less strident in claims to political outlook than the conservative attacks. Most stressed that *Platoon* did not really attempt to make a vociferous statement on the war’s morality, but simply provided an accurate representation of infantrymen’s experiences.<sup>256</sup>

While conservatives responded defensively to *Platoon*, liberals were more ambivalent about its political content. Given that, after Iran Contra, conservatives were increasingly on the back foot in public debate, one might suggest that their attacks on *Platoon* were as much a case of them fearing that they were losing ground to liberal voices as it was the film’s political address. *Platoon* appeared at a time when the moral expediency of Reagan and his allies’ foreign policy decisions was under assault. The film’s popularity and high-profile suggested to some conservatives that it was part of a broader liberal counter offensive against their bellicose Cold War stance. As later chapters further elucidate, there is a sense that, regardless of a film’s ideological content, and regardless of when it was produced, the political outlook most dominant at the time of a film’s release tends to influence political interpretation.

Had *Platoon* been released one year earlier, would it have been appropriated by conservatives as emblematic of their own values? It is of course impossible to say for certain. One might, however, consider conservative appropriation of another cultural text as a case in point. When Bruce Springsteen’s single “Born in the USA” was released in 1984, Reagan and his administration trumpeted the song as representative of “conservative” uncritical patriotism. Regardless of the song’s content and Springsteen’s own political announcements (he roundly attacked the Republican Party for its failure to provide employment for Vietnam veterans and for its war-mongering rhetoric) “Born in the USA” was swept up in a conservative

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<sup>254</sup> Hoberman, “At War,” p. 79.

<sup>255</sup> Dave Kehr, “Reality of *Platoon* is Steeped in Surreality,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 1986, p. D3.

<sup>256</sup> Paul Attanasio, “*Platoon*’s Raw Mastery,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 1987, p. B1; Canby, “*Platoon* Finds New Life,” p. H21; Charles Champlin, “Has *Platoon* Deescalated War Movies,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1987; Kempley, “*Platoon*,” p. W17; McPherson, “Echoing the Voices of Vietnam,” p. G1.

celebration of jingoistic pride.<sup>257</sup> One could locate this conservative appropriation within a broader culture in which the political Right had adopted – in musical terms – the major key as its own. As Robert Collins points out, part of Reagan’s success in the 1980s was built upon his ability to construct the Republican Party as *the* party of optimism and the Democrats as a group of weak pessimists. Harking back to former Democrat President Jimmy Carter’s notorious “malaise” speech of 1979, Reagan and his allies reminded the nation that “Carter’s America ... was in retreat; Reagan’s America would be on the march.”<sup>258</sup>

At the time of *Platoon*’s release, however, Iran-Contra had, for many commentators, somewhat impeded Reagan’s “march.” The question now arose: were political conservatives the most qualified to, in Chris Taylor’s words, “find a goodness and meaning to this life”? I would suggest that conservative attacks on *Platoon* were as much born out of a loss of prestige in the political arena; conservatives themselves at this point in time were not identified with renewal, but with downfall and therefore could not utilise the film in the name of national renewal (a “coming-to-terms” with Vietnam). All they could do was attack the film’s allegedly left-wing bias. In late 1986 and early 1987 the political and moral high-ground belonged to liberal commentators. Perhaps, then, the liberal or left-wing status that some, especially conservative, commentators ascribed to *Platoon* was down to the changed political landscape into which the film entered. This may also partially explain why many commentators touted *Platoon* as a symbol of the changing times: the first “real” Vietnam film and, finally, an opportunity for everyone to reflect honestly on the recent American past.

Aspects of *Platoon*’s promotional campaign heavily emphasised the film to be based on Oliver Stone’s personal experience. Charles Glenn, marketing executive for Orion, the company that distributed the film, explained in 1987:

[T]he movie was originally sold as Oliver Stone’s story with what the industry calls ‘reader ads’, advertisements with a large block of copy. There were three or four Polaroid snapshots of Mr Stone in uniform. The copy told of his being

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<sup>257</sup> David James, “The Vietnam War and American Music,” *Social Text* no. 23 (1989), p. 138.

<sup>258</sup> Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 49.

wounded twice and winning the Bronze Star, and of his making a movie about 'men he knew and fought with.'<sup>259</sup>

The primary aim of the campaign was, firstly, to assert the historical accuracy Stone's experiences. Here was a film made by someone who was there; someone who legitimately could provide an authoritative account of America in Vietnam. Beginning with photographs of Stone dressed in combat fatigues, the trailer for *Platoon* immediately emphasises its autobiographical qualities. "Oliver Stone has come a long way since Vietnam", declares the voiceover, "but he hasn't left it behind." The fictional scenes that follow dissolve so inconspicuously into the trailer's narrative they could almost seem to be a continuation of Stone's Vietnam story. Marita Sturken argues that personal experience is considered by many as "the primary basis of truth" and, by extension, "the viewer of the Vietnam War film thus lays claim to having had an authentic experience of the war."<sup>260</sup> The promotion of Stone as veteran suggested to viewers that they could experience the real history of Vietnam. This form of promotion was certainly given a boost by the mainstream American media's willingness to provide Vietnam veterans' with opportunities to chart their own personal experiences.

Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Vietnam veteran George Masters sets the tone for the numerous *Platoon* reviews penned by veterans throughout the winter of 1986 and spring of 1987. "When the movie was over and the credits had ended", wrote Masters, "I tripped over the past and a slide show started: Parris Island, S.C. Marine Corps Recruit Depot, 1965." As the film ends his flashbacks begin, he goes back in time, back to the day he signed up for the Marines, back to the beginning of his Vietnam experiences. Throughout, he jumps between post-*Platoon* discussion with his friend and war reminiscences. The film was "the trip wire that set off the memories."<sup>261</sup> Masters was not the only veteran reported to have engaged the film in this way. The *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Houston Post* and *Atlanta Journal* all invited groups of veterans to private screenings and asked them to rate *Platoon's*

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<sup>259</sup> Aljean Harmetz, "Unwanted *Platoon* Finds Success as U.S Examines the Vietnam War," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987, p. C13.

<sup>260</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 99.

<sup>261</sup> George Eyre Masters, "'Platoon' Looses Torrent of Tortured Memories for Vietnam Veteran," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1987, p. 2.



authenticity against their memories of the war.<sup>262</sup> The *Washington Post* organised a group viewing of the film for Vietnam veterans. Their responses were subsequently reported. Particular attention was paid to the disagreements over *Platoon*'s controversial scenes, such as those in which American soldiers shoot at and kill other American soldiers. Some believed the scenes to be realistic; others did not.<sup>263</sup> Some African-American veterans in particular were concerned with the films' representation of black veterans, who they felt, were either portrayed as dope-smoking bums, or whining cowards.<sup>264</sup>

If responses veered from the critical to the celebratory, *Platoon* nevertheless opened the door for many veterans to publicly air their own experiences. One article quoted a spokesman for a veteran's group saying: "We get calls daily from veterans who saw the movie and feel they have to talk to someone."<sup>265</sup> Such was the response that therapists at one hospital in New Jersey started to use the film to "help ex-GIs process memories, confront unfinished business and speed the healing process."<sup>266</sup> Citing Vietnam veteran Henry Adams' famous remark that the "Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective, a mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves",<sup>267</sup> Sturken suggests that 1980s Vietnam films became a "mobile script" upon which numerous other Vietnam stories could be told.<sup>268</sup> Different individuals bring their own personal beliefs and experiences to the text and superimpose those beliefs onto historical representation. *Platoon*'s history is demonstrated here to be "in the eye of the viewer, not inscribed on the film itself."<sup>269</sup> The promotion of *Platoon* as Stone's and, by extension, a range of other Vietnam veterans', personal testimony encouraged many others to read the film in just such a way.

The film was not, however, simply promoted – and certainly was not received – as a representative story of Vietnam veterans alone. Promotional articles

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<sup>262</sup> John Stone, "Evil in the Early Cinema of Oliver Stone: *Platoon* and *Wall Street* as Modern Morality Plays," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer 2000), p. 83.

<sup>263</sup> Phil McCombs, "Veterans Reliving the Pain," *Washington Post*, January 16, 1987, p. B1.

<sup>264</sup> Clyde Taylor, "The Colonialist Subtext," p. 172.

<sup>265</sup> Janet Gardner, "*Platoon* Raising Veterans' Anxieties," *New York Times*, January 7, 1987, p. NJ1.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.* See also Wendy Melillo, "The Power of *Platoon*," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1987, p. Z16.

<sup>267</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 86.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>269</sup> Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 190.

and features endeavoured to promote Stone's life as a representative experience of the Sixties more generally. A narrative of Stone's life, one that extended beyond his time in Vietnam, was frequently recounted in the popular press. It was one which resonated with numerous public commentators, veterans and non-combatants alike. It was, in many ways, a narrative of the Sixties generation. Spanning from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, Stone's publicised personal life referenced many Sixties political and cultural touchstones. The son of a stockbroker, Stone's privileged 1950s upbringing began many a journalistic account of his life, then came his political awakening, then Vietnam and, finally, his return to a divided late 1960s America. "I was very gung-ho", recalled Stone in one *Washington Post* interview. He was referring to his pre-Vietnam years of privilege. He was conservative: "I supported [Republican presidential candidate Barry] Goldwater in '64."<sup>270</sup> Much emphasis was placed upon his personal conversion narrative in which the son (Stone) finally broke from the conservative politics and culture of his father's generation. He refers to 1965 and a brief stint at Yale University as just such a turning point. Stone informed *Time* magazine that, at Yale, "I saw myself as a product – an East Coast socioeconomic product – and I wanted to break out of the mold."<sup>271</sup>

Stone's attempt to break from convention – to achieve personal authenticity – was discussed in an uncannily similar vein to ways in which other Sixties narratives were promoted by various public commentators throughout the 1980s. His politics, his political awakening and his experiences in Vietnam may have differed from other members of the Sixties generation, but, nevertheless, the Sixties conversion narrative was ever-present in public memory of this era. For example, Stone described his return from Vietnam in a fashion that was very much in keeping with other popular accounts of the late Sixties "descent-into-chaos." The director told the *Washington Post* that he "was pretty wild in those days [the late 1960s and early 1970s]. I was drinking. I was a bachelor ... I didn't behave like a writer. I behaved ... like a

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<sup>270</sup> Paul Attanasio, "The Long Inner War of Oliver Stone," *Washington Post*, January 11, 1987, p. H5.

<sup>271</sup> Corliss, "*Platoon*: Vietnam As It Really Was on Film,"

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,963314-8,00.html> (Accessed May 2009). See also Julie Salamon, "Finally a True-to-life Look at War," *Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 1986, p. 24; Hal Lipper, "Hollywood Takes a Harder Look at Vietnam," *St Petersburg Times*, January 25, 1987, p. 1E.

madman.”<sup>272</sup> One might see a touch of liberal commentator Todd Gitlin’s “murk of collective despair” in Stone’s description of the late Sixties.<sup>273</sup> Gitlin used this phrase to describe his experience of the anarchy engulfing the New Left post-1968. Stone’s personal story offered a similarly bleak post-68 rendition of chaos, anarchy and excess. Likewise, when Stone told *Time* that, upon returning from Vietnam, “I hated America. I would have joined the Black Panthers if they’d asked me. I was ready to kill”,<sup>274</sup> the negative interpretation of the Panthers seemed much like conservative reminiscences of this organisation as a destructive murderous force.

In general, Stone’s life story was promoted as being very much in keeping with broader culture wars’ rhetoric (noted in the introduction) that claimed the Sixties to have been a time when America came apart at the seams. Stone’s life story therefore could act as a different framing device for the film and it could be appropriated by other commentators, those who perhaps did not fight in Vietnam, to read *Platoon* as a Sixties coming-of-age story. For example, Paul Attanasio of the *Washington Post* called *Platoon* “the first serious youth movie in ages, for at its heart, the war is treated as a rite of passage in its most intense form.”<sup>275</sup> Attanasio continues by reading this “rite of passage” as taking place against the backdrop of Sixties conflicts. He notes a “kind of civil war” developing in the platoon, “between the ‘juicers’ (who drink) and the ‘heads’ (who smoke dope).”<sup>276</sup> Sergeant Barnes is even associated with an icon that many of the Sixties generation would recognise – “you see the high school football hero as he once was.”<sup>277</sup> The sergeant becomes a universal symbol of lost youth, innocence spoiled, and a nation in turmoil. Other reviewers picked up on this metaphorical representation of America in the Sixties. *Time*’s Richard Corliss suggests it was “a metaphor for the uncivil war that raged in the U.S.” Yet in the same review Corliss had celebrated the film as a realist document, one that showed America “what it was like, over there [in Vietnam, that is].”<sup>278</sup> This slippage between celebrating the film’s documentary-like accuracy, while at the same time emphasising its metaphorical potency, was echoed by David

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<sup>272</sup> Attanasio, “The Long Inner War,” p. H1. See also Corliss, “*Platoon*”; Marc Cooper, “Oliver Stoned,” *Playboy*, January, 1988. Reprinted in *Show Business*, January 13, 1988, p. 8.

<sup>273</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 398.

<sup>274</sup> Corliss, “*Platoon*.”

<sup>275</sup> Paul Attanasio, “*Platoon*’s Raw Mastery,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 1987, p. B1.

<sup>276</sup> Attanasio, “Raw Mastery,” p. B1.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. B4.

<sup>278</sup> Corliss, “*Platoon*.”

Halberstam in the *New York Times*. *Platoon*, according to Halberstam had “the authenticity of documentary” but also the “vibrancy and originality of art”.<sup>279</sup> It was this slippage between authenticity as it applies to accuracy and artistic metaphor that enabled many commentators to read *Platoon* as a broader story of the Sixties, one that could resonate with combatants and non-combatants alike. The film told the real Vietnam story, but also the real Sixties story. *Platoon* was a “symbol of a torn nation.”<sup>280</sup> The *St Petersburg Times* argued that the film depicts a veritable raft of schisms: “corruption, racism and cultural elitism among the ranks: dopers vs. boozers, black vs. white, rich vs. poor, North vs. South.”<sup>281</sup>

Such reviews suggest less an attempt on the part of commentators to declare that they had vicariously experienced Vietnam than an insistence that *Platoon* was telling the story of anyone who experienced the Sixties. While I cannot offer statistics to show how many of the commentators involved in *Platoon*’s reception actually fought in Vietnam, it does seem telling that the film was constructed and received as one which chimed with combatants’ and *non-combatants*’ experiences. *Platoon* built a bridge between both these sides of the Sixties generation. That the Vietnam veteran was in need of a “welcoming back” and “rehabilitation” into American society, was but one side of public conflicts over the war. In a sense, there was another demographic whose psychological status, though not so heavily discussed as the veteran’s psychology, was subjected to similar scrutiny. In 1975, James Fallows eloquently expressed the feelings of guilt felt by some of those that protested the war and avoided the draft but did nothing to stop the thousands of working-class, less privileged young men from being sent to die for their country. For all their anti-war sentiment, the “mainly white, mainly well-educated children of mainly comfortable parents – who are now mainly embarked on promising careers in law, medicine, business, academics” had not really succeeded in stopping Vietnam; they had simply avoided going themselves.<sup>282</sup> Arnold Isaacs outlines the suggested tensions between combatants and non-combatants: “soldiers and protestors alike

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<sup>279</sup> David Halberstam, “Two that Were There: The Correspondent,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 1987, p. B38.

<sup>280</sup> Kempley, “Awesome Requiem,” p. W17.

<sup>281</sup> Hal Lipper, “*Platoon* Captures Vietnam’s Depths,” *St Petersburg Times*, January 30, 1987, p. 1D.

<sup>282</sup> James Fallows, “What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?” *Washington Monthly*, October 1975. Reprinted in Mary Susannah Robbins, *Against the Vietnam War: Writings by Activists* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 162.

often found it hard to face the inner truth of their experiences. Students hid from the truth that they were protesting because they were afraid of dying in the war”.<sup>283</sup>

Whether or not all protestors held these emotions, and regardless of how many critics were or were not Vietnam veterans, I would suggest that *Platoon* was constructed and framed in the public sphere as a film with which both combatants and non-combatants alike could identify. Taylor was a veteran, but a middle-class veteran – a volunteer – whose political beliefs and personal development mirrored that expressed in many accounts of the Sixties. Stone’s added back story further limned associations with a broader Sixties narrative associated in particular with the white middle-classes. For this reason, *Platoon* could be appropriated as a resonant representation of Vietnam, the Vietnam veteran, and the Sixties generation. Perhaps, declared *Platoon*, both veterans and non-veterans had experienced the Sixties “authentically,” some in the war in Vietnam and others in the war back home.

## Conclusion

It is clear how, in Rick Altman’s words, “not only the events, but the characters and dialogue [of any given film] are susceptible to the logic of multiple framing, both in terms of textual strategies and in terms of spectator processing.”<sup>284</sup> Whether in script development, promotion or reception, certain scenes, sequences and characters were framed and re-framed in line with prominent discourses circulating in the public sphere. Stone made changes to the *Platoon* script that complicated the film’s engagement with public politics. Lines of dialogue were cut, extra scenes added, which made the film’s ideological outlook more ambiguous. *Platoon* was constructed to straddle liberal and conservative views toward Vietnam. At the same time, a narrative stressing personal development against the backdrop of Sixties politics and culture was strengthened. In many ways Taylor’s search for personal authenticity in the end served as the narrative in which historical and political concerns were mediated. It is very much a commentary on the Sixties; the protagonist’s changing mindset is brought about by his experiences of Vietnam, but

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<sup>283</sup> Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, p. 47.

<sup>284</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 136.

also by his adopting principles associated with the Sixties counterculture and anti-war movement and attempting to put these principles into practice.

Promotion and reception continued to frame and re-frame the film from different perspectives: as politically ambiguous, as a representative story of Vietnam veterans and of the Sixties generation more broadly. Vietnam veterans read the film against their own personal experiences, while other critics saw *Platoon* as metaphor for the social and political conflicts of the Sixties. The potential for multiple perspectives such as these ensured the film's prominent place in public debate. *Platoon* was constructed and received so as to appeal across a divide that many viewed as unbridgeable. Arnold Isaacs quotes a Vietnam veteran as saying that "[t]here's a wall ten miles high and fifty miles long between those of us who went and those of us who didn't."<sup>285</sup> Perhaps for a brief moment at least, *Platoon* offered some people the hope that this wall could be demolished. It brought people together in communal reflection on the Sixties.

Inspiring masses of public debate and critical and popular acclaim,<sup>286</sup> *Platoon* paved the way for an explosion of Vietnam-set productions over the next four years: *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987), *Gardens of Stone* (1987), *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987), *84C MoPic* (1989), *Casualties of War* (1989), and Stone's own *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). *Platoon*'s success at stimulating political commentary and op-ed editorials also indicated that cinema could play a very real part in public debates on the Sixties, and on issues paramount to the political framing of this era. One year after the release of Stone's Vietnam picture, another young person's coming-of-age in the Sixties was rendered across the big screen. Like *Platoon*, it was constructed as a young protagonist's political and personal coming-of-age. Also like *Platoon*, it became a national craze; a public phenomenon, but for very different reasons. That film was *Dirty Dancing*.

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<sup>285</sup> Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, p. 47.

<sup>286</sup> *Platoon* won the Best Picture, Best Director, Best Editing and Best Sound Oscars at the 1987 Academy Awards.

## Chapter Two

### **“There are a lot of things about me that aren’t what you thought”: *Dirty Dancing* and Women’s Liberation**

A police station on the outskirts of Chicago: two teenagers sit on a couch in the foyer. The young woman, dressed in frumpy beige cardigan and navy blue trousers, looks with disdain at the young man cracking his knuckles loudly. He sports a leather jacket and tight blue jeans, very much the rebel to her goody two-shoes. “Drugs?” he enquires. “No thank you, I’m straight”, she spits back. “No, are you in here for drugs?” She is not. She is there to report an intruder that broke into her house. The real cause of her irritation is, however, not the trespassing, but her absent brother, who is currently playing truant, and, worse still, getting away with it. Her companion offers some words of advice: “You should think less about your brother and more about yourself.” This sympathetic statement begins to quell her rage. Conflict quickly gives way to comity as the couple embarks upon a discussion about their emotions and relationship woes. In no time at all, they are locked in a passionate embrace. In the space of a few minutes, this young woman has not only found love, but also exits the police station having experienced a teenage epiphany, the one that goes: spend less time worrying about other people and “just be yourself.”

This saccharine-sweet moment appears in a film that featured two young actors of particular relevance to this thesis, Charlie Sheen and Jennifer Grey. The sequence comes from 1986’s hit teenpic *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. A brief respite from the film’s central storyline (the comic escapades of its eponymous hero), the police station scene affords Sheen and Grey barely minutes of screen time in which to act out their youthful debate on self-fulfilment. Yet, for both actors, it can be seen to serve as an uncanny harbinger of things to come. By the time *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* reached US cinemas in June 1986, Sheen was shooting a coming-of-age story in which he took centre stage: *Platoon*, the primary focus of Chapter One. In January of 1987, Grey was hired to star in another Sixties-set feature, *Dirty Dancing*. While Sheen learns some tough life-lessons in Vietnam, Grey has a similar experience in the summer of 1963, the period in which her film is set. *Dirty Dancing* depicts the political and personal struggles of a young, white, middle-class woman. At a holiday

resort in the Catskill Mountains, upstate New York, she discovers what is depicted as a phenomenon sweeping working-class American culture – dirty dancing. Under the tutelage of Johnny (Patrick Swayze) she learns the sexually suggestive dance moves associated with this form of cultural expression and, against a backdrop of early Sixties politics and popular culture, Grey’s character (Baby Houseman) finds independence, sexual liberation and a life that is personally authentic.

This chapter explores *Dirty Dancing*’s dual concerns with public politics and personal authenticity. I argue that certain political issues were cut or curtailed during script development. Nevertheless, *Dirty Dancing* infuses its central protagonist’s search for personal authenticity with a politically liberal commentary on the Sixties and, in particular, on the feminist movement. The chapter’s focus on politics and authenticity differs from other academic treatments of *Dirty Dancing*, which often locate the film within broader trends associated with “high concept” filmmaking. For example, Stephen Prince’s weighty volume on 1980s cinema makes several brief references to *Dirty Dancing*’s glossy, easily marketable style and to what he sees as its thematic impoverishment. Prince places *Dirty Dancing* within a body of 1980s “high concept musicals”, which, he suggests, “will be remembered for their marketing innovations, not their art.”<sup>287</sup> Chris Jordan argues that *Dirty Dancing* promotes traditional middle-class family values, claiming that any of the political and/or feminist intentions of the film’s makers are effaced through their use of hackneyed tropes such as the cross-class love story (that ends happily) and the tale of easily achieved social mobility.<sup>288</sup> To my knowledge, David Shumway’s article on *Dirty Dancing*’s soundtrack provides one of only a few dissenting interpretations. Focusing on the film’s incorporation of rock and roll music into its narrative, Shumway suggests that *Dirty Dancing* bears traces of liberal themes.<sup>289</sup> This chapter builds on Shumway’s work, and argues that *Dirty Dancing* is far more than a marketing hook or glib conservative nostalgia. While historical film studies have provided a number of in depth examinations of male-centred Sixties films – pictures

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<sup>287</sup> Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow: History of the American Cinema, Volume 10* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 309. See also R. Serge Denisoff and George Plasketes, “Synergy in 1980s Film and Music; Formula for Success or Industry Mythology?” *Film History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1990), pp. 263-264.

<sup>288</sup> Chris Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics* (Westport, Conn and London: Praeger, 2003), pp. 111-118.

<sup>289</sup> David Shumway, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Sound Tracks and the Production of Nostalgia,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Winter 1999), p. 45.



on the Vietnam War, or on “great” men of the era, for example – this chapter argues that *Dirty Dancing* shares with these films an investment in offering a serious commentary on Sixties political and social transformations, but articulates it in the context of a female-youth-centred narrative.<sup>290</sup>

Comparing a 1985 draft script with the finished film, I argue that *Dirty Dancing*'s references to prominent public events and issues such as the civil rights movement and abortion rights are heavily curtailed and/or presented in ways that make possible multiple political readings. However, the politics of private relationships and gender are strengthened. Through a narrative that emphasises Baby's search for authenticity, screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein provides a commentary on generational and gender conflicts present in 1960s political activism. In particular, Baby's gaining of authenticity is brought about by her applying principles usually associated with the feminist movement to her personal life.<sup>291</sup>

Accordingly, the chapter begins by locating *Dirty Dancing*'s production history, and the public persona of screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein, within broader debates on the legacy of the feminist movement. It then shifts to an examination of the changes made to *Dirty Dancing*'s script during the years 1985-1987. Finally, I examine the film's promotion and reception, suggesting what contextual factors may have influenced the predominant interpretive frames within which *Dirty Dancing*

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<sup>290</sup> See, footnote 12 in the Introduction for a list of books and articles examining these films.

<sup>291</sup> Arguing that *Dirty Dancing* engages with “feminism” requires clarification. I am aware that the “feminist movement” did not, and does not, constitute a unified ideological voice. Not all feminists were/are always in agreement as to the most important issues in the struggle for women's liberation. Alice Echols notes the distinction between “liberal feminists” such as Betty Friedan and her National Organisation of Women (NOW), whose campaigns – at least from the mid-1960s to early 1970s – focused more on issues such as equality in the workplace and “integrating women into the public sphere”, and “radical feminists”, whose activism set out to challenge and reconfigure ingrained and oppressive social structures: male, female relationships and the family, for example. Even within the two camps, as Ellen Willis' discussion of radical feminism in New York makes clear, conflicts over politics and strategy abounded. I do not attempt to analyse *Dirty Dancing* in reference to these various political definitions. Rather, I am concerned with what seems to me to be a reasonably agreed upon impact and success of the broader feminist movement. As Sara Evans argues, “[w]hen liberals and radicals included the personal within their definitions of the political, they reconfigured U.S. politics across the political spectrum.” I suggest that *Dirty Dancing* provides a running commentary on this political reconfiguration. Baby's personal life and her intellectual transformation are intrinsically bound up with attempts to overcome unequal male/female relationships within the family and, by extension, within society more generally. See Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 3; Sara Evans, “Beyond Declension: Feminist Radicalism in the 1970s and 1980s,” in Van Gosse and Richard Moser (eds), *The World the 60s Made* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), p. 63; Ellen Willis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism,” in Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz and Fredric Jameson (eds), *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 91-118.

was understood critically upon its original US theatrical release. While *Dirty Dancing* contained a range of important political and social touchstones, an unwillingness, on the part of many public commentators, to view Baby's personal relationships as "Political" (i.e. nationally representative) meant that *Dirty Dancing* did not make the same impact on the public sphere as had Oliver Stone's Vietnam War drama.

### ***Dirty Dancing* in Production, 1980-1987.**

Eleanor Bergstein has said that she conceived the basis of *Dirty Dancing* in 1980, while her first film script, *It's My Turn* (1980) was being made into a film.<sup>292</sup> At this time, an intensified "backlash" against the feminist movement is said to have swept America.<sup>293</sup> Drawing upon a wealth of materials, Susan Faludi demonstrates how this backlash could be seen in the media, in literature, in government legislation and in academia. New Right groups of the late 1970s and early 1980s denounced publicly abortion rights, equal pay in the workplace and women's liberated sexuality under the rhetorically questionable banners of "pro-life", "pro-motherhood" and "pro-chastity." Organisations such as Stop ERA (a group that wanted to stop the passing of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, which would guarantee women equality in the workplace and illegalise prejudiced hiring on the basis of gender, pregnancy and sexual preference), as well as the Moral Majority and the Heritage Foundation railed against feminism as the cause of the break-up of the "traditional" nuclear family and as a catalyst for the apparent emergence of a "permissive society." For instance, in his 1980 book *Listen America*, Moral Majority leader Rev. Jerry Falwell proclaimed that "we must stand against ... the feminist

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<sup>292</sup> Eleanor Bergstein, "Best of Times; Worst of Times," *The Sunday Times*, September 21, 2008. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/film/article4772857.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article4772857.ece) (Accessed January 2009).

<sup>293</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 85-89; Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 39-43. Susan Douglas, however, points out that a "backlash" was present in journalistic and cultural representations of feminism from the early 1970s. She notes the many critical responses to early publications of *Ms.* magazine and satires of the feminist movement in shows such as *All in the Family*. Throughout the 1970s emerged a debate and conflict over women's "proper place." Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 193-219.

revolution, and the homosexual revolution.”<sup>294</sup> Falwell was at the forefront of a New Right campaign that had been running since the late 1970s, whereby what others saw as women’s positive social, political, and personal gains achieved partly as a result of the actions of feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, were attacked for having destroyed familial relations and for having taken women out of their “natural” environment: the home.

The International Women’s Year Conference, which was held in Houston, TX, in 1977 apparently acted as a springboard for numerous New Right activists to emerge onto the national scene.<sup>295</sup> In 1978, the chair of Stop ERA, Phyllis Schlafly, denounced the Equal Rights Amendment and its supporters as “a combination of federal employees and radicals and lesbians who spent \$5 billion of our tax payers’ money.”<sup>296</sup> This rhetoric was to foreshadow the framing strategies that were implemented by the anti-feminist lobby across the 1980s: they would bundle together women’s liberation with that other conservative bugbear, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. Women’s rights were equated with wasteful government spending, permissive sexuality and, in these commentators’ views, “perverse” lifestyles. In 1981, economist George Gilder attacked the feminist movement, claiming that its success in propelling greater numbers of women into executive positions in the workforce had damaged the national economy, male psychology and the nuclear family. Gilder’s book, *Wealth and Poverty*, a popular text amongst the Reagan administration, claimed that “the equal-rights campaign discriminates in favor of female credentials over male aggressiveness and drive.”<sup>297</sup> Running throughout *Wealth and Poverty* is the suggestion that a man who cannot provide for a passive female – or, preferably, a middle-class housewife – is emasculated: he is, in short, not a real man. A culture of affirmative action and sexual equality, in Gilder’s logic, and that of his peers, led not only to weak men but also to an uncompetitive marketplace, loose morality and sexual profligacy.<sup>298</sup>

It has even been argued that in the late 1970s and 1980s some feminist writers turned their backs on the old ideals of “the movement” in favour of a return

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<sup>294</sup> Quoted in Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 40.

<sup>295</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 252.

<sup>296</sup> James Lardner and Neil Henry, “Over 40,000 ERA Backers March on Hill,” *Washington Post*, July 10, 1978, p. A1.

<sup>297</sup> George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 137.

<sup>298</sup> Gilder, *Wealth*, pp. 259-260.

to traditionally feminine stereotypes. For example, in 1979, Betty Friedan, author of 1963's influential feminist tract *The Feminine Mystique*, penned an article for the *New York Times* that would eventually serve as the basis for her 1981 book *The Second Stage*. "With the same mixture of shock and relief with which the women's movement began in the 1960s," wrote Friedan, "feminists at the end of the 1970's are moving to a new frontier: the family."<sup>299</sup> In *The Second Stage*, Friedan accused radical feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s for having focused disproportionately on personal/sexual issues at the expense of public political exigencies such as employment and child-care initiatives.<sup>300</sup> Feminist writers such as Faludi and Zillah Eisenstein certainly saw Friedan as in some way turning her back on feminism; for both, she had greatly misrepresented radical feminism and was a symptom of the broader backlash taking place at this time against feminists and feminist sympathisers.<sup>301</sup>

Given these developments, it is perhaps unsurprising that the movement was also discussed as having had a rather negative impact on the private lives of women. While the early 1980s began to see a change in the content of public sphere debates around the Vietnam veteran – from threatening, alienated psychotic to a valorised national hero – feminism, as a complex and debated doctrine, and those who had gained from the successes of the feminist movement, were not treated with the same reverence. "The health advice manuals inform: High-powered career women are stricken with unprecedented outbreaks of 'stress-induced disorders', hair loss, bad nerves, alcoholism", wrote Faludi. "[W]omen are enslaved by their own liberation."<sup>302</sup> Between 1983 and 1986, Faludi concluded that national magazines ran fifty three major articles on single women (another demographic associated with changes brought about by the feminist movement), almost all of which were critical of them. In the same period, there were only seven articles on single men.<sup>303</sup> Elsewhere, Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs observed that a general "backlash was brewing against what was pejoratively called female

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<sup>299</sup> Betty Friedan, "Feminism Takes a New Turn," *New York Times*, November 18, 1979, p. SM10.

<sup>300</sup> Friedan, *The Second Stage* (London: Abacus, [1981] 1983), pp. 43-58.

<sup>301</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, pp. 351-358. Zillah R. Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America* (New York: New York Monthly Review Press, 1984), p. 195.

<sup>302</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>303</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 97.

‘promiscuity.’”<sup>304</sup> Mainstream media outlets were proposing causal links between males’ diminishing dominance in the bedroom and the boardroom. In these accounts, female promiscuity had destroyed old-fashioned notions of love and romance.<sup>305</sup>

Film and television also offered representations that presented women as damaged individuals due to their having gained independence and equality. In 1987, the year of *Dirty Dancing*’s release, Glenn Close played, in Faludi’s view, the defining symbol of the conservative backlash. All the negative stereotypes the backlash had associated with women’s independence, she argued, coalesced in *Fatal Attraction*’s villainous female stalker Alex Forrest (Glenn Close). Much like the mad veteran cycle of the 1970s and early 1980s, and the parallel cycle of films about woman-hating misfits, including *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980), one sees unfolding across the late 1980s and 1990s a cycle of ruthless – if not necessarily mad – career women: *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *Disclosure* (1994) being three of the biggest hits. Yvonne Tasker suggests that films such as *Disclosure* at least aspire toward a liberal feminist representation of women in the workplace. However, she notes that such films nevertheless end up reworking classical *film noir*’s dichotomy between the “sexually aggressive” *femme fatale* – “now often cast as a career woman” – and a “persecuted” male protagonist. Fears of male emasculation at the hands of powerful, independent women are therefore one of this cycle’s defining characteristics.<sup>306</sup>

Against this backdrop of conservative backlash, *Dirty Dancing*’s scriptwriter Eleanor Bergstein promoted herself and her films as attempting to provide a liberal counterattack. Her first screenplay was called *It’s My Turn*. The film, which was in development in 1978, focuses on a female mathematics professor and the struggles she faces in balancing her job and her love life. Bergstein informed *Newsweek* that she wrote *It’s My Turn* because “I have never seen a film which honestly deals with a contemporary woman trying to put her life together.”<sup>307</sup> Whether Bergstein had seen pictures of this sort or not, there were certainly a number of films attempting to do something similar throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. For example, Karen

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<sup>304</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, *Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), p. 162.

<sup>305</sup> Ehrenreich *et al*, *Re-making Love*, pp. 167-171.

<sup>306</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 132-135.

<sup>307</sup> Jack Knoll, “Little Fantasies,” *Newsweek*, November 3, 1980, p. 90.

Hollinger notes the existence of two strands of “New Women’s film” that emerged in the 1970s: Firstly, there was the “independent woman’s film”, in which a female character attempted to negotiate work and personal life without the support of a long term (male) spouse. Secondly, was the “female friendship film”, which examined the politics or, more often than not, simply the psychology, of all-female alliances.<sup>308</sup> Hollinger argues that the independent woman’s film was exemplified by such pictures as *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) and *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) and was, by the late 1970s, in decline, quantitatively. The female friendship film, on the other hand, flourished from the late 1970s onwards. Films such as *Julia* (1977), *Girl Friends* (1978), *Nine to Five* (1980), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *The Color Purple* (1985) *Outrageous Fortune* (1987) and *Beaches* (1987), suggests Hollinger, were deliberate attempts on the part of Hollywood to attract female audiences. Hollinger is, to differing degrees, sceptical about the extent to which the representation of women in these pictures can be seen as progressive. She concludes that most Hollywood films may start with a potentially progressive storyline, which ends up being largely contained by conventional tales of personal fulfilment at the expense of political commentary.<sup>309</sup> However, in dealing with independent women and female alliances the industry was nevertheless exploring “two issues initiated by the growth of the women’s movement of this period”.<sup>310</sup>

Within this context, *It’s My Turn* might be viewed as an example of the New Woman’s Film. Its focus on a professional woman’s life and the difficulties she encounters as she seeks to balance career and relationships locate Bergstein’s debut film firmly within the independent woman’s sub-genre, which Hollinger argues to have been in decline at this point in time. *It’s My Turn* was directed by Claudia Weill, who previously had helmed a documentary on the feminist movement called *Year of the Woman* (1973) and the aforementioned *Girlfriends*, a film lauded on art circuits for its realistic portrayal of female friendships.<sup>311</sup> In many ways, *It’s My Turn* bore several similarities to a spate of contemporaneous films including *Private*

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<sup>308</sup> Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>309</sup> Hollinger, *In the Company*; Hollinger, “From Female Friends to Literary Ladies: The Contemporary Woman’s Film,” in Steve Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: bfi, 2002), pp. 77-90, esp. 77-83.

<sup>310</sup> Hollinger, *In the Company*, p. 2.

<sup>311</sup> Hollinger, *In the Company*, p. 53.

*Benjamin*, *Nine to Five* (both 1980), and, somewhat later, *Broadcast News* (1987) and *Working Girl* (1988), that presented independent women attempting to negotiate a career and their place in a male dominated society. Focusing on the political and private concerns of a young woman, *It's My Turn* was Bergstein's first attempt to present feminist issues on the big-screen.

Bergstein had, however, already demonstrated an interest in depicting such issues in her 1973 novel *Advancing Paul Newman*. Since the ideas expressed in this novel are similar to those in *Dirty Dancing*, it is worth examining briefly Bergstein's first significant contribution to the feminist debate. *Advancing Paul Newman* focuses on two young women, Kitsy and Ila, and their experiences of events such as civil rights marches, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Beatles' appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show, the Vietnam War and the 1968 presidential election. It is also revels in the liberated sexualities of its two central protagonists. As Bergstein explained in a 1974 interview, her novel was an attempt to show "how the events and conditions of the sixties were intermingled in the lives of [the] characters."<sup>312</sup> Jumping backwards and forwards in time, the novel begins by, is interspersed with, and ends by, detailing Kitsy and Ila's activism, which is undertaken on behalf of anti-Vietnam War Senator Eugene McCarthy as he attempts to win the Democratic Party's nomination for 1968's presidential election.

In many ways, the year 1968 signals a symbolic end to the Sixties in Bergstein's novel. Hopes and dreams have evaporated as the young women's political activism comes to nothing. Surprisingly, but perhaps because of the fact that the narrative concludes in 1968, *Advancing Paul Newman* makes no explicit reference to the women's liberation movement.<sup>313</sup> Bergstein explained that her female characters "are rejecting old roles, but they have no vocabulary by which they can understand they are doing so."<sup>314</sup> The two central young women develop a sense of anger at injustices wreaked upon themselves as well as those wreaked upon the people for whom they campaign, but we do not know if they subsequently joined the feminist movement. *Advancing Paul Newman* does, however, chart a similar

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<sup>312</sup> Wendy Martin, "Eleanor Bergstein, Novelist," *Women's Studies*, vol. 2 (1974), p. 95.

<sup>313</sup> According to Alice Echols, the movement did not really become a mass phenomenon until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Alice Echols, "Nothing Distant About It: Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in David Farber (ed.), *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 149-174.

<sup>314</sup> Martin, "Eleanor Bergstein," p. 96.

psychological journey to that which Sara Evans argues was experienced by many of the women involved in early 1960s activism. The progressive philosophies and politics of the New Left informed these young women's political outlooks. However, the rampant sexism that blighted many leftist organisations led experienced female campaigners to organise themselves and to fight for their own rights.<sup>315</sup> There is a sense that the women in *Advancing Paul Newman* have been let down by their male role models. Kitsy, for example, combines the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, her husband's death in Vietnam, and her relationship to her father in one unbroken statement:

The pilot announcing that Robert Francis Kennedy is dead – Louis [her husband] why did you die – Daddy had really not wanted to live – stroking her hair that Christmas vacation, his darling daughter, didn't he want to live for her?<sup>316</sup>

One sentence becomes a time machine. Various time periods coalesce within the same statement, with the overriding theme being Kitsy's feelings of being let down by men, whether they were political leaders, husbands or fathers. A far cry from *Dirty Dancing's* rather more positive ending (discussed below), Bergstein's suggestion that her characters are rejecting old roles, but do not have the vocabulary through which to "understand they are doing so" could, I argue, be just as easily applied to her later cinematic work. This novel also indicated Bergstein's investment in exploring the era's liberal politics, which remained a principal theme running through *It's My Turn* and *Dirty Dancing*.

*It's My Turn* settles for a rather ambiguous and abrupt reconciliation of gender conflicts. Will love or career choices prevail? We are left unsure whether the central protagonist Kate (Jill Clayburgh) and her new love Ben (Michael Douglas) will drop their old lives in order to be together. The only clue offered is a final message from Ben that he is "trying to redirect his flight", which, in the context of their relationship, suggests that he is giving up his old life and will fly to Chicago to be with Kate. While attempting to negotiate between successful career and love life, *It's My Turn* certainly does not suggest that Kate should relinquish her independence

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<sup>315</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>316</sup> Eleanor Bergstein, *Advancing Paul Newman* (New York: Popular Library, 1973), p. 314.



in order to follow the man of her dreams. If anything, it is Ben who has to make the compromise.

*Advancing Paul Newman* and *It's My Turn* were precursors to *Dirty Dancing*. Both texts appeared at a time of intense conflict in the public sphere over the role of women. *Dirty Dancing*, too, appeared when, according to Faludi, the cinematic and television backlash against feminism was at its high point.<sup>317</sup> Yet, it must also be stressed that, throughout the 1980s, public opinion polls (and Faludi makes this clear) consistently demonstrated that the majority of women supported the women's movement and looked positively upon the gains it had initiated.<sup>318</sup> Furthermore, as noted above, there was at least an attempt to court the female audience with films featuring strong female characters. One might suggest that, with regard to 1980s films, the American film industry was endeavouring to provide politically progressive representations of strong female characters, which have, in retrospect, been deemed flawed. A case in point is provided by Marsha Kinder. She describes the production history of *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), a film based on the experiences of scientist Diane Fossey and her attempts to protect from poachers an endangered species of mountain gorilla. Director Michael Apted apparently wanted to make the film progressive by representing an independent woman who gives up a relationship in order to continue her political activism, and by focusing on environmental issues. Kinder notes how Apted also cast Sigourney Weaver in the title role for the very reason that she already had demonstrated an aptitude for portraying strong female characters in films like *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986). Nevertheless, Kinder argues that by privileging white male authority – Fossey is hired by a man – and in relegating to secondary roles African characters, *Gorillas in the Mist* ultimately promotes a patriarchal, conservative message.<sup>319</sup> Certainly, these criticisms are valid. Yet, as Kinder points out, the intentions behind this film's production were very different to the interpretation she makes of the completed film.

On the one hand, then, *Dirty Dancing* emerged into a public sphere where negative coverage of feminism prevailed and at a time that has been argued by some

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<sup>317</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, pp. 125, 112-168, 142.

<sup>318</sup> For a survey of opinion polls of the 1970s and 1980s see Leonie Huddy, Francis K. Neeley and Marilyn R. Lafay, "Trends: Support for the Women's Movement," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 309-350.

<sup>319</sup> Marsha Kinder, "Back to the Future in the 80s with Fathers and Sons, Supermen and Pee Wees, Gorillas and Toons," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4 (Summer 1989), pp. 8-11.

writers to have been defined by a re-masculinisation of Anglophone culture, whereby, Sigourney Weaver's roles notwithstanding, tough men and subservient women tended to be promoted as cinematic ideals.<sup>320</sup> But this was not a period defined by conservative moralising alone. Hollywood was at least attempting to examine feminist issues. I would suggest that *Dirty Dancing* encapsulates these tensions. One might view the film in light of Annette Kuhn's argument regarding women's films of the late 1970s and 1980s (many of which are noted above). Kuhn suggests that these films basically displayed political ambiguity that permitted "readings to be made which accord more or less with spectators' prior stances on feminist issues."<sup>321</sup> An analysis of *Dirty Dancing*'s script development suggests that this appears to have been Bergstein's intention. Changes made to the script open *Dirty Dancing* to a variety of interpretations. At the same time, a narrative stressing the protagonist's acquisition of personal authenticity emphasised a number of positive contributions made by the Sixties feminist movement. Again, however, direct references to feminism are avoided, for *Dirty Dancing*'s action is set during a period not associated with any large-scale feminist activity. In many ways, the film's 1963 backdrop provides a less controversial arena in which to examine controversial issues more readily associated with the late Sixties; issues like abortion, sexual freedoms, and gender roles.

### **Public Politics/Personal Authenticity: *Dirty Dancing* from Script to Screen**

"The film couldn't have been set a few months earlier or later," stated *Dirty Dancing* screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein in an interview with the *New York Times*. "It was the summer of the Peace Corps and the summer of [Martin Luther King's] 'I Have a Dream' speech." She explained her rationale for having the film's action take place entirely in the summer of 1963. According to the writer, it was something of a historical turning point. "Because two months after the movie is over J.F.K is assassinated. Then the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan. And after that it's radical

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<sup>320</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

<sup>321</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Hollywood and New Women's Cinema," in Charlotte Brunsden (ed.), *Films for Women* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 129.

action”, she explained.<sup>322</sup> Notably missing from the 1985 draft of the script<sup>323</sup> is the famous opening voiceover (one often cited in reviews)<sup>324</sup> in which Baby declares: “That was the summer before President Kennedy was shot, before the Beatles came; that was the summer when everybody called me Baby and it didn’t occur to me to mind”.

The emphasis placed on locating the film’s action at this time served a double function. Politically, it distanced the film and its central protagonist Baby (Jennifer Grey) from any association with the more divisive (from a 1980s perspective) late Sixties. Secondly, it followed in a long line of financially successful youth-centred films set in the early 1960s that used pre-Kennedy assassination America to explore social transformation and coming-of-age.<sup>325</sup>

“Where were you in ’62?” went the promotional tagline to George Lucas’ 1973 hit teenpic *American Graffiti*. Set in 1962 (not 1963) *Graffiti* nevertheless makes reference to Kennedy. One of the central characters, Curt (Richard Dreyfuss) is portrayed as something of an idealist, whose dream, as it is recounted to us by his friend, is to shake President Kennedy’s hand. All of *American Graffiti*’s action takes place in one evening and focuses on the escapades of four protagonists: Curt, Steve (Ron Howard), Toad (Charles Martin Smith), and John (Paul Le Mat). The film’s closing captions inform us of the four protagonists’ future Sixties experiences: one is killed in a car crash in 1964; one goes missing in Vietnam; another has become an insurance salesman; and one is now working as a writer in Canada (possibly in order to avoid the draft).

With its collection of 1950s hits providing the soundtrack to a 1960s-set story, *American Graffiti* is an early example of the confluence between the 1950s and early 1960s that takes place in much political and cultural commemoration of this era, which generally encompasses some or all of the following features: evocation of John F. Kennedy, early rock and roll, the early civil rights movement, issues pertaining to social class; youth school and leisure activities such as diners,

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<sup>322</sup> Samuel D. Freedman, “*Dirty Dancing* Rocks to an Innocent Beat,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1987, p. B19.

<sup>323</sup> Eleanor Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (September 1985), p. 1.

<sup>324</sup> See for example Helen Knode, “Father Knows Best,” *LA Weekly*, September 4, 1987, p. 43; Julie Salamon, “On Film: Borsch Belt Princess Hot to Cha Cha Cha,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 1987, p. 16.

<sup>325</sup> The significance of the Kennedy assassination to public debates on the Sixties is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

proms, drag racing; and teenage or youthful character types including nerds, jocks, greasers, prom queens. Above all, the period is suggested to stand at a historical threshold. For good or for ill, things will never quite be the same again. Major commercial hits like *Animal House* (1978) and smaller productions such as *The Wanderers* (1979) also incorporate references to Kennedy, rock and roll and tales of teenage rebellion into their plots. “We know now,” *The Wanderers*’ trailer declared, “that the Fifties ended in 1963.” These two films also end with a look into the future. In a parody of *American Graffiti*’s conclusion, *Animal House* flashes up a series of comic captions informing us of its characters’ later Sixties selves. Similarly, *The Wanderers* indicates the differing life trajectories many of its characters take.

*American Graffiti*, *Animal House* and *The Wanderers* lavish more attention upon male than female characters. Other films of the 1970s foregrounded the experiences of women. One of the biggest hits of the 1970s was the filmed version of hit Broadway musical *Grease* (1978). Although ostensibly set in 1959, the film can be viewed as another example of the blurring of boundaries between the 1950s and the early 1960s. It does, after all, feature cameos from Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello, stars of the early 1960s *Beach Party* films (1963, 1964, and 1965). *Grease*’s theme tune was also performed by Frankie Valli, one-time vocalist of the early 60s pop group the Four Seasons. The film depicts its central protagonists, Danny (John Travolta) and Sandy (Olivia Newton John) in the throes of teenage self-discovery. Set against the backdrop of rock and roll, high-school proms and hot-rod racing, both characters undergo a transformation. Whereas Danny loses some of his rough edges to become a more sensitive and attentive boyfriend, Sandy loses a little of the prim-and-proper stuffiness associated with her *Gidget* namesake.<sup>326</sup> By the time *Dirty Dancing* was released, the early-Sixties-set teenpic had become an established part of American film industry output. Films like the male-centred *The Outsiders* (1983) and *Losin It* (1984) and the female-centred *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) set all, or most, of their action at this time. It is little wonder that some scholars have viewed such films as “fifties” representations: all three seem intent on expanding the 1950s boundary to encapsulate the early 1960s.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Sandra Dee is a reference to the heroine of the *Gidget* films (1959-1965).

<sup>327</sup> See, for example, Paul Elitzik, “Coppola, Francis Ford” in Gary Crowdus (ed.), *The Political Companion to American Film* (New York: Lakeview Press, 1994), p. 90; Fredric Jameson,

In *Dirty Dancing*, 1963 is set up as a threshold; this is the year that Baby undergoes a life changing transformation. While the 1985 draft of the script was set in 1963, it did not announce this fact directly; nor did it frame the film as Baby looking back in time. The addition of Baby's "That was the summer before Kennedy was shot" voiceover is significant because it raises a key political conundrum associated with Sixties commemoration. Is Baby looking back on this period of her life as the end of a golden era (a conservative version of the Sixties)? Or, is she suggesting it to be the beginning of a positive transformation (a liberal interpretation)? In many ways, the film's representation of issues such as race relations and abortion is ambiguous enough to suggest both readings. Baby's personal narrative, however, presents 1963 as the start of a positive transformation.

In terms of race relations, much material was cut from earlier drafts of the script. Two scenes present in the 1985 draft offer an exploration of issues pertaining to the early 1960s civil rights movement. The first features Tito Suarez (played in the film by Charles "Honi" Coles) and an unnamed black trumpeter. The trumpeter totters nervously at the side of a swimming pool in Kellerman's holiday camp. Kellerman's, a Catskills resort, will provide the setting for all of the film's action. As this scene suggests, the camp is supposed to be indicative of 1960s liberal northern attitudes toward race. The trumpeter is from the South and is unsure whether to jump into a pool full of white people. "It's not like that up here", says Suarez. After much dithering, the young man finally falls in and, as the script direction states, "none of the swimming guests bat an eye."<sup>328</sup> Later on we have another reference to racism in the southern states. Camp owner Max Kellerman's son Neil (Lonny Price) informs Suarez that he is to join a Freedom Ride.<sup>329</sup> Suarez warns him of the dangers: "I know you want me to say you're a hero, son ... [but] you don't know what you're doing." After hearing Neil's response, he concludes, "you stay up North here with you grandpa, it's bad down there, more bad than you know."<sup>330</sup> The removal of these two scenes means that discussions of black-white relations are far less prominent in

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"Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in John Belton (ed.), *Movies and Mass Culture* (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 190.

<sup>328</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), p. 25.

<sup>329</sup> Freedom rides began in 1961 when civil rights activists rode buses through the southern states in order to test the implementation of laws forbidding segregated buses. In the finished film, we also hear very briefly that Neil is to join a Freedom Ride, but both the above noted scenes are removed.

<sup>330</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), p. 49.

the finished film. While Chapter Four examines civil rights debates in greater detail, this removal is significant because it expunges a potentially polarising image of 1960s racism. These scenes very clearly, and without complication, locate racism in the South while serving to celebrate the more “enlightened” North. The civil rights Sixties narrative, in which the South is constructed as the nation’s “opposite other”<sup>331</sup> – a racist backwater in need of northern assistance – may have been present in public debate, but I would suggest that the decision to cut these scenes may have saved the film from alienating white southern audiences tired of having *all* of the blame for America’s racist past laid at their door. However, one must also view the removal of these scenes as another example (Stone had also trimmed *Platoon*’s engagement with racism) of Hollywood filmmakers having second thoughts about incorporating a racial sub-plot into their historical representations. As later chapters further illuminate, the absence of prominent African-American characters and the erasure of African-American agency in political struggles of the Sixties is conspicuous across the cinematic landscape at this time.

If attitudes toward race are largely elided in *Dirty Dancing*, issues pertaining to public debates on the feminist movement are engaged, but made somewhat ambiguous in the process. A prominent sub plot in *Dirty Dancing* is the illegal abortion obtained by Penny (Cynthia Rhodes). Penny does not have the means to finance the abortion and therefore must rely on Baby, and Baby’s father’s money. It turns out that the GP is a con-man; he injures Penny seriously and it is left to Baby’s father, Dr. Jake Houseman (Jerry Orbach), to bring her back to health. It is never explicitly stated whether Penny goes through with the abortion to avoid economic hardship or because she does not want to have the child of a man who clearly has no intention of supporting her financially or emotionally. Yet, the very fact that abortion is viewed as the only sensible course of action was controversial in the 1980s. Of all the topics related to women’s liberation, abortion rights was particularly contested prior to, and at the time of, the film’s release. Abortion had been a political hot-potato ever since its decriminalisation in 1973, after the *Roe vs. Wade* court ruling concluded in favour of legalising women’s rights to have an abortion (under certain

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<sup>331</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* vol. 91, no. 4 (2005), p. 1239.

conditions). Groups such as National Right to Life emerged almost immediately as vociferous public opponents to the ruling.<sup>332</sup>

By the 1980s, however, the stakes had been raised as a number of militant groups began to bomb abortion clinics, threaten doctors and attempt, often violently, to dissuade women from having the operation. As Marcy J. Wilder notes, by “the mid-1980s there had been a perceptible shift in anti-choice tactics from the rule of law to the reign of lawlessness.”<sup>333</sup> Echoes of the Sixties were ever present in discussions of what one critic has referred to as “our new Vietnam.”<sup>334</sup> Anti-abortion protestors were often, whether positively or negatively, compared to their anti-war predecessors. “On the surface,” wrote Linda Witt in the *Chicago Tribune*, “antiabortion activity would seem to be just another in a long series of protest movements ... employed more recently by those opposed to the Vietnam War”.<sup>335</sup> The anti-abortion documentary *The Silent Scream* (1984) claimed that a twelve week-old foetus could “scream” in pain as it was aborted. President Ronald Reagan ensured that every member of Congress received a copy gratis. “We now have films that portray abortions with all the blood and gore in order to persuade through shock and abhorrence”, noted one journalist. This strategy was, however, “not that unusual: Liberals did the same by showing the horrors of Vietnam on television.”<sup>336</sup> Like Vietnam, the issue of abortion seemed to be irreconcilable, as pro-choice and pro-life advocates battled each other over its moral and political import.

With regard to *Dirty Dancing*'s abortion sub-plot, Bergstein has said that her intention was “to show a generation of girls who have grown up post-*Roe* what could happen without legal safeguards.”<sup>337</sup> She apparently first inserted the abortion sub-plot in 1985, because she was worried that *Roe vs. Wade* was in danger of being overturned.<sup>338</sup> The sub-plot stands unchanged between 1985 and 1987, though Bergstein has said that the film's advertising sponsors, a company that made pimple

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<sup>332</sup> Marcy J. Wilder, “The Rule of Law, the Rise of Violence and the Role of Morality: Reframing America's Abortion Debate” in Richie Solinger (ed.), *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 79.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>334</sup> Ellen Willis, “Forward,” in Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, p. viii.

<sup>335</sup> Linda Witt, “Man with a Mission,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 11, 1985, pp. G10, 12.

<sup>336</sup> Carl D. Maxcey, “Broaden the Abortion Debate,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1985, p. 19.

<sup>337</sup> Cath Clarke, “Just don't say the A Word,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/nov/23/1> (Accessed May 2009).

<sup>338</sup> Irin Carmon, “Dirty Dancing is the Greatest Movie of All Time,” *Jezebel: Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women* <http://jezebel.com/5527079/dirty-dancing-is-the-greatest-movie-of-all-time> (Accessed January 2010).

cream, wanted her to remove it.<sup>339</sup> However, the way in which abortion is framed does suggest an attempt to invite multiple political interpretations. On the one hand, it might be read as highlighting the dangers young women faced at a time when it was extremely difficult, if not, for the poor, downright impossible, to terminate a pregnancy safely. But, its pre-*Roe v. Wade* setting also allows the film to present abortion as a clandestine, “dirty” and dangerous procedure. The blood, the screaming, the near-death experience suffered by Penny depicts abortion as life-endangering. Readings of the film’s depiction of abortion really seem to hinge on whether one places abortion within its early 1960s historical context (early 1960s illegality means endangering lives) and therefore interprets it from a liberal perspective. Or, conversely, reading it simply as a depiction of abortion, a dangerous procedure that can lead to tragic consequences (a conservative reading). With regard to the second reading it is, however, worth noting that there is no indication that Penny is psychologically devastated in the wake of her abortion. Indeed, after recovering from its physical effects, she returns to her previous sprightly self. Her rapid psychological recovery might, therefore, suggest a slight bias toward a pro-choice position, which according to Bergstein at least, was her intention. A liberal take on feminist gains can be found to a greater degree in Baby’s personal narrative, which incorporates two features central to the Sixties debate: the renegotiation of gender and family roles.

Baby’s gaining of personal authenticity is predicated on her breaking away from the intense grip that her father, Dr. Jake Houseman, holds on her political beliefs and personal life. Dr. Houseman is the symbolic authority figure for both the Houseman family and, I would suggest, middle-class American society more generally. When Baby begins to challenge and question his values, she also is challenging what is represented in this film as broader social and political norms governing the behaviour of women in the early 1960s. Early lines spoken by Baby and her father establish these two characters as the film’s moral core. Houseman criticises the recent use of police dogs during a civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama. Baby follows this with a reference to “monks burning themselves in protest” at South Vietnam’s American-backed Diem regime. Baby is very much her father’s girl. She shares his politics, which establishes her as a caring, politically

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<sup>339</sup> Clarke, “Just don’t Say the A Word.”



aware young woman. However, his liberal politics notwithstanding, Dr. Houseman holds some deep-seated prejudices with respect to how his daughter should behave. The first indication that Baby will break free from her father's control occurs in a scene that was added to the finished film. Not present in the 1985 draft, this new sequence depicts the Houseman family's first dance lesson. Dance leader Penny encourages the more reticent guests to loosen up and swing to the music. Then she shouts to the female guests: "when the music stops, find the man of your dreams." The music stops and Baby looks toward her father. Too late, Penny herself has stepped in and stolen Houseman from his daughter. Penny's "claiming" of Houseman at this early stage is a harbinger of Baby's literal and metaphorical break from her father.

The father/daughter break runs in tandem with Baby's discovery that Houseman's politics and those of his associates, while seemingly liberal, are in many ways a façade. Camp owner Max Kellerman (Jack Weston) and his grandson Neil also initially espouse a liberal political outlook. In the few brief mentions of racial issues that remained in the finished film, we see Kellerman dancing alongside Tito Suarez and appealing to the audience to give his employee a round of applause. We hear very briefly that Neil is to join a civil rights Freedom Ride in Mississippi at the end of the summer. Both characters, on the other hand, hold disrespectful views toward women. The character of Neil, in particular, was drastically altered between 1985 and 1987. In the 1985 draft, he was a more earnest and less condescending character, who starts off by attempting to endear himself to the working class entertainment staff, joining their after-work activities, and participating in their banter.<sup>340</sup> He even turns alibi for Baby when she conducts an affair with Johnny.<sup>341</sup> Neil's transformation into the tyrannical and patronising character that appears in the finished film occurs only after he has been beaten up by one of the working-class characters; he is thus given a reason (of sorts) for becoming a tough "little boss man", as he is termed.<sup>342</sup> None of this mitigating content remains in the version of *Dirty Dancing* that reached audiences, and Neil comes across as a wholly unsympathetic character.

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<sup>340</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), p. 58.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

In the finished film, Baby is privy to the removal of camp owner Max Kellerman's moral authority. She overhears him demanding that his well-to-do waiting staff romance the guest's daughters, "even the dogs" as he bluntly puts it. At the same time, he orders working-class Johnny to keep his "hands off" the female guests. In the 1985 draft, Baby was not present during Kellerman's outburst and is thus not provided with a rationale for wanting to break from this kind of sexism and middle-class snobbery.<sup>343</sup> The finished film, however, has Baby peering from the doorway (Figure 2.1). It is one of the first scenes to allow events visually to unfold from Baby's point of view. This strategy is employed in several subsequent scenes. In *Dirty Dancing* there is a fetishisation of the male body (Swayze) and a presentation, formally, from a female perspective of the actions of male characters (Figure 2.2). The effect is to turn Laura Mulvey's notion of the male "gaze" – man as in possession of "the active power of the erotic look" – on its head, in much the same way as Chuck Kleinhans argues to be the case with earlier female coming-of-age stories such as *Little Darlings* (1980).<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>344</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 842-844; Chuck Kleinhans, "Girls on the Edge of the Regan Era," in Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (eds), *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2002), pp. 72-90.



Figure 2.1: Baby observes Max Kellerman in *Dirty Dancing*.



Figure 2.2: Watching Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*.

Throughout the film, Baby becomes increasingly aware of her father and his associates' unwillingness to put abstract egalitarian ideas into practice. In many ways, the sneering, snobbish and thoroughly immoral college-boy waiter Robbie (Max Cantor), and the patronising, hideously avuncular Neil serve as ironic representatives of the kinds of children Dr. Houseman's generation are actually raising. Fawned over by Houseman for the majority of the film, Robbie's selfish credentials are cemented early in the film. Since it is Robbie who has impregnated Penny in the first place, Baby demands that he provide the funds for her abortion. Robbie's reply: "Some people count, and some people don't." He then produces a book and encourages Baby to "read it." The book is Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943). This book's celebration of unbridled individualism and ruthlessness stands as the polar opposite to Baby's attempts to synthesise personal development and compassionate, egalitarian politics. Robbie's "ask not what your waiter can do for you, but what you can do for your waiter" philosophy is the kind of selfish solipsistic attitude toward life that Baby has been taught to reject. On the other hand, Neil is another caricature. He is a negative representation of the New Left man – he is to go on a Freedom Ride after all – whose political convictions are bound up with rather archaic views on masculinity. His insistence on asserting publicly his authority over the camp's employees and over Baby provide a scathing indictment of the hypocrisy existing not just amongst older liberals, but amongst a new generation of politically active young men who still equated "invigorated citizenship with masculinity, viewing it as a triumph over effeminacy."<sup>345</sup> As noted above, part of the reason for the feminist movement's break from the 1960s New Left was the sexism that existed in organisations such as the SDS and SNCC.<sup>346</sup> Robbie and Neil thus provide two negative stereotypes: the heartless individualist and the hypocritical activist.

Amongst the film's women, too, is a pantheon of negative, undesirable stock characters. There is Baby's sister Lisa (Jane Brucker), who is beautiful, vain and cannot countenance love as anything more than a pathway to marriage, security and social status. Then there is the girls' mother, Marjorie Houseman (Kelly Bishop), the "typical" housewife: domesticated, loyal to her husband and devoted to her children. Her binary opposite is found in the form of Vivian Pressman (Miranda Garrison), the

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<sup>345</sup> Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left In America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 17.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

cheating, childless shrew. A number of script changes, particularly with respect to Vivian – who was going to be presented in a more sympathetic light (the 1985 draft paints her initially as a bubbly, affable and artistic friend of Marjorie)<sup>347</sup> – suggest that female characters were simplified greatly during script development. They became less complete individuals than stock representatives, intended merely to act as foils to Baby and the process of personal development through which she goes. Authenticity, as Peterson reminds us, is a state defined as much by what it is *not* as by what it is: “Issues of authenticity most often come into play when authenticity has been put in doubt.”<sup>348</sup> These female characters provide the caricatures of femininity that Baby must reject to become authentic herself.

Reject them she does. Baby avoids falling into any of the pitfalls to which the film suggests other women have become susceptible – complete domestication, loveless marriages, privileging financial gain over love, acquiescence to male sexual aggression. If these are the inauthentic representatives from whom Baby is distinguished, her search for personal authenticity sees her enter a world that is represented as being far removed from her comfortable, middle-class existence.

It is an “adventure” into the world of the working-class that provides Baby’s authentic awakening (much as it did Taylor’s rebirth in *Platoon*). In *Dirty Dancing*, the working-class world is not a military platoon, but a cultural underground defined by expressive dancing and rock and roll music. The importance of music to the film is immense. Bergstein has said that before she had even written the script, a collection of songs had been selected.<sup>349</sup> In the 1985 draft we already get a clear impression of the political and social import that the screenwriter placed on the use of music. In this draft, virtually every scene is accompanied by an evocative mood-setting pop song of the early 1960s. Precise historical accuracy does not seem to have been a concern; Bergstein mentions songs that were released after 1963. Rather the music fulfils a symbolic function. There is what Bergstein refers to as “Clean Teen”, songs like “Goin to the Chapel” (The Dixie Cups, 1964) that emphasise the safe, middle-class girlhood enjoyed initially by Baby and her sister Lisa.<sup>350</sup> This

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<sup>347</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), pp. 8, 78.

<sup>348</sup> Richard Peterson, “In Search of Authenticity,” *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 42, no. 5 (July 2005), p. 1083.

<sup>349</sup> Bergstein, “Best of Times; Worst of Times.”

<sup>350</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), p. 10.

musical style is equated with repression, decorum and, overall, emotionlessness. Then there is “Johnny’s Music,” the raw, soulful sounds of songs like “Do You Love Me” (The Contours, 1962) and “Wild Thing” (The Wild Ones, 1965).<sup>351</sup> Bergstein associated this music with vitality and liberation.

Baby, as it has been argued with regard to many teenagers of the 1950s and early 1960s, seeks authenticity by identifying with musical styles that originated in black and working-class cultures. As George Lipsitz notes, in “a culture that recommended obedience to all authority and lauded the ‘organization man,’ they [white middle-class teenagers] sought autonomy, emotion, and authentic connection to others in the cultures of the working class.”<sup>352</sup> And, furthermore, by “pursuing black music, working-class whites explored forbidden ground as did middle-class whites pursuing working-class music.”<sup>353</sup> Such a concern is immediately illuminated in *Dirty Dancing*’s opening credit sequence. Not mentioned in the 1985 draft, but present in the finished film, is an opening sequence that features a sepia-tinted slow-motion montage of dirty dancers. The backing music is African-American girl group the Ronettes’ “Be My Baby.” Susan Douglas argues that “in the early 1960s, pop music became the one area of popular culture in which adolescent female voices could be clearly heard.”<sup>354</sup> Articulating female desires and anxieties in a far more direct manner than was common at the time, groups such as The Ronettes, The Shirelles and The Chiffons helped teenage girls to come to terms with their own hopes, desires and sexuality.<sup>355</sup>

The eventual inclusion of this opening sequence therefore sets up an important aspect of *Dirty Dancing*’s historical representation: popular music as liberator. Shumway argues that the music used in the film “evokes the subversive or transgressive experience with which rock ‘n’ roll was associated.”<sup>356</sup> It is the musical equivalent of the dancing itself, offering Baby an escape from the confines placed upon her by social institutions: the family, and, more generally, middle-class mores.

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<sup>351</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing*, p. 4.

<sup>352</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 120.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>354</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, p. 87. See also Lipsitz’s references to women singers of the early 1960s such as Jan Bradley and Sandy Posey. Lipsitz argues that songs such as “You Don’t Own Me”, “It’s My Party” and “Mama Didn’t Lie” revealed “the unfair constraints and double standards applied to females”. Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, p. 116.

<sup>355</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, pp. 83-98.

<sup>356</sup> Shumway, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Soundtracks,” p. 46.

In many ways, the soul tracks played in *Dirty Dancing* serve as the other side of the more literal (at least vocally) rebellion of the revived early 1960s American folk music scene. Singers such as Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, and a young Bob Dylan, were at this time challenging overtly the political establishment and the American government's foreign policy through the lyrics of their songs. Their musical styles and performances were, however, missing the visceral kick and in-your-face sexual aggression of Johnny's soul music. Baby is already in possession of the outward-looking liberal politics of these folk singers; the soul music facilitates her turn inward. Music acts as a non-diegetic commentary on Baby's personal development. Her romantic relationship with Johnny is accompanied by various songs. For example, when she enters the entertainment staff's quarters for the first time, she is greeted by a blast of "Do You Love Me." She begins dancing with Johnny, and the accompanying screen direction states, "a new Baby is being born before our eyes."<sup>357</sup>

Alongside the dance and the music is Baby's relationship with Johnny. Baby is drawn to Johnny for the same reasons she is drawn to soul music: excitement and sex. In one sense, Johnny's emotionalism and his physicality bear similarities to the male protagonist of another 1980s Sixties film, *Baby, It's You* (1983). Taking place over the years 1966-1969, *Baby It's You* chronicles the life and loves of a Jewish teenager Jill Rosen (Rosanna Arquette). While at high-school she meets a working-class rebel by the name of Albert "Sheik" Capadilupo (Vincent Spano). Sheik is an embodiment of everything Jill's middle-class upbringing has taught her to avoid: fast cars, sex, drinking, disrespecting parents and talking back to teachers. Yet Jill, naturally, is drawn to Sheik because of his rebelliousness – Jill, like Baby, is fond of gleefully telling her boyfriend that he is "crazy." As the years go by, however, it becomes clear that Sheik cannot keep up with the changing times. Jill becomes a fully fledged hippie; Sheik clings to his hopeless dreams of following in Frank Sinatra's footsteps and singing in Florida clubs. This film ends on a bitter-sweet note: a last dance to Sinatra's "Stranger's in the Night" and a mutual realisation that their relationship is about to end. Baby and Johnny's relationship follows a similar narrative arc. It begins with the promise of transgression and freedom, but – like *Baby, It's You* – questions whether this relationship has the potential to last beyond a summer fling.

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<sup>357</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), p. 23.



As she moves further away from her father, Baby moves closer to Johnny. Immediately after she admits that she is involved romantically with Johnny, Baby confronts her father and demands that he face up to his hypocrisy. “You told me you wanted me to change the world”, she says to him during the climax of their argument. “But you meant by becoming a lawyer or an economist and marrying someone from Harvard.” Houseman had wanted to mould Baby in his own image; she was to change the world, but not herself. And, furthermore, she was certainly not to question his authority. In direct contrast to Dr. Houseman, who seems intent on maintaining authority over his daughter, Johnny’s actions and words suggest that he, Johnny, is invested in Baby’s personal maturation. For much of the film, it is Baby who takes the lead in the relationship. Johnny may teach her the dance steps, but she instigates the romance. The estimation in which Johnny holds Baby rises throughout the film. His referring to “Frances” as opposed to “Baby” Houseman during the final scene acts as a symbolic assertion that Baby has grown up, has become her own woman. Bergstein tellingly cut a line of dialogue present in the 1985 draft, which would have weakened this narrative greatly. That line appears after the couple’s first sexual encounter. Baby informs him that her real name is Frances. In the 1985 draft, Johnny replies, “Frances?...That’s a real grown-up name. But you’re still Baby to me.”<sup>358</sup> The final part of this statement was eventually cut. It is quite patronising, establishing Johnny’s authority – “you’re still Baby.” Instead, the finished film presents a final scene in which Johnny delivers a respectful salute to the emotional and educational impact of their relationship.

*Dirty Dancing*’s final scene witnesses both the consummation of Baby’s personal narrative and her reunion with her father. In direct challenge to conservative culture wars rhetoric, *Dirty Dancing* announces the politicisation of personal life to have been a positive consequence of the Sixties. Baby no longer simply parrots her father’s political rhetoric but instead reveals its limitations and stands up to his hypocrisy. Her sabbatical from middle-class society and, by extension, the oppressive expectations placed upon “good” middle-class female behaviour and sexuality highlight the development of her own personal, ethical and political code. Furthermore, her disruption of the family unit and independent behaviour did not signal a destruction of the family – far from it. She is welcomed back into the family;

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<sup>358</sup> Bergstein, *Dirty Dancing* (1985), p. 83.

“you looked wonderful out there”, her father informs her after the final dance. By the film’s conclusion, Baby is thoroughly transformed. Like *Platoon*’s Taylor, she is elevated to the status of teacher. Johnny announces her to have “taught me a lot about the kind of person I want to be.” Baby’s final dance acts as a catalyst for many of the other middle-class characters to loosen up and join in the revelries (a symbolic national loosening up, perhaps). Following Baby’s lead, previously staid and stolid men and women come together in a collective expression of social and sexual freedom.

Scholars such as Chris Jordan (noted in the chapter’s introduction) have read *Dirty Dancing*’s conclusion as exemplifying a theme associated with the Classical Hollywood musical: that of easily achieved social mobility, if not a complete erasure of class concerns.<sup>359</sup> The working class characters are welcomed into middle-class society as symbolised rhetorically by Dr. Houseman’s apology to Johnny: “When I’m wrong, I say I’m wrong”. I would, however, suggest that the film’s conclusion betrays a little more complexity than this reading allows. Dr. Houseman’s apology to Johnny is hardly a welcome into his family. There remains no suggestion that Johnny and Baby’s relationship will be anything more than a summer fling. Quite how much social mobility is depicted in this scene is questionable. Have Johnny, or any of the other working-class characters, benefitted from this rapturous interlude, or will things return to normal once the music stops? The room – although shared by working-class and middle-class characters – remains segregated. Most of the dance couples are of the same class and, as the occasional appearance of an African-American couple attests, race. Segregation persists. The end credits are suggestive in this respect (again this scene is not mentioned in the 1985 draft). A 1980s song, “Yes”, by Merry Clayton booms over another slow motion sepia-tinted montage of dirty dancers. The song may be upbeat, but the images remind us that the party is a distant memory. The Sixties may have offered some members of society the opportunity for personal liberation, but, without the accompanying change in American society, the era’s impact on 1980s America is incomplete. Jon Lewis suggests that youth-centred films of the 1970s and 1980s often concluded with the

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<sup>359</sup>Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” *Movie no. 24* (Spring 1977). Reprinted in Stephen Cohan, *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 23.

“restoration of the adult authority informed rather than radicalized by youth.”<sup>360</sup> This would seem to be a pertinent appraisal of *Dirty Dancing*. Dr. Houseman’s rule of law is not re-asserted at the film’s conclusion. Rather, he is forced to adapt to his daughter’s new found independence. The question of whether one reads this as a conservative rediscovery of “traditional forms of authority”<sup>361</sup> or as a call for a continued struggle with regard to gender, race and class relations is, I argue, very much left to the viewer. In public responses to *Dirty Dancing*, however, there was a tendency to deny the film a place in such debates on the past and future of America.

### **“Have the Time of Your Life”: Promotion and Reception**

*Dirty Dancing* was in many ways a *Platoon* for women. Its representation of issues central to debates on the feminist movement and its narrative stressing a young protagonist’s authentic experience of the Sixties offered plenty of subject matter for a political debate. *Dirty Dancing* did not, however, become a catalyst for public remembrance in the way that *Platoon* had done. While Chris Taylor’s relationship with sergeants Barnes and Elias was suggested in much commentary to be a metaphor for Sixties political conflicts, Baby’s relationships to her father and other characters in *Dirty Dancing* were not in the public sphere imbued with the same “importance.” Some promotion materials, and a great deal of the film’s critical reception was, I argue, influenced by broader social discourses in which women’s Sixties experiences and feminist issues were, when portrayed at all, treated as less-significant subjects of commemoration than the Vietnam War. While in interviews, Bergstein attempted to promote the film as a serious engagement with politics, other promotional materials such as posters and trailers actually sought to minimise the potential for a political reading. In the end, *Dirty Dancing* was framed for the most part as an apolitical, “good time,” movie, albeit one which was discussed as having had a great impact on women.

*Dirty Dancing*’s promotional poster (Figure 2.3) did not include any evidence of the film’s political or historical content. It featured Swayze and Grey dancing against a plain white background. This background provides no suggestion of the

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<sup>360</sup> Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

film's Sixties setting. Much like the poster of the other female-centred film set predominantly in the early 1960s, *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Figure 2.4), *Dirty Dancing*'s poster gives the impression that the film's action is less historically specific than dream-like. Foregrounding the central protagonists against an excessively bright and empty landscape, both posters suggest these films to be less about real issues and important events than about personal wish-fulfilment and individual dreams or desires. This is emphasised in *Dirty Dancing*'s tagline: "Have the Time of Your Life." Note here the differences between this and *Platoon*'s "The First Casualty of War is Innocence." The latter promotes Stone's film as a commentary on matters universal. It is a grand, metaphysical statement on the impact of war. *Dirty Dancing*'s tagline, on the other hand, aims for the personal. Though this film too is concerned with lost innocence, not to mention events of the Sixties that were discussed as having an immense impact on American society, it does not attempt to encourage anything other than personal pleasure. It is simply a call to have a good time. Such a statement fitted neatly into a broader current in 1980s American culture in which representations of female emancipation frequently removed the political from the personal.

Susan Douglas argues that the 1980s saw numerous attempts on the part of the advertising industry to court the "liberated woman." Adverts for cosmetics, clothes and exercise equipment tipped their hats to the feminist movement while at the same time erasing its political agency. "Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism", argues Douglas, "as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires."<sup>362</sup> Individuality and self-empowerment were reduced to improving one's appearance and having a good time. This, of course, was achieved through consumption. From Cybil Shepard advertising Loreal hair dye with the statement "I'm worth it" to numerous adverts featuring women "reclining on beds of satin sheets, or soaking in bubble baths", these combinations of copy and image convey "complete control", empowerment and self-fulfilment – all by way of purchasing power.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, p. 246.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245, 251.

Patrick Swayze  
Jennifer Grey

# Dirty Dancing

*Have the time  
of your life...*



Figure 2.3: *Dirty Dancing*'s promotional poster.

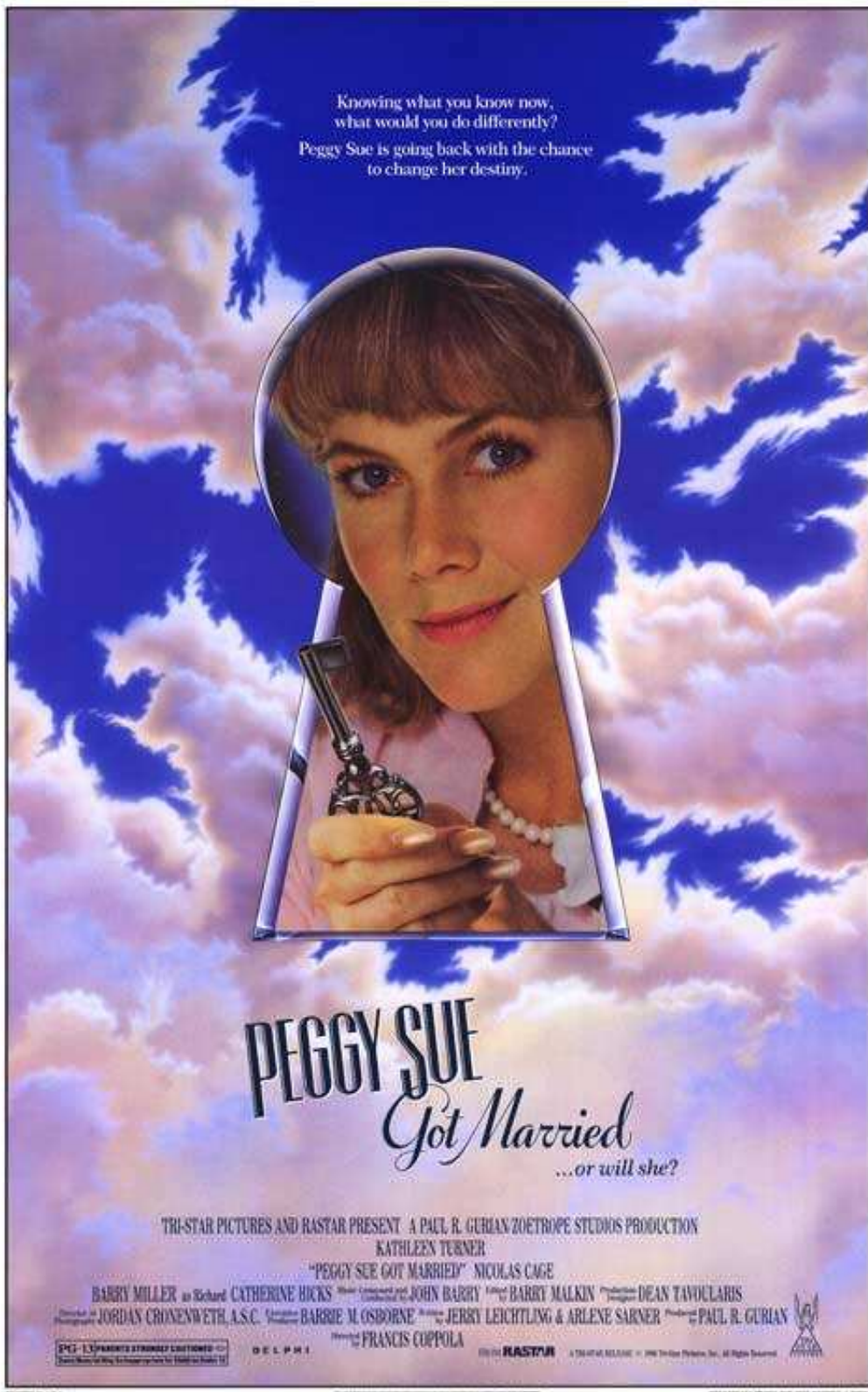


Figure 2.4: Promotional poster for *Peggy Sue Got Married*.

While arguing that this became more pronounced in the 1990s, Yvonne Tasker and Dianne Negra note the emergence in the 1980s of discourses that they attribute to a post-feminist culture in which the political concerns of the feminist movement were circumvented. “Postfeminist culture”, argue Tasker and Negra, “works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer.”<sup>364</sup> With its focus on personal pleasure, *Dirty Dancing*’s tagline “Have the Time of Your Life” might be seen as reflecting a cultural climate in which feminism had been hijacked by big business and reconceptualised as a form of narcissistic self-indulgence. In many ways then, its poster began to frame the film as solely commercial entertainment, and not worthy of serious debate. There is no sense at all that *Dirty Dancing* is likely to inspire discussion let alone conflict (a la *Platoon*). Rather, its poster implies that Baby is not gaining political or even emotional maturity. She is simply having the “time of her life.”

Such an approach to *Dirty Dancing*’s political content was complicated in other promotional materials, which attempted to affirm the film’s political and historical value. *Dirty Dancing*’s production notes spent several pages outlining the film’s historical background. The early 1960s saw “the widening gap between generations, the revising of political, sexual and even emotional lines.” They then go on to explain how the dance style known as “dirty dancing” broke from traditional forms of dance and how it “seemed to foreshadow a new world.” It therefore “chronicles social dancing’s place in this turning point time as experienced by one 17-year-old-girl.”<sup>365</sup> One pre-release interview with Bergstein noted that the film’s fictional setting, “Kellerman’s, the fictive Catskills hotel that provides the setting for the new film *Dirty Dancing*, is meant to be more than the sum of its parts ... It stands as a metaphor for America in the summer of 1963”.<sup>366</sup> The screenwriter emphasised the importance of the year 1963 as a historical threshold, arguing that the film’s ending is “in its way not so different than Bob Dylan singing ‘The Times They Are a-Changing.’”<sup>367</sup> As with Stone and *Platoon*, Bergstein promoted aspects

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<sup>364</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>365</sup> *Dirty Dancing* production notes, pp. 8-9. (Available at Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles).

<sup>366</sup> Freedman, “*Dirty Dancing* Rocks to an Innocent Beat,” p. B19.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

of her own life story as a means of bolstering her claims to *Dirty Dancing*'s historical truth. In a *New York Times* interview she informed a journalist that many of the incidents and characters from the film were based on her own recollections of visiting summer camps in the Catskills Mountains as a young girl.<sup>368</sup>

Yet, it would seem that, on the whole, *Dirty Dancing* was not deemed to be of any real political merit. David Sterritt in *The Christian Science Monitor* called the film "a dud." For Sterritt, bits of "good acting are not enough to overcome the bogus elements at the center of the story ... or the overcooked melodrama that grows from them."<sup>369</sup> Roger Ebert thought that "this might have been a decent movie if it had allowed itself to be about anything" and referenced *Dirty Dancing*'s "Idiot Plot".<sup>370</sup> Ebert had not noticed the rather hackneyed tropes present in *Platoon*'s plot. He had celebrated Stone's film for the very reason that *Platoon* was "not legend, not metaphor, not message" and that there was "no carefully mapped plot."<sup>371</sup> It seems that *Platoon*, which, in Ebert's view was not about anything but fighting, did not need to strive to provide a message. Bergstein's memories of recent American history, on the other hand, needed to "be about [something]." Ebert, like a number of other critics, did not think that *Dirty Dancing* had sufficient substance. David Denby of *New York* magazine thought *Dirty Dancing* "sweet and rich and a bit runny around the edges."<sup>372</sup> Denby argues that the film effaces any kind of political comment because it is so melodramatic.<sup>373</sup> Other film critics felt that the film should never have strived for social commentary in the first place. For example, Julie Salamon of the *Wall Street Journal* suggested that the "movie is at its weakest when it elaborates on its 'serious' theme – that the revolution in dancing will soon spread to every facet of society."<sup>374</sup> There was not the same synthesising of political issues and personal experience as there had been in reviews of *Platoon*. Whereas Chris

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<sup>368</sup> Freedman, "Dirty Dancing," p. B19.

<sup>369</sup> David Sterritt, "Dirty Dancing: A Second Look at a Big Box-Office Hit," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 19, 1987, p. 24.

<sup>370</sup> Roger Ebert, "Dirty Dancing," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 21, 1987, [www.rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19870821/REVIEWS/708](http://www.rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19870821/REVIEWS/708) (Accessed May 2009).

<sup>371</sup> Roger Ebert, "Platoon," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 30, 1986, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19861230/REVIEWS/612300301/1023> (Accessed May 2009).

<sup>372</sup> Ebert, "Dirty Dancing."

<sup>373</sup> David Denby, "The Princess and the Peon," *New York*, September 7, 1987, p. 60.

<sup>374</sup> Julie Salamon, "Borsch Belt Princess," p. 16. See also Vincent Canby, "Dirty Dancing: A Catskills Romance in 1963," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1987, p. C3.



Taylor's story could stand in as nationally representative, Baby Houseman's story was separated from any kind of broader American experience.

This separation of *Dirty Dancing* from politics was facilitated by way of word choices used to describe the film. Words such as “melodrama” – “overcooked melodrama” as Sterritt (noted above) put it – and “sweetness” were common currency. The reviewers would seem to have been influenced by the post-1970s understanding of melodrama, and, what Steve Neale describes as its “gender-specific appeal or address to woman”.<sup>375</sup> Neale shows that recent understandings of the term melodrama, when it became associated primarily with films made mainly for female audiences, took shape in the 1970s. Prior to the 1970s, use of the word in film industry discourse and critical reviews often appeared in materials discussing male audience action-centred films including war films, gangster pictures, and, what now are generally called *films noir*. Melodrama was a word used rarely in reviews of *Platoon*, yet Stone's film, with its “Manichean structures ... and its dedication to thrills and suspense”, meshed well with conventions that were associated with the term in 1940s, 1950s and 1960s discussions of cinematic output.<sup>376</sup> Yet, in reviews of *Dirty Dancing* the term melodrama was used as a pejorative; as a way of highlighting the film's lack of “realism”, its appeal to female viewers, and, by extension, its failure to meet the criteria of “serious” contribution to political debate. The term melodrama was accompanied with semantically “feminine” adjectives like “sweet”,<sup>377</sup> and “coy”.<sup>378</sup> It is particularly telling that phrases like “wish fulfilment”,<sup>379</sup> and “wet dream”<sup>380</sup> also appeared in these reviews, for it speaks to the manner in which many reviewers dismissed its political representation. Referring to the *New York Times* interview with Bergstein (noted above), Denby replied: “That the *Times* should treat this female wet dream ... as an event of profound cultural significance completes the fantasy.” He concludes: “To women I'd say, you may enjoy *Dirty Dancing*, but you'll hate yourself in the morning.”<sup>381</sup> *Dirty Dancing*, in these terms, was not a politicised portrayal of female emancipation, but an appeal to women's

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<sup>375</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 181.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>377</sup> Canby, “*Dirty Dancing*,” p. C3; Salamon, “Borsch Belt Princess,” p. 16.

<sup>378</sup> Ebert, “*Dirty Dancing*.”

<sup>379</sup> Denby, “The Princess and the Peon,” p. 60.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

individual sexual desires and their narcissistic self-interest (much in the vein of the above noted commentary on 1980s advertisements). Evoked here is the negative version of authenticity levelled at former Sixties denizens (discussed in the introduction to this thesis) in which politics and political activism were evacuated from the search for personal authenticity.

Not all reviews were, however, quite so negative about *Dirty Dancing*'s attempts to engage with history and politics. David Ansen of *Newsweek* wrote that "Eleanor Bergstein understands the crucial part rock and roll played in priming a generation of middle-class kids for the social and sexual revolution ahead." At the same time, Ansen believed that the film "flirts throughout with cliches, and some of the more melodramatic plot devices creak at the joints."<sup>382</sup> Helen Knode of *L.A. Weekly* noted that the "film's historical accuracy is less important ... than the value of dirty dancing as a powerfully physical metaphor for America's subconscious, for social and psychic tensions struggling to the surface in the early '60s."<sup>383</sup> Certainly, as was far more prominent in the case of *Platoon*'s reception, some reviewers found a metaphorical potency in *Dirty Dancing*. "The film makers use dirty dancing as a hint of what is almost palpably around the corner in the America of 1963," wrote Sheila Benson in the *Los Angeles Times*. Around the corner was "change of a radical, sweeping, all-pervasive nature."<sup>384</sup> Benson was one of the foremost critics to promote the film as an attempt at least to grapple with serious historical issues.<sup>385</sup> In an article in which she reflected upon her own baby boom childhood, the writer Alice McDermott noted approvingly that *Dirty Dancing* was "among the few current films that treat their [teenage] subjects with some seriousness."<sup>386</sup> Other (usually female) critics too found in the film social conscience and at least an attempt at political commentary. Molly Haskell wrote in *Vogue* that *Dirty Dancing* "is a conventional film in its Borscht Belt setting, ethnic satire, and feel good ending, but

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<sup>382</sup> David Ansen, "An August Heat Wave," *Newsweek*, August 24, 1987, p. 60.

<sup>383</sup> Knode, "Father Knows Best," p. 43.

<sup>384</sup> Sheila Benson, "*Dirty Dancing* Takes a Big Step Toward Being Very Smart and Funny," *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 1987, Calendar, p. 11.

<sup>385</sup> Sheila Benson, "Two Attempts at Social Comment Hit the Mark," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1987, pp. 39-40.

<sup>386</sup> Alice McDermott, "Teen-Age Films: Love, Death and the Prom," *The New York Times*, August 16, 1987, p. B1.

with a deliciously subversive core.”<sup>387</sup> Haskell argued that, although the film eventually ends with a rather staid gesture toward conformity and reconciliation, the earlier representation of Baby’s “unleashed sexuality” is in itself a “declaration of independence.”<sup>388</sup> That Haskell could dismiss the ending as forced and contrived, yet still find some kind of progressive possibility in the film’s political representation suggests one possible way in which other viewers may have understood the film. Writing with respect to television programmes, George Lipsitz argues:

for any given viewer the ruptures opened by the show might carry as much impact as the narrative resolution ... as long as ruptures and closures accompany each other within media texts, at least the possibility of oppositional readings remains alive.<sup>389</sup>

The scenes and lines of dialogue recalled by viewers, like those upon which they place special significance, are thus liable to change. While *Dirty Dancing*’s ending may have been considered contrived and excessively Utopian, it does not mean that the subversive potential in other scenes and sequences was completely denigrated or erased.

While *Platoon* was frequently reported to have served as a kind of cathartic function for Vietnam veterans and for other commentators and to have helped them come to terms with their Sixties experiences, *Dirty Dancing*’s impact on female viewers was not discussed in such terms. With regards to audience response, *Dirty Dancing*, in some promotion and reception materials, was framed as a pathway to ecstasy, wish-fulfilment, but, once again, completely bereft of political value.

“The heat is in the music, the music sets you dancing, the dancing sets her free” went *Dirty Dancing*’s trailer’s tagline. Featuring early 1960s hits by the Ronettes’ and the Contours, the use of old songs and the appeal to “you” followed by “her” (Baby), suggests that some viewers, women in particular, might identify with the experiences of the film’s central protagonist. Just as Baby found authenticity through dance, so too, implies the trailer, can viewers. This direct address to audiences was continued in other forms of promotion, none more so than in the

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<sup>387</sup> Molly Haskell, “What’s New/What’s Coming,” *Vogue*, August, 1987 [no page: available as a clipping at the Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles].

<sup>388</sup> Haskell, “What’s New.”

<sup>389</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, p. 94.

promotional music video that accompanied the release of the film's hit single "I've Had the Time of My Life" (1987). For those familiar with 1960s and 70s music, the vocalists might have been recognisable. They were former Righteous Brother Bill Medley and solo artist and sometime Leonard Cohen backing singer Jennifer Warnes. Inter-cutting between Medley and Warnes and Baby and Johnny, the video draws rather explicit parallels between the four performers. It virtually declares the actors to be the singers' younger selves. Scenes of Baby and Johnny dancing together intersperse the singers' less vigorous on-screen shufflings. A shot-reverse-shot of Medley and Warnes looking into one another's eyes is followed by Baby and Johnny kissing; as Warnes leans her head back to deliver a particularly passionate harmony we cut to Baby leaning back and clutching Johnny in a passionate embrace. Such parallels continue throughout the video to the extent that Medley and Warnes would seem to be acting out their own (imagined) adolescence. The escapades of *Dirty Dancing*'s main characters become a canvas upon which the singers project a loving nostalgia for the times of their youth (see Figures 2.5 and 2.6). Self discovery and sexual awakening is linked explicitly to dance and music.



Figure 2.5: Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes singing “I’ve Had the Time of My Life” (the lighting is, unfortunately, this dim in every scene featuring the two singers).



Figure 2.6: Baby and Johnny in the “Time of My Life” video.

Some reviewers picked up on *Dirty Dancing*'s potential to appeal to women across the generational divide. Sheila Benson suggested the film offered audiences the opportunity to participate in Baby's narrative of self-discovery. "The dirty dancers are young", wrote Benson "their audience does not have to be young to share their elation." And, because "half the film's dances have to be learned by a faintly klutzy amateur, we learn with her, and her final burst of joy is ours too."<sup>390</sup> She is seemingly suggesting that Baby's coming-of-age can be experienced by other women vicariously. As the protagonist finally connects with her inner feelings, so too does the audience. There were also reports of a dirty dancing craze sweeping the country with women and men alike signing up to learn Baby and Johnny's dance routines. In a *New Yorker* article that featured the film's director, Emile Ardolino, announcing that he was attracted to the film's script because of the "chance to show that dancing can transform people's lives," we hear of the hundreds of new students of all ages attending dirty dancing lessons in this city.<sup>391</sup>

Other commentators associated the film with extreme emotionalism. "Drop into a shopping-mall multiplex and listen", announced *Newsweek*, "there are pockets of people reciting the lines along with the actors."<sup>392</sup> The article was on the "*Dirty Dancing* addiction" that they reported to have taken a hold of American women. One audience member, who apparently had seen the film twenty five times, was described as being in a state of "Dirty Denial." Another was quoted as stating: "I see the movie instead of eating"; yet another audience member apparently commented that the film was "the first girls' porno ever made".<sup>393</sup> Such comments bear a similarity to Denby's (noted above), "you might enjoy *Dirty Dancing*, but you'll hate yourself in the morning." The film was treated as instant gratification, of little long-term importance. Such word choices as "addiction", "denial" and "porno," suggest that a kind of extreme emotional attachment, if not hysteria, surrounded the film's release. *Dirty Dancing*'s impact on women, as discussed in this article, was to shatter their self-control. These were not the sobering reports of a film helping people to come to terms with political and personal struggles, but the ravings of

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<sup>390</sup> Benson, "*Dirty Dancin* Takes a Big Step," p. 11.

<sup>391</sup> Anon, "Dirty Dancing," *New Yorker*, April 18, 1988, p. 33.

<sup>392</sup> Charles Leershen and Tessa Namuth, "Getting Down and Dirty," *Newsweek*, December 21, 1987, p. 63.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

viewers steered by their uncontrollable libidos. This *Newsweek* article also suggests that *Dirty Dancing* did not appeal solely to teenagers, but to older women as well. The woman in a state of “dirty denial” was 45 years old; others were described as young professionals: writers, finance managers etc. They were all associated with a kind of extended adolescence, a release of hormonal energy usually associated with teenage girls. While I do not wish to evacuate the fun from a film to which many people do seem to have reacted positively, it is notable that this was considered the only “newsworthy” element of *Dirty Dancing*’s public impact. Whereas *Platoon* acted as a canvas on which sober reflections on the Sixties and on growing up at this time were written large, *Dirty Dancing* was reported to be having an infantilising effect on women. *Platoon*’s coverage spoke of a long-lasting, emotional, therapeutic relationship between film and viewer. *Dirty Dancing*, on the other hand, was reported to be the cinematic equivalent of a one-night-stand.

Is it any wonder, then, that *Dirty Dancing* was largely viewed as apolitical, juvenile fare? Even the controversial abortion sub-plot was dismissed as a distraction. When reviewers referenced this subplot, it was usually in a very brief sentence. “Penny conveniently gets pregnant so she can have an abortion and therefore be unable to perform at a neighbouring resort”, wrote Julie Salamon in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>394</sup> Vincent Canby also devoted one sentence to “a really quite awful subplot about Penny’s abortion, financed by money that Baby has borrowed from her conventionally liberal doctor-father”.<sup>395</sup> Generally, no one was willing to discuss the abortion, and rarely discussed any of the film’s other political issues.

Indeed, it would not be until several years after its initial reception that the abortion sub-plot, and other political issues articulated by *Dirty Dancing*, rose to prominence in journalistic discourse. In 1997, *USA Today* noted that the film was in many ways subversive; it “[broke] the rules.” The example this publication provided: it doesn’t punish “a character for getting an illegal abortion.”<sup>396</sup> The same article refers to screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein’s claims that feminist activists such as Gloria Steinem approved of *Dirty Dancing*’s political outlook.<sup>397</sup> As the numerous

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<sup>394</sup> Salamon, “Borsch Belt Princess,” p. 16.

<sup>395</sup> Canby, “*Dirty Dancing*,” p. C3. See also Tom Cuneff, “*Dirty Dancing*,” *People Weekly*, August 31, 1987, p. 8.

<sup>396</sup> Susan Wloszczyna, “*Dirty Dancing*: Can it Still Generate Steam?” *USA Today*, August 15, 1997, 7D.

<sup>397</sup> Wloszczyna, “*Dirty Dancing*,” p. 7D.

blogs and articles appearing in newspapers and online in recent years attest, a generation after *Dirty Dancing*'s initial release, the film is more easily viewed as political.<sup>398</sup> Far from the summer fling-like transience that reviewers (noted above) ascribed to *Dirty Dancing* during its theatrical release, the film continues to resonate with generation after generation of film viewers.

## Conclusion

*Dirty Dancing* was produced and received within political and cultural debates where feminism was the subject of conflict, contestation and reconfiguration. By way of certain creative decisions and script changes, screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein either curtailed or made politically ambiguous the representation of controversial issues such as abortion and race relations, while at the same time strengthening the protagonist's gaining of personal authenticity. Locating the film's action in 1963 also avoided associating Baby with the late Sixties radical feminist movement. It followed a long line of commercially successful representations that positioned coming-of-age narratives against a backdrop of late 1950s and early 1960s iconography drawn from the repository of popular culture. At the same time, Baby's personal narrative was infused with a political dimension. She gains personal authenticity by challenging middle-class moral codes that put unfair pressures on young women. By the end of the film, Baby has stood up to the hypocrisy of her father and his associates – who spout liberal politics, but do not apply them to their own lives – and has liberated herself, intellectually and spiritually. This blend of politics and personal life, I have argued, had the potential to participate in public debates on the legacy of the Sixties.

What is clear is that critics and commentators alike chose, on the whole, to ignore *Dirty Dancing*'s political implications. It was not viewed, as was *Platoon*, as an important player in “coming to terms” with the Sixties. Rather, it was discussed as a cultural artefact that may have touched the hearts of millions of women, but did not deserve serious political attention. An unwillingness to treat Baby's transformation as anything but a wish-fulfilment and as fodder for personal/sexual

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<sup>398</sup> See for example the numerous blogs on the film at the *Jezebel* website: [www.jezebel.com](http://www.jezebel.com); Clarke, “Just Don't Say the A-word”; Bergstein, “Best of Times, Worst of Times.”



desires meant that *Dirty Dancing* was marginalised in the public sphere. Whereas *Platoon*'s reception spoke of catharsis, *Dirty Dancing*'s spoke of hysteria. A film that charted a woman's authentic experience of the Sixties was received as mindless, largely apolitical piece of clichéd, melodramatic (in its pejorative sense) entertainment. This reading, I have argued, was influenced by broader debates in the public sphere in which feminism frequently found itself either being attacked outright as a negative social phenomenon, or being re-configured, to recall Tasker and Negra's words, as a form of "empowered [consumption]."

Politically ambiguous and emotionally resonant, *Dirty Dancing* was the most commercially successful female-centred Sixties film of the period 1986-94. Looking back upon 1963 America, it mediated issues that remained central to public debate in the 1980s. According to Bergstein, it depicted a historical watershed, an "innocent" time just before America descended into radical action. Pre-Kennedy assassination innocence was, as the following chapter shows, a common preoccupation in public debate throughout the 1980s and 90s. A problematic narrative of recent history to say the very least, it would be one which rose increasingly to the fore in film-related debates when Oliver Stone's first presidential film *JFK* reached cinemas in 1991. *JFK* began from where *Dirty Dancing* left off. The Kennedy assassination acts as the film's key site of Sixties remembrance and, furthermore, as the catalyst for another Sixties protagonist to gain personal authenticity.

### Chapter Three

#### **Bad Sixties/ Good Sixties: JFK and the Sixties Generation**

December 1988: two years have passed since the release of *Platoon*. Ellen Ray of Sheridan Square Press, a small publishing company located in New York City, hands Oliver Stone a copy of her company's latest publication. The book, *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988), was New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's first-person account of his 1960s investigation into the killing of President John F. Kennedy, and subsequent attempts to secure a criminal conviction. Three days later, Stone informed the publisher that he wished to option the book with a view to adapting Garrison's story for the big screen.<sup>399</sup>

October 1989: Stone begins work on a screenplay for another cinematic biography. This one, on the life and times of 1960s rock and roll star Jim Morrison, is entitled "The Doors."<sup>400</sup> By year's end Stone had completed a draft script. It opens with a "Wife and Husband" expressing their dismay at the death of President John F. Kennedy: "Oh God. Oh God. Not the President for Christ's Sake." According to script directions, the camera would then turn to focus on Jim Morrison himself. Concurrently, a single line of dialogue appears: "Who's Next?"<sup>401</sup>

Who's next? It seems that, at this stage of the screenwriting process, Stone intended to provide a direct connection between President Kennedy and Jim Morrison, as if the former's assassination was somehow a prophecy of the latter's impending demise. This scene was eventually cut from *The Doors* (1991), yet the assassination's symbolic status as a catalyst of the "turbulent Sixties" – turbulent for certain individuals and turbulent for America in general – re-emerged in and around Stone's next film, *JFK* (1991). An exploration of events surrounding the president's murder in Dallas' Dealey Plaza on November 22 1963, *JFK* entered a public debate concerning the assassination's political ramifications for 1990s America.

This chapter examines the construction and reception of public politics and personal authenticity in and around *JFK*. In the view of historians and film scholars such as Robert Rosenstone, Hayden White and Robert Burgoyne, *JFK*'s formal and

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<sup>399</sup> Gary Crowds, "Getting the Facts Straight," *Cineaste*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1992), p. 28.

<sup>400</sup> James Riordan, *Stone: Stone: The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (London: Aurum Press, 1996), pp. 310-311.

<sup>401</sup> Oliver Stone, *The Doors* (October 1989), p. 1.

stylistic features, such as the mixing of documentary footage and staged re-enactments, as well as its fragmented narrative, offer a radical challenge to traditional historical discourse. These scholars argue that, rather than portraying history as a linear narrative of progress, *JFK* foregrounds ambiguity and questions the notion of a singular historical truth.<sup>402</sup> Other academic examinations criticise *JFK*'s historical content and its stereotypical representation of women, gays and African-Americans.<sup>403</sup> Janet Staiger and Barbie Zelizer have explored the film's reception, noting the controversy the film engendered and the strategies that Stone mobilised to defend himself against the tidal-wave of media criticism to which he was subjected.<sup>404</sup>

While this work informs my analysis of *JFK*, I employ different methods of analysis and implement a distinct critical framework. Firstly, rather than focusing on a single moment in *JFK*'s life cycle, I follow the film from production history to critical reception and reveal the diverse ways in which the film was shaped and understood by various arbiters during its production and release. Secondly, utilising the public politics/personal authenticity approach allows me to identify two highly politicised Sixties narratives present within the film. In its representation of public politics and personal authenticity *JFK* mediates both a "bad Sixties" narrative, which states that American society was impacted negatively in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, and a "good Sixties" whereby post-assassination America experiences, for many people, a positive intellectual awakening, a personal coming-of-age.

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<sup>402</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 125-144; Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 120-131; Rosenstone, "Oliver Stone as Historian," in Robert Brent Toplin (ed.), *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History and Controversy* (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 2000), pp. 26-39; Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modernist Event* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 17-38.

<sup>403</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 102-105; Michael Rogin, "JFK: The Movie," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (April, 1992), pp. 500-505; Marita Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas," *History and Theory* vol. 36, no. 4 (December, 1997), pp. 64-79.

<sup>404</sup> William Benoit and Dawn Nill, "Oliver Stone's Defence of JFK," *Communication Quarterly* vol.46, no. 2 (Spring, 1998), pp. 127-43; Janet Staiger, "Cinematic Shots: The Narration of Violence," in Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 210-228; Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 201-214.

The chapter begins by locating *JFK*'s adaptation from novel (Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*) to script, within broader public debates on Kennedy and the impact of his assassination on American society and Americans' psychologies.<sup>405</sup> Liberal and conservative commemoration of JFK, I argue, was – but for minor variations – virtually interchangeable, as commentators on both sides of the political spectrum agreed that, following the assassination, America descended into a period of turbulence and underwent a profound transformation. Examining script content and comparing it to the finished film, I argue that *JFK*'s script was tailored in line with this popular “descent into chaos” narrative. Screenwriters Stone and Zachary Sklar associated this narrative with a range of liberal and conservative signifiers.<sup>406</sup>

While Stone and Sklar painted the assassination's impact on America in politically diverse terms, they infused central protagonist Jim Garrison's (Kevin Costner's) gaining of personal authenticity with an alternative interpretation of the Sixties. Again, examining draft scripts and the finished film, I argue that Garrison's intellectual development is premised on his questioning of the moral authority of a whole range of elites: the government, the military, business and the media. He awakens to the institutional and systemic failures plaguing the highest levels of American politics and culture. This “loss of ignorance” (as opposed to the “loss of *innocence*” often used to categorise the assassination's impact on America)<sup>407</sup> is *JFK*'s “good Sixties.” Though Garrison himself was forty-six-years-old when he began his investigation, I argue that his personal narrative, as reconstructed by Stone and Sklar, was intended to resonate with a generation of young men and women that had grown up in the Sixties and was associated publicly with a similar search for authenticity.

The chapter's final section examines *JFK*'s promotion and reception. I argue that much public discussion of the film was influenced heavily by contemporaneous

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<sup>405</sup> While *JFK* is, according to the film's credits, primarily based on two books, *On the Trail of the Assassins* and Jim Marrs' compendium of conspiracy theories *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy*, I focus on Garrison's novel as it provides the film's central narrative and key characters. See Jim Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins* (London: Penguin [1988] 1992); Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1989).

<sup>406</sup> This chapter's script analysis relies primarily on an undated, but published, version of the shooting script. There are a number of significant differences between the published script and the finished film. See Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), pp. 1-185. Additional information comes from an unpublished script dated January 1991 and from correspondences I had with co-screenwriter Zachary Sklar.

<sup>407</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997), p. 28.

understandings of the word “conspiracy” and the positive or negative attributes that were being ascribed to so-called “conspiracy theories.”<sup>408</sup> Examining a range of newspaper and magazine articles, I demonstrate that references to conspiracy theory allowed competing commentators to attack and to defend the Sixties from a variety of political perspectives and to promote or discredit the politics and philosophies of various groups and individuals: New Left radicals, journalists, Jim Garrison, Oliver Stone, and even President Kennedy himself.

### **Lost Innocence/Lost Ignorance: Kennedy Commemoration and the Sixties**

When, in 1987, Jim Garrison presented Sheridan Square Press’s editor Zachary Sklar with the first draft of *On the Trail of the Assassins*, the book was not told in the first-person. Rather, it was written in the style of a scholarly monograph and attempted to elucidate Garrison’s theory as to who killed Kennedy. Garrison suggested that the assassination was a conspiracy between the CIA, the US military, the FBI, Cuban exiles and right-wing militias. According to Sklar, who later would write the first draft of the *JFK* script, the editor’s initial reply was: “[t]here’s a lot of great stuff in here, but you’ve left out the most important part of your own story.” He went on to suggest to Garrison that “if you can show the transformation of consciousness that you went through ... you’ll have accomplished a great educational process.”<sup>409</sup> Sklar was appealing for a less detached and more intimate story, one that would focus as much upon Garrison’s personal development as it did upon the warp and woof of assassination research. Garrison rewrote the book in this vein, inserting commentary on his own life and state of mind during the years of his investigation.

The decision to rewrite *Assassins* from a personal perspective was apt, given broader discursive shifts which, by the 1980s, saw personal stories compete with, and often trump detached examinations as the legitimate, authoritative chronicle of Kennedy’s death. Barbie Zelizer notes the growth in the 1980s of media retellings of

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<sup>408</sup> The term “conspiracy theory” is a loaded one, and is discussed in greater detail during my examination of *JFK*’s reception. For the time being I borrow Michael Barkun’s succinct definition of a conspiracy theory as “the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end.” Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>409</sup> Crowds, “Getting the Facts Straight,” p. 29.

the assassination. Significant to these retellings was the prominent cultural status placed on personal testimony. “Newspapers filled with eyewitness articles under titles like ‘Many Remember the Scene as It Was’ ... [and] ... ‘You Had to Be There to Know the Pain’” were, argues Zelizer, part of a 1980s culture of Kennedy commemoration in which diverse groups and individuals battled it out not only over the political meaning of the assassination but also over who had the right to tell the “real” story of the events of November ’63.<sup>410</sup> Therefore, by including his own reminiscence, Garrison’s book became part of this personalised Kennedy debate.

For numerous public figures, JFK was both a national hero and an inspiration. Generally, the president’s death was discussed as having been a monumental rupture in American history; a “loss of national innocence” for a country that would, in its aftermath, descend into the upheavals and transformations of the Sixties.<sup>411</sup> Public commentators asserted the assassination to have been a prelude to a Sixties declension narrative, one riddled with catastrophe after catastrophe: the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the revelations of government and intelligence agency corruption, the Watergate scandal of 1974, and President Richard Nixon’s forced resignation – all the hellish trappings of what Tom Shactman called the “decade of shocks.”<sup>412</sup> Indeed, Thomas Brown notes that, although many historians had, since the late 1960s, challenged the “Camelot” version of JFK’s presidency as a golden era, public sentiment remained “placidly unaffected” by such revisionism.<sup>413</sup>

Furthermore, and importantly, by the 1980s, politicians on the Left and the Right were laying claim to the president’s legacy.<sup>414</sup> Brown argues that President Kennedy crossed the political divide precisely because his years as commander and chief were so contradictory:

For conservatives and neoconservatives, there is Kennedy the hard-line cold warrior, tax cutter, and advocate of national discipline; for leftists, there is Kennedy the insipient populist radical; for liberals Kennedy the high-minded statesman; and

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<sup>410</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, p. 125.

<sup>411</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 28.

<sup>412</sup> Tom Shactman, *Decade of Shocks: Dallas to Watergate, 1963-1974* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983). See also Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5; Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 127.

<sup>413</sup> Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (London: I.B Tauris and Co Ltd, 1988), p. 100.

<sup>414</sup> Brown, *JFK*, p. 106-7.

for neoliberals, the tough and ‘realistic’ politician whose prime virtue seems to have been simply that he was a Democrat who won elections.<sup>415</sup>

Ronald Reagan consistently invoked Kennedy in the 1980s. As Von Bothmer notes, celebrating John F. Kennedy’s tenure was central to Reagan’s Sixties narrative. The early 1960s were remembered as the last time a Democratic government did the right thing for America. Reagan waxed rhapsodic over Kennedy’s tough anti-communism and tax cutting. Kennedy and his successor Lyndon Baines Johnson were cited as binary opposites. Kennedy was the “good sixties” of conservative values and policies, while Johnson was the “bad sixties” of big government, “unfair” welfare systems and weak foreign policy.<sup>416</sup> For Reagan, Kennedy was the last “Republican” Democrat; after JFK’s death the Democrats suffered their own declension narrative.

A tussle over JFK’s legacy ensued throughout the 1980s with Republicans and Democrats both staking claim to Kennedy as one of their own. The same year that Stone optioned Garrison’s book (1988), both Democrat presidential and Republican vice-presidential candidates, Michael Dukakis and Dan Quayle, were reciting their Kennedy credentials, to, it must be said, little avail.<sup>417</sup> Kennedy was a universal hero, it seemed. Large scale memorials to the slain leader were held on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of his assassination in 1983 and 1988 respectively. In 1983, *Newsweek* printed an opinion poll that found JFK to be the most popular president in history. Furthermore, sixty-six percent of respondents believed that, had Kennedy lived, “more money and effort” would have been put into helping the poor and disadvantaged; forty percent said that America would not have had a full scale war in Vietnam (compared with 37 percent that had said yes). Overall, sixty-five percent of respondents reported themselves as believing that “American society would have been much different if John Kennedy had not been assassinated.”<sup>418</sup> Much like the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassination was being discussed as

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<sup>415</sup> Brown, *JFK*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>416</sup> Bernard Von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), pp. 46-69.

<sup>417</sup> E.J. Dionne Jr., “Dukakis Takes the Fore In the Land of Kennedy,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1988, p. D25; Michael T. Kaufman, “J.F.K., Then and Now,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1988, p. E1; Douglas Martin, “Defining Today By Looking Back and Far Ahead,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1988, p. 29; Anon (Editorial), “George Bush’s Candidate,” *New York Times*, October, 7, 1988, p. A34.

<sup>418</sup> Peter Goldman, “Kennedy Remembered,” *Newsweek*, November 28, 1983, p. 64.

having had a horrendous impact upon the nation. At the same time, however, another assassination story circulated through public channels. This story, while still stressing the assassination's traumatic impact, nevertheless suggested that, for some Americans, Kennedy's death had ushered in political and personal coming-of-age. It was a narrative intrinsically associated with the Sixties generation.

“The idyll of the fifties did not end for baby boomers on December 31, 1959”, wrote Landon Jones in his 1980 book *Great Expectations*. “The time for innocence for this generation, in its own mind, ended on November 22, 1963.”<sup>419</sup> Jones cites a slightly older commentator, journalist Jeff Greenfield (b. 1943) as stating: “[w]hat our parents learnt in a war, or in a struggle for survival, we learned that November.” According to Greenfield, “no one was safe; if not John Kennedy, then definitely not any of us.”<sup>420</sup> The comparisons between World War II, the Depression and the Kennedy assassination captured much of the symbolic import that was being placed by some commentators on the events of November 1963. Greenfield's comment spoke to a widely circulated public narrative associated with the assassination in which Kennedy's murder acted almost as the requisite “hardship,” or enduring challenge that signified a generation's transition from childhood to adulthood. It was the Sixties generation's baptism of fire. Ever in tune with the ebb and flow of public debate, baby-boomer pop-star Billy Joel (b. 1949), whose song “Goodnight Saigon” was mentioned in Chapter One, appeared on a 1988 CBS news broadcast and aired his views on the assassination: “we were never really kids after that. Life just wasn't Mickey Mouse, rock and roll and shiny cars. It was different, everything was different after that.”<sup>421</sup> Or, as Tom Hayden eulogised in his Sixties memoir, the “tragic consciousness of the sixties generation began here, and would continue to grow.”<sup>422</sup> It should be noted that both of these commentators came from white, middle-class backgrounds, and that this post-assassination memorial narrative was created and disseminated primarily by the white middle classes. Issues such as institutionalised racism and government sanctioned segregation – “two

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<sup>419</sup> Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980), p. 65.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>421</sup> Quoted in Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 127.

<sup>422</sup> Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 114-115.



nations separate and unequal” – rarely appeared in these Kennedy-inspired Sixties recollections.

Unlike the national “loss of innocence” narrative (noted above), the Sixties generation often suggested the assassination to have led to a “loss of ignorance.” In these personal accounts the Kennedy assassination marked the beginnings of an entire generation’s political and spiritual “quest.” Todd Gitlin speaks to the infusing of JFK with authenticity. Kennedy was “the wanderer who dies trying to help the uncomprehending” – an outsider, a rebel, even. And, by extension, Kennedy, according to Gitlin, at least, was an inspiration for young New Leftists to take up a countercultural path.<sup>423</sup> In experiencing the assassination, the Sixties generation may have lost their childhoods, but they had been shaken into action.<sup>424</sup> Such a narrative also served to promote and legitimate this generation’s stories in the public sphere. Sturken notes that “survivors of traumatic historical events are often awarded moral authority” and, therefore, “their testimony carries the weight of cultural value.”<sup>425</sup> The Kennedy assassination was therefore cited as both the Sixties generation’s doorway into adulthood and an event that established the legitimacy and credence of this generation’s Sixties story. “Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is not glamorous to be a baby boomer,” began a 1988 article in the *New York Times*, continuing thus: “the assassination of President Kennedy assured us that the only thing we could count on was that life would make us cry.”<sup>426</sup> The Sixties generation had suffered, and were now returning to the public sphere as, to recall Sturken’s comment with regard to Vietnam veterans, “figure[s] of wisdom and truth.”<sup>427</sup>

At the same time as the Sixties generation were promoting their assassination histories in the public sphere, Oliver Stone’s standing as a generational spokesman was on the rise. “The sixties defined Stone,” wrote Stephen Talbot of *Mother Jones* in early 1991: “[H]is movies provide an insider’s portrait of that era: war, protest, sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll.” And, furthermore, he “was there, an eyewitness, a participant, and, as an insider who now has the rare opportunity to tell his stories – our generation’s stories, our movement’s stories”.<sup>428</sup> Certainly, for Talbot, Stone had

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<sup>423</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 34.

<sup>424</sup> Brown, *JFK*, p. 75.

<sup>425</sup> Sturken, “Reenactment,” p. 68.

<sup>426</sup> Meryl Ain, “Baby Boomers Need a Break,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1988, p. LI32.

<sup>427</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 86.

<sup>428</sup> Stephen Talbot, “Sixties Something,” *Mother Jones*, vol. 16, no. 2 (March/April, 1991), p. 46.

transcended the Vietnam veteran status with which he was associated during *Platoon*'s release, and was instead an all encompassing Sixties storyteller. The filmmaker's back catalogue had grown since *Platoon* and now included two other representations of Sixties politics and popular culture: another Vietnam picture, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and the biopic of Jim Morrison, *The Doors*. In one pre-release interview for *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone informed the *New York Times* that the protagonist, Ron Kovic's, story was very much also representative of his own and of Vietnam veterans in general. "Coming home was a second war", he said, "[i]t slammed so many of us right in the back of the neck."<sup>429</sup> *Born on the Fourth of July*'s star Tom Cruise provided direct parallels between Stone and Kovic. Cruise claimed that *Born on the Fourth of July* was also "his [Stone's] life story, his *Coming Home*."<sup>430</sup> During *The Door*'s release, *USA Today* quoted one commentator as stating that "whether he likes it or not, Stone has become a de facto historian for a generation whose ideas and views are increasingly shaped by movies and TV."<sup>431</sup> Stone was promoted as at once a Sixties spokesman and as a Sixties historian.

Stone's status as Sixties spokesman and historian was promoted similarly, but contested strongly during the production and reception of *JFK*, for, while Stone's generation – the Sixties generation – were one group attempting to establish themselves as legitimate assassination chroniclers, others also felt that they were in possession of the "real" assassination history. Barbie Zelizer and Peter Knight demonstrate that the assassination was retrospectively claimed by various older journalists to have had a profound impact upon their own lives. Famous broadcasters and scribes that covered the actual event such as Dan Rather (b. 1931), Tom Wicker (b. 1926) and Walter Cronkite (b. 1916) continued to play a prominent role in Kennedy commemoration well into the 1980s and 1990s. Cronkite's emotional reaction to Kennedy's death, Wicker's ability to transform the day's events into eloquent prose under difficult conditions (he wrote the story at the airport), and Rather's status as the first reporter to broadcast news of the shooting, have become ingrained in journalistic folklore. Such stories heralded these three journalists as

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<sup>429</sup> Paul Chutkow, "The Private War of Tom Cruise," *New York Times*, December 17, 1989, p. H1.

<sup>430</sup> Trip Gabriel, "Cruise at the Crossroads," *Rolling Stone*, January 11, 1990, p. 46.

<sup>431</sup> Deirdre Donahue, "Opening Doors on the Morrison Legend," *USA Today*, February 22, 1991, p. 6D. See also Paul Chutkow, "Oliver Stone and *The Doors*: Obsession Meets the Obsessed," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1991, p. H1.

legitimate assassination chroniclers.<sup>432</sup> The story of the assassination was also a broader (positive) story of journalistic diligence under intense emotional strain. Those that (like the Vietnam veteran) “were there” sought to claim their representations as the legitimate and authoritative accounts of November ’63.<sup>433</sup> That both the Sixties generation and these older journalists would seek to claim the assassination as “their” event is significant for when *JFK* was released theatrically there was in some cases a kind of generational war taking place between journalists such as Wicker and younger Sixties generation commentators over the meaning of the assassination and, by extension, the meaning of the Sixties.

Two strands of debate were central to public discussion of the Kennedy Assassination during the 1990s. First there was the assassination as national loss of innocence – America descends into the turbulent Sixties. Second, there was a personal loss of ignorance – the beginnings of a journey of self discovery, a gaining of wisdom. Screenwriters Stone and Sklar, I argue, adapted Garrison’s novel and developed the script in such a way as to turn *JFK* into a meditation on the assassination’s national impact, while at the same time stressing its personal resonance for the Sixties generation, who, according to many accounts, came-of-age when shots were fired on Dealey Plaza.

### **Innocence Lost: Adaptation and Script Development, 1988-1991**

*JFK*’s historical representation shared many similarities with the national “loss of innocence” narrative, noted above. Both Marita Sturken and Robert Burgoyne suggest that the film represents America’s national unravelling in the assassination’s wake.<sup>434</sup> Burgoyne argues that *JFK*’s explicit reflection upon “time” and its vulnerability to manipulation, not to mention the film’s fragmented narrative and multiple points-of-view, serve to create a sense of discontinuity and loss. These thematic and formal features communicate “the message that the national narrative has come unravelled, that the shots in Dealey Plaza have produced a caesura in the

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<sup>432</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, pp. 143-150.

<sup>433</sup> Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, p. 17.

<sup>434</sup> Sturken, “Oliver Stone’s Docudramas,” pp. 71-72.

narrative of nation.”<sup>435</sup> Certain creative decisions made during script development indicate that Stone and Sklar were attempting to invite this reading. A descent into chaos narrative had already appeared in basic form in Garrison’s memoir, and *JFK*’s source text, *On the Trail of the Assassins*. Garrison concludes his memoir by stating that “[w]ith the passage of time, we can see the enduring results of President Kennedy’s assassination.” America “is still recovering from its tragic nine-year adventure in Vietnam. The C.I.A. continues to run our foreign policy without any real control by either Congress or the President.”<sup>436</sup> Here the Vietnam War and governmental corruption are claimed to have proliferated with greater strength after JFK’s murder. Stone and Sklar added other verbal and visual signifiers to this perspective on post-assassination America.

After Stone had optioned Garrison’s memoir, he asked Sklar to produce a draft script. Stone wanted Sklar to write a script in which we “see the actual assassination in Dealey Plaza at the beginning, again later, and again near the end, each time from different viewpoints and with more clarity.”<sup>437</sup> The frequent incorporation into the film’s narrative of Abraham Zapruder’s footage of the Kennedy assassination (the only footage which actually recorded the fatal head shot), was designed to recall other films that had portrayed events from multiple perspectives such as *Rashomon* (1950) and *Z* (1969).<sup>438</sup> From early in the production process, it is clear that Stone envisioned *JFK* as offering a multifarious view on the assassination, one which framed and re-framed the event from a variety of perspectives. In retrospect, cultural theorist Hayden White interpreted this narrative strategy as an attempt to challenge traditional (written) historical discourse. White contends that many major events of the twentieth century cannot be represented wholly or adequately by way of traditional linear historical narratives and by complete adherence to “fact.” There are, he suggests, too many conflicting perspectives. White praises *JFK* for revealing the subjective nature of historiography, presenting multiple perspectives on the same event and questioning

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<sup>435</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 94, pp. 94-96.

<sup>436</sup> Garrison, *Assassins*, pp. 295-296.

<sup>437</sup> Sklar correspondence with author.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

any neat distinction between “truth on the one side and myth, ideology, illusion and lie on the other.”<sup>439</sup>

The combining of staged re-enactments with constant references to the documentary record (the Zapruder footage) was planned very early in the production of *JFK*, allowing Stone eventually, in White’s view, to challenge orthodox forms of history telling. The frequent return to the Zapruder footage is also significant because it mobilises what, by the mid-1970s, had become established in public memory as the most iconic imagery associated with the assassination. Prior to its screening on the television programme *Good Night America* in 1975, the American public had only ever seen the Zapruder footage as a series of still photographs. Shortly after the assassination, the media conglomerate Time-Life bought the rights to the footage and published stills in *Life* magazine. Time-Life did not, however, allow the public to view the actual film, keeping it locked away until 1975. In 1975, the rights to the home movie were sold back to the Zapruder family. Soon it was being quoted and referenced in everything from documentaries, short films to pieces of video art.<sup>440</sup> The footage is so intrinsically associated with the assassination that some people have even publicly mis-remembered watching it for the first time in November 1963.<sup>441</sup> As Burgoyne puts it, “we ‘remember’ seeing the [Zapruder] film when we ‘remember’ our experience of the assassination.”<sup>442</sup>

Snippets of the Zapruder footage are used throughout *JFK*, although the most brutal moment (the head shot) is not revealed until the film’s end. The unfolding of *JFK*’s Sixties narrative thus runs in tandem with the gradual revelation of the horrors of the Zapruder footage. The footage often appears after particularly shocking revelations. For example, it flashes into one of Garrison’s nightmares just after he has come to the conclusion that the government’s Warren Commission investigation into the assassination (the official 1964 investigation) was superficial if not deliberately misleading (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). During the film’s climactic courtroom denouement, the head-shot that kills Kennedy is finally screened diegetically and thus, by extension, for viewers of *JFK*. This moment is repeated several times, to gasps within the courtroom. It is accompanied by Garrison’s chant-

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<sup>439</sup> White, “The Modernist Event,” pp. 18-19.

<sup>440</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, pp. 27-33.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 31.

<sup>442</sup> Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, p. 106.

like summation “back and to the left, back and to the left.” Burgoyne argues that the interweaving of documentary footage into staged re-enactments and speculative fiction means that “the meaning of the documents is altered”.<sup>443</sup> In this case, the Zapruder film becomes more than a documentary account of the assassination; it is used in *JFK* as a metaphor for what this film claims to be America’s unravelling in the Sixties.



Figure 3.1: The Zapruder footage in *JFK*.

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<sup>443</sup> Robert Burgoyne, “Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film,” in Paul Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 233.



Figure 3.2: The Zapruder footage II.

In later drafts of the *JFK* script, a range of political and cultural phenomena are added to the film's representation of Sixties decline. Without a full breakdown of who wrote what, I rely upon my own correspondence with Sklar, published interviews with Sklar and Stone, two draft scripts and the completed film itself. Available in the draft scripts, and almost verbatim in the finished film, is a conversation between Garrison and Senator Russell Long (played in the film by Walter Matthau). We are told by caption that three years have passed since the

assassination. Garrison sits next to Long on a flight to Washington. The country is “screwed up”, opines Long: “all these hippies running around on drugs ... Values have gone to hell, Jim”. There is also a reference to biting “off more than we can chew” in Vietnam. Garrison replies that “I sometimes think things have gone downhill since John Kennedy was killed.”<sup>444</sup> Garrison’s memoir did not include these lines of dialogue. In the book we are simply privy to Long’s comment that “[t]here’s no way in the world that one man could have shot up Jack Kennedy that way.”<sup>445</sup> Long’s link between the assassination and the counterculture is Stone and Sklar’s creation.<sup>446</sup> *JFK*’s script compresses the idea that not only the Vietnam War, but also other upheavals of the Sixties were the result of the assassination. As well as references to the counterculture, there is mention of Kennedy’s civil rights policies. In the finished film there appears staged footage of a black woman informing a television reporter that “he [Kennedy] did so much for coloured people.” As we will see in the following chapter, the notion that the struggle for African-American equality reached its pinnacle in 1963 and subsequently dissipated was a symptom of conservative discourse, which hoped to separate a “good” civil rights of the early 1960s from “bad”, late 1960s civil rights struggles.

As *JFK* progresses we are provided with further evidence of a conservative “bad sixties” emerging in post-assassination America. The one prominent character coded as a hippie, Garrison’s acquaintance Dean Andrews (John Candy), is depicted as a corrupt co-conspirator in the Kennedy assassination. In the 1991 draft of the script Andrews is introduced as “framed by huge black glasses” and “talks in the Louisiana hippie argot of the 50’s.”<sup>447</sup> Andrews may be an older character – a Fifties beatnik type – yet his appearance in the film’s post-1966 period imbues Andrews with a Sixties countercultural resonance. In the finished film, his hippie demeanour is even shown to be a fraud. We are treated to a flashback of Andrews consorting with another conspirator, Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones). Here he loses his hippie dialect and speaks as if desperately attempting to master a well-to-do, “King’s English”, as Andrews himself puts it. Andrews stands as this film’s lone hippie representative and therefore provides a representation of the hippie counterculture as

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<sup>444</sup> Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK* (January 1991), p. 19; *JFK* (shooting script), p. 25.

<sup>445</sup> Garrison, *Assassins*, p. 13.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>447</sup> Stone and Sklar, *JFK* (shooting script), p. 62.



immoral, corrupt and, above all, fraudulent. Or, in the parlance of this thesis, Andrews and, perhaps hippies in general, are inauthentic.

For all his associations with Sixties politics and culture, Stone does seem to have an ambivalent view toward the hippie counterculture. While *Platoon*'s Elias was imbued with some positive qualities associated with hippies, Stone's Jim Morrison biopic, *The Doors*, would seem to paint a rather damning picture of those that bought into the Woodstock ethos wholesale. The film's hero-worship of Morrison notwithstanding, *The Doors* demonises the Sixties counterculture, turning its alternative lifestyles into bizarre satanic rituals, icons such as Andy Warhol and Nico into airheaded weaklings or sex objects. This is the only one of Stone's Sixties films that does not synthesise its central protagonist's gaining of personal authenticity with a call for social activism. In Stone's apocalyptic vision, the "poet" Morrison is physically and emotionally corrupted, and eventually destroyed, by the counterculture's excesses. In *The Doors*, Stone envisions a negative search for authenticity (one criticised by Adorno and discussed in the introduction) in which people did not set out to commit significant actions or change society, but to retreat from society and, eventually, to destroy themselves. In this sense *JFK* followed on from *The Doors*' in arguing that the counterculture was not just peace and love, and did have a dark side beneath its flowery veneer.

It has also been noted that *JFK*'s Sixties narrative verges in one sense on an extreme conservative, if not right-wing, interpretation of history. If hippies are one target of the film's loss-of-innocence narrative, another rises to prominence as Garrison's investigation develops: gay men. Sklar and Stone apparently differed over whether to include the scenes that depict a number of the conspirators acting out sexual fantasies and discussing their sexuality. Sklar felt that these added scenes were unnecessary and, in fact, were "gratuitous."<sup>448</sup> Yet Stone prevailed and these scenes made it into the finished film. "Homosexual panic displaces politics in *JFK*", argues Michael Rogin.<sup>449</sup> *JFK*'s representation of lost innocence, in Rogin's view, is the revelation of a nefarious homosexual underground whose conspirators plotted the murder of America's 35<sup>th</sup> president.<sup>450</sup> Clay Shaw, David Ferrie (Joe Pesci) and

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<sup>448</sup> Sklar correspondence.

<sup>449</sup> Michael Rogin, "Body and Soul Murder: *JFK*," in Marjorie Garber (ed.), *Media Spectacles* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>450</sup> Rogin, "Body and Soul," pp. 10-17.

Willy O'Keefe (Kevin Bacon) are all represented in the film as quasi-fascist political activists. During an interview with Garrison, O'Keefe verbally expresses the political convictions of this sinister cadre. He is asked why he is willing to testify against his co-conspirators and implicate them in the plot to kill Kennedy. O'Keefe says it is because JFK stole the presidential election in 1960. "Nixon was going to be one of the great presidents, until Kennedy wrecked this country", he informs Garrison. Next he announces that because of Kennedy, there are "niggers wanting their damn rights" and "why do you think we've got all this crime now?" In one speech O'Keefe links homosexuality to right-wing and racist views. In terms of this representation, *JFK* very much would seem to be presenting a national narrative of decline in which gay men brought down Kennedy and, by implication, America. I do, however, disagree with Rogin that the entire film is premised on the murderous plotting of a gay cabal. The representation of gay men is certainly a problematic feature of this film, and rightly has been subjected to criticism. But *JFK*'s villains are not all coded as gay, nor are homosexuals portrayed as the main threat to America.

In what might be seen as a more liberal account of the Sixties, an out-of-control militaristic culture is suggested to have destroyed American society. In 1989, Sklar created the first version of a scene based on a letter sent by former military advisor Fletcher Prouty to Garrison.<sup>451</sup> The letter recounted Garrison's meeting with an informant who in the film is called "X" (Donald Sutherland). Lamenting corruption at the highest levels, X refers to "something ugly" emerging from within the government and the military after Kennedy's death. He suggests that CIA-run "Black Ops" were involved in the assassination, and that Kennedy was killed because he was not willing to intensify American military presence in Vietnam. Garrison asks in disbelief if the assassination was really down to the president's attempts to question the military establishment and to try to "change" society. X responds in the affirmative. Sklar deliberately relocated this scene's action to Washington D.C. so as to provide it with certain symbolic connotations.<sup>452</sup> Setting the scene in the Washington Mall provides an alternative narrative of national history to that present in X's conspiratorial rhetoric. Burgoyne highlights how this sequence begins at the Lincoln Memorial and concludes at Kennedy's grave. He suggests that

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<sup>451</sup> Sklar correspondence.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

these monuments conjure a “different narrative of nation”, one associated with a positive, communal reflection on America’s past – a history of the “people.”<sup>453</sup> In my view, it supports a reading of the Kennedy assassination as a historical watershed. Garrison and X’s walk from Lincoln (Memorial) to Kennedy (tomb) might be viewed as a march through American history. From Lincoln to Kennedy there is an unbroken march of benevolent leaders and public servants. Yet, as Garrison and X’s conversation indicates, this positive narrative of government leaders ends in 1963 with Kennedy’s assassination.

In one scene that appears towards the end of *JFK*, even the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy are suggested to have been the result of the same dark forces that brought to an abrupt end the president’s life. As Garrison prepares a drink in his family kitchen a sudden burst of gunfire is heard coming from the television. Robert Kennedy is dead. This is followed by the same military drum beat that accompanied JFK’s assassination during the film’s opening montage, thus providing an aural link between the perpetrators of the two crimes. “They killed him ... they killed Robert Kennedy”, Garrison informs his wife Liz (Sissy Spacek). “You were right”, she replies, at last coming around to her husband’s belief in governmental corruption. This is the late Sixties disaster narrative coming to a head, as it does in Todd Gitlin’s autobiography (noted in the Introduction) in 1968.<sup>454</sup>

In many ways then, *JFK* invites an interpretation of the Sixties that is in keeping with the declension narrative of popular memory. The Kennedy assassination unleashes chaos, leads to disillusionment and despair. The early Sixties is the last period of hope and optimism. It is a narrative that could resonate with liberal and conservative voices alike. Liberals could claim that America went downhill because of an out-of-control culture of militarism. *JFK* also presents the conservative view that America unravelled under the weight of hippy protests and free love. An alternative Sixties narrative, however, emerges if one focuses on Jim Garrison’s personal story. In many ways, it reverses the standard “descent into chaos” trajectory and actually locates the “bad sixties” in the early 1960s, and the “good sixties” post-1963. By reading the film as a search for personal authenticity an entirely different story of the Sixties emerges.

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<sup>453</sup> Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>454</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 381.

## **In Search of Authenticity: *JFK*'s "Good Sixties".**

Garrison's encounter with X ends at Kennedy's grave. With the "eternal flame" burning in the background, *JFK* makes it rather clear that Kennedy's flame has not ignited the passions of subsequent governments or military leaders; they are not heirs to Kennedy's values and ideals. Again, Burgoyne provides an interesting interpretation of this composition. Referring to the visual connection made between Kennedy's tomb and African-American children playing near the tomb, Burgoyne argues that the keepers of Kennedy's flame are the American people. It is an example of what he calls "history from across", whereby national history is retold from the perspective of the disenfranchised, as opposed to that of the powers that be. It is America's positive, democratic history.<sup>455</sup> Building on Burgoyne's argument, I contend that this positive history is extended by way of Garrison's personal narrative. In the Washington scene, Garrison is literally placed next to Kennedy's flame just before X implores him to continue with his investigation to uncover the "truth." Throughout the film, Garrison is presented metaphorically as an heir to Kennedy. Garrison adopts what the film suggests to be Kennedy's anti-establishment attitude as he seeks, like Kennedy, to challenge corrupt government and corrupt military institutions.

Reading the film as Garrison's gaining of wisdom, self-knowledge and a mature political outlook requires a reversal of *JFK*'s Sixties narrative. Indeed, there are sufficient visual and verbal cues present in the film to indicate that *JFK*'s "bad sixties" could very easily be located in the Kennedy era (the early 1960s) and a (though certainly still traumatic) "good sixties" of sorts emerges in post-Kennedy-assassination America. On this count, it is worth first of all considering Stone's previous Sixties films, for the filmmaker had never attempted to present the early 1960s as a golden era. As noted in Chapter One, *Platoon* critiques a culture of conformity, militaristic zeal and moral oppressiveness. This film does not explicitly reference Kennedy or the early 1960s as symbolic of this, but such themes are indicative of those usually applied to the pre-1963 era. Stone's second Vietnam film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, explicitly associates the early 1960s and even John F. Kennedy with a negative, oppressive, conformist society.

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<sup>455</sup> Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, p. 101.

*Born on the Fourth of July*'s opening act focuses on central protagonist Ron Kovic's (Tom Cruise's) home town of Massapequa, Long Island. The town portrayed is one defined by a culture of militarism: young boys pretend to be John Wayne, there are lavish parades in which war veterans take centre stage, parents instil rabid anti-communist and pro-military sentiment into their children and, at the centre of it all, John F. Kennedy appears on television calling upon his fellow Americans to ask "not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."<sup>456</sup> As Robert Rosenstone argues, Kennedy functions somewhat differently in *Born on the Fourth of July* than he does in *JFK*. In the former, the president promotes a negative masculine ideal, as opposed to the latter in which he is presented as a positive symbol of change.<sup>457</sup> Kennedy in *Born on the Fourth of July* sends young men off to die in Vietnam; Kennedy in *JFK* attempts to bring them home.

*JFK*'s opening act shares a number of similarities to *Born on the Fourth of July*. The film begins with documentary footage. President Dwight D. Eisenhower forewarns of the dangers of a "military industrial complex," a triangular relationship between the state, the military and private industry, which sought, for political and financial reasons, to keep America in a perpetual state of war. This warning is taken from the final speech Eisenhower delivered before he left office in January 1961. As Eisenhower speaks, a sequence of clips and photographs of military training, production and advertising begins. From shots of factories producing airplanes and missiles to smiling faces of two soldiers on what looks like an advertising billboard to a wedding held at a church to a family eating a picnic by a river, this mini-sequence provides a running commentary on Eisenhower's fears that this nefarious concatenation of business, war and politics has an "economic, political, even spiritual influence upon every city, every court, every statehouse of the federal government." Cutting between images of the war industries and seemingly innocuous events such as weddings and picnics provides the first ominous signs of widespread infiltration. Note also Eisenhower's choice of words. This is not just a political, but a "spiritual" infiltration. One might say that *JFK* is again attempting to

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<sup>456</sup> Jack E. Davis, "New Left, Revisionist, In-Your-Face History," in Toplin (ed.), *Oliver Stone's USA*, pp. 139-142.

<sup>457</sup> Rosenstone, "Oliver Stone as Historian," p. 37.

evoke the conformist, militaristic society referred to by Taylor in *Platoon* and portrayed visually in *Born on the Fourth of July*.

In *JFK*, Kennedy is represented as a challenge to this stagnant, oppressive society. In the film's opening scene, a voiceover declares that Kennedy is a symbol of the "new freedom of the 1960s." In the finished film, the president is associated visually with the civil rights movement. In three quick cuts we are greeted by an image of Martin Luther King, followed by an image of Kennedy, then Nation of Islam spokesman Malcolm X. Allying Kennedy with Dr. King as well as, even more controversially, Malcolm X (see Chapter Four), suggests Kennedy to have been an anti-establishment figure. Stone and company, in the script and in the film itself, imbue the slain president with a kind of countercultural chic. In this opening montage, Kennedy is clearly not presiding over a magical kingdom. Subsequent images of sinister military activity and capitalist enterprise build further toward a negative image of the early 1960s. This period is referred to in the script as "those tense times", suggesting that the screenwriters were not really thinking of the period as one of innocence for America.<sup>458</sup> In the finished film, the sound of a military-like drumbeat becomes more and more prominent on the soundtrack. As the montage sequence reaches footage of the assassination, the drum beat is over-powering; it is an aural reminder of the culture that *JFK* argues Kennedy to have stood against, and which eventually killed the president – a military, mechanistic, inauthentic America, an America that, in *Platoon*, was associated with Sergeant Barnes. In *JFK*, it is well and truly brought home. Kennedy's death is a victory of the machine over the human. And yet, as the film fades out from the death of one hero to the face of Garrison, the man that will become the film's hero, there is the suggestion that someone else will take up the slain president's mantle: Kennedy's death instigates Jim Garrison's political and spiritual rebirth.

*On the Trail of the Assassins* had already offered an indication of Garrison's personal journey. Chapter One of Garrison's memoir is entitled "The Serenity of Ignorance" and, like the film, introduces Garrison sitting in his office about to hear that Kennedy has been shot. We read that Garrison was born with "patriotism in [his] blood".<sup>459</sup> When, shortly after the assassination he finds his first suspect, David

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<sup>458</sup> Stone and Sklar, *JFK* (shooting script), p. 1.

<sup>459</sup> Garrison, *Assassins*, p. 9.

Ferrie, Garrison is convinced of the integrity of the FBI and of their investigative abilities. Over the years, Garrison had “acquired a reverence for the law.”<sup>460</sup> Furthermore, he “could not imagine then that the government ever would deceive the citizens of this country.”<sup>461</sup> Immediately, one can see how such sentiments intersect with the kinds of stories told by the Sixties generation (noted above). Although Garrison (b. 1921) was many years older than this cohort, his story had a cross-generational resonance. It referred to a similar “awakening” to institutional corruption post-1963.

During script development and (as examined later) during the film’s promotion, one can see an attempt, on the part of Stone and Sklar, to frame Garrison as a mainstream figure, not an extremist and certainly not a paranoid lunatic or a crackpot (accusations levelled against him in the 1960s).<sup>462</sup> Generally, as Peter Knight notes, “critics of the lone gunman version were relegated to the world of the tabloids and small press ‘crackpot’ publications, until the emergence of revelations about the covert and illegal operations of the intelligence community in connection with Watergate [in 1974].”<sup>463</sup> In the late 1970s, however, the belief that more than one person had been involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy gained a greater degree of credence. A new array of books was published, which suggested possible conspiracies behind JFK’s murder.<sup>464</sup> In 1978, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, a task force charged with re-evaluating the findings of the Warren Commission, concluded that it was possible that there had in fact been a conspiracy behind Kennedy’s murder involving the mafia. Television documentaries and docudramas such as *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* (1977), *On Trial: Lee Harvey Oswald* (1986), *The Men who Killed Kennedy* (1988) investigated possible conspirators involved in his killing. A feature film called *Flashpoint* (1984), which was set in the 1980s and which suggested FBI involvement in the Kennedy assassination, was released as were novels such as Don DeLillo’s, *Libra* (1988), a fictional account of the assassination. By the 1980s, a diverse array of speculative histories of the assassination had appeared which, for many Americans, stood as

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<sup>460</sup> Garrison, *Assassins*, p. 8.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>462</sup> Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1989), pp. 505-506.

<sup>463</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 88.

<sup>464</sup> Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, pp. 92-93.

genuine attempts to uncover the truth behind Kennedy's killing.<sup>465</sup> By the 1980s, it was therefore easier for Garrison to avoid being associated with an extremist fringe.

Garrison's growing belief that military, CIA and FBI operatives were involved in Kennedy's killing is not represented in *JFK* as delusional, but as perspicacious. "My eyes have opened", he informs his wife Liz during an argument halfway through the film. Chastising Liz's willingness to ignore state corruption in favour of a quiet life, Garrison rages: "I had a life too, you know ... But you can't just bury your head in the sand". His speech then takes a similar direction to Chris Taylor's attack on the "world" of his parents (noted in Chapter One):

It's not just about you – and your well-being and your two cars and your kitchen and your TV and your 'I'm just fine honey.' While our kids grow up in a shit-hole of lies ... My life is fucked Liz, and yours is too.

With this speech Garrison, like Taylor, highlights the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy. In *JFK*, those with vision are those who are willing to break from a consumerist, conformist culture and stand up to the state. When confronted with Garrison's conspiracy theory, Liz tells him that she "doesn't want to see". She prefers to remain in the dark. Up until *JFK*, Stone's Sixties films had tended to either be absent of female characters or present women as an impediment to the hero's gaining of authenticity. As noted in Chapter One, *Platoon*'s Chris Taylor embarks on his personal journey under the tutelage of two fathers Sergeants Barnes and Elias. It is also notable that *Born on the Fourth of July* seems unwilling to grant women any stake in the protagonist's positive personal development. For example, Kovic's mother is the anti-communist, gung-ho Fifties representative, who is implicitly blamed for her son's physical and psychological failings. For Burgoyne, this film ends up reaffirming traditional gender roles, suggesting that Kovic's political activism has "rescued" the nation from the threat of emasculation (signified by both Kovic's impotency and his overpowering mother).<sup>466</sup> In *The Doors*, Morrison's girlfriend Pamela Courson (Meg Ryan) self-consciously announces herself to be an

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<sup>465</sup> Opinion polls suggest that large numbers of the public believed that more than one person was involved in Kennedy's murder. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 81.

<sup>466</sup> Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, pp. 57-87



“ornament”. And if there is certainly a touch of sarcasm in Courson’s statement, her major role throughout the film does seem to be to chastise Morrison for his sexual, drink and drug-related misdemeanours. Appearing in Morrison’s dreams and hallucinations, a Native American shaman becomes the rock-star’s spiritual guide.

In *JFK* another father figure – in this case Kennedy – inspires the central protagonist’s political action and personal transformation. Sklar notes that several early drafts of *JFK* included a scene in which Garrison visited his mother. “I wanted the audience to know where Jim got his own toughness,” said Sklar, “the ability to stand up to authority”.<sup>467</sup> This scene never appeared in the finished film and its omission means that once again the central protagonist is guided solely by a male role model (as was the case in both *Platoon* and *Dirty Dancing*). The absence of any prominent female characters in *JFK* (Garrison’s wife Liz and an investigator called Susie [Laurie Metcalf] have relatively minor roles) means that the Kennedy-era and Kennedy’s assassination are explored from an exclusively male perspective.<sup>468</sup> In a sense, as the film progresses, Garrison “becomes” Kennedy (or *JFK*’s idealised image of Kennedy). During early drafts of the script Stone apparently wanted to intensify this connection, with John Kennedy’s ghost appearing at Garrison’s side right after Robert Kennedy’s death is announced.<sup>469</sup> While this scene was eventually discarded prior to shooting, there is nevertheless the persistent suggestion that the District Attorney is the inheritor of Kennedy’s values. At the beginning of the film, Garrison sits in a restaurant as news reports of the assassination attempt are broadcast. “Come on Jack, pull through”, he says, while awaiting further news. The use of a familiar nickname suggests a certain intimacy between the two characters. It is almost as if Garrison is addressing a family member. The two men are linked visually early in the film. While Garrison works at his desk, his son Jasper is seen playing at the bottom of the frame, thus providing a subtle reference to a famous photograph of JFK and his son in the Oval office (Figure 3.3).

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<sup>467</sup> Sklar correspondence. A version of this scene appears in the January 1991 draft. Garrison’s mother discusses her own life story and struggles in Depression era America. She then informs her son that “they [Garrison’s critics] won’t beat you child.” Stone and Sklar, *JFK* (January 1991), pp. 116-117.

<sup>468</sup> It is telling that the film makes no reference to the alleged impact that Jackie Kennedy had upon women’s politics, fashions and aspirations in the early 1960s. It would take another film, *Love Field* (1992), one of the few female-centred Hollywood Sixties features, to redress this imbalance (this film is discussed briefly in the Conclusion).

<sup>469</sup> Sklar correspondence.

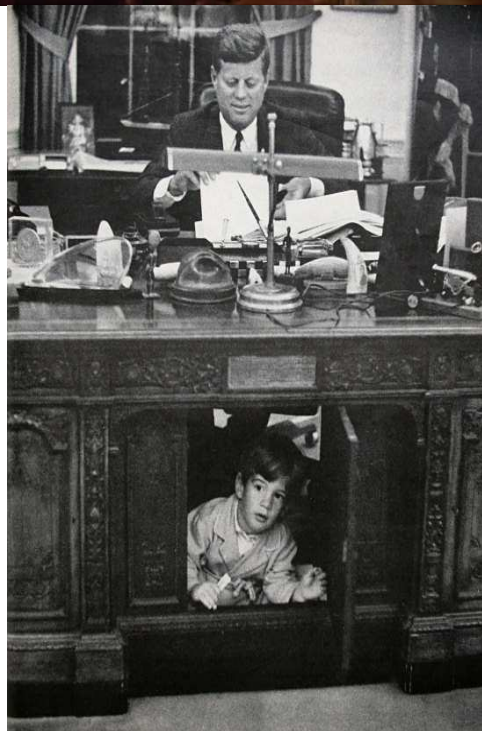


Figure 3.3: *JFK*'s Jim Garrison at work; Kennedy at work.

*JFK* depicts Garrison and the president as being of similar mind-sets. As Garrison learns more about the assassination, he begins to turn against the government, the CIA and the military. Providing staged re-enactments and references to presidential memos, *JFK* suggests that Kennedy also turned against these institutions. The president was, as X puts it, “like Caesar, surrounded by enemies.” Learning of Kennedy’s views – at least as they are characterized in *JFK* – toward the CIA and the Vietnam War, affects Garrison profoundly. These are the eye-opening moments in the protagonist’s personal narrative. Garrison’s attitude

toward the state changes from a conservative belief its benign authority to a radical critique of its political and moral standing in part because he discovers that Kennedy was of the same mind. “Authenticity”, wrote the existentialist thinker Jean Paul Sartre, “consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate.”<sup>470</sup> This might almost be seen to define Garrison’s journey from ignorance to authenticity. He slowly begins to gain a “lucid consciousness” of the corruption residing within state institutions. The media ridicules him for his beliefs and, yet, by the film’s concluding scene, Garrison forces others to confront the horrors lurking in the deepest recesses of the government and the military.

Garrison’s courtroom summation at the film’s conclusion cements personal experiences as authentic. Like Taylor from *Platoon* and *Dirty Dancing*’s Baby, he is promoted to the status of inspiration and “teacher.” Turning toward the jury he announces “I’d hate to be in your shoes today.” Then, as if commenting on his own personal development, while also making a statement that mirrored those made by numerous members of the Sixties generation (noted above), Garrison delivers the following words:

Going back to when we were children, I think most of us in this courtroom thought that justice came into being automatically, that virtue was its own reward, and that good would triumph over evil. But as we get older we know this just isn’t true ... Individual human beings have to create justice and this is not easy because truth often presents a threat to power and we have to fight power often at great risk to ourselves ... The truth is the most important value we have because if the truth does not endure, if the Government murders truth ... then this is no longer the country I was born in.

With this statement Garrison highlights the need for the individual to develop his or her own ethical code and to challenge social structures that seek to conceal wrongdoing and oppress others. The early part of the speech (“when we were children ...”) recalls the Sixties generation’s public recollections of its experiences

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<sup>470</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 90.

of pre-assassination America. Garrison too, though older, has metaphorically grown up in the assassination's wake. His call for others – the jury – to follow him is reminiscent of the didactic conclusions to both *Platoon* and *Dirty Dancing*. Here is another filmic protagonist calling on viewers to engage in a political and personal journey. He repeats the word “truth” several times throughout the speech. It is a quality found not by swallowing the official line, but by standing up and challenging those in power. Finally, Garrison turns to face the camera and, by extension, the cinema audience, and announces “it’s up to you.” This statement is all the more resonant because he has not succeeded in securing a conviction. Conspiracy suspect Clay Shaw is found not guilty. The book is closed on Garrison’s failed attempts to prosecute Kennedy’s “real” killers, and it is left to someone amongst the 1990s film audience to take up his mantle.

The finished film therefore ends, on an upbeat note with Garrison as inspiration. In earlier drafts of *JFK*'s script, there was going to be an additional scene. The original ending was to feature Garrison and his Washington informant X meeting once again to discuss Garrison’s failed attempts to convict Clay Shaw. Garrison’s trial and the 1960s are over. Neither Garrison nor X betray any signs of hope for the future. “Just think what happened to this country ... to the world ... because of that murder”, says Garrison. “Vietnam, racial conflict, breakdown of law, drugs, thought control” – the District Attorney can do little but lick his wounds and lament his country’s downward spiral since November ’63.<sup>471</sup> The final sequence of the shooting script is an imaginary scenario – one that eventually appeared midway through the finished film – in which President Lyndon Johnson informs military top brass that he is “committed to Vietnam” and declares “Just get me elected, and I’ll give you your damn war.”<sup>472</sup>

*JFK*'s eventual concluding lines are markedly different from this draft of the script. As the District Attorney leaves the courthouse he is accosted by journalists. “Are you [Garrison] going to resign?” one asks. “Hell no”, says Garrison, “I’m going to run again, and I’m going to win”. The journalists then turn to Clay Shaw and ask: “do you think Garrison will be back?” Whether or not Garrison would personally “be back” is academic by this stage in the film, for Garrison has already called upon

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<sup>471</sup> Stone and Sklar, *JFK* (shooting script), p. 183.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

others to follow in his footsteps: “It’s up to you.” This is *JFK*’s positive Sixties narrative. *JFK* thus ends with a celebration of Garrison’s intellectual and spiritual development as opposed to a reference to the Sixties “descent into chaos” narrative. Garrison was inheritor of what *JFK* claims to be Kennedy’s political and moral values. The President’s flame has not been extinguished; just passed on.

### **Through the Looking Glass: Promotion and Reception**

In the spring of 1991, as Oliver Stone was directing his recreation of John F. Kennedy’s presidential motorcade into Dallas’ Dealey Plaza, he may have been unaware that an ambush was about to take place. “There is a point at which intellectual myopia becomes morally repugnant”, declared the *Dallas Morning News* on May 14 1991. “Stone’s new movie proves he has passed that point.”<sup>473</sup> A few days later, George Lardner Jr. of *The Washington Post* weighed in with his conclusion that “Oliver Stone’s version of the Kennedy assassination exploits the edge of paranoia.”<sup>474</sup> Vehemently chastising the director’s choice of Jim Garrison as the movie’s hero, these articles were the first of many to attack *JFK*. Or, perhaps *ambush* is a more appropriate description, for, at this point, the film had not even been released and the only available material was a leaked draft of the script.

Barbie Zelizer and Janet Staiger argue that the controversy surrounding *JFK* during its production and release was informed by debates on cultural legitimacy: who had the right to lay claim to the “real” assassination story? Zelizer suggests that it was Stone’s questioning of the professional integrity of other public chroniclers of the assassination – independent critics, historians and especially mainstream journalists – that led to the large number of attacks on the film. In essence, contends Zelizer, media coverage of *JFK* exemplified the “ongoing contest for authorization” existing within 1990s Kennedy remembrance.<sup>475</sup> Staiger similarly claims that the battle over *JFK* was a question of “who is appropriately authorized to fill in the

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<sup>473</sup> Jon Margolis, “Dallas in Wonderland,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 14, 1991. Reprinted in Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, *JFK: The Book of the Film* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), pp. 190-191.

<sup>474</sup> George Lardner Jr., “On the Set: Dallas in Wonderland,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1991, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, p. 191.

<sup>475</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, p. 213.

[assassination] narrative”.<sup>476</sup> She takes to task Hayden White, who, as noted above, had argued that its formal experimentation had made *JFK* a radical and innovative representation of history. Staiger argues that many film critics and public commentators were well-schooled in the techniques of so-called “postmodern” metahistories (the mixing of documentary footage and staged re-enactment was, for example, a long established technique in film and crime television programmes) and therefore able fully to grasp the intricacies of *JFK*’s multiple perspectives and fragmented narrative. Nor was the film’s case for a conspiracy particularly disputed; even journalists who attacked the film’s adherence to the historical record conceded that there was strong evidence that more than one person was involved in the plot to kill Kennedy. There was, however, a general fear that Stone’s film would impede a search for the truth by becoming the new authorized historical account.<sup>477</sup> The examination of the critical reception of *JFK* presented below also focuses on questions of cultural authority. I suggest that much of *JFK*’s positive and negative criticism was informed by a broader debate on the political validity of what Peter Knight calls “conspiracy thinking” and its relationship to Sixties politics and culture.<sup>478</sup> In reviews and articles on *JFK*, the semantic framing of such terms as “conspiracy theory” and “paranoia”, was used as a way of attacking or celebrating the Sixties and of promoting or discrediting various groups and individuals.

The term “conspiracy theory” is a loaded one, and can, as Knight points out, be used simply to denigrate or dismiss someone else’s perspective on an event.<sup>479</sup> However, Knight also suggests that views toward conspiracy theories have undergone significant reconfiguration since the late 1960s. Conspiracy thinking, in the early 1960s dismissed, by prominent intellectuals such as Richard Hofstadter as the extremist beliefs of (usually right-wing) ideologues, became, by the late 1960s, popular currency for both the political Left, Right and, especially after the full revelations of the Watergate scandal in 1974, the American public more generally.<sup>480</sup> “For Hofstadter and other commentators”, writes Knight, “the typical American conspiracy theorist is a right-wing misfit who is incapable of sophisticated political

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<sup>476</sup> Staiger, “Cinematic Shots,” p. 225.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>478</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 51-56, 273-291.

thought.”<sup>481</sup> This, however, in, Knight’s view, is not always the case. Knight suggests that many involved in the 1960s New Left used a conspiracy framework within which to understand institutional racism, sexism and governmental corruption.

With conspiracy theories emerging on the left and on the right and gaining popularity with the American public, Knight suggests that, in the late twentieth century, it has been impossible to dismiss conspiracy theory as the exclusive province of dangerous extremists. Indeed, Knight considers conspiracy thinking as having both positive and negative potential: on the one hand it can be “dangerous and deluded”, while, on the other hand, it can be a “necessary and even a creative response to the rapidly changing condition of America since the 1960s”.<sup>482</sup> These two perspectives on conspiracy define *JFK*’s reception. Admirers (usually, but not always, members of the Sixties generation) touted *JFK* as a wake-up call – a positive challenge to a corrupt state whose nefarious activities not only led to Kennedy’s death but to the war in Vietnam. Detractors (usually, but not always, older members of the political and journalistic elite), framed *JFK* as a paranoid distortion. To its detractors, *JFK* was evidence of a negative Sixties legacy: the mainstreaming of paranoia. Stone and anyone who participated in his historical reconstruction were, by extension, uninformed and delusional.

*JFK*’s promotional poster (figure 3.3) seems to have been designed in such a way as to highlight the film’s political significance. Images and text tap into various strands of the assassination debate. Of particular note is the torn American flag, which serves as a backdrop to the words “President Kennedy shot to death by assassin [in] Dallas”. Visually, the poster evokes the “descent into chaos” narrative associated with the assassination. With images (or are they staged re-enactments?) of the Zapruder video situated hazily at the top of the poster, the overall effect is to suggest that the assassination tore America in half. Appearing in 1991, the torn flag acted as an apt symbol of the claim that, suddenly, American identity and American values were no longer stable or agreed upon. Made by various political and cultural commentators (noted in the introduction), such jeremiads conveniently forgot the fact that, as the introduction noted, similar debates had been in circulation long

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<sup>481</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 32.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

before the 1990s and, indeed, before the 1960s. That Kennedy had presided over a country divided along racial lines, not to mention a country under the sway of pervasive class and gender inequalities, was also submerged beneath rabid attacks on America's descent into chaos. This poster can be seen as a visual manifestation of such culture war rhetoric. To the left of *JFK*'s poster is an image of the film's star, Kevin Costner. It was a shrewd decision to cast Costner in the role of Jim Garrison, for, not only had he just starred in the commercially successful historical epic, *Dances With Wolves* (1990), but he also boasted a public image which could take the edge off the radical crackpot associations with which some in the media had tarred Garrison. Costner, as Janet Staiger notes, was known to socialize with Republican President George Bush Sr.<sup>483</sup> This actor was not associated with any form of radicalism, nor really with political protest; his previous high-profile roles in *The Untouchables* (1988), *Field of Dreams* (1989), and *Dances With Wolves* saw him portraying a kind of statesman or everyman. Costner's public persona in many ways legitimised Garrison as an American hero. It was easy to place next to Costner the statement: "He will risk his life, the lives of his family, everything he holds dear for the one thing he holds sacred ... the truth." Kevin Costner, not Jim Garrison would introduce cinema goers to the truth behind the Kennedy assassination. Beneath the image of Costner was the film's title, on either side of which appear two more statements. Just above the title are the words "An Oliver Stone Film" and just below it is the tagline "The Story that won't Go Away." In this poster, then, Stone is positioned personally within the public debate on the assassination, or "the story that won't go away." As attacks on the film increased, his personal credentials would come increasingly under scrutiny.

Throughout the summer of 1991 a media sparring match between Stone and various journalists took place. The journalists, having gained access to an early 1991 draft of *JFK*'s script, attacked the film's historical representation. In an article published in May of 1991, *The Washington Post*'s George Lardner Jr. highlighted the presence of scenes and sequences from the early draft script that he knew to be inaccurate. Zelizer cites Lardner's article as the first of many written by long-standing re-tellers of the assassination who were "bothered by the unexpected

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<sup>483</sup> Staiger, "Cinematic Shots," p. 222.



presence of a filmmaker in their midst.”<sup>484</sup> Lardner had covered Garrison’s investigation and the Clay Shaw trial during the 1960s. He had also met and interviewed a number of Garrison’s colleagues and suspects including assistant DA Pershing Gervais and conspiracy suspect David Ferrie.<sup>485</sup> Using words such as “absurdities,” “palpable untruths” and “paranoia” in his article, Lardner presented Stone and *JFK* as deranged in their attempts to report on the assassination.<sup>486</sup> These criticisms of Stone were balanced out with Lardner’s own systematic rebuffs of *JFK*’s history.



Figure 3.4: *JFK*’s promotional poster.

<sup>484</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, p. 202.

<sup>485</sup> Lardner, “Dallas,” p. 192-193.

<sup>486</sup> Lardner, “Dallas,” p. 198.

While Lardner's article does not connect *JFK* to a broader Sixties narrative, it began to frame the terms within which negative interpretations of *JFK* were discussed: Stone as paranoid; Stone's detractors as rational, balanced and authoritative. Believers in the conspiracy theory propounded by *JFK* were thus linked to conspiracy theory's negative connotations, i.e. as having "severed important ties with a realistic and accurate view of the world."<sup>487</sup> Like the mad Vietnam veterans, and the ruthless, emotionally crippled feminists of Chapters One and Two, Stone was framed here as deluded and disconnected from society. In this account, he was inauthentic.

Stone responded to Lardner's attack directly by way of an article that was printed in the *Washington Post* two weeks later. "Let me explain why we are making this film", began Stone. "The murder of President Kennedy was a seminal event for me and for millions of Americans ... It put an abrupt end to a period of innocence and idealism."<sup>488</sup> Here the filmmaker mobilised the Sixties generation narrative, in which Kennedy's death signified a coming-of-age. *JFK*, in this article, is a metaphor for "doubts, suspicions and unanswered questions" over the events of November 1963.<sup>489</sup> Importantly, Stone concludes his article by commenting that he "can only hope the free thinkers in the world, those with no agenda, will recognize our movie as an emotional experience that speaks a higher truth than the Lardners of the world will ever know."<sup>490</sup> This reference to "free thinkers" suggests the alternative, more positive, countercultural, view on conspiracy. Conspiracy, here is, recalling Knight's words, a "creative" response to contemporary politics and society. For Stone, non-conformists, those not influenced by outside forces, would read *JFK* as a challenge to "official" history. Believing in conspiracy, according to this article, was the pathway to personal authenticity: "a protest against the blind, mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values."<sup>491</sup>

Stone's and Lardner's views on *JFK*'s conspiracy provide the discursive framework within which discussion of the film's Sixties representation operated.

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<sup>487</sup> Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 9.

<sup>488</sup> Oliver Stone, "Stone's *JFK*: A Higher Truth?" *Washington Post*, June 2, 1991. In Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, p. 199.

<sup>489</sup> Stone, "Stone's *JFK*," p. 199.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>491</sup> Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 11.

*JFK*'s conspiracy was either deluded paranoia (Lardner) or countercultural free-thinking (Stone). Shortly after Stone's *Washington Post* article, *Time* magazine countered with another attack on the film. Referring to Stone's "dark hints of a conspiracy to discredit his movie", *Time*'s Richard Zoglin replied: "And who said the '60s were over." Zoglin went on to describe Jim Garrison as a "wide-eyed conspiracy buff" and as someone who was "near the far-out fringe of conspiracy theorists".<sup>492</sup> Druggy phrases like "wide-eyed" and "far out" are very clearly supposed to associate Garrison, Stone and *JFK* with the a negative interpretation of the counterculture and, furthermore, implies that the Sixties were an era of dangerous paranoia verging on lunacy. Subsequent articles addressed this negative version of the Sixties and develop it to a far greater extent. Tom Wicker continued the "far out" theme, lambasting *JFK* as "paranoid and fantastic."<sup>493</sup> In a *Washington Post* review, George Will declared Stone to be "another propagandist frozen in the 1960s ... combining moral arrogance with historical ignorance." The director was "a specimen of 1960s arrested development, the result of the self-absorption encouraged by all the rubbish written about his generation being so unprecedentedly moral, idealistic, caring etc."<sup>494</sup> Will used *JFK* as a springboard from which to mount an attack on the Sixties generation as a whole. According to Will, the Sixties Generation was morally suspect and a threat to American society. Stone's film was the product of a rotten generation, whose gift to America was not idealism and ethics, but self-indulgence and paranoia. Evoking Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Patrick Moynihan titled his dismissal of *JFK* "The Paranoid Style". He thought the film to be an example of extremist paranoia and, comparing it to a left-wing radical publication of the Sixties said that certain scenes were "straight out of Ramparts in a slow week in the '60s."<sup>495</sup>

If left-wing and countercultural paranoia was one way in which critics attacked Stone, then the association of *JFK* with right-wing politics was also common amongst other commentators. Former Warren Commission consultant

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<sup>492</sup> Richard Zoglin, "More Shots in Dealey Plaza," *Time*, June 10, 1991, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, pp. 205, 206.

<sup>493</sup> Tom Wicker, "Does *JFK* Conspire Against Reason," *New York Times*, December 15, 1991, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, p. 248. See also Anthony Lewis, "*JFK*," *The New York Times*, January 9, 1992, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, pp. 387-389.

<sup>494</sup> George F. Will, "*JFK*: Paranoid History," *Washington Post*, December 26, 1991, p. A23. Also syndicated in the *St. Petersburg Times*, December 26, 1991, p. 16A.

<sup>495</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Paranoid Style," *Washington Post*, December 29, 1991, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, p. 331.

David Belin linked Stone not to youthful political activism, but to right-wing paranoia and propaganda of the 1960s. Thus “[w]hat far-right extremists tried to persuade a majority of Americans in the 1960s with their ‘impeach Earl Warren’ billboards, Hollywood has been able to achieve in the 1990s in the impeachment of the integrity of a great chief justice.”<sup>496</sup> Similarly, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. associated *JFK* with another less-than-complimentary figure from history suggesting that “conspiracy theory in *JFK* is reckless, paranoid, really despicable fantasy, reminiscent of the wilder accusations of Joe McCarthy.”<sup>497</sup> Schlesinger’s and Belin’s comments indicate an attempt to associate *JFK* with right-wing politics. The film, in these commentators’ views, was evidence that right-wing extremism had crept into mainstream society. The same year as *JFK*’s release, was published right-wing fundamentalist preacher Pat Robertson’s book *The New World Order* (1991). As Knight points out, books such as this, with their assertions that the world is going to be taken over by a shady global cabal of businesses and Wall Street bankers, share similarities with criticisms of government and industrial corruption emanating from the political left.<sup>498</sup> In many ways, Belin and Schlesinger were using *JFK* as a starting point from which to consider a Sixties narrative rarely examined in popular accounts of the Sixties, and certainly ignored by conservative commentators. This is the rise, not of the left-wing “sixties gang”, but of right-wing politics. What they viewed as the film’s paranoid slant on American history was tantamount to McCarthy-like thinking having infiltrated mainstream America. The film, for these commentators, signified the rise of the political Right.

In opposition to these attacks, promotional materials and other reviews and commentaries attempted to construct an alternative, more benign, Sixties narrative around *JFK*. The film’s production notes began by charting what is noted above to be the narrative of the Sixties generation. “On November 22, 1963, the United States of America was to be forever changed as a nation ... Innocence was shattered.”<sup>499</sup> Stone refers to Kennedy as “like the Godfather of my generation.”<sup>500</sup> Here Kennedy was granted the status of role model and inspiration. Kennedy’s murder “marked the

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<sup>496</sup> David Belin, “*JFK* Lies Don’t Belong in School,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 10, 1992, 9A.

<sup>497</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “*JFK*: Truth and Fiction,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 1992, p. A8. See also Anon, “Oliver Stone’s *JFK*,” *Washington Times*, January 10, 1992, p. F2.

<sup>498</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, pp. 37-43.

<sup>499</sup> *JFK* Production Notes, p. 1. (Available at the BFI Library, London), p. 1.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

end of a dream ... that's the reason I particularly was plunged into betrayal and war – race war, Vietnam, Watergate. The whole laundry list of problems that have bedevilled America since his death.”<sup>501</sup> Here the promotion would seem to be attempting to avoid controversy, aligning *JFK* with the popular and uncontroversial idea that the assassination had brought about an end of innocence. The production notes also gestured toward a version of the late Sixties defined by a personal search for “truth” and justice. “To Academy Award winner Oliver Stone, the question [as to who killed Kennedy] was not who? – but why?”<sup>502</sup> Thus the assassination is promoted as marking the point at which Stone began to question the moral authority of the “establishment.” Note here that the filmmaker’s promoted personal narrative is re-moulded to fit his latest cinematic production. During *Platoon*’s promotion (discussed in Chapter One) it was the Vietnam War that had made a profound emotional and intellectual impact on Stone. In fact, during *Platoon*’s promotion Stone claimed to have remained a conservative supporter of Barry Goldwater up until 1964. In these production notes, the filmmaker’s life story was rewritten; now it is JFK’s murder that led to Stone’s search for personal authenticity.

In promotional materials Stone constructed what one might term a relay narrative in which Kennedy’s values and idealism spurred Jim Garrison to embark upon a search for “truth,” which, in turn, fuelled Stone and his generation’s own personal quests. Throughout *JFK*’s release, the filmmaker constructed his own personality as what one commentator, with his tongue placed firmly in his cheek, referred to as “this doughty hero, this David to the Establishment’s Goliath”.<sup>503</sup> This form of promotion was bolstered further through Stone’s attempts to link himself to Garrison’s investigation in the 1960s. In various letters to, and articles published in, the mainstream press, Stone argued that Garrison had also been ill-treated by the media. Defending Garrison’s reputation, as William Benoit and Dawn Nill point out, served indirectly to bolster the director’s own historical representation.<sup>504</sup> Like Garrison, Stone and his film were lone beacons of hope in a mass-media landscape controlled by yes-men in the service of “them” – the government, military, state institutions. The lines spoken by the District Attorney during the final courtroom

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<sup>501</sup> *JFK* Production Notes, p. 6.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>503</sup> Richard Cohen, “Oliver’s Twist,” *Washington Post*, January 19, 1992, p. W5.

<sup>504</sup> Benoit and Nill, “Oliver Stone’s Defence of *JFK*,” pp. 137, 134-35.

scene were echoed by Stone in a letter he wrote to the *New York Times*. “If I am subverting faith in our institutions”, mused Stone, “I must wonder along with Jim Garrison: Is a government worth preserving when it lies to the people ... I say let justice be done though the heavens fall.”<sup>505</sup> Garrison becomes Kennedy, Stone becomes Kennedy – the narrative of struggle continues. In this way, a positive narrative of Sixties anti-establishment sentiment is associated with *JFK*.

*JFK* was promoted as a form of political activism. One film critic wrote that he received press materials from the studio that included Gallup-poll results which showed that “only sixteen per cent of the American people now believe that Oswald acted alone; seventy three per cent endorse the view that ‘others were involved’”.<sup>506</sup> Eric Hamburg, a government employee, who had, for some years, campaigned for the release of all withheld documents pertaining to the Kennedy assassination, recalled a meeting he had had with Stone in early 1991. Stone informed Hamburg that “Warner Brothers was putting together a ‘Free the Files’ campaign in support of the film, and that buttons with this inscription would be handed out in the theaters where this film was showing.”<sup>507</sup> Certainly, these badges were reported to have been handed out at various press meetings and conventions to which Stone was invited.<sup>508</sup>

While many of *JFK*’s most vehement critics were older journalists and commentators, positive articles on the film’s representation were often written by members of the Sixties generation.<sup>509</sup> Their understanding of conspiracy – as it applied to *JFK* – was not a condemnation, but a belief that the film was informed by the progressive philosophies of the counterculture. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Tom Hayden contended that, since many films had played loose with the historical record, attacks on *JFK* were “really over the meaning of the 1960s.”<sup>510</sup> Hayden associated the film with Sixties “radicalism”, “visionary heroes” and “civil rights

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<sup>505</sup> Oliver Stone, “Via the Director’s Viewfinder,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1991, p. H4.

<sup>506</sup> Terrence Rafferty, “The Current Cinema,” *The New Yorker*, January 13, 1992, p. 73. The production notes contain such a poll. See *JFK* Production Notes, p. 11.

<sup>507</sup> Eric Hamburg, *JFK, Nixon, Oliver Stone and Me: An Idealist’s Journey from Capitol Hill to Hollywood Hell* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), p. 37.

<sup>508</sup> Michael Isikoff, “Seeking *JFK*’s Missing Brain, Secret Files,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 1992, p. A17.

<sup>509</sup> The writer Norman Mailer’s (b. 1923) positive review jumped out at me as a notable exception. However, his association with the New Left throughout the 1960s and publication of such books as *The Armies of the Night* (1968) does suggest he has affinity with the Sixties generation. See Mailer, “Footfalls in the Crypt,” *Vanity Fair*, February, 1992, in *JFK*, pp. 438-448.

<sup>510</sup> Tom Hayden, “Shadows on the American Storybook,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1992, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, p. 386.

marches”.<sup>511</sup> Stone himself is an “incarnation of the 1960s”, threatening to bring back Sixties radicalism.<sup>512</sup> Like Stone, Hayden mobilises the Sixties generation’s loss-of-ignorance narrative. The assassination “led us to believe that American democracy was not what it claimed to be ... it was a system threatened by invisible elites”.<sup>513</sup> Here Stone’s and *JFK*’s “paranoia” is presented as a positive attribute. In fact, Hayden claimed that “we need more haunted souls than comfortable sleepers in this country”. For this reason, Stone has answered the “cry of the 1960s.”<sup>514</sup> Hayden argues that the journalists who had attacked *JFK* were the deluded parties. These journalists “cling to a fairy tale notion of democracy”; they are, in other words, lacking wisdom and awareness: they are, according to Hayden, inauthentic. Fellow New Left activist Todd Gitlin compared Stone’s film to “Ballad of a Thin Man” (1965), a song written and performed by another Sixties rebel, Bob Dylan, that is generally assumed to have been intended as an attack on the media. “Something is severely wrong,” wrote Gitlin in reference to media compliance with a corrupt state, “and like Dylan’s [song character] Mr. Jones, the media don’t know what it is.”<sup>515</sup> While the media slept in blissful ignorance, Stone, claimed Gitlin, was awakening America to what really was happening.

*JFK*, in these accounts, was a call for political activism, one which was answered in some quarters. Completing symbolically the relay narrative that Stone and *JFK* had initiated, some younger viewers drew upon Garrison and *JFK* as inspirations for a continued search for justice. One Florida high-school student wrote that “if *JFK* makes us realize anything, it is that now is the time for truth, the time to know what is real and what is fiction”. She concluded with yet another reiteration of Garrison’s “let justice be done though the heavens fall” valediction.<sup>516</sup> Other young people presented similar interpretations. “I guess that hippie guy was right”, one was reported as saying, “[n]ever trust anybody over thirty.”<sup>517</sup> In these comments, *JFK*

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<sup>511</sup> Hayden, “Shadows,” p. 386.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>515</sup> Todd Gitlin, “The Stoning of Oliver,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 16, 1992, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, p. 457. See also Carl Oglesby, “The Conspiracy That Won’t Go Away,” *Playboy*, February 1992, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, pp. 425-437.

<sup>516</sup> Donna Rossi, “*JFK* Review was Off the Mark,” *St. Petersburg Times*, Jan 10, 1992, p. 15.

<sup>517</sup> Michael Specter, “Explosive Imagery of *JFK* Igniting Debate in Audiences,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1991, p. A1. See also John Hanc, “Students Seek the Truth in the JFK Case,” *Newsday*, December 26, 1991, in Stone and Sklar, *JFK*, pp. 316-318.

was identified with a late Sixties challenge to establishment authority. These kinds of responses extended the film's promotional narrative whereby Stone's film had impacted America's youth by encouraging them to challenge preconceived ideas and official accounts of history.

Some reception materials also endeavoured to place *JFK* at the vanguard of a campaign to free government and intelligence agency files pertaining to the Kennedy assassination. In January 1993, Dallas City Council ordered the release of 2,500 items related to the assassination. The councilman who had campaigned for their release, Domingo Garcia, claimed that he "sought the release of all the city's files on the assassination after seeing the movie *JFK*".<sup>518</sup> In August that year, the National Archives opened to the public over 90,000 pages of CIA reports, presidential papers, photographs and investigation documents. The *New York Times* reported that it "was reaction to and revulsion toward ... the 1991 movie *JFK* directed by Oliver Stone ... that prompted Congress to order the files opened today."<sup>519</sup> Like 1988's *The Thin Blue Line*, a feature-length documentary concerning the wrongful conviction of Randall Dale Adams for the murder of a police officer, which led to Adams' conviction being overturned, *JFK* thus became one of a select group of films that inspired directly some form of social action or government legislation.

At a time when public assassination debate was as much about writing oneself into history as it was a case of debating the political and historical "facts," one might say that a diverse array of commentators used *JFK* to promote their own personal agendas. Hayden, the Sixties New Left activist, announced the film a throwback to his generation's radical politics. Schlesinger, the historian, attacked the film's history and, then, as if to re-assert the validity of his profession, informed readers that "[h]istory will survive."<sup>520</sup> In their reviews and commentaries, both sides of the conflict were reflecting upon the mainstreaming of conspiracy thinking since the late 1960s, and whether conspiracy theories were dangerous delusions or positive critiques of the establishment. For many older commentators, *JFK* was about cynicism, paranoia and the rise of dangerous extremism. For Gitlin, Hayden and

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<sup>518</sup> Thomas C. Hayes, "Trivia (and Answers?) in J.F.K. Files," *New York Times*, February 1, 1992, 7.

<sup>519</sup> Tim Weiner, "Papers on Kennedy Assassination are Unsealed, and '63 is Revisited," *New York Times*, August 24, 1993, A1.

<sup>520</sup> Schlesinger, "*JFK*," p. 396.



company, the film exemplified the spirit of enquiry and thinking outside-of-the-box intrinsically associated with positive Sixties activism.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps Garrison (Costner) sums up *JFK*'s production and reception best when, during the film he informs his colleagues that they are about to go "through the looking glass ... black is white and white is black." This comment is made as the sheer scale of the conspiracy behind Kennedy's death is becoming apparent. Suddenly everything is mixed-up; everything is the opposite of what it seemed to be. Such incoherence certainly defined *JFK*'s political representation. The film was constructed so that every signifier that might attract the attention of liberals (the rise of governmental corruption, for instance) was countered with its conservative double (immoral hippies running riot in the assassination's wake). "Everyone's flipping sides", says David Ferrie (Joe Pesci) midway through the film, "it's fun and games, man." In *JFK*'s representation of public politics, a similar back and forth takes place between liberal and conservative views on the Sixties. Nevertheless, Stone and Sklar also imbued Garrison's personal narrative with a positive version of the Sixties. Garrison's gaining of personal authenticity comes when he questions convention and stands up to the establishment. It is a political and spiritual awakening, and, furthermore, a call to bring back the anti-establishment mentality associated with members of the Sixties generation. In this way, *JFK* presented a liberal version of Sixties politics and culture.

The chapter's promotion and reception study has argued that much discussion of *JFK* was informed by contemporaneous views toward conspiracy theory and its value as a form of political thinking. Promotional materials frequently presented Stone as heir to the countercultural values and spirit of enquiry that *JFK* had associated with President Kennedy and Jim Garrison. In this sense *JFK*'s representation of conspiracy was declared to be a timely attack on a government and media that had withheld the truth of the assassination for nearly thirty years. Commentators such as Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin interpreted *JFK* in line with this promotional campaign, and added that *JFK* was a positive reawakening of the kinds of political protests and anti-authoritarian attitudes associated with the Sixties

New Left. However, older journalists and commentators like Tom Wicker, David Belin and Arthur Schlesinger reframed *JFK* as evidence of a negative Sixties legacy: the mainstreaming of extremist, paranoid, views on American politics and culture. In some of these accounts, *JFK* was a dangerous attack on truth and rationality and recalled racist and anti-communist demagogues of the 1950s and 1960s.

Yet, regardless of the criticisms to which *JFK* was subjected, the film established Stone's position as a prominent public spokesperson on recent American history. Invites to debate history with historians and prominent commentators such as Norman Mailer and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. quickly followed this film's release.<sup>521</sup> The mass of journalistic attention that greeted *JFK* was replicated during the pre-production and release of his 1995 biopic of President Richard Nixon, *Nixon*. In this film, Stone's view toward the Sixties finds particularly vivid expression in a brief speech. The full implications of the Watergate scandal will soon be revealed and a vanquished Nixon prepares to give his resignation speech. He passes a portrait of Kennedy in the White House and addresses it: "When they [the public] look at you they see what they want to be" he says. "When they look at me they see what they are." In a 1997 interview with *Cineaste* magazine, the filmmaker consecrated this interpretation of Sixties America, stating that he was "looking for a very difficult pattern in our history ... What I see from 1963, with Kennedy's murder at high noon in Dallas, to 1974, with Nixon's removal, is a pattern."<sup>522</sup> Stone promoted his films and himself as both thorns in the side of a corrupt "post-Nixon America", and a wake-up call. It was time for other Americans to follow where *JFK*'s John F. Kennedy and Jim Garrison, *Platoon*'s Chris Taylor, *Born on the Fourth of July*'s Ron Kovic and, of course Oliver Stone's Oliver Stone had dared to tread. Speaking in 1996, the filmmaker declared that "my movies have reflected the way I feel. What I think is authentic."<sup>523</sup> In one way or another, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK* and his next Vietnam picture *Heaven and Earth* (1993) all suggested that social activism led to spiritual maturation and, by extension, personal authenticity.

In retrospect, films like *Platoon* and *JFK* have become subjects for commemoration unto themselves. *Platoon* has its own "20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition"

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<sup>521</sup> Jeremy Gerard, "Stone Holds Own in Gotham *JFK* Debate," *Variety*, March 3, 1992, p. 5.

<sup>522</sup> Mark C. Carnes, "Past imperfect: History according to the movies," *Cineaste*, vol. 22, no. 4 (March 1997), p. 35.

<sup>523</sup> Quoted in Chris Salewicz, *Oliver Stone: The Making of His Movies* (London: Orion, 1999), p. 9.

DVD, which features a documentary of Vietnam veterans revisiting this film in much the same way as veterans had “revisited” Vietnam during *Platoon*’s theatrical release. *JFK* has to date received four DVD reissues. The latest, *JFK: Ultimate Collector’s Edition* (2008) locates the film within an enormous collection of visual and textual documents examining the life and times of President John F. Kennedy. It is as if *JFK* itself has become part of Kennedy-history. “The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans” JFK famously announced during his inaugural speech of 1961. On DVD, it would seem that *JFK* and Oliver Stone are bearers of this torch.

Subjected to masses of commentary and huge amounts of criticism, *JFK* indicated that public debates and conflicts over Hollywood’s representation of the Sixties were, if anything, becoming more pronounced. Stone’s promotion of Jim Garrison as an authentic Sixties representative, and role model for America’s youth was, in the views of many of the commentators noted above, a controversial decision. If this was Hollywood pushing the limits, then what would such commentators think, when, later the next year, a high-profile Sixties film presented a classroom full of children standing up and, one by one, uttering the provocative lines: “I’m Malcolm X”?

## Chapter Four

### **“Out of the Prison of Your Mind”: Framing *Malcolm X***

“When I was growing up”, wrote filmmaker Spike Lee in 1991, “one of my favorite shows on television was *THE FBI*”.<sup>524</sup> Lee continued his appraisal of the long-running 1960s and 1970s programme, with comments that may now sound familiar. The young Spike Lee cheered on *THE F.B.I.*’s protagonists as they “outmaneuvered crooks, Communists, thieves, murderers, to uphold truth, justice and the American way.”<sup>525</sup> Having grown a little older, however, Lee decided that so flattering a portrayal of state operatives was simply untrue. He came to the conclusion that “[w]e all live in a wicked country where the government can and will do anything to keep people in check.”<sup>526</sup>

Published as an introduction to a book about FBI surveillance of civil rights leader Malcolm X during the 1950s and 1960s, Lee’s statements pre-empted by one year the US theatrical release of his eponymously titled biopic *Malcolm X* (1992). These statements were, however, an early attempt on the part of the filmmaker to situate himself within wider discursive practices associated with Sixties commemoration. In what might be seen as a reworking of the politicised invectives surrounding Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, Lee’s introduction reached a crescendo with his claim that “the FBI, CIA and the police departments around this country ... are all in cahoots” and “played a part in the assassination of Malcolm X.”<sup>527</sup> As became clear throughout *Malcolm X*’s production and release, Malcolm X was as much a hero to Lee as JFK was to Oliver Stone; the civil rights leader’s assassination could, according to Lee, be viewed similarly as having lifted the lid on a corrupt and murderous national body politic. Like *JFK*, Lee’s biopic of the life and times of Malcolm X provided a filmic portrayal of political activism and personal maturation designed to intervene in public debates on the Sixties. Yet, unlike Stone’s film, *Malcolm X* was a rare thing in mid-to-late-1980s/early-1990s Hollywood: a Sixties representation made by, and based on, an African-American figure.

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<sup>524</sup> Spike Lee, “Introduction,” in Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: One World Books, [1991] 1995), p. xi.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

This chapter explores how the film *Malcolm X* was produced, received and promoted in the context of what can be described as a veritable minefield of conflicting interpretations of Malcolm X's political and cultural legacies. To date academic studies have gone some way to unravelling the complex networks of written, visual and aural texts that played a part in shaping Malcolm X's image in public memory and have, to some extent, illuminated the influence that these texts exerted on Spike Lee's film. For example, Michael Eric Dyson, Ed Guerrero and Thomas Doherty have examined *Malcolm X*'s adaptation of, and the film's dialogue with, diverse cultural artefacts such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), which was a cooperation between Malcolm X and writer Alex Haley and 1990s rap musicians' appropriation of Malcolm X.<sup>528</sup> I build on these studies by providing an analysis of the social and cultural backdrop to the production of *Malcolm X*, an analysis of the shifts in content and themes between a 1991 draft script and the finished film and, finally, an examination of *Malcolm X*'s promotion and critical reception in the context of public remembrance of the African American freedom struggle. This chapter does not set out to question whether Lee has done justice to Malcolm X's political and personal history, or adapted accurately the original source text, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Several, often extremely critical, analyses have already been written on these subjects.<sup>529</sup> Rather, this chapter illuminates the ways in which broader discursive currents concerned with commemorating the African American freedom struggle served to frame and to re-frame *Malcolm X* from production, to the film's promotion and reception.

I begin by charting the ways in which Spike Lee's public persona as civil rights spokesman was constructed during the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that the filmmaker used his elevated cultural standing to challenge, and to invite others to reflect upon, prominent memories associated with the African American freedom struggle. An analysis of script development follows. Two sources provided the initial

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<sup>528</sup> Thomas Doherty, "Malcolm X: In Print, On Screen," *Biography*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 29-48; Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 129-144; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 197-204.

<sup>529</sup> See, for example, Claybourne Carson, "Malcolm X," in Mark C. Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 278-283; bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge [1994] 2008), pp. 180-192; Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 144-145, 154-155.

basis for Lee's film: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and a 1971 draft script written by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl.<sup>530</sup> The latter has proven impossible to obtain, but I do draw on interviews, biographies and a documentary, *Malcolm X* (1972), which is based on the Baldwin-Perl script. I argue that Lee borrowed a number of the visual and narrative techniques present in these texts, while at the same time incorporating a range of visual and aural signifiers that had been in circulation in early 1990s America. Then, I compare an April 1991 draft script with the finished film. Focusing on how formal and narrative changes impacted upon *Malcolm X*'s themes, my reading shows that, whereas some political content was down played, the central protagonist's gaining of personal authenticity became increasingly prominent. Moving further, as it is put in the film, "out of the prison of [his] mind", Malcolm X's gaining of personal authenticity runs hand in hand with his ever-expanding political career. In the figure of Malcolm X this film offers a liberal synthesis of early-1960s- and, more controversially (from a 1990s perspective) late-1960s- and 1970s- black political activism.

Finally, I examine *Malcolm X*'s promotion and reception. I argue that, in an attempt to appeal to diverse audiences, promotion of the film and of the film's key personnel – Spike Lee and star Denzel Washington – emphasised *Malcolm X*'s multi-political address. Reception materials indicate that, while *Malcolm X* was in production, the mainstream media provided a forum in which large numbers of African-Americans discussed the film and its relevance to broader debates on the Sixties legacy. *Malcolm X* did not, however, receive large quantities of political commentary and op-ed discussion after its theatrical release. I argue that, at a time of heightened public debates and conflicts over American race relations, the widespread media framing of *Malcolm X* as a "special interest", black-themed, picture fuelled an initial flurry of features and articles. However, such pigeon-holing, I argue, also meant that the film's broader resonance as a significant artefact of Sixties

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<sup>530</sup> Absent from this list is, of course, James Baldwin's play based on the life of Malcolm X, *One Day When I Was Lost* (1972). While it is very likely that Lee had read this text before writing his script, I have been unable to find any statements (on the part of Lee or anyone else) that suggest *One Day When I Was Lost* served as a source for the film. Baldwin's stated dislike of his and Perl's finished script would surely indicate that his later attempt at a stage play drastically differed from the material he produced in Hollywood. For this reason, I do not include discussion of *One Day When I Was Lost* in my chapter.

commemoration was either played-down or simply dismissed by many (predominantly white) critics and commentators.

### **A Civil Rights Sixties**

During the release of *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee's 1989 film about racial tensions in New York, journalists asked why, at the film's end, the director had placed side-by-side quotations attributed to two of the African-American freedom struggle's most famous leaders: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.<sup>531</sup> "The quotes complete the thread of Malcolm and Martin that has been woven throughout the film", Lee replied, adding:

In certain times, both philosophies can be appropriate, but in this day and age ... I'm leaning more toward the philosophies of Malcolm X. Non violence and all that stuff had its time, and there are times when it's still appropriate, but when you're being hit upside the head with a brick, I don't think young black America is just going to turn the other cheek and say "Thank you Jesus."<sup>532</sup>

These comments provided a straightforward dichotomy between Dr. King and Malcolm X. The former is presented as a rather passive, pliant individual, whose reaction to racism is simply to "turn the other cheek"; the latter – these comments imply rather than directly affirm – is active, aggressive and open to using violence as a means of achieving racial equality. Lee's distinction between Dr. King and Malcolm X would undergo some revision when he began to produce *Malcolm X* (discussed below). However, his comments speak to broader political and cultural

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<sup>531</sup>*Do the Right Thing*'s closing credits contain the following quotations attributed to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X respectively. King: "Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all... Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers." Malcolm: "I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in these positions to block things that you and I need ... you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence."

<sup>532</sup>David Handhelm, "Insight to Riot," *Rolling Stone*, July 13, 1987, p. 104.

debates on the African American freedom struggle in which the two leaders were presented as binary opposites.

Around the figures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King emerged conflicting stories of the Sixties. Both stories often meant a simplification, if not a distortion, of each man's political outlook. Spike Lee's comments therefore reflected a culture in which Dr. King was associated – usually positively, but, as in the case of Lee's reference, sometimes negatively – with an era of early-1960s civil rights activism which, by the 1980s, had been institutionalised as part of America's positive heritage (most obviously with the establishment of Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday in 1986) and which was celebrated by black and white commentators alike. Memories of Malcolm X, on the other hand, often came laden with countercultural overtones. While Malcolm X's iconic image was, at times, commodified by business interests (a subject discussed below) it was also mobilised frequently by African-American commentators to complicate established memories of black political activism of the Sixties. Memories of Malcolm X commonly associated this figure with later, more controversial, activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s and therefore had the power potentially to subvert the dominant good sixties/bad sixties memorial narrative of the freedom struggle.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, in public memory, Martin Luther King is often frozen in time at the moment at which he delivered his famous 1963 "I have a dream" speech.<sup>533</sup> For example, Edward P. Morgan notes the outpourings of discussion over "King's Dream" in 1983, the twentieth anniversary of 1963's march on Washington. The civil rights leader and the civil rights movement were frequently represented in the form of apolitical sound-bites, and were used simply to express, as Morgan quotes from *Time* magazine, the "distance the United States has travelled toward an integrated society."<sup>534</sup> Dr. King's status in much public commemoration as an entirely unaggressive, "ideologically sanitized"<sup>535</sup> figurehead meant that the

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<sup>533</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, J.R.* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), pp. 12-29; Stephen Lawson, "Freedom Then/Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 96, no. 2 (April, 1991), p. 460; Edward P. Morgan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement," in Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (eds), *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), pp. 141-144.

<sup>534</sup> Morgan, "The Good," p. 143.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.



Martin Luther King of the later 1960s was largely forgotten. Dr. King's Vietnam War protests, his activism on behalf of poor people in northern cities and his shift from attacking government sanctioned segregation in the South to de facto economic segregation in the North were lost.<sup>536</sup> Celebrating a simplistic "I have a dream" version of Martin Luther King and a simplistic version of early 1960s civil rights activism also served to de-radicalise the civil rights movement, substituting gentle "dreamers" for hardened activists.<sup>537</sup>

The film industry played a central role in celebrating the early Sixties civil rights movement. *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Heart of Dixie* (1989), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Love Field* (1992), and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) marked a distinct phase in cinematic treatments of the movement. Sharon Monteith has argued that such films constitute an emerging "sub-genre" of film that she calls "civil rights cinema." The late 1980s saw the appearance of a "critically self-conscious body of work" that commemorated key events and personages of the late 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement: the Montgomery bus boycott (*Long Walk Home*), the Mississippi Freedom Summer (*Mississippi Burning*), the integration of Southern universities (*Heart of Dixie*).<sup>538</sup> Appearing just after the establishment in 1986 as a public holiday of Martin Luther King Day and the high-profile television series on civil rights *Eyes on the Prize* (1987), these films were part of an explosion of public memorials of the movement. From the late 1980s onward, museums dedicated to the movement appeared en masse across the South; from Birmingham and Little Rock, to Atlanta, Memphis, Selma and Savannah.<sup>539</sup> *Mississippi Burning*, *Heart of Dixie* and *The Long Walk Home*, however, are notable for a very specific kind of selective remembrance. Each film features at least one central white protagonist, leading Monteith to argue that they are essentially "white redemption stories", which foreground white characters' shedding of prejudice in favour of tolerance.<sup>540</sup> With

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<sup>536</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* vol. 91 no.4 (2005), p. 1234.

<sup>537</sup> In this respect, one might also consider the way in which public memory has shaped the image of another famous civil rights activist and instigator of the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, Rosa Parks. As Sharon Monteith notes, public memory "prefers to mythologise Rosa Parks as a tired seamstress rather than a trained activist and secretary of the Montgomery chapter of National Association of Colored People (NAACP)." Monteith, "The Movie-made Movement: Civil Rites of Passage," in Paul Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 123.

<sup>538</sup> Monteith, "The Movie-made Movement," p. 121.

<sup>539</sup> Kevin Sack, "Museums of a Movement," *New York Times*, June 28, 1998, p.TR12.

<sup>540</sup> Monteith, "The Movie-made Movement," p. 137.

their focus on the pre-Civil Rights Act and pre-Voting Rights Act South, such films certainly commemorate much positive activism and heroic action in the name of equality, but they also are beholden to the message “look how far we’ve come.” Or as Monteith puts it elsewhere, “the dominant popular representation of the civil rights era has been as an integrationist success story; movies and fictions function in self-congratulatory, wish-fulfilling ways involving the amelioration of racism and white-on-black violence.”<sup>541</sup> In true 1940s and 1950s social problem film style,<sup>542</sup> films such as *Mississippi Burning* and *The Long Walk Home* confine their “illness” (racism) to a fixed area, in this case the South, and, with the problem identified and isolated it can then be cured.

With this version of Sixties civil rights dominating much political and cultural remembrance, one might view Spike Lee’s privileging of Malcolm X over Martin Luther King as more a critique of white America’s near-exclusive celebration of the early Sixties (southern) civil rights movement than a complete dismissal of Dr. King. In the aforementioned films and museums, racism was not so much engaged as overcome. Lee himself had, on several occasions, criticised *Mississippi Burning*’s representation of race.<sup>543</sup> He, like a number of other African-American commentators, mobilised images of Malcolm X to critique established memories of civil rights activism and to address racism as it existed not only in southern and *northern* states in the early 1960s, but across the whole of the nation in the 1980s and 1990s.

Michael Eric Dyson equates the increasing popularity of Malcolm X in the 1980s and 90s with “the renaissance of black nationalism” as expressed in hip-hop culture.<sup>544</sup> When asked in 1992 why he thought that there had been a surge of interest in Malcolm X, Spike Lee replied “Chuck D., with Public Enemy, and K.R.S.-One, with Boogie Down Productions have to be credited with really giving black youth

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<sup>541</sup> Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 185.

<sup>542</sup> Monteith suggests that these films are very much influenced by social problem films of the late 1940s and early 1950s such as *Pinky* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Monteith, “Movie-made Movement,” p. 125.

<sup>543</sup> David Sterritt, “Spike Lee’s Hotly Debated New Film,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 27, 1989, p. 15; Lee, “Introduction,” in *Malcolm X: The FBI File*, p. xii.

<sup>544</sup> Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, p. 85.

Malcolm through their lyrics.”<sup>545</sup> Malcolm X had not excited sizable support among whites, nor among many blacks during his lifetime but, by the 1980s, Malcolm X had become the subject of much praise.<sup>546</sup> Rap artists sampled speeches and provided historical references in their songs, thus reproducing and conflating Malcolm X’s rhetoric with their own musical meditations on contemporary African-American life. In rap music, Malcolm X was remembered for his aggressive black nationalist stance against racism and for his willingness to achieve racial equality by, as Malcolm X himself had put it, “any means necessary”.<sup>547</sup>

Just as many public spokespeople claimed themselves heirs to John F. Kennedy (see Chapter Three), Malcolm X was often promoted in rap music as a transcendental figure, whose personal history and political beliefs could be appropriated, thus enabling artists to “become” metaphorically Malcolm X. As Manning Marable notes, several rappers “drew parallels between the narrative Malcolm X presented in his *Autobiography* and their own lives.”<sup>548</sup> Thus Boogie Down Production’s 1988 album *By All Means Necessary* invoked the civil rights leader’s famous call for racial equality while the album’s front cover, promoted through deliberate pastiche, rapper KRS-One as heir to Malcolm X’s legacy (see Figure 4.1). In his 1990 song “Words of Wisdom”, Tupac Shakur expressed the Malcolm X/Dr. King dichotomy thus:

No Malcolm X in my history text  
Why is that?  
Cause he tried to educate and liberate all blacks  
Why is Martin Luther King in my book each week?  
He told blacks, if they get smacked, turn the other cheek.

Through the notion of violence vs. nonviolence, the two leaders were once again touted as duelling representatives of conflicting philosophies. Shakur’s personal history as the son of a former Black Panther would have been familiar to those interested in him and his music at the time, serving further to bolster the idea that

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<sup>545</sup> Spike Lee in conversation with Henry Louis Gates Jr. Reprinted in “Just Whose ‘Malcolm’ Is It, Anyway?” *New York Times*, May 31, 1992, p. H13, 16.

<sup>546</sup> Jesse Algeron Rhines, *Black Film/ White Money* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 72.

<sup>547</sup> Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, p. 87.

<sup>548</sup> Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 143.

Dr. King's philosophies were outdated, frozen in a time long gone, while Malcolm X's transcended his lifetime and impacted upon later 1960s developments. Once again, promoting himself as heir to Malcolm X's legacy, KRS-One's song "Ah-Yeah" (1995) provided a historical narrative that emphasised Malcolm X's late sixties connections. Rapped KRS-One:

They Tried to harm me; I used to be Malcolm X  
Now I'm on the Planet as the one called KRS ...  
The Black Panther, the answer is for real  
In my spiritual form I turn into [Black Panther founder]  
Bobby Seale.

The rapper was proclaiming himself to be the next Malcolm X, while constructing a narrative in which later Sixties activist group, the Black Panthers, also figured. Malcolm X was not frozen in time – like Martin Luther King so often was – but served as a bridge between a 1960s and 1990s struggle for civil rights. According to Marable, the image of Malcolm X constructed by rap artists was that of “the ultimate black cultural rebel, unblemished and uncomplicated by the pragmatic politics of partisan compromise”.<sup>549</sup> Like these rap artists, Lee would spend considerable time promoting this version of Malcolm X.

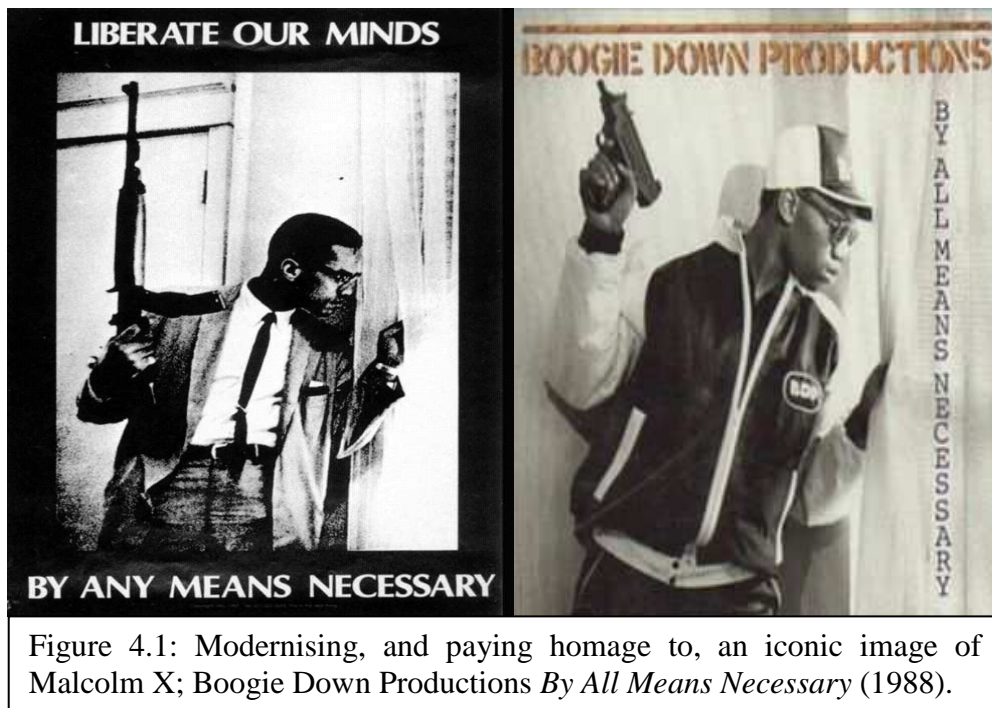


Figure 4.1: Modernising, and paying homage to, an iconic image of Malcolm X; Boogie Down Productions *By All Means Necessary* (1988).

<sup>549</sup> Marable, *Living Black History*, p. 146.

In 1990, Lee stirred controversy when he criticised publicly Norman Jewison a non-black director that at this point in time was scheduled to helm the *Malcolm X* film. As Lee recounts: “when it got out that Norman was going to direct this film, that’s when I started to speak out. Too many times have white people controlled what should have been black films.”<sup>550</sup> Over the past twenty five years, a Malcolm X film project had been associated with a number of writers and directors – James Baldwin, Charles Fuller, David Bradley, Jewison, David Mamet, and Sidney Lumet.<sup>551</sup> For Lee, *Malcolm X* had to be directed by an African-American; a white director would not be able, or willing, to memorialise Malcolm adequately. Lee’s comments were couched in the kind of nationalist rhetoric of self-determination and racial solidarity that was often associated with Malcolm X himself. Yet, at the same time – and this irony would not be lost on many of Lee’s critics – the filmmaker was out of necessity reliant on a (primarily white) Hollywood both to finance and to distribute his film. Lee was calling for black control of – albeit a tiny – portion of the Hollywood film industry.

Hollywood’s general reticence to afford African-Americans the opportunity to make high-profile, comparatively big-budget, movies was certainly a cause for concern throughout the 1980s. For example, Jesse Rhines provides evidence of unequal hiring practices adopted by the film industry throughout the 1980s. While African-Americans made up twelve percent of the US population and, according to some surveys, one third of filmgoers,<sup>552</sup> their presence behind the camera was minimal to say the least. Rhines draws attention to surveys conducted throughout the 1980s that highlighted the extent to which African-Americans and some other racial minorities were underrepresented in Hollywood. For example, in 1983, the major Hollywood studios Fox, Universal, Warner Brothers, Paramount, MGM/UA and Disney had hired well over 1000 directors, only 23 of which were minorities.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 9, 11. Later in the 1990s Lee would criticise, for similar reasons, the white director Quentin Tarantino for his representation of African-American lifestyles and culture in the 1997 film *Jackie Brown*.

<sup>551</sup> Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>552</sup> Rhines, *Black Film*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Throughout the decade there were several reports in the trade press on black screenwriters, stunt artists and actors being passed over for jobs.<sup>554</sup>

Not only was Spike Lee a rarity, a successful black director in Hollywood, but he made a point of hiring a high percentage of blacks to work as part of his crews. As Nelson George pointed out in 1990, “save attorney Arthur Klein and line producer Jon Kilik, all of [Lee’s] key business and creative collaborators are African American.”<sup>555</sup> These individuals included cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, co-producer Monty Ross, casting director Robi Reed and set designer Wynn Thomas. Most of them went on to assist the production of *Malcolm X*, and, furthermore, Dickerson has subsequently directed his own films, after having gained experience working with Lee. Lee’s hiring of African-Americans extended beyond his filmmaking activities and into his growing business empire, consisting of clothing shops in New York City and Los Angeles.<sup>556</sup>

With a number of well-received films – *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Mo Better Blues* (1991) – already under his belt, not to mention a growing chain of retail outlets, Spike Lee was, in the mainstream media, elevated to the status of prominent African-American spokesman. Rhines suggests that, in the media, Lee cultivated a public image – much like the hip-hop artists noted above – that fostered associations to a particular demographic, one which received much attention in the media: the black urban underclass.<sup>557</sup> In *She’s Gotta Have It*, Lee played the character Mars Blackmon, which was read in the popular press as a representation “of the black underclass.”<sup>558</sup> *Do the Right Thing* explicitly addressed the problems facing blacks in a deprived area of New York. Rhines suggests that this association with the underclass allowed Lee to build a strong and powerful presence in the media as a

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<sup>554</sup> Rhines, *Black Film*, pp. 81-87. See also Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 120.

<sup>555</sup> Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on a Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), p. 110.

<sup>556</sup> George, *Buppies*, p. 109.

<sup>557</sup> Rhines, *Black Film*, p. 107. Of course films such as *She’s Gotta Have It* and *School Daze*, with their middle-class professionals and college students, can be viewed as Lee attempting to court middle class audiences. Some critics have explicitly attacked Lee for providing a highly middle class “buppie” (short for a black yuppie) perspective on African-American life. See, for example, Amiri Baraka, “Spike Lee at the Movies,” in Manthia Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>558</sup> Rhines, *Black Film*, p. 109.

social commentator.<sup>559</sup> In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the filmmaker appeared on numerous major news programs in which he discussed issues pertaining to civil rights and urban deprivation.<sup>560</sup> The *Malcolm X* project was at once a consummation of the filmmaker's concerns with exploring these issues and a way of adding a certain degree of legitimacy and authenticity to his own public persona. For Lee, like contemporaneous hip-hop artists, Malcolm X's politics and philosophies served as a way of authenticating political outlooks and creative endeavours.

Compared to the other hip-hop artists, however, Lee was something of an anomaly. Born in 1957, Spike Lee's age puts him at the tail end of what this thesis has called the Sixties generation. Many of the hip-hop artists, such as Chuck D of Public Enemy (b. 1960), KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions (b. 1965) and Tupac Shakur (b. 1971) were part of a younger cohort. It can also be argued that these artists were speaking less to the Sixties generation than to their younger siblings, or even their children. In general, Malcolm X was often viewed more as a youth phenomenon than as a figure popular with older Americans. For instance, One 1992 *Newsweek* poll found that 84 per cent of black respondents aged 15 to 24 considered Malcolm to be a hero compared with 59 per cent aged 25 to 49 and 33 per cent aged 50 plus.<sup>561</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, his appeal to youth led to those of a less altruistic disposition attempting to cash in on Malcolm's popularity. There were reports of a new, massively popular phenomenon sweeping youth culture in many American cities – "Malcolmania." Terry Pristin of the *Los Angeles Times* referred to the commercialisation of Malcolm thus:

Malcolmania now seems ubiquitous – from the T-shirts and baseball caps emblazoned with the 'X' symbol, to clothing and posters bearing his likeness, to the black metal-framed eyeglasses modelled after the ones that became his trademark.<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>560</sup> Rhines, *Black Film*, pp. 110-114.

<sup>561</sup> Mark Whitaker and Vern E. Smith, "Malcolm X: A New Film Burnishes the Myth," *Newsweek*, November 16, 1992, p. 66.

<sup>562</sup> Terry Pristin, "Malcolm X, the Movie – Why Now?," *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1992, Calendar, p. 6.

With Malcolm X's image being re-appropriated increasingly as either a signifier of youthful rebellion or a youth market "product," certain expectations began to take shape in the media as to the kind of impact *Malcolm X*, the film, would have on America. There would be large scale conflicts over whether Spike Lee, whose association with youth culture and whose entrepreneurial spirit were both well-known, was the right person to commemorate adequately and appropriately Malcolm X.

The above noted discussion of Malcolm X commemoration is but one strand of debate around this highly contested historical icon. Other interpretations of Malcolm X's political and cultural legacy would come into play once the film's production was underway and, especially during the film's promotion and reception (most of which occurred before the film was released). However, against a backdrop of civil rights commemoration and contestation, Lee attempted to produce a film that would appeal to diverse political perspectives. Associating Malcolm X with both early Sixties civil rights activism and later civil rights radicalism (the Black Panthers, Black Power), Lee sought to weave his biographical subject into a tapestry of Sixties struggles for African-American civil rights. This encompassing narrative, I argue, reached its conclusion in the film's final act, during which Malcolm X's life and the civil rights struggle more generally were promoted as a synecdoche for the Sixties generation's experiences of the recent American past.

### **A Change is Gonna Come: Producing *Malcolm X***

When writing *Malcolm X*'s screenplay, Spike Lee drew inspiration from several written and visual texts. The initial source material was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. This book was written by Alex Haley and published after Malcolm X's assassination in 1965. Thomas Doherty suggests that it is this text, and not video and audio clips of Malcolm X, that has "preserved and assured Malcolm's legacy" since his death.<sup>563</sup> The *Autobiography* is constructed as a personal and political awakening. First there is the young Malcolm Little, a criminal and street-wise hustler of 1940s Boston and New York. Then there is Malcolm X as prominent spokesman for the black separatist organisation the Nation of Islam (1952-64). Finally there is Malcolm

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<sup>563</sup> Doherty, "Malcolm X," p. 29.



X, or El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, as he renamed himself, after he had split with the Nation in 1964. After visiting the holy city of Mecca, Malcolm X converts to orthodox Islam and, on his return to America he softens his staunch separatist views.

According to Manning Marable, the autobiography's writer, Alex Haley, emphasised transformative episodes in Malcolm's life. "Haley as a writer," argues Marable "was primarily attracted to Malcolm's dramatic moments of epiphany" (as opposed to the complexities and evolution of Malcolm X's radical politics), before adding that this content explains why the book continues "to appeal to a universal audience."<sup>564</sup> If we are to accept Marable's argument, we might say that the autobiography, like Garrison's autobiography (noted in Chapter Three) sought to curb Malcolm's divisiveness and to present him as a more universal, conciliatory individual. A life story in the style of a classic religious conversion narrative, *The Autobiography* has taken an uncontroversial place amongst the pantheon of "classic" works of American literature.<sup>565</sup> Its canonization did not mean, however, that later adaptations of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* would be uncontroversial.

A filmed version of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* was in development by 1968, when the author James Baldwin was commissioned to write a script. Conflicts between studio management and creative personnel are reported to have blighted the screenwriting process. Columbia Pictures, the company for which Baldwin was writing the script, did not want to give the impression that their *Malcolm X* film was going to be incendiary, particularly in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in April 1968. The studio was adamant that Baldwin should not include any material that was likely to provoke controversy – apparently, studio management sent a memo to Baldwin ordering him to "avoid giving any political implications to Malcolm's trip to Mecca."<sup>566</sup> As another memo stated: "the writer ... should be advised that the tragedy of Malcolm's life was that he had been mistreated, early, by some whites, and betrayed (later) by *many* blacks."<sup>567</sup> Columbia in the end provided the writer with what was called a "technical expert", television screenwriter and producer Arnold Perl. Baldwin accuses Perl of altering certain scenes to the

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<sup>564</sup> Marable, *Living Black History*, p. 153.

<sup>565</sup> Doherty, "Malcolm X," p. 29.

<sup>566</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p. 299. See also James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p. 551.

<sup>567</sup> Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," p. 551. (Emphasis in original).

detriment of the screenplay. “[A]s the weeks wore on,” he wrote in the early 1970s, “and my scenes were returned to me ‘translated,’ it began to be despairingly clear (to me) that all meaning was being siphoned out of them.”<sup>568</sup> Baldwin eventually left the project after deciding that he did not have the freedom to create the Malcolm X he envisioned.

Lee claims that much of the Baldwin-Perl script remained in the finished film and that only the script’s final third was rewritten significantly.<sup>569</sup> The one historical document that is publicly available as testament to the Baldwin-Perl script’s content is the documentary *Malcolm X* (1972). The documentary was based on this script after Baldwin had left the project.<sup>570</sup> The documentary begins with a black screen, over which is played Billie Holiday’s powerful condemnation of American racism “Strange Fruit”. Then appears the documentary’s opening montage, which is an early precursor to the barrage of images that begin and conclude the 1992 film. There is footage of Malcolm X demanding equal rights for blacks and asserting his intention to achieve equality “by any means necessary.” After this speech, a procession of documentary clips of 1970s African-American lifestyles and culture appears, accompanied by the Last Poet’s proto-rap tract “Niggers are Scared of Revolution.” The sequence cuts back to Malcolm X’s “by any means necessary” speech and, finally, to another speech, one that charges the white man with being “the greatest murderer on earth”. The “I charge the white man” speech already had a history in visual representations of Malcolm X, and of the Nation of Islam more generally. The same speech opened the 1959 documentary, *The Hate that Hate Produced*, which, for many Americans, offered the first glimpse of the Black Muslims and of Malcolm X.<sup>571</sup> In this documentary, the speech was followed swiftly by presenter Mike Wallace’s warnings of a plague of “black supremacy” and “extremism” threatening late 1950s America. In the 1972 documentary, however, the speech’s aggressive stance is provided with more justification, for it appears straight after images of deprivation and poverty that still gripped many black Americans. 1972’s *Malcolm X* uses it to comment on African-American disillusionment and continued white prejudice and discrimination. Combining snippets of dialogue from the

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<sup>568</sup> Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” p. 552.

<sup>569</sup> Lee, *By Any Means*, p. 27.

<sup>570</sup> Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 301.

<sup>571</sup> Doherty, “Malcolm X,” p. 32.

*Autobiography* and documentary footage of civil rights activism of the 1960s and into the 1970s, *Malcolm X* (1972) pre-empted Lee's attempts to inject Malcolm X's image with contemporaneous resonance. Significantly, *Malcolm X* (1992) also begins with the "I charge the white man" speech, but provides footage directly pertinent to the 1990s.

Like *Dirty Dancing*, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* begins by framing its 1960s events from a contemporary (in this case 1990s) perspective. Present in the completed film is an opening sequence featuring the voice of Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) over a visual juxtaposition of an American flag and real documentary footage of black motorist Rodney King being beaten by white policemen in March 1991. This footage, shot by private citizen George Holliday, quickly found its way onto major television news broadcasts. When the policemen who were charged with the offense were found acquitted in court, it was, for many commentators, the final spark that ignited the Los Angeles uprisings of 1992. Lee's inclusion of this footage was therefore prescient; Malcolm's tone of voice becomes all-the-more understandable as this footage unravels before our eyes.

*Malcolm X* is littered with references to other historical and contemporaneous visual and verbal documents. The film pays homage and, at times, reframes various photographs, speeches and documentary excerpts. Guerrero refers to *Malcolm X*'s "historical intertextuality", pointing out the film's many explicit and subtle references to recognisable images and persons.<sup>572</sup> I build on Guerrero's perceptive analysis and suggest that Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* constitutes an attempt to synthesise various icons associated with the civil rights movement.

The film begins in the 1940s and even reaches, by way of flashbacks, back to the 1920s and 1930s. Like the *Autobiography*, it is divided into three acts. The first act concerns Malcolm X's early years and criminal activities. The second act examines his joining of the Nation of Islam and rise to prominence as spokesman for this organisation. The third act depicts Malcolm X's break from the Nation of Islam and conversion to orthodox Islam after a pilgrimage to Mecca. While I am primarily concerned with representations of the late 1950s and 1960s in *Malcolm X* (this

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<sup>572</sup> Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 197-204.

period approximately encompasses the years of the “Civil Rights Movement”)<sup>573</sup>, it is worth considering briefly the significance of the opening act.

The first act introduces a young Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) and emphasises his lack of political and spiritual maturity at this stage in his life. The act begins with the subtitle “Boston, the War Years.” The film has flashed-back to America during World War II. The camera’s leisurely tilt downward from a sign saying “Dudley Street Station” to the streets of Boston’s Roxby district provides a visual metaphor for Malcolm X’s life and state of mind at this time; Malcolm X, or Malcolm Little as he is called presently, is metaphorically asleep; asleep to the plight of the African-American people. Colours used throughout the opening act, the garish yellows and blues of nightclubs of Roxbury and Harlem, contribute to a sense that this is all a dream from which he must awaken. Much criticism has been levelled at Lee for not providing sufficient references to the broader political and historical concerns existing in America during Malcolm’s life.<sup>574</sup> bell hooks found the opening act particularly lacking in political commentary; it was, according to hooks, a “neo minstrel spectacle” of blacks dancing and singing and a Malcolm devoid of character or personality.<sup>575</sup> If one reads this opening act, however, as an externalisation of Malcolm X’s current state-of-mind, then the lack of political context and emphasis on surreal spectacle provides a metaphorical starting point for the protagonist’s personal maturation. The film, much like the *Autobiography*, suggests that Malcolm X has not yet found his calling and is detached from reality.

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<sup>573</sup> To demarcate an exact chronological “Civil Rights Movement” is in itself a difficult task. Scholars are at pains to note its historical origins. Events such as the formation of the NAACP in 1909, the work carried out by civil rights groups during the Great Depression are often noted. However, events such as the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that segregated public schools were unconstitutional, the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1963 march on Washington, passing of the Civil Rights act in 1964 and Voting Rights Act in 1965 are often cited as bookends to what Howard Schuman *et al* call the “Modern Civil Rights Movement.” Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, Maria Krysan, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 20. See also John Higham, “Introduction: A Historical Perspective,” in Higham (ed.), *Civil Rights and Social Wrongs: Black-White Relations Since World War II* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 3-30; Kathryn L. Nasstrom, “Beginnings and Endings: Life Stories and the Periodization of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 86, no. 2 (September, 1999), pp. 700-711; Cornel West, “The Paradox of the Afro-American Rebellion,” *Social Text*, nos. 9-10 (Spring/Summer 1984), pp. 49-50.

<sup>574</sup> Rhines, *Black Film*, pp. 155-156; Todd Boyd, “Popular Culture and Political Empowerment: The Americanization and Death of Malcolm X,” *Cineaste*, vol. 19, no. 4 (March 1993), pp. 12-13.

<sup>575</sup> hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, p. 184.

Puncturing the surreal atmosphere of 1940s Boston and New York are the voiceovers of an older, wiser, Malcolm X. The first commentary is instigated by a freeze-frame of Malcolm X strutting down the Boston streets in a brand new zoot suit. The older Malcolm X's voice is broadcast concurrently: "When my mother was pregnant with me, a party of Klansmen surrounded our house in Omaha, Nebraska." This statement instigates a flashback in which Klansmen are shown smashing the Little family house's windows with rifle butts. Throughout the film, each time a gun appears or a gun shot is heard, it is a harbinger of the struggles to come. During a scene in Boston, Malcolm and his friend Shorty (Spike Lee) act out moments from their favourite gangster films. Suddenly a non-diegetic gun shot instigates a flashback in which we see Malcolm's father, Earl Little (Tommy Hollis), brutally murdered by white racists. Again, the gunshot appears just before Malcolm is forced to flee New York in fear for his life. This gun-shot is a prophecy of Malcolm's imminent break from West Indian Archie (Delroy Lindo) and the New York underworld, and his eventual arrest and imprisonment.

*Malcolm X*'s second act is a lengthy one, spanning over a decade of the protagonist's life. It begins when Malcolm meets Nation of Islam minister Baines (Albert Hall) in prison and ends in 1964 with his break from the Nation of Islam. Baines serves as Malcolm X's first spiritual guide, opening the young Malcolm to the teachings of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad (played in the film by Al Freeman Jr.). "Elijah Muhammad can get you out of prison", says Baines, "out of the prison of your mind."

Once Malcolm X leaves prison, the film offers further evidence of his political and personal development. Guerrero observes that, during one scene – ostensibly set in the 1950s – Malcolm X is joined by two real and recognisable, personalities: former Black Panther Bobby Seale and black activist Al Sharpton. All three are making public speeches and outlining their respective philosophies. Seale and Sharpton's appearance provides a "self-reflexive" gesture toward later African American political action.<sup>576</sup> What Fredric Jameson negatively refers to as postmodern culture's "collapsing of time into a series of perpetual presents" serves a

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<sup>576</sup> Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 202.

rather more progressive function here.<sup>577</sup> Jameson suggests that, whether in contemporary film, poetry or art, such temporal manipulation is ideologically conservative and usually reproduces the dominant culture into which cultural products are released, and of which they are constituent parts. In this scene, however, the technique indicates an attempt at political commentary. With the appearance of both Seale and Sharpton, a bridge is suspended between different eras, and different philosophical and political ideologies associated with civil rights activism. These links become all the more pronounced when the film associates Malcolm X with the universally celebrated civil rights activist, Martin Luther King.

While comments made by Lee during the release of *Do the Right Thing* (noted above) attempted to place a clear distinction between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the film *Malcolm X* attempts to highlight similarities between the two leader's politics and their philosophies. In a book published at the time of *Malcolm X*'s theatrical release, Lee harks back to the aforementioned conclusion to *Do the Right Thing* in which Malcolm X and Martin Luther King quotations were placed side-by-side. Lee informed readers that "when I put those two quotes there, it was not a question of either/or ... I think they were men who chose different paths trying to reach the same destination against a common opponent."<sup>578</sup> No longer is Lee favouring any particular philosophy (as he had done in the quotation noted above). Instead, he promotes the value of both Dr. King and Malcolm X's political outlooks. This apparent change in perspective was developed as Lee rewrote his *Malcolm X* script.

Toward the end of Malcolm X's involvement with the Nation of Islam, a scene featuring newsreel footage of southern civil rights protests appears. This footage is mentioned in the April 1991 draft script: "police using dogs against people. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Marching. Cattle Prods used against men, women and children ... The smouldering ruins of Birmingham's 16<sup>th</sup> St. Baptist church."<sup>579</sup> What is not stated in this draft, however, but is present in the finished film, is the presence of Malcolm X observing this footage on television. In the 1991 draft there is simply a voiceover of Malcolm X making a speech. The

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<sup>577</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in John Belton (ed.), *Movies and Mass Culture* (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 202.

<sup>578</sup> Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, p. 5.

<sup>579</sup> Lee, *Malcolm X* (April 15, 1991), p. 134.

finished film jumps between Malcolm X at home watching events transpiring in the South and Malcolm X speaking at a Nation of Islam rally. The speech in the 1991 draft immediately follows the appearance of the documentary footage, and proceeds as follows:

They say I advocate force and violence. All I ever said is that where the government is unwilling or unable to uphold the law and defend the lives and property of Negroes, it's time for Negroes to defend themselves. Don't go looking for white folks with rifles and form battalions – though you would be within your rights if you did – But it is time to let the Man know. Anytime they bomb a church and murder in cold blood, not some grown-ups, but four little girls, who are praying to the same God the white man taught them to pray to, I say No!<sup>580</sup>

The finished film intersperses Malcolm X's speech with scenes of him watching the footage on television. The following lines of dialogue were added:

The black people in this country have been the victims of violence ... and following the ignorant Negro preachers, we have thought that it was God-like to turn the other cheek to the brute that was brutalising us ...

The differences between the two speeches are striking. In the 1991 draft script, Malcolm X announces that he is not calling for violent uprisings – “don't go looking for white folks with rifles”. In this way the speech softens Malcolm X's image; it is Lee attempting to portray the minister in a gentler light. It also makes no reference to the “ignorant Negro preachers” noted in the finished film. The speech in the 1992 finished film seems at first to be far harsher toward Martin Luther King and other civil rights activists. However, when combined with the shots of Malcolm X watching the documentary footage on television, the speech's aggressive rhetoric is provided with a more complex meaning. A split between Malcolm X's public and private personas emerges throughout this scene. The scene begins with a medium close-up of Malcolm X watching television. As he watches television, Malcolm's

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<sup>580</sup> Lee, *Malcolm X* (April 1991), p. 134.

face does not express hatred, but a sadness born of empathizing with that which is being shown on the screen. Then there is a cut to documentary footage of police dogs being used on civil rights protestors. This is followed by another medium close-up, this time of Malcolm X making the above noted speech at a Nation of Islam rally. The camera has, in a sense, travelled through the television screen; the Malcolm X that stands in front of the Nation of Islam rally is linked visually to the civil rights activists he has seen on television. The subsequent cuts – between Malcolm X at home, Martin Luther King and other civil rights protestors on television and Malcolm X in public – link diverse factions of civil rights activism (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). This scene therefore has become less a case of Malcolm X being softened. Rather, Malcolm X and his own personal beliefs and politics become assimilated into the wider civil rights movement. The Nation of Islam spokesman is here presented as an – albeit critical – ally of a national struggle for African-American civil rights. In this way, Lee is beginning to break down the barriers that public memory frequently constructed between images of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, while still maintaining a sense of the two leaders’ distinctive philosophical outlooks.

This scene is also one of the first indications that Malcolm X’s philosophies are beginning to outgrow Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X’s apparent empathy toward other civil rights activists is followed shortly by indications of the animosity brewing in the Nation of Islam. “Wake up!” screams his wife, Betty X, “are you so dedicated that you have blinded yourself?”<sup>581</sup> She is referring to the ways in which other Nation of Islam ministers seem to be giving the cold shoulder to, or even plotting against, Malcolm X. Betty X’s comments serve as the final catalyst for Malcolm X’s break from the Nation of Islam and propel him onward in a journey of political and personal discovery.

*Malcolm X*’s final act begins with some familiar footage. Both the black and white shots of President Kennedy’s motorcade arriving at Dallas’ Dealey Plaza and an accompanying military drum-roll are very similar to *JFK*’s rendition of the same historical event. Even the editing at this juncture – the mixing of black and white and colour images, documentary footage and staged re-enactments – is reminiscent

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<sup>581</sup> The sight metaphor shares distinct similarities with *JFK*’s scene where Jim Garrison announces that his eyes “have been opened.”



of Stone's film. As Jesse Rhines notes, throughout *Malcolm X*'s production, Spike Lee constantly spoke about *JFK* as an important precursor to his film. Rhines suggests that Lee's comparisons were made primarily for economic reasons; the filmmaker hoped to press Warner Bros. – the company that financed and distributed *JFK* and *Malcolm X* – into providing him with the same financial resources as the studio had provided *JFK*'s writer-director-producer Oliver Stone.<sup>582</sup> It is clear, however, that parallels between *Malcolm X* and *JFK* go beyond matters fiscal. Some of the visual and thematic features present in Stone's film are reworked and reconfigured in *Malcolm X*'s final act, which begins just after the Kennedy assassination and ends with Malcolm X's murder.



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<sup>582</sup> Jesse Rhines, "Spike Lee, Malcolm X, and the Money Game: The Compromises of Crossover Marketing," *Cineaste*, vol. 19, no. 4 (March 1993), p. 17.



Figure 4.2: Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) at home and in public.



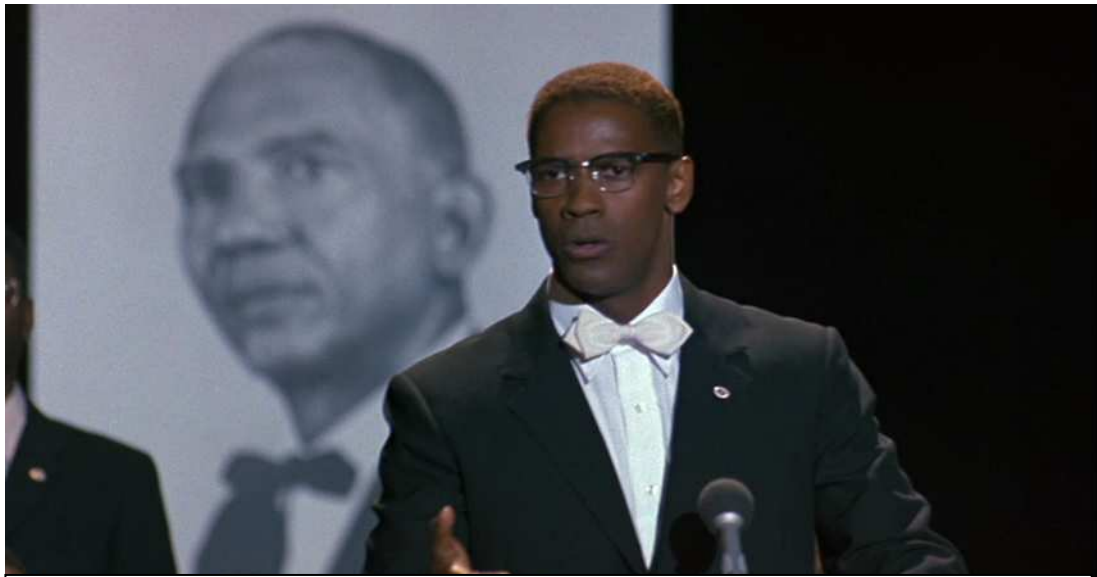


Figure 4.3: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

In what can be seen as a gesture toward debates on the Sixties that were unfolding in the public sphere, Lee has ascribed added significance to the Kennedy assassination, portraying it as having catalysed both a descent into national chaos and having catalysed Malcolm X's gaining of personal authenticity. Malcolm X's comments following Kennedy's death – the comment that this was an example of the white man's "chickens coming home to roost" – provoke Elijah Muhammad into silencing the minister for ninety days, and, subsequently, to Malcolm X's break from the Nation of Islam.<sup>583</sup> In the film, the silencing is immediately followed by the first threat against Malcolm X and his family. Like Garrison's wife, Liz, Malcolm X's wife starts to receive threatening phone calls. The appearance of CIA and FBI operatives, who follow Malcolm X's every move in the film's final third, further adds to an atmosphere of paranoia. Manning Marable reminds us that in reality Malcolm X had been under FBI surveillance since the early 1950s.<sup>584</sup> In depicting the interference of state operatives in the immediate wake of the Kennedy assassination, Lee seems to be aligning his film with the Sixties narrative that was promoted and discussed in and around *JFK*. Here once again is the military-

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<sup>583</sup> This is also the case in Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 301-302.

<sup>584</sup> Manning Marable, "Malcolm as Messiah: Cultural Myth vs. Historical Reality in *Malcolm X*," *Cineaste*, vol. 19, no. 4 (March 1993), p. 8.

industrial-complex seen mobilising its forces; Malcolm X becomes another martyr in a post-1963 national declension narrative.

Running in tandem with the descent into political chaos is the blossoming of Malcolm X's personal narrative. In the film there are barely minutes between the Kennedy assassination and a press conference where Malcolm X announces that he will be forming a new organisation dedicated to the struggle for black civil rights. A notable alteration to the script took place between 1991 and 1992. In the April 1991 draft, Malcolm X announced that he would no longer be speaking on behalf of Elijah Muhammad and would be founding his group the Organization of Afro-American Unity.<sup>585</sup> In the finished film he says much the same, but adds the following words:

Now that I have more independence of action, I intend to use a more flexible approach toward working with others ... I'm not out to fight other Negro leaders ... We must work together to find a common solution ... [and] ... whites can help us.

These lines seem to suggest that the spokesman had only made negative comments against other African American civil rights activists and preached a separatist doctrine because of Elijah Muhammad. Now that Malcolm X is free from such constraints – “now that I have more independence of action” – he is willing to cooperate with others, whites included. Immediately, then, Malcolm X is being shaped into a figure of universal appeal. He is beginning to build a bridge between himself and the broader civil rights movement and between himself and white people. *Malcolm X*'s final act sees the civil rights leader's persona transcend the aggressive, outspoken image projected in hip-hop culture of the 1990s and become a national and international statesman.

During his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X makes a statement (also present in the *Autobiography*), which would likely appeal to members of the Sixties generation: “As racism leads America up the suicidal path, I do believe that the younger generation will see the writing on the wall, and many of them will want to turn to the spiritual path of the truth.”<sup>586</sup> Again, this statement was not in the 1991

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<sup>585</sup> Lee, *Malcolm X* (April 1991), p. 160.

<sup>586</sup> Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin [1965] 1992), p. 341.

draft script.<sup>587</sup> These additional lines of dialogue speak to Malcolm X's empathy towards young Americans of the 1960s. It is almost as if he is prophesising a generation's search for personal authenticity. When Malcolm X returns from his pilgrimage, both the bad sixties of chaos and corruption and the good sixties of personal maturation continue to unravel in and around his person. More death threats are made; the FBI is seen tapping private telephone calls. Malcolm X's family house is firebombed. Those plotting Malcolm X's assassination appear in brief, shadowy scenes, testing their weapons. Then, as the civil rights spokesman drives to what turns out to be his last speaking engagement, Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" (1964) blasts out a musical accompaniment. On the one hand, the song serves as a bitter commentary on Malcolm X's impending death. The assassins strike; this time diegetic gunshots ring-out and the civil rights leader falls. On the other hand, Cooke's song also signifies a celebration of Malcolm X's legacy. Malcolm X is introduced by a speaker stating that "we are living in ... changing times." Like Kennedy's introduction in *JFK*, Malcolm X becomes symbolic of Sixties transformation.

This view of Malcolm X as a harbinger of sweeping changes in American society is further emphasised in the film's final moments, when a montage of photographs and documentary footage appears. The first public figure to appear in this montage is Martin Luther King. Dr. King's proclamation that Malcolm X's death is a "tragedy" once again brings the two civil rights leaders together. As the montage progresses, actor Ossie Davis's 1965 eulogy for Malcolm is played by way of a voiceover. A series of black and white images of Malcolm X appear. Then the montage bursts into colour. On screen appear documentary images of late-1960s civil rights activists such as Angela Davis, and Olympic medal winners John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their fists in the Black Panther salute. Then again, the montage presents more photographs of Malcolm X. After these photographs appears footage of the integration of Alabama University in 1962, thus connecting Malcolm X to both early- and late-Sixties civil rights activism. Finally, the montage moves into the 1990s, showing shots of black people cheering Malcolm X's name in Harlem and schoolchildren standing up and proclaiming: "I'm Malcolm X ..."

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<sup>587</sup> Spike Lee, *Malcolm X* (April 1991), p. 163.

African civil rights activist Nelson Mandela provides the last celebration of Malcolm X's legacy, quoting Malcolm X's "by any means necessary" speech.

In this final sequence Malcolm X is promoted as an inspiration. His life is portrayed as a sweeping Sixties narrative in which the struggles for racial equality and for personal authenticity are synthesised and promoted as one of the era's positive legacies. Malcolm X becomes a bridge between civil rights activism past, present and, in the case of the school children's announcements, civil rights activism future. By associating Malcolm X with so vast a collection of notable individuals and events, *Malcolm X*'s protagonist encompassed a panoply of political and cultural phenomena, all of which had the potential to spark heated conflict and debate in the public sphere.

### **“Getting the Word Out”: Promotion and Reception**

In August 1991, as Spike Lee was completing the script to *Malcolm X*, a group of black political activists hand-delivered a letter to his Brooklyn home. The letter was a fiery condemnation of all of Lee's previous films. It was also a plea for the director to seek advice before shooting his biopic of the slain civil rights leader. For these activists, Lee's films *She's Gotta Have It*, *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues* and *Jungle Fever* had been a "caricature of Black people's lives" and a "dismissal of our [civil rights] struggle."<sup>588</sup> Lee, it was felt, should not now be allowed to trample over the legacy of so important a political and cultural figurehead as Malcolm X. Lee lashed back with a reply: "While I respect the concerns of the writers of the letter, this film will not be made by a committee."<sup>589</sup>

Throughout the film's production, media coverage of *Malcolm X* highlighted the debates and conflicts that the project was exciting amongst African Americans in particular. In the wake of the Rodney King beating and, especially after the L.A. Riots of April and May 1992, discussion of Lee's film was invested with an urgency that ensured that *Malcolm X* remained a high-profile film during its production. After its release on November 18, 1992, however, the film soon faded from public debate.

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<sup>588</sup> Herb Boyd, "Group of Prominent Activists Write Critical 'Open Letter' to Spike Lee," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 3, 1991, pp. 3, 50.

<sup>589</sup> Herb Boyd, "Spike Lee Lashes Back at Critics," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 10, 1991, p. 3.

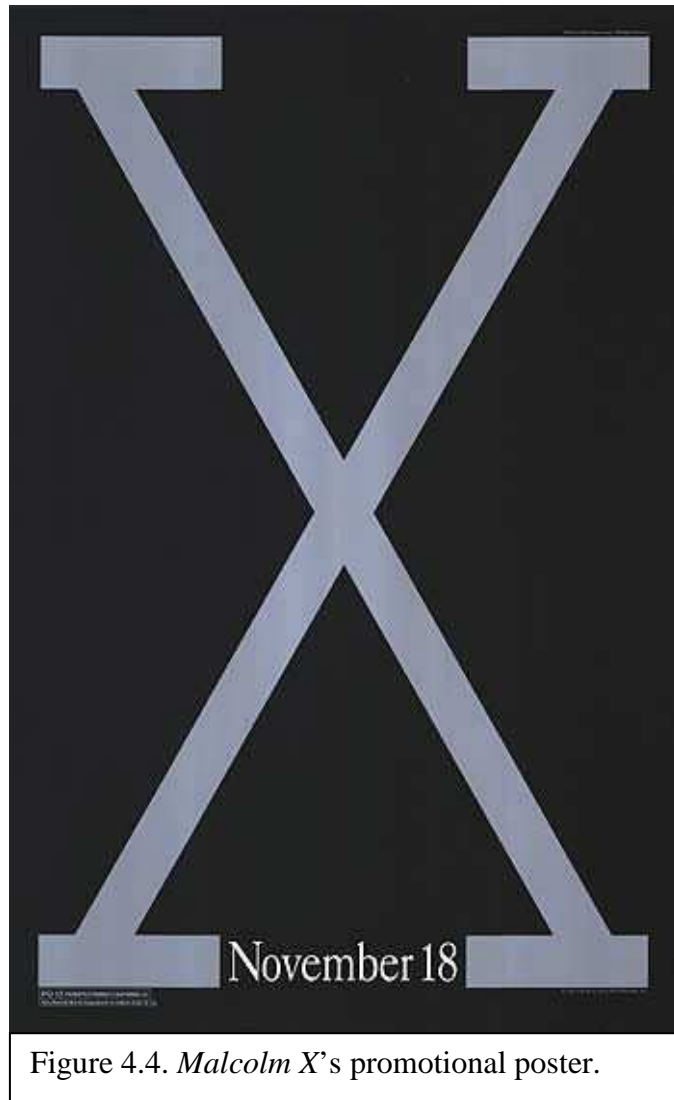
I argue that, while *Malcolm X* was constructed and promoted so as to appeal to black and white audiences, prominent journalists and political claims-makers did not see in *Malcolm X* an opportunity to reflect on a broader “American” experience of the Sixties. For this reason, once controversy had died down and the film was released, *Malcolm X*’s presence in public culture wars debates proved to be limited.

Prior to, and during, *Malcolm X*’s US theatrical release, Lee and Warner Brothers ran various marketing campaigns which attempted to appeal to diverse audience demographics. After being confirmed as the film’s director in January 1991, Spike Lee began selling at his New York clothes store baseball caps embossed with an X logo. The caps’ popularity ensured that soon an entire range of Malcolm X memorabilia was on sale. Within a year, one estimate suggested that \$100 million in revenue had been generated through sales of Malcolm X caps, t-shirts, jackets, air-fresheners, even potato chips.<sup>590</sup> The ubiquitous X logo became a marketing gimmick on a par with other film promotional campaigns such as the Bat symbol which had been used to promote the 1989 blockbuster *Batman* (see Figure 4.3). Employing imagery that could be reproduced on street wear, Lee was selling an image of Malcolm X that would resonate with younger Americans. “[F]rom Paris to Iowa”, declared film director Reginald Hudlin, “people are wearing ‘X’ hats ... Spike has done a phenomenal job getting the word out.”<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> William Reed, “‘X’ Marks the Big Money,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 21, 1992, p. 1.

<sup>591</sup> Bruce Horowitz, “When X Equals \$: Spike Lee’s New Film Creates an Instant Icon,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1991, Calendar, p. 1.



Here lay the bone of contention. Spike Lee was about to make a prestigious historical epic about a legendary individual, yet he was participating in, and, being associated with, blatant commercial profiteering on a huge scale. For some on-lookers, this meant that Lee was exploiting black culture. Before shooting had even begun on *Malcolm X*, a protest was organised and over two hundred people, led by writer and activist Amiri Baraka, congregated in Harlem on August 3 1991. At the protest, Baraka is said to have announced: “We will not let Malcolm X’s life be trashed to make middle-class negroes sleep easier”; another protester commented



that “the life of Malcolm X should not be another ‘Spike Lee Joint’”.<sup>592</sup> Other articles on the conflicts between Lee and Baraka appeared in the following weeks.<sup>593</sup> Baraka’s opinion of Lee’s previous films no doubt informed this pre-release diatribe, for it would be safe to conclude that the two men did not see eye-to-eye with one another when it came to on-screen representations of African Americans. To the older activist, Spike Lee embodied a particularly distasteful 1980s stereotype, an over-privileged, middle-class black yuppie or – to use popular terminology of the time – a “buppie.” The director was, as Baraka put it, “the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black, petit bourgeois professional.”<sup>594</sup> Baraka, who had met Malcolm X in the 1960s, had a personal investment in Malcolm X’s political and philosophical memorialisation. Baraka did not view Lee as a positive heir to Malcolm X’s fearless political stance, but as depressing evidence of middle-class blacks’ obeisance to the inherently racist social and economic system.<sup>595</sup>

In response to these criticisms, Lee reemphasised his commitment to making a film that would not trivialise Malcolm X, but that would provide an important contribution to civil rights history. In August 1991, Lee held an exclusive preview of the film for black journalists at the Schomburg Center in New York. The preview apparently concluded with Malcolm uttering the provocative line “you been took” to a group of African-Americans. Vinette Price of the *New York Amsterdam News* wrote that this line “left food for thought and affirmation that the militant was way ahead of his time.”<sup>596</sup> At the same screening, Lee announced that he had made the film because “the story needs to be told, and the public needs to know that this is more than about wearing a hat.”<sup>597</sup> Here Lee was emphasising *Malcolm X*’s didactic

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<sup>592</sup> Evelyn Nieves, “Malcolm X: Firestorm Over a Film Script,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1991, pp. B1-B2.

<sup>593</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “The Battle Over Malcolm X,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 1991, p. G1.

<sup>594</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Spike Lee at the Movies,” in Manthia Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

<sup>595</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Malcolm as Ideology,” in Joe Wood (ed.), *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1992), pp. 18-35.

<sup>596</sup> Vinette Price, “Spike X’s out White Press at *Malcolm* Screening,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 8, 1992, p. 21.

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*

potential, even, in some interviews, controversially encouraging students to “skip school” to watch the film.<sup>598</sup>

The filmmaker also emphasised that *Malcolm X* was not an exploitation of black history. In Lee’s view, his film could actually help promote other African-Americans in the public sphere. Prior to the film’s release, Lee announced that he would prefer to be interviewed only by African-American journalists.<sup>599</sup> Furthermore, he frequently reminded reporters that part of *Malcolm X*’s funding had come from African-American public figures: Bill Cosby, Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey, Janet Jackson, Prince, Tracy Chapman, Magic Johnson and Peggy Cooper Cafritz (the founder of the Duke Ellington School for the Arts in Washington D.C.).<sup>600</sup>

If Lee was attempting to appeal directly to African Americans, distributor Warner Bros. intended to soften Malcolm X’s image in the hope that the film would also appeal to conservative white audiences. Joel Wayne, executive vice president of marketing at the company remarked in an interview, that, “if people think that the film ‘Malcolm X’ stands for anger and fists in the air, it will be harder to market.”<sup>601</sup> The studio ran trailers “that portray[ed] Malcolm as a relatively moderate man in order to attract older people and whites to see the film.”<sup>602</sup> In *Malcolm X*’s US theatrical trailer there is no reference to the opening scene of the leader “charging the white man” over the Rodney King footage. Two significant lines of dialogue are, however, included: firstly, when informed by a white reporter that he has admitted to being “anti-white”, Malcolm X replies “no *you’re* saying I’m anti-white”; secondly, when asked by another white reporter whether he advocates violence he replies brusquely: “no.” Much of the marketing budget set aside by Warner Bros. was, in fact, used to target whites. Reports surfaced that the 225 Black-owned newspapers in the US – those that had given Lee’s film so much pre-release publicity – received little money to advertise *Malcolm X*. Warner Bros. bought advertising space in only 20 of the 205 black-owned newspapers, and each advertisement comprised only an

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<sup>598</sup> David J. Fox, “Malcolm X,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1992, p. F1; Elston Carr, “‘X’ Hits the Target Tolerance,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1992, p. F3.

<sup>599</sup> Bernard Weinrub, “Spike Lee’s Request: Black Interviewers Only,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1992, p. C22.

<sup>600</sup> Lena Williams, “Spike Lee Says Money from Black Saved X,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1992, p. C15; Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>601</sup> Horovitz, “When X Equals \$,” p. 1.

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*

eighth of a page compared to the half pages advertisements that the company had taken out in mainstream publications.<sup>603</sup> Warner Bros.' newspaper ads avoided taking a provocative political stance. Instead, the ads spotlighted different aspects of Malcolm's personality: "Scholar, Convict, Leader, Disciple, Hipster, Father, Hustler, Minister, Black Man, Every Man." Ending with the assertion that Malcolm was an "every man", this extensive and varied list bespeaks the attempts made by Warners' marketing department to universalise the civil rights leader.

While Spike Lee promoted Malcolm's politics and attitude, Warner Bros. courted more conservative theatregoers. One final marketing angle attempted to stretch the film's appeal beyond African-American youths and a generalised white America. Publicity surrounding Denzel Washington created a narrative targeted at older audiences, and in particular, the Sixties generation. Washington's biography was revisited frequently in press articles and interviews. The actor was born in 1955, aligning him with the baby boomer demographic. In public discussion, he was often touted as a kind of "every boomer", someone who could appeal to older, black and white audiences.<sup>604</sup> The actor's biography, as it was presented in the media, follows a middle-class baby-boomer trajectory: brought up in a middle-class family in suburban New York; enrolled in college where he initially studied journalism. Washington speaks of being a "real jock" at college: "it was football, football, football."<sup>605</sup> The popularity of American football amongst college students, or the "football boom",<sup>606</sup> had gained great momentum through the 1960s and into the 70s (when Washington and many of the Sixties generation were at college). In a 1989 interview, the actor commented upon his own personal life story, saying that "my ultimate search ... is a search for self ... Everything I do now, work wise, is spiritual."<sup>607</sup> Embarking upon a "spiritual" quest, Washington would have found many fellow travellers amongst the older baby-boomers then entering their thirties and forties. In his book *Boomer Nation*, Steve Gillon notes that, in the late 1970s and 1980s, "many Boomers who had turned away from organised religion in the '60s and

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<sup>603</sup> Mark R. Moss, "Black Publishers Miffed Over Ads Purchased for Malcolm X Film," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 5, 1992, p. 5.

<sup>604</sup> Donna Britt, "Sincerely, Denzel Washington", *Washington Post*, August 25, 1989, p. D1.

<sup>605</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Here, There and *Elsewhere*," *Washington Post*, September 18, 1985, p. D10; Lena Williams, "Playing With Fire," *New York Times*, October 25, 1992, pp. SM39, SM65.

<sup>606</sup> Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 124.

<sup>607</sup> Donna Britt, "Sincerely, Denzel Washington," *Washington Post*, August 25, 1989, p. D10.

'70s were turning their attention again to things spiritual.”<sup>608</sup> Regular church attendance among boomers born between 1945 and 1954 climbed from 32.8 percent in 1975 to 41.1 percent by 1990.<sup>609</sup> Again, Washington’s life was presented in such a way as to maximise its potential to resonate with members of his generation, or at least to showcase his membership of the demographic, which in turn served to frame *Malcolm X* as a film that spoke directly to baby boomers.

There was some question as to whether Washington was a suitable candidate to play Malcolm X. A lengthy feature on the actor published in the *New York Times* immediately before *Malcolm X* was released remarked that “there are cadres of Malcolm purists ... who question whether Washington whose pretty-boy looks and sex appeal have landed him on the cover of *People* magazine ... is right for the part of a man who inspires reverence among some and fear among others.”<sup>610</sup> Washington’s previous cinematic attempt at playing a civil rights activist, South African anti-apartheid campaigner Stephen Biko, had received some criticism. One review of the film suggested that Washington “reduce[d] Biko to a mere black civil rights liberal, which he was not.”<sup>611</sup> But before *Malcolm X*, Washington had won a best supporting actor Oscar in a Civil War epic entitled *Glory* (1989), the story of a battalion of African-American soldiers. As Trip, a tough-talking escaped slave who shows belligerence toward white officers, Washington’s role in *Glory* was seen by some reviewers to be a move away from his more clean-cut “middle-class” characters (such as his stint playing Dr. Philip Chandler in the television programme *St. Elsewhere* [1982-1988]).<sup>612</sup> One reviewer thought Trip “at moments to be a somewhat back-dated Black Panther, full of cynicism and rage”.<sup>613</sup> Denzel Washington’s star persona was therefore politically complex; sometimes associated with a rather gentle approach to racial issues; sometimes linked to outspoken activism. It was therefore a persona that could be used to make the films in which he starred appealing to diverse members of the Sixties generation. Yet, for all the efforts

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<sup>608</sup> Steve Gillon, *Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever and How It Changed America* (New York: The Free Press, 2004), p. 110.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>610</sup> Lena Williams, “Playing With Fire,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1992, p. SM38.

<sup>611</sup> Mxolisi Mgxashe, “A Black South African Looks at ‘Cry Freedom,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 18, 1987, p. 13.

<sup>612</sup> Glenn Collins, “Denzel Washington Takes a Defiant Break from Clean-Cut Roles,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1989, p. C13.

<sup>613</sup> Richard Bernstein, “Heroes of ‘Glory’ Fought Bigotry Before All Else,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1989, p. H22.

to market *Malcolm X* to diverse audiences, once it reached cinemas the film seems to have for the most part failed appeal to white audiences.

Interviewed in early November 1992, the editor of *Black Elegance Magazine* Sharon Skeeter provided succinct reasoning as to why the real Malcolm X remained a topic of conversation in the public sphere. “Everyone’s looking back at the ‘60s,” contended Skeeter, “blacks are the same way.”<sup>614</sup> Placing Malcolm X commemoration within broader Sixties remembrance offered, for this commentator, a rubric under which at least some of the contemporary fascination with Malcolm might be understood. Yet Skeeter is also quite specific about who precisely was revisiting Malcolm. Not America – for this was no sweeping declaration of national mourning and reconciliation (à la Vietnam or Kennedy assassination) – but “blacks.” The emphasis upon African-American participation in the Sixties debate would resonate in subsequent discussion of *Malcolm X*. On the one hand, this motion picture provided a national forum for a marginalised group to air their views on the recent American past. On the other hand, such racial specificity was telling, because these debates were located within a framework that implied special interest as opposed to national concern.

Throughout the production of *Malcolm X*, countless articles were published which discussed the film and Malcolm X’s relevance to contemporary society. Alongside the conflicts between Lee and Baraka (noted above) appeared think-pieces that used *Malcolm X* as an entry point in to considerations of the civil rights leader’s legacy. Many prominent African-American academics and spokespeople expressed their points of view in mainstream news articles.<sup>615</sup> Some articles suggested that part of Malcolm X’s enduring popularity resulted from his having spoken to the concerns of deprived and disillusioned African-American youths in the aftermath of the Los Angeles uprisings of April and May 1992. For instance, an interview with Spike Lee published at the end of May 1992 intimated that the rise of “Malcolmania” was linked directly to the need for outspoken black heroes after the uprisings, which were

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<sup>614</sup> Steve Lowery, “Mad About Malcolm,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, November 9, 1992. (This article is available in the clippings collection at the Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles. Unfortunately, the page number was not preserved).

<sup>615</sup> Ansen *et al* “The Battle for Malcolm X,” p. 52; Kaylois Henry, “Spike Lee: Malcolm X’s Message Still Relevant,” *St Petersburg Times*, August 21, 1992, p. 8A; Anon, “Just Whose Malcolm is it Anyway,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1992, p. B13.

a “wakeup call to the nation” on inner-city deprivation.<sup>616</sup> There were even fears that *Malcolm X* was going to instigate further violence.<sup>617</sup> Black-themed films of the early 1990s had been dogged by reports of violence at cinemas. Laura Baker examines media responses to cinema audience violence during the US theatrical runs of two black films of the early 1990s, *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* (both 1991). Baker notes that the violence which erupted during some screenings of the two films may well have been down to other factors: the very recent beating of Rodney King had, for example, just received widespread broadcast. Nevertheless, the mainstream media created a moral panic around *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* which was focused on their potential impact on black youths, which, argues Baker, reflected white fears that high-profile, black-centred, films might lead to the migration of “dangerous” blacks into previously “safe” white neighbourhoods and white neighbourhood cinemas.<sup>618</sup> *Malcolm X* was therefore produced and discussed at a time when media coverage of black-themed films were frequently imbued with a sense of urgency, as if every cultural representation of racial unrest had the potential to spark heated conflict and even violence.

*Malcolm X* continued to be subjected to scrutiny in the weeks that followed its theatrical debut. For example, *Advertising Age* found that, in November 1992, magazine cover stories on *Malcolm X* were second only in number to those on Democrat presidential election winner Bill Clinton.<sup>619</sup> After the film’s opening night, there were articles quoting the positive appraisals of the film made by African-American politicians such as Jesse Jackson and Maxine Walters.<sup>620</sup> The film’s educational potential was also celebrated. Two days before its release, the president of Los Angeles Inner City Theaters commented that “we’re getting calls daily from high-schools in the area that are interested in getting students together to see the movie.”<sup>621</sup> Another article reported how a Los Angeles church had arranged for large

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<sup>616</sup> Anon, “Just Whose Malcolm is It Anyway,” p. B13.

<sup>617</sup> Jennifer Pendleton, “Lee Dismisses X Violence Concerns at Joint Opening,” *Variety*, October 26, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>618</sup> Laura Baker, “Screening Race: Responses to Theater Violence at *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 44 (Fall 1999), pp. 4-19.

<sup>619</sup> Jeff Jenson, “Clinton Tops Cover Story Votes,” *Advertising Age*, December 7, 1992, p. 41.

<sup>620</sup> John Mitchell and Terry Pristin, “*Malcolm X* Draws Crowds in Most of L.A. on Opening Day,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1992, pp. A3, 37.

<sup>621</sup> David J. Fox, “Malcolm X,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1992, p. F1.

groups of youths to watch the film, a number of whom gave it positive reviews.<sup>622</sup> As with *JFK*, there were also several articles reporting the positive responses of young people to the film.<sup>623</sup>

In terms of critical reception, many film critics approved of *Malcolm X*'s complex representation of Malcolm X's developing philosophical and political outlook and of Denzel Washington's performance. What most reviews and features failed to address, however, was whether *Malcolm X* had any relation to broader debates on the Sixties. This may in part be down to a frequent implication contained within reviews that *Malcolm X* was not really controversial enough. At a time when the Sixties were being framed as a battleground for competing political perspectives, many reviewers stressed what they believed to be *Malcolm X*'s cautious approach toward its subject's political and philosophical development. For example, Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* expressed surprise at how "careful and classical a film it finally is" even with the outspoken Spike Lee at its creative helm.<sup>624</sup> Another critic stated that *Malcolm X*, in contrast to a film such as Stone's *JFK*, was "part of an older, softer, more conventional tradition of biographical enshrinement".<sup>625</sup> Some critics highlighted the similarities, in terms of central protagonist, between Lee's film and the 1982 chronicle of the Indian political leader *Ghandi*. Both Washington and Ghandi's actor Ben Kingsley had, in these commentators' views, provided hyper-dignified portrayals of the civil rights leader.<sup>626</sup> Most negatively, Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine stated that the Malcolm X presented in Lee's film was too reserved and that "[m]oviegoers may accept Lee's burning logo and tepid melodrama now. They can hope for the fire next time."<sup>627</sup> This was no explosive cultural document (as Corliss had described *Platoon*) depicting the Sixties conflicts

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<sup>622</sup> Elston Carr, "'X' Hits the Target Tolerance," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1992, p. F3; Lynda Richardson, "For Youths, 'Malcolm X' is Reflection and Identity," *New York Times*, November 19, 1992, p. B4.

<sup>623</sup> See, for example, John Mitchell and Terry Pristin, "*Malcolm X* Draws Large Crowds in Most of L.A. on Opening Day," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1992, pp. A3, 37; Dave Wielenga, "X Hits the Spot: Moviegoers Take a Ride Through History with *Malcolm X*," *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, November 19, 1992, pp. D1, 3; Yusef Salaam, "Vocational Students Comment on *Malcolm X* Movie Screening," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1993, p. 26.

<sup>624</sup> Kenneth Turan, "*Malcolm X*: Hero for Troubled Times," *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1992, p. F1.

<sup>625</sup> Peter Rainer, "Antihero Worship," *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1992, Calendar, p. 22.

<sup>626</sup> Turan, "*Malcolm X*," p. F1; Vincent Canby, "*Malcolm X* as Complex as Its Subject," *New York Times*, November 18, 1992, p. C19.

<sup>627</sup> Richard Corliss, "The Elevation of Malcolm X," *Time*, November 23, 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,977068,00.html> (Accessed May 2009).

and divides. That Lee could be viewed as having managed the same feat as Stone had done with Jim Garrison (turning a controversial historical figure into a universal hero) was not treated as controversial this time around. In fact, a Ghandi-like Malcolm X was seen as thoroughly standard – boring, even.

Importantly, there were few suggestions that *Malcolm X* could provide a springboard for white public commentators of the Sixties generation to relive their experiences. A *Newsweek* report published the day after *Malcolm X*'s release claimed that “most whites today know or care little about Malcolm.”<sup>628</sup> African-American commentators, on the other hand, did occasionally use the film to reminisce. For example, in *The New Statesman*, black conservative commentator Shelby Steele noted Malcolm X's importance to young African-Americans in the 1960s. “Late at night in the [college] dorm, my black friends and I would listen to his [Malcolm X's] album of speeches, *The Ballot or the Bullet*, over and over again. He couldn't have all that anger and all that hate unless he really loved black people, and, therefore, us.”<sup>629</sup> A very brief attack on the film by former head of 1960s activist group the Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee (SNCC) and sometime Black Panther Stokely Carmichael appeared in January 1993.<sup>630</sup> And yet, such articles were few and far between. Whereas *Platoon* and *JFK* received mainstream news coverage months after their theatrical releases, *Malcolm X* received minimal discussion after November 1992. I would argue that the failure of white journalists and politicians (who constituted a substantial majority of media and political elites) to view *Malcolm X* as a Sixties-story of national, rather than racial, concern, contributed to the film's inability to impact culture wars debates after the film's theatrical release.

In this respect, it is worth noting the response of one prominent white journalist who had been involved heavily in debates over *JFK*. When in December 1992, CBS's Dan Rather – a vociferous critic of *JFK* – produced a documentary on Malcolm X, the documentary did not once mention Lee's film. In an interview, Rather provided reasoning for this omission: “There is nothing incumbent on Spike Lee as a film maker to make his film consistent with the facts,” the journalist declared. “He has every right to make a film that takes the proverbial literary

<sup>628</sup> Mark Whitaker *et al.*, “Malcolm X,” *Newsweek*, November 16, 1992, p. 16.

<sup>629</sup> Shelby Steele, “Malcolm Little,” *The New Republic*, December 21, 1992, p. 28.

<sup>630</sup> Anon, “Carmichael Blasts Lee on Malcolm,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1993, p. F14.



license.”<sup>631</sup> Rather, who had interviewed and criticised Oliver Stone during a programme on the Kennedy assassination,<sup>632</sup> seemed more ambivalent about Lee’s film. According to Rather, Stone and Lee were guilty of distorting the “facts” in the name of entertainment, yet only Stone’s film was considered worthy of sustained attack. If, as Rather contended, Lee was playing with facts, why did this journalist (or other journalists for that matter) hold fire? *JFK* had been lambasted for the damage it could do to young people’s understandings of the Kennedy assassination. To find this kind of intense scrutiny of *Malcolm X*, one needed to look to the African-American press (the *New York Amsterdam News*, for example, ran attacks on Lee’s film well into January 1993).<sup>633</sup> It would seem that the mainstream media was not so concerned with viewing *Malcolm X* as of similar national consequence. On the whole, Lee’s film was received by media elites as a representation of a complex and much discussed individual; but it was not portrayed as a representation of “the Sixties.”

This is not to say, however, that *Malcolm X* had no impact on the American public. *Malcolm X*’s \$45 million domestic theatrical box-office gross was viewed as something of a failure. Yet *Malcolm X* generated greater numbers of ticket-sales than the other civil rights film which received masses of media attention, *Mississippi Burning*, which scored \$34 million at the US box-office.<sup>634</sup> Perhaps even more significant than its financial performance is the fact that market research and articles indicate that the majority of people attending screenings of *Malcolm X* were black. Although some reports suggested solid white attendance figures in large urban areas, in general, it was thought that white audiences did not watch *Malcolm X* en masse.<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> Ed Bark, “CBS Takes Its Own Look at Malcolm,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 3, 1992, p. 1C.

<sup>632</sup> See Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, pp. 203-205.

<sup>633</sup> Yusef Salaam, “X-Ploitation: *Malcolm X*,” December 5, 1992, p. 30; J. Zamgba Browne, “Spike Lee Conspired to Reduce Malcolm to Nothing, Critic Says,” December 26, 1992, p. 9, 37; Yusef Salaam, “Vocational Students Comment on *Malcolm X* Movie Screening,” January 9, 1993, pp. 26, 35; Abiola Sinclair, “Is there a Conspiracy Against Spike Lee,” January 16, 1993, p. 23. (All published in the *New York Amsterdam News*).

<sup>634</sup> Figure taken from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1988&p=.htm>. [Accessed December, 2009].

<sup>635</sup> Michael Fleming, “Lee: X Not Getting Credit,” *Variety*, December 18, 1992, p. 1; Mitchell and Pristin, “*Malcolm X*,” p. A3, A37.

“Long after people have forgotten a film like *Scent of Woman*”, Spike Lee declared in February 1993, “young people will still be introduced to *Malcolm X*.”<sup>636</sup> Lee had just discovered that his film had not been nominated for the Best Picture or Best Director Oscars. Yet the filmmaker was convinced of *Malcolm X*'s longevity. And, as was the case with *JFK* and Oliver Stone, time has shown that *Malcolm X* cemented Lee's position as prominent filmmaker and social critic. *Malcolm X* featured on top-ten films of the 1990s lists, compiled by critics such as Roger Ebert, and filmmakers like Martin Scorsese.<sup>637</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Lee continued to produce politically challenging feature films and documentaries, such as *Get on the Bus* (1996), a fictional recreation of a group of African-American men preparing to join the Million Man March of 1995; *Four Little Girls* (1997), a documentary, named in honour of the victims of the Birmingham church bombing of 1963, that explores broader issues pertaining to 1950s and 1960s race relations in the US South; *Bamboozled* (2000), a satire of racism and inequality in the workplace; *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001), a television biography of the Black Panther founder; and *When the Levees Broke* (2006), a documentary that lambasts state and federal administrations for failing to adequately protect New Orleans from the long-predicted threat of flooding and subsequent lack of support for the poor in Hurricane Katrina's wake. While *Malcolm X* may not have inspired the same amounts of culture wars coverage as *JFK* had done, Lee, like Stone, has since become one of the most prominent politically engaged filmmakers working in Hollywood. Both filmmakers' reputations were only bolstered by their forays into biopic production. Both filmmakers portrayed their central protagonists' personal narratives as explicitly mirroring those promoted publicly by members of their own generation, the Sixties generation. Emphasising that Garrison and Malcolm X gained personal authenticity against the backdrop of Sixties politics and culture and, in particular, in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, turned these characters into honorary baby-boomers. Just as George Custen has argued to be the case with classical Hollywood biopics, fidelity to the facts played second fiddle to these filmmakers' “strong vision

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<sup>636</sup> Lynette Holloway, “On Rikers, *Malcolm X* and Director Find Fans,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1993, p. B3.

<sup>637</sup> <http://www.filmdetail.com/archives/2010/04/01/roger-ebert-and-martin-scorsese-best-films-of-the-1990s/>; Desmond Ryan, “Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* and Masterwork of the 90s,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 26, 2001, p. W12.

of what a proper film of a life should be.”<sup>638</sup> It would seem that a “proper life”, for Lee and Stone, was to have turned Sixties experience into political activism.

## Conclusion

*Malcolm X*'s promotional tagline – “Scholar, Convict, Leader, Disciple, Hipster, Father, Hustler, Minister, Black Man, Every Man” suggested the mass-audience that the film's distributor Warner Bros. hoped to reach. Even during production, Lee had made every effort to imbue *Malcolm X* with a spectrum of political and cultural references in the hope of securing large numbers of black and white movie-watchers. Furthermore, Malcolm X's gaining of personal authenticity in the wake of the Kennedy assassination associated directly this historical figure with a memorial narrative that intersected with that promoted by members of the Sixties generation. In this way, *Malcolm X* had the potential to appeal to public commentators as another contribution to debates on the meaning of the Sixties.

During promotion, director Spike Lee targeted young people by providing links between his film and youth culture of the early 1990s. After receiving criticism for this trivialisation of Malcolm X, the filmmaker emphasised *Malcolm X* as a serious slice of African-American history. Warner Bros. targeted conservative white audiences with a marketing campaign designed to soften Malcolm X's aggressive image. Publicity surrounding Denzel Washington promoted the actor as someone who could appeal to a (black and white) Sixties generation. For all these promotional efforts, however, the film quickly faded from the public sphere. Generally viewed as a black film, and therefore of primary appeal to African-Americans, *Malcolm X* was not translated easily into a broader cultural meditation on “America's” Sixties.

Yet, as was the case with *JFK* and Oliver Stone, *Malcolm X* enhanced Lee's cultural standing. On the back of their respective biopics Stone and Lee's respective public personae gained a scholarly-like reputation – they have both found a presence in literature on American history and politics. Stone has written forewords to historical studies such as *The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy: The Conspiracy and the Coverup* (2006) and *JFK: The CIA, Vietnam and the Plot to Assassinate*

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<sup>638</sup> George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), p. 111.

*John F. Kennedy* (2009). Lee has written forewords to books such as *Fight the Power: Rap, Race and Reality* (1997), *Encyclopaedia of Rap and Hip Hop Culture* (2008) and *Design for Obama, Posters for Change: A Grassroots Anthology* (2009). Today, both filmmakers' names evoke what might be called, following Gerard Genette, a *paratextual* quality,<sup>639</sup> framing such books immediately as politically inquisitive, challenging and, likely, an attack on "official" politics and culture. In a sense, Stone and Lee have acquired some of the political connotations and cultural values that they ascribed to their respective heroes, JFK and Malcolm X. In public debates at least, both continue to carry the Sixties torch.

Throughout 1992, as Spike Lee was promoting and defending *Malcolm X*, two other prominent public figures with an investment in the Sixties were on their way to becoming major political and cultural sensations. Both were avid fans of Elvis Presley, had shaken the hand of President John F. Kennedy, had participated in Vietnam War demonstrations, and, eventually, would become successful public statesmen. One was the soon-to-be president of the United States, Bill Clinton. The other was a man called Forrest Gump.

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<sup>639</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

## Chapter Five

### **“That’s All I’ve Got to Say About That”: A Tale of Two Sixties in *Forrest Gump***

In 1985, film producer Wendy Finerman reads the galleys of author Winston Groom’s novel, *Forrest Gump* (published in 1986). Portraying its eponymous hero’s involvement in such iconic events as the Vietnam War and America’s opening of diplomatic relations with China by way of a ping-pong tournament, *Forrest Gump* is a black comedy about young Americans’ participation in Sixties politics and culture. Finerman immediately options the book and commissions Groom to write a script.<sup>640</sup>

July 1994: After nine years in development the film version of *Forrest Gump* finally reaches cinema screens. Now based on a drastically altered screenplay written by baby boomer screenwriter Eric Roth (b. 1945), produced by Finerman (b. 1961) and Steve Tisch (b. 1948), directed by Robert Zemeckis (b. 1952) and starring Tom Hanks (b. 1956), *Forrest Gump* quickly becomes a national phenomenon and a cultural touchstone for the Sixties generation.<sup>641</sup> “America has gone Gump”, went one advertising slogan at the height of the film’s cultural visibility.<sup>642</sup> “If a presidential election were held today”, quipped the *New York Times*’ Frank Rich, “the likely winner would be Forrest Gump.”<sup>643</sup>

From page to spirit-of-the-age, *Forrest Gump* was, like the film’s infamous feather, blown upon the winds of fortune, and was shaped and re-shaped according to the ebb and flow of public political discourse. This chapter examines the framing and re-framing of public politics and personal authenticity in and around *Forrest Gump*. To date, academic writing on this film has developed two schools of thought. The most prominent school of thought portrays *Forrest Gump* as a conservative demonization of the Sixties, which served as a filmic harbinger of the Republican Party’s successes during the 1994 mid-term elections. For scholars of this opinion,

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<sup>640</sup> Bernard Weinrub, “*Gump*, a 9-Year Personal Campaign,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1994, p. C14.

<sup>641</sup> Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2002), p. 127.

<sup>642</sup> Michael Grunwald, “The Politics of Gump: The Boomer Message Movie whose Hero has Nothing to Say,” *Boston Globe*, March 26, 1995, p. B27.

<sup>643</sup> Frank Rich, “The Gump from Hope,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1994, p. A23.

the film is, as Paul Grainge puts it, “a powerfully conservative film.”<sup>644</sup> Others have suggested that *Forrest Gump* works as a self-conscious meta-historical commentary on the recent American past. Both Vivian Sobchack and Steven Scott argue that the film has a “postmodern” sensibility, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present, significant and trivial, and actually asks viewers to reflect upon the manner in which history is experienced by individuals and how history is presented in the public sphere.<sup>645</sup>

Suggesting, as I have done in previous chapters, that Hollywood representations of public politics are ideologically diverse, I counter charges that *Forrest Gump* is a conservative demonization of the Sixties. I begin by analysing Eric Roth’s first draft of the *Forrest Gump* script, written throughout 1992, arguing that Roth reworked *Forrest Gump* into a parody of the masses of Sixties-related discourses surrounding Democrat presidential candidate William Jefferson Clinton during the 1992 election. Then, by highlighting the changes that were made to the script between 1992 and 1994, and by providing a textual analysis of the finished film, I argue that some political content, which might have been read as falling too far to the liberal side of political debate, was cut from the script. At the same time, a narrative stressing the protagonist’s gaining of personal authenticity was strengthened. I disagree with Robert Burgoyne’s contention that *Forrest Gump* “consigns to oblivion ... the memory of historical agency that is the most enduring legacy of the sixties.”<sup>646</sup> Indeed, I argue that it is Gump’s participation in, and interaction with, a range of Sixties events, movements and persons (some famous, some fictional) that contribute toward his spiritual, moral and emotional

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<sup>644</sup> Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, p. 147. See also Thomas B. Byers, “History Re-Membered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counterculture,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Summer 1996), p. 421; Karen Boyle, “New Man, Old Brutalisms? Reconstructing a Violent History in *Forrest Gump*,” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* (December 2001), [www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/scopearchive](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/scopearchive) (Accessed April 2008); Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 104-119; Jennifer Hyland Wang, “A Struggle of Contending Stories: Race, Gender and Political Memory in *Forrest Gump*,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 92-115.

<sup>645</sup> Steven D. Scott, “‘Like a Box of Chocolates’: *Forrest Gump* and Postmodernism,” *Literature and Film Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2001), pp. 23-31; Vivian Sobchack, “Introduction: History Happens,” in Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modernist Event* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-4. While arguing that *Gump* is a conservative text, Grainge also suggests that the film mobilises a playful, postmodern style, which he aligns with what Jim Collins has called “eclectic irony.” Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, pp. 130, 140; Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 242-264.

<sup>646</sup> Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, p. 119.

development. In his private life and relationships, Forrest Gump's story is depicted as one of positive personal transformation. And, furthermore, by guiding those of a conservative disposition toward more liberal values of tolerance for diversity and universal love, Forrest Gump, like all of Hollywood's Sixties protagonists examined thus far, is presented as an inspirational figure, an authentic Sixties representative.

Finally, I examine *Forrest Gump*'s promotion and reception. I demonstrate that the film was initially promoted and received as an apolitical representation of the Sixties, one that could inspire the reminiscences of the Sixties generation. However, once the film had become a cultural sensation, Republican politicians moved to appropriate the film and announced it to be reflective of their conservative agenda. I argue that this appropriation was facilitated by a sea change in the public Sixties debate. Prominent challenges to President Clinton's public persona throughout 1994, and the President's inability to counter these attacks (as he had managed to do in 1992) ensured that conservatives reclaimed the political and even the moral high-ground in public debate. The Republicans' success at declaring themselves to be the voice of optimism and change throughout the summer and autumn of 1994 allowed them to claim a popular and optimistic film such as *Forrest Gump* as representative of their own ideological outlook.<sup>647</sup>

### **Suspicious Minds: The Sixties in 1992**

"The object of having a fool for most writers," says Dr. Quackenbush, a fictional university lecturer that appears in Winston Groom's novel *Forrest Gump*, "is to employ the device of *double entendre*" (emphasis in original). The fool makes a fool of himself while simultaneously allowing "the reader the revelation of the greater meaning of the foolishness."<sup>648</sup> Groom's novel is very much a catalogue of double entendres. From his commentary on the anti-war movement to that on

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<sup>647</sup> Part of my examination thus supports James Burton's insightful reading of *Forrest Gump*'s reception. Burton contends that conservative appropriation was not inevitable but "historically contingent upon the discursive cultural moment of its release." However, while Burton's discursive analysis focuses on the rise of Republican "family values" rhetoric in the public sphere as the reason for conservatives' appropriation of *Forrest Gump*, I focus more upon the "fall" of Clintonite uses of the recent American past. James Burton, "Film, History, and Cultural Memory: Cinematic Representations of Vietnam Era America During the Culture Wars, 1987-1995," (University of Nottingham: Unpublished Thesis, 2007)," p. 256.

<sup>648</sup> Winston Groom, *Forrest Gump* (London: Black Swan, [1986] 1994), p. 100.

American-Chinese relations, Forrest Gump may not understand what he is saying, but his words and actions are laden with implied significance. He is a foil to the world's foolishness and its absurdities.

As *Forrest Gump* travelled from page to screen, its eponymous hero and his life story were altered. However, the double entendres remained. *Forrest Gump*, the film, revised the novel, providing new frames of historical reference and a vastly altered central protagonist. In an appropriate act of symmetry, Bill Clinton's presidential campaign and Eric Roth's script for *Forrest Gump* were both being completed throughout 1992. In November 1992, Clinton became the first Democrat president in twelve years, winning the election by a hair's breadth from Republican incumbent George Bush Sr. In December, after one year's writing, Roth handed Hollywood producer Wendy Finerman the latest in a long line of *Forrest Gump* scripts.<sup>649</sup> The similarities between the new *Forrest Gump* and the media constructed image of presidential hopeful Bill Clinton are tantalising. While I do not suggest that Roth attempted actively to turn Gump into Clinton, the additions and alterations made to the script suggest that Roth took some satirical inspiration from contemporaneous discourses surrounding the president-to-be.

Throughout 1992, the Sixties were ever-present in discussions of the upcoming presidential election. Generational conflict was a prime subject in the media. Bush was said to be representative of the older generation, those that had fought in the "good war", World War II, and had started families in the post-war era. Clinton, born in 1946, was, however, part of the generation that grew up with the Vietnam War and the counterculture. Public commentators debated the consequences of electing a member of the Sixties generation to the presidency; did this generation "now have the maturity for leadership after their juvenile outbursts in the 1960s?"<sup>650</sup> In June 1992, Ellen Goodman of the *Washington Post* asked whether a baby-boomer president would be able to unite America in the same way as a World War II veteran like Bush: "in some ways, Bush's generation were blessed, at least with certainty and unity", explained Goodman. But, she continued, "if Bush is the candidate of a generation at ease with itself, then Clinton is the candidate of a generation still at

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<sup>649</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "Gump a 9-Year Personal Campaign," *New York Times*, July 13, 1994, p. C14.

<sup>650</sup> Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 166.



odds with itself.”<sup>651</sup> Clinton, along with his generation, came of age against division – divisions over the Vietnam War, over gender roles, over race relations and over government involvement in all of these issues.

John Kenneth White argues that Republicans moved first to turn the presidential election into a “referendum on the 1960s counterculture”.<sup>652</sup> Republican politicians such as Bush, vice-president Dan Quayle, Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senator Patrick Buchanan declared war on what they argued to be the pernicious influence of the Sixties counterculture on social and moral mores.<sup>653</sup> Clinton’s draft status (he had not fought in Vietnam and had organised protests against the war), his drug-taking (he claimed to have tried marijuana, but “didn’t inhale”) and his extra-marital affairs became the subject of much scrutiny. The Republican National Convention in August 1992 provided a forum for some particularly vociferous anti-Sixties/anti-Clinton declarations. Marilyn Quayle, wife of vice-president Quayle took the opportunity to link Clinton with all of the aspects of the era that were being demonised by Republicans. “Not everyone demonstrated, dropped out, took drugs, joined the sexual revolution or dodged the draft”, she announced.<sup>654</sup> Patrick Buchanan made his now infamous declaration that the country was in the throes of a large-scale “cultural war” a “struggle for the soul of America.” In this speech, which raged against women’s rights, gays and minorities, Buchanan accused Clinton of being a flag-bearer of liberal causes such as these, while Bush was the promoter of older, “traditional”, and therefore superior, values.<sup>655</sup>

Central to conservative attacks on Clinton and his allies was an attempt to present Democrats as “inauthentic.” Questions surrounding Clinton’s character and integrity abounded. Referring back to the Democratic convention held in July 1994, Bush announced that “20,000 radicals and liberals came dressed up as moderates and centrists – in the greatest single exhibition of cross-dressing in American political history”, adding: “[Americans] are not going to buy back into the failed liberalism of

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<sup>651</sup> Ellen Goodman, “The Search for an Intragenerational Truce,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1992, p. 83.

<sup>652</sup> John Kenneth White, *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes New American Politics* (Boulder, CO and London: Westview Press, 1998), p. 215.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 215-218; Marcus, *Happy Days*, pp. 153-155.

<sup>654</sup> Quoted in Steve Gillon, *Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever and How It Changed America* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 249.

<sup>655</sup> Bernard Von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 127.

the 1960s and seventies, no matter how slick the package in 1992.”<sup>656</sup> Themes of dishonesty, deviousness and duplicity permeate Bush’s assault on the New Democrats. The final reference to a “slick package” was a subtle jibe at Clinton himself. “Slick Willie” was the title bandied about in media discussions of Clinton throughout the presidential election. James Patterson notes that many politicians and reporters complained about Clinton’s self-aggrandizing spin and his “politically driven self-absorption”.<sup>657</sup> Slick Willie became shorthand for chiding what detractors believed to be Clinton’s slipperiness, indecisiveness, dishonesty and lack of integrity. If Bush’s above noted comment at the Republican Convention was a gentle nudge in this direction, the press release written by the Bush campaign’s political director Mary Matalin that was sent to newspapers in early August, suffered from no such restraint. The press release, entitled “Snivelling Hypocritical Democrats: Stand Up and Be Counted. On Second Thoughts, Shut Up and Sit Down,” brought together accusations that Clinton dodged the draft, had extra-marital affairs and took drugs. The press release “scoffed at the Arkansas Governor as ‘Slick Willie’” and lambasted both Clinton’s politics and his character.<sup>658</sup> For Republicans, Clinton was “the eternal politician who can’t be outpandered or pinned down by anybody”: slippery, amoral and bereft of a strong character.<sup>659</sup> Bush frequently intoned that if Clinton was elected “we’d have to replace the American eagle with a chameleon.”<sup>660</sup>

The mobilising of negative aspects of the Sixties formed part of an offensive against the Democratic nominee, which hoped to instil in the public an idea that Clinton was in thrall to a dubious legacy of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. Similarly, Clinton’s personal history became the base from which Republicans and their allies could question the Democratic contender’s character. For these commentators Clinton’s lack of authenticity was striking; he was a slippery, lying, cheating fraud.

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<sup>656</sup> Von Bothmer, *Framing*, p. 127.

<sup>657</sup> James T. Patterson *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush V. Gore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 320.

<sup>658</sup> Andrew Rosenthal, “The 1992 Campaign: The Republicans; Bush Campaign Issues Stinging Attack,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1992, p. A14.

<sup>659</sup> Bill Nichols, “How the Slick Label Stacks Up: A Look at Clinton’s History,” *USA Today*, October 8, 1992, p. 11A.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*

## For the Good Times: Scripting Clinton/ Scripting *Gump*

Clinton's response to these criticisms involved reframing both Sixties politics and himself in a more positive light. He attempted to soften, heal even, the blows directed by Republicans at the era and against his person. Marita Sturken notes the ways in which memory can fulfil a healing function, arguing that the ameliorating of trauma is a central function of cultural memory. The role of cultural memory, argues Sturken, is to provide a form of catharsis, to heal the wounds left by these events. "That cultural memory has been prominently produced in these contexts of pain", she writes, "testifies to memory's importance as a healing device and a tool for redemption".<sup>661</sup> Clinton's election campaign attempted to heal the ruptures engendered by debates on the Sixties. The Democratic challenger was by no means attempting to present a strong left-wing case for the era. Clinton's Sixties was largely a promotion of pre-1963 icons such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Clinton did not celebrate the anti-war movement or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.<sup>662</sup> However, while Republicans used the Sixties as a way of attacking and demonising their political foes, Clinton incorporated the Sixties into his electioneering to highlight unity, shared beliefs and common ideals.

It is significant that, unlike historical narratives that sought to posit a break between the "Fifties" and the Sixties (consider, for example, the use of the Kennedy assassination as national rupture discussed in Chapters Two-Four), Clinton's narrative went some way to providing continuity between the two eras. Clinton's dalliances with popular culture began not with the Sixties but with a cultural figurehead whose career began in the 1950s. Far from being a representative of a straight-laced Republican Fifties, however, the historical figure Clinton chose to invoke was a precursor to Sixties popular culture. "The statehouse doors open ... and here's Bill", wrote Steve Perry of the *Minneapolis City Pages*, "in a white jumpsuit".<sup>663</sup> In May 1992, Clinton went on the Arsenio Hall Show and played "Heartbreak Hotel" with the resident band. Writing in October 1992, Greil Marcus

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<sup>661</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 16.

<sup>662</sup> Von Bothmer, *Framing*, pp. 132-137.

<sup>663</sup> Quoted in Greil Marcus, "Hound Dog or Teddy Bear," *New York Times*, October 27 1992. Reprinted in Greil Marcus, *Double Trouble: Bill Clinton and Elvis Presley in a Land of No Alternatives* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 47.

noted, with an element of mock surprise, that “in no presidential year was Elvis Presley so inseparable from the action as in 1992.”<sup>664</sup> The countless comparisons between Clinton and Elvis in the press were received with pleasure, and even encouraged by Clinton himself. In fact, some commentators have argued that Elvis’s iconic image, and the position that the singer held in the popular imagination, may well have contributed to Clinton’s success.<sup>665</sup> At a time when Clinton was coming under attack for his supposed Sixties liberal elitism and for his dope-smoking history, his associations with Elvis went some way to tempering such attacks. As early as 1975, Greil Marcus noted that, when Elvis sings, “[t]he divisions America shares are simply smoothed away.”<sup>666</sup> Young and old, rich and poor, conservative and liberal, northern and southern: a palliative to such divides emerged in the music and personality of Elvis Presley. While late Sixties rock and roll rebellion – and its association with marijuana and LSD – was controversial, Elvis was a “unifier of a generation that the Republicans define by its schisms.”<sup>667</sup> There was an element of rebellion in Elvis, but a very contained rebellion. People could be fans of Elvis without necessarily condoning the less savoury elements associated with rock and roll of the Sixties. In tapping into this sentiment, Clinton perhaps managed to capture some of the King’s popular appeal.

Is it therefore any wonder that a historical figure not found in Winston Groom’s novel makes his way into Roth’s script? Just as Clinton attempted to “become” Elvis, mimicking him on television, infusing his own public persona with a Presley-like energy, so too is Forrest associated with the rock ‘n’ roll legend’s mannerisms. In fact, Forrest becomes the inspiration behind Elvis’ famous pelvic thrusts. The comments in the screenplay read as follows: “I [Forrest] just started to move along with the music swinging my hips ... And that young man said ‘that was pretty good’, and he copied me.”<sup>668</sup> At the scene’s end, Forrest says that his “life was about to change forever.”<sup>669</sup> The singer has the same profound impact on the young Forrest Gump as he was claimed to have had on the young Bill Clinton. Gump, like

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<sup>664</sup> Marcus, “Hound Dog,” p. 48.

<sup>665</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, pp. 154-159.

<sup>666</sup> Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 137.

<sup>667</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 159.

<sup>668</sup> Eric Roth, *Forrest Gump* (December 18, 1992), p. 9.

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*

Clinton, becomes heir apparent to Elvis Presley and, by extension, the singer's ability to unify America.

Presley was but the first populist figure appropriated both by Clinton and Gump. One of the most widely circulated images of the 1992 presidential election featured young Bill Clinton shaking hands with President John F. Kennedy (figure 5.1). The video image taken in the summer of 1963 became an ever-present in television advertisements for the Democrat contender, as did comparisons linking Clinton with Kennedy throughout the campaign.<sup>670</sup> In the wake of his victory, *Newsweek* ran an article entitled "The Torch Passes" – surely a reference to Kennedy's famous speech of 1961 in which he spoke of a torch being passed to a new generation. The piece continued: "Standing beside his wife, Hillary, and his youthful running mate, Al Gore, Clinton's thoughts may well have been drawn to a moment in 1963 ... a 16-year-old Bill Clinton on a sun-drenched White House lawn, shaking the hand of his and his generation's idol, John F. Kennedy."<sup>671</sup> The torch had been passed and a new generation, the Sixties generation was in the White House. The invocation of Kennedy here was not – as was the case with Reagan – a way of longing for a pre-1963 era when even Democrats followed conservative principles of tax cutting and an aggressive foreign policy. Clinton promoted the slain president as a beacon of idealism for the future; a prophet of positive political and social transformation (much as was the case with regard to *JFK's* representation of Kennedy).

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<sup>670</sup> Daniel Marcus notes that Clinton claimed his inspiration for entering into politics was Kennedy and campaign buttons produced by his publicity team featuring such slogans as "The Dream Lives On" and "The Torch is Passed to a New Generation." Marcus, *Happy Days*, pp. 164-65.

<sup>671</sup> Howard Fineman, "The Torch Passes," *Newsweek*, Special Election Issue November/December 1992, p. 4.



Figure 5.1 Mr Clinton and (in the completed film) Mr Gump go to Washington.

Roth's *Forrest Gump* script, like Groom's novel, also incorporates an encounter with Kennedy into its narrative. "How are you doing", asks the president, to which Forrest replies "I got to go pee."<sup>672</sup> Like Clinton, Forrest Gump has arrived at the White House with a large group of other young Americans – the All American Football Team. Here was another baby boomer, a leader of his generation no less, stood in a line waiting to be greeted by one of the most popular presidents in US history. The comic interaction between Gump and JFK would seem to have a double resonance. On the one hand, for those old enough to remember, it satirises memories

<sup>672</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 30.

of seeing the real JFK on television in early 1960s. It acted as a light-hearted dig at a man that baby-boomers would have watched as children as he delivered far more magisterial speeches, perhaps to an extent humanising the mythic president. On the other hand, in the wake of the Clinton video, it is hard not to view this moment as a send-up of the famous campaign advertisement; *Forrest Gump* was parodying the reverence with which Clinton had invoked Kennedy during his campaign.

Clinton's association with more controversial Sixties issues – drug taking and draft-dodging – was largely elided in Democrat campaigning.<sup>673</sup> In Roth's script, Forrest Gump is also shown to consort with counterculture figures while never "inhaling" all that the movement had to offer. The 1992 script informs of the protagonist's visit to a counterculture enclave where everyone is "drunk and stoned".<sup>674</sup> Forrest, completely sober, strolls around introducing himself to everyone. He may be hanging out with hippies, but he is very much oblivious to their more controversial activities. Groom's novel had seen Gump acquire a marijuana habit, smoking the drug regularly for some time.<sup>675</sup> Roth's script provides a far more sanitised figure, one that may socialise with flower children, but that does not partake in their excesses.

A similar strategy is used with respect to Forrest Gump's anti-Vietnam War stance. Gump, unlike Clinton, did fight in Vietnam. Clinton had countered accusations that his draft-dodging was unpatriotic by reiterating his love of America and stressing his desire to unite a divided country. On this matter, he informed Bush that "you were wrong to attack my patriotism. I was opposed to the [Vietnam] War, but I love my country and we need a president who will bring this country together, not divide it."<sup>676</sup> When Gump returns from his tour of duty he makes a speech at an anti-war rally, which is Clinton-like in its evasiveness. Whereas Groom's novel sees the protagonist directly announce that the Vietnam War is a "bunch of shit", Roth's script features Gump opting for an ambiguous protest.<sup>677</sup> In the 1992 draft, Forrest Gump attends an anti-war rally in Washington D.C. Ushered into a procession of anti-war Vietnam veterans, Gump eventually finds himself on stage with Yippie

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<sup>673</sup> White, *Still Seeing Red*, p. 216.

<sup>674</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 73.

<sup>675</sup> Groom, *Forrest Gump*, p. 107.

<sup>676</sup> White, *Still Seeing Red*, p. 216.

<sup>677</sup> Groom, *Forrest Gump*, p. 83.

activist Abbie Hoffman.<sup>678</sup> Hoffman asks Gump to say something about Vietnam. In the 1992 script Gump simply plays a harmonica tune (the finished film features a similarly apolitical response, to which I return later in the chapter).<sup>679</sup> In essence, Gump neither protests explicitly nor supports the Vietnam War. In this way, the Forrest Gump of Roth's script indulges in Sixties countercultural and anti-war activities with a similar detachment to that promoted by Clinton. Both men maintained a distance from activities that might be viewed as controversial and likely to alienate those of a conservative disposition.

The issue of personal authenticity also arose in Clinton's self promotion and in Roth's draft script. By citing his Elvis and Kennedy credentials, Clinton was already attempting to challenge Republican accusations of inauthenticity. Adopting these two populist figures as his mascots, Clinton sought to assert himself to be an "ordinary guy", just a regular Elvis Presley fan, or, with respect to Kennedy, simply an admirer of a populist president. Furthermore, far from the slippery fraud figure that features heavily in Republican discourses, Clinton promoted himself as sensitive, sympathetic and caring. "In the manner of fellow boomers who were comfortable with open displays of emotion", writes James Patterson, "he [Clinton] was quick to touch, hug, and reassure his fellow Americans."<sup>680</sup> "I feel your pain", Clinton was known to tell audiences.<sup>681</sup> In response to Republican attacks, Clinton dismissed claims that he was a cynical, wooden-hearted politician by emphasising his sensitivity and the empathy he felt towards those that had suffered. "I feel other people's pain a lot more than some people can", Clinton informed the *New York Times*, "I think that's important for a politician."<sup>682</sup> It was also important for Forrest Gump.

Like Clinton, the character of Forrest Gump was reshaped from bitter cynic into sensitive, loving human being. Where Groom began with Forrest Gump announcing that "bein an idiot is no box of chocolates", Roth's Gump recalls his mother's words that "life was just like a box of chocolates".<sup>683</sup> This, as one critic put

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<sup>678</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 67.

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>680</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, p. 319.

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>682</sup> Peter Appleborne, "Bill Clinton's Uncertain Journey," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. F26.

<sup>683</sup> Groom, *Forrest Gump*, p. 9; Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 1. The finished film added the refrain "you never know what you're gonna get."



it, is “stupidity gentled into soulfulness” – Forrest Gump becomes not a cynical, but a spiritual, being.<sup>684</sup> Furthermore, what, in Groom’s novel, are transient relationships with fellow Vietnam soldier Lt. Dan and girlfriend Jenny, become, in Roth’s script, life-long emotional bonds. David Lavery points out that, in Groom’s *Forrest Gump*, Gump and Lt. Dan share some post-war escapades, but Dan “plays a distant and ironic role in Forrest’s life.”<sup>685</sup> The last reference to Dan in the novel refers to his transformation into a “bitter communist.”<sup>686</sup> In Roth’s script, not only does Gump save Dan from certain death in Vietnam, but he also saves his commanding officer from descending into a post-Vietnam spiral of alcohol-fuelled self-pity.<sup>687</sup> Dan and Gump embark upon a profitable shrimp-fishing enterprise, which eventually makes them “more money than Davy Crockett.”<sup>688</sup> At the end of the script, Forrest and Dan have an emotional reunion; we hear that Dan, who had lost his legs in Vietnam, had “got himself some new legs.”<sup>689</sup> Gump is portrayed as having “saved” his comrade physically and emotionally. Similarly, Gump’s relationship with Jenny is greatly altered. In the 1992 script, Jenny is molested by her father as a child, is beaten by her New Left boyfriend, marries Forrest Gump and eventually dies of an unnamed virus (presumably AIDS). Her relationship with Forrest spans thirty years and ends with a bitter-sweet reunion. None of these events occur in the novel. In Groom’s version, Forrest ends the novel reconciled to the fact that Jenny has married another man.<sup>690</sup> Roth turns Forrest and Jenny’s relationship into a love that transcends time and space; Jenny dies, but – as the film might have put it – they’ll always be together, in each others’ hearts.

Roth’s *Forrest Gump* also shares a deep kinship with an African-American character. Roth introduces Bubba as “the first negro football player ever to play” at the University of Alabama (in Groom’s novel Bubba was white).<sup>691</sup> Forrest’s ability to align himself with persons of various demographics – black and white – and psychographics – liberal and conservative – imbued him with a Clinton-like (or at

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<sup>684</sup> David Denby, “Forrest Gump,” *New York*, July 18, 1994, p. 50.

<sup>685</sup> David Lavery, “‘No Box of Chocolates’: The Adaptation of *Forrest Gump*,” *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1997), p. 20.

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>687</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 54.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>690</sup> Lavery, “‘No Box of Chocolates,’” p. 21.

<sup>691</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 21.

least how Clinton portrayed himself) universality. In Roth's script, Gump is authentic because he feels a kinship for those who have suffered: he, like Clinton, feels their pain. By December 1992, therefore, Eric Roth had produced a version of *Forrest Gump* that bore more than a passing similarity to Clintonite rhetoric surrounding the Sixties and surrounding Clinton himself.

### **Public Politics/Personal Authenticity: *Forrest Gump*, 1993-1994.**

Throughout 1993, several alterations and additions were made to Roth's script, which had a bearing on *Forrest Gump*'s representation of politics and authenticity. With regard to the film's stance on the Vietnam War, some controversial material was cut. Roth's 1992 script featured an episode in which Forrest is conscripted into an army platoon comprised of idiots.<sup>692</sup> "What made us special", Forrest explains, "was that we were all pretty much alike. We were slower than molasses."<sup>693</sup> The "stupid dozen", as one soldier calls them, was assembled by the government in the hope that these soldiers would not question any orders and would complete any task set by their superiors, no matter how unethical.<sup>694</sup> While at the barracks a journalist quizzes Forrest on his platoon and whether "it were true we was a unit of retards." Forrest says that he "didn't think [they] were any stupider than the people who sent [them] over there."<sup>695</sup> Placed in context, this statement is an "accidental" anti-war statement; Forrest was told not to speak to the press and his words just slip out. Yet, it is easy to read this comment as a slight at the intelligence of the American government and their decision to invade Vietnam. Neither the "stupid dozen", nor Forrest's verbal swipe at the Johnson administration remains in the finished film, thus removing what would likely have been read as a liberal denunciation of the American government's Vietnam policy.

*Forrest Gump*'s representation of the anti-war movement is also somewhat modified. Like Roth's script, the finished film features Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks) making a speech at an anti-war protest in Washington D.C. We do not hear what Forrest actually says because a military operative has pulled the wires from the

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<sup>692</sup> Groom's novel does feature this episode.

<sup>693</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 32.

<sup>694</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>695</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 45.

microphone socket, thus Gump's anti-war statements are literally and metaphorically muted. However, in the 1992 script, this speech was to be followed with a violent confrontation between police and protestors. The police announce that the Washington protest constitutes an "illegal assembly." A stampede ensues, which leads to a police officer beating the central protagonist. At this point the script commentary reads: "It's chaos. Tear gas choking the air ... an overzealous Policeman hits him [Forrest] with his billy club".<sup>696</sup> Thereafter, an image of Forrest on *Newsweek's* front page was to appear, accompanied by the statement: "'The Anti-War Movement Grows.'"<sup>697</sup> Perhaps raising the spectre of police/protestor confrontation was considered to be too divisive a historical reference, one that would likely alienate viewers, particularly those of a conservative disposition.

With regards to the finished film, Thomas Byers contends that the anti-war movement suffers a thorough vilification in *Forrest Gump*.<sup>698</sup> For Fred Pfeil, Forrest Gump's muted speech in this scene, and the film more generally, attempts to "sidestep and evacuate the very concepts of history and politics alike."<sup>699</sup> Yet, while the confrontation between police and protestors is cut, there is still the potential to read this scene as a positive representation of the anti-war movement. During Forrest's speech, the camera pans over a group of young and old fellow speakers, male and female. Vietnam veterans, whites, blacks, men, women, old and young: all are involved in the protest. Previous Sixties films had presented the anti-war movement as rather more divisive. *Four Friends*, the 1981 film focusing on a group of young people's adventures in the Sixties (mentioned in the Introduction), featured an extremely brief sequence depicting an anti-war protest. The protestors in this film are not only depicted as scruffy hippies, but also as dangerous, unpatriotic hooligans. As central protagonist Danilo (Craig Wasson) drives through New York City, he despondently watches these reprobate protestors burning the American flag that had, to Danilo, symbolised freedom and opportunity. Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) depicted the Vietnam Veterans Against the War movement, but this movement is explicitly separated from the anti-war protests of non-combatants. The

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<sup>696</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump*, p. 70.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid.

<sup>698</sup> Byers, "History Re-Membered," p. 435.

<sup>699</sup> Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 252.

veterans in *Born on the Fourth of July* march alone, they are a protest group that seems not to have the support of others. In *Forrest Gump*, the anti-war rally could almost be a microcosm of society. The film reminds Republicans that long-haired hippies were not the only people to stand up against Vietnam; the professional classes, the soldiers and many others also held decidedly anti-war sentiments.<sup>700</sup> The film takes a movement that conservatives tended to associate with long-haired hoodlums and demonstrates that it was not as divisive as Republicans had made it out to be (see figures 5.2 and 5.3).

Forrest and his girlfriend Jenny (Robin Wright) are reunited at this anti-war protest. Dressed in military uniform and hippie robes respectively, their coming together under the shadow of the Washington Monument provides a striking visual metaphor for a united front against the Vietnam War. In a rare academic article to avoid levelling charges of conservatism against *Forrest Gump*, Peter Chumo II suggests that the film provides a fantasy narrative of the past in which bitter divides over history and politics can be assuaged, and that the film's protagonist is actually promoted as both a war hero and an anti-war hero. After Forrest has made his (muted) speech, the Abbie Hoffman character does, after all, embrace his slow-witted companion and declare "that's so right on."<sup>701</sup> One might add that Gump had also – no matter how unwittingly – just bared his behind to President Lyndon Johnson during an award ceremony in which he received the medal of honour for bravery in Vietnam. Gump is being anti-establishment, even if that is not his intention. While I disagree with Chumo's overall argument that *Forrest Gump* completely erases any controversial aspects of recent history, or that it portrays a trauma-less American past, the anti-war movement as represented in this film, could be read as a force bringing people together, not tearing them apart. Indeed, one might

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<sup>700</sup> There is a very brief gesture toward the anti-war movement's mass appeal in the 1988 picture *1969*. *1969* presents young and old Americans marching for the release of Ralph (Robert Downey Jr.), who had attempted to steal his draft card from the local government building. In this scene, political reasons for marching against the war are somewhat elided in favour of a more localised struggle for the release of a friend. This film's other main protagonist Scott (Kiefer Sutherland) concludes the film by dedicating *1969* to everyone who joined the 1969 anti-war march on Washington D.C. In many ways such a dedication parallels *Platoon*'s closing dedication to those that fought in Vietnam. *1969*'s comparative lack of media coverage and poor box-office takings (\$5 million) may suggest that it was harder to imbue anti-war protestors than Vietnam veterans with widespread appeal.

<sup>701</sup> Peter N. Chumo II, "You've Got to Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On: *Forrest Gump* and National Reconciliation," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1995), p. 4.

suggest similar readings of other Sixties phenomena such as the counterculture and the civil rights movement.



Figure 5.2: Divisiveness. *Four Friends* and *Born on the Fourth of July*.



Figure 5.3: Collective action. *Forrest Gump* (top) and *1969* (1988).

Not long after the anti-war speech appears a scene that has been subject to much criticism. Forrest and Jenny enter a room where Black Panthers and members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) are debating politics. Forrest watches Jenny speaking with her boyfriend, and president of the Berkeley chapter of the

SDS, Wesley (Geoffrey Blake). Wesley punches Jenny, and Forrest proceeds to pummel him to a pulp. This scene has been attacked for demonising the New Left and Black Panthers and trivialising their politics.<sup>702</sup> But with regard to this scene's treatment of the SDS and Black Panthers, we could say that Wesley was an – albeit extreme – representative of the misogyny that did permeate such organisations. We had already seen a positive representation of a larger group of anti-war activists during the scene at the Washington Mall. Now we see the less pleasant, but unfortunately oft-cited, aspects of the New Left. It is interesting to note that, in Roth's 1992 script, Jenny's boyfriend and assailant was going to be a Black Panther.<sup>703</sup> Had the finished film kept this relationship it might have opened it up to charges of racism (a black man beating a white woman), but also evoked the spectre of former Panther Eldridge Cleaver's declaration that raping a white woman was a form of political protest, an "insurrectionary act".<sup>704</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, a primary reason for the feminist movement's break from the New Left was the rampant misogyny existing within its ranks.

Given *Forrest Gump*'s focus on New Left misogyny, however, one might question why there is no suggestion that Jenny joins the feminist movement. As Karen Boyle points out, "what is perhaps most striking about Jenny's journey through the counter-culture is the fact that she is never presented as feminist, and, indeed, that the existence of the women's liberation movement is denied."<sup>705</sup> Of the key Sixties political movements, feminism is conspicuously absent. Yet, one might at least suggest that Jenny subverts traditional forms of female characterisation. She is portrayed as strong-willed and independent. It is Forrest who plays the domesticated role and waits at home for Jenny's return, not vice versa. Furthermore, the valorisation of the lone mother is a theme present throughout *Forrest Gump*. Gump's mother (played by Sally Field) and Jenny are both presented as positive parental figures. Without wishing to place too much significance in one survey, it is worth noting that one Gallup poll found that women gave the film a higher approval

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<sup>702</sup> Pfeil, *White Guys*, p. 253; Byers, "History Re-Membered," p. 435.

<sup>703</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 72.

<sup>704</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, "On Becoming," in Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p. 25.

<sup>705</sup> Boyle, "New Man, Old Brutalisms"; Byers, "History Re-Membered," p. 433.

rating than men.<sup>706</sup> The fact that Mrs Gump and Jenny are depicted as strong, intelligent and independent women may have encouraged at least some viewers not to read *Forrest Gump* as an anti-feminist tract.

Byers has also taken to task *Forrest Gump*'s representation of race and of the civil rights movement. With *Gump*'s seeming fascination with assassinations and attempted assassinations – John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, John Lennon, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan – Byers points out rightly the conspicuous absence of Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, thus adding further fuel to his argument that the real victims of the Sixties according to *Forrest Gump* are white men.<sup>707</sup> The absence of Dr. King in particular seems rather strange. In the Roth 1992 script, there was to be a scene set in the early Sixties with Dr. King and his peers on a civil rights march. A group of white policemen are about to unleash their dogs on the marchers when Forrest produces a stick and begins playing with the animals. He then approaches the civil rights activists. "I'm sorry they interrupted your singing", he tells the marchers, "they don't know any better."<sup>708</sup> The unintentional dig at the white policemen, and the white establishment – "they don't know any better" – would seem perfectly in keeping with Forrest's later unintended sleights toward Presidents Johnson and Nixon. One could argue that Dr. King's absence avoids the necessity of treating this historical figure with the same irreverence as all of the other public personalities on display in *Forrest Gump*. Perhaps reducing Dr. King and his peers' protests to the level of "singing" was felt to be simply dismissive and patronising.<sup>709</sup> Elvis' dance routine in "Hound Dog" has already been proven not to be an unbridled expression of sexuality but an imitation of a young Forrest's jarring steps in leg-braces. There are no soaring Kennedy speeches, only a baffled President in the presence of a young man who has to "go pee." And there was the aforementioned bottom-baring incident with President Johnson, not to mention Gump's later thwarting of the Watergate break-in, which leads to President Nixon's resignation. Furthermore, with regards to the civil rights movement, the film does

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<sup>706</sup> Leonard Klady, "B.O. bets on Youth Despite a Solid Spread," *Variety*, April 10, 1996. Quoted in Peter Kramer, "Would you Take Your Child to see this Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie," in Neal and Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, p. 307.

<sup>707</sup> Byers, "History Re-Membered," p. 427.

<sup>708</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump* (1992), p. 14.

<sup>709</sup> James Burton comes to a very similar conclusion in his *Forrest Gump* analysis. Indeed, Burton points out that this scene was shot but removed from the finished film late in production. Burton, "Film, History," p. 240.



contain a scene at the University of Alabama, where Gump unintentionally plays a part in the university's integration of 1962, retrieving a black woman's book when she drops it at the doorway.<sup>710</sup> In this scene, Tom Hanks adopts a subtly ironic tone in his conversation with fellow students. When informed that blacks want to join the all-white university, Gump (Hanks) replies; "they do?" In my view Hanks' intonation at this juncture captures exactly what Roth's script sought to achieve with the Dr. King scene; it is a portrayal of whites as savages – why would anyone want to come to university with us (whites)? It is a subtle gesture that, rather than parodying the civil rights movement, parodies those that tried to thwart its progress. Perhaps in this way, *Forrest Gump* could potentially invite a liberal interpretation of the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, an analysis of *Forrest Gump*'s script development process indicates the filmmakers involved were attempting to tone down certain explicitly liberal signifiers and construct a Sixties open to multiple political interpretations. Also like *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK* and *Malcolm X*, *Forrest Gump* betrays a more distinctly liberal interpretation of the Sixties by way of its narrative stressing personal authenticity.

During one scene early on in the film, a dripping wet Forrest Gump sits with Jenny in her college dormitory. "Did you ever think who you're gonna be?", Jenny enquires. "Who I'm gonna be", replies Forrest: "Aren't I gonna be me?" To this Jenny says, "you'll always be you, just what kind of you? You know, I want to be famous, I want to be a singer like [folk musician] Joan Baez ... I want to reach people on a personal level." Jenny strives for an identity beyond the individual – she wants to be famous, successful, someone else, in order to "reach people." Forrest, on the other hand, cannot think in such grandiose existential terms. Going on this brief interaction, one might be inclined to associate Jenny with the positive, active, version of personal authenticity, that is a desire to change society for the better (which I have identified as being present in *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK* and *Malcolm X*), and link Forrest to a passive, negative, form of inactivity (Theodore Adorno's view on authenticity discussed in the Introduction). Alan Nadel asserts that

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<sup>710</sup> This scene appears in the Roth script. I do wonder if Roth had recently watched, or been encouraged to watch, the 1989 film *Heart of Dixie* (mentioned in Chapter Four), which concludes with virtually the same scene. Maggie (Ally Sheedy) retrieves a black student's dropped glove during the formal integration ceremony. *Heart of Dixie* was also produced by *Gump*'s co-producer Steve Tisch, who was involved with *Forrest Gump* from 1985 onwards.

Forrest Gump brings with him the message that “we can escape change” by forsaking the value of social activism and entrusting “America to witless white men and get[ting] rid of all the women and blacks”.<sup>711</sup> Yet, such an argument is premised on the notion that Forrest Gump does not strive to improve himself or society, and that the other characters in the film are not presented in a positive light. *Forrest Gump* promotes all three of the film’s main characters – Forrest, Jenny and Lt. Dan (Gary Sinise) – as active agents in Sixties politics and culture and as embodiments of an authentic experience of national history. The absence of an authentic African-American protagonist is, once again, a notable and problematic aspect of Hollywood’s representation of the Sixties during the years 1986-1994. I return to this issue in the conclusion to this thesis; however, what *Forrest Gump* does offer is a triumvirate of characters whose personal stories encapsulate what this film presents as a positive legacy of the Sixties. Lt. Dan’s intellectual development sees him – as was the case with *Platoon*’s Chris Taylor (see Chapter One) – reject the militaristic tendencies present in American culture. Jenny gains independence and strength of character when she breaks with a string of violent and abusive men. And Forrest’s authenticity is celebrated through his challenge to traditional notions of masculinity and masculine behaviour.

Forrest, Jenny and Dan each begin their lives as the victims of oppressive forces associated by liberal commentators with pre-Sixties America. Thus Forrest’s story begins with an allegorical representation of racial inequalities in the 1950s. Forrest is initially refused entry to a high school because he is “different”. Later on, and after being eventually accepted because his mother sleeps with the principal, the young Forrest is attacked and chased by a group of boys waving Confederate flags. The veiled references to racism and segregation indicate a far more negative view of Fifties America than that which, as we have seen, was promoted by conservative commentators. Some scholars view this allegorical representation as extremely problematic. Byers suggests that the “attributes of otherness (Blackness, femininity)” are incorporated into Forrest’s character so as to erase the need to question race and gender inequalities and to contribute towards the film’s broader rewriting of history.<sup>712</sup> Yet, one might also argue that many viewers would surely have picked up

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<sup>711</sup> Nadel, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams*, p. 206.

<sup>712</sup> Byers, “History Re-Membered,” p. 422.

on this double meaning and not simply read this as a case of white victimhood but as a broader commentary on racial inequalities in the 1950s. Supporting the notion that such a reading was encouraged by key creative personnel is the case of the semi-animated *film noir*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1987) in which *Forrest Gump*'s director Zemeckis mobilised similar allegorical representations of racism and segregation in 1940s Los Angeles; this time the cartoon characters are treated as inferior by the human characters. Surely, it would be underestimating filmgoers' intelligence and cine-literacy to suggest that everyone read this straight and did not recognise the implied significance of such a form of representation.

Immediately, then, in *Forrest Gump*'s personal story, we see the beginnings of a critique of the Fifties. This negative Fifties is further illuminated by way of Jenny's story, for she is molested by her father and forced to leave her family home. Again, this representation of familial abuse contradicts the notion of "traditional" family values retrospectively ascribed to the Fifties by conservative commentators of the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, Lt. Dan begins the film in possession of another philosophy that liberal commentators associate with a pre-Sixties America: a belief in the glory of death on the battlefield. We are informed that Dan expects to follow a long line of family members who have fought and died in every American war – this is his destiny. Through their own experiences and interactions with other characters, Forrest, Jenny and Dan are taught to reject the values and philosophies the film associates with the Fifties. Forrest's mother teaches her son the value of equality – "don't let anyone tell you they're better than you" – and an acceptance of people's different lifestyle choices. The phrase "life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get" might even be seen to exemplify a counterculture-like openness to new experiences and social transformation. Jenny literally involves herself in activities associated with the Sixties counterculture: folk singing, Vietnam War protests and drug-taking. Dan eventually rejects the idea that he should have died "gloriously" in Vietnam and ends the film marrying a woman who a few years earlier he may have mistaken for the enemy (she is of South East Asian descent).

In the characters of Forrest and Jenny are what some view to be conflicting perspectives on the Sixties. Forrest goes to Vietnam, avoids drugs, and does not partake (at least intentionally) in any anti-establishment activity. Jenny's life follows an entirely different path: she dresses like a hippie, takes drugs, protests the war and

generally runs the sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll gauntlet.<sup>713</sup> Yet, on examining certain visual and aural techniques utilised throughout the film, there is a sense that the filmmakers sought to undermine this binary opposition. In many ways, *Forrest Gump* goes out of its way to present both protagonists’ lives as deeply intertwined, to the extent that they become one and the same person. Byers criticises the film’s constant “suturing of the viewer into Forrest’s position, so that herstory [Jenny’s story] is constantly translated into his.”<sup>714</sup> However, Forrest’s lack of comprehension ensures that there is never any explicit commentary or perspective applied to scenes in which Jenny features. Jenny’s Sixties experiences are usually introduced with a wistful voiceover in which Forrest longs to be with her, or with no commentary at all. While Forrest will pass commentary over footage featuring public figures like JFK or George Wallace, he rarely speaks over footage featuring Jenny. One might counter Byers’ reading and suggest that, during the brief moments in which she appears without Forrest, Jenny usurps Forrest’s role as lead protagonist. Conveying joy, fear, sadness or desperation, her expressions often carry with them a narrator’s authority. It is not Forrest, but Jenny (or Robin Wright) who conveys the thrills of leaving on a whim for San Francisco, or the communal spirit that could be found in the counterculture. She narrates the highs and lows of this aspect of the Sixties.

*Forrest Gump* also makes use of parallel editing so as to suggest that, Forrest and Jenny’s lives are, in many ways interchangeable. While Forrest bunks down for the night in Vietnam, the film cuts to a scene of Jenny preparing to embark on a road trip. Both characters, at this stage, are depicted as relatively content, relaxed and happy. Both are amongst friends: Forrest rests against his fellow soldier Bubba (Mykelti Williamson); Jenny embraces her hippie travelling partners. Later in the film, as Forrest forlornly sees in the New Year (1970), we cut to a parallel scene of Jenny in tears (see Figure 5.2). Forrest and Jenny’s facial expressions bear an uncanny similarity, as if they are human barometers of each other’s emotional status. At the film’s end, as Jenny lays dying, her final words fully cement the emotional and spiritual coming-together of these two characters. Forrest expresses regret that Jenny had not been with him for much of his life. Jenny replies simply: “but I was.” This brief phrase cements what had been implied throughout the film. Forrest and

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<sup>713</sup> Byers, “History Re-Membered,” p. 427.

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434.

Jenny are, as Forrest puts it, “like peas and carrots”; they share each other’s successes and failures, each other’s outlooks, each other’s lives.

The only difference between Forrest and Jenny’s outlook on life for much of the film relates to how they conceive personal identity. Forrest just wants to “be me”; Jenny is forever striving to be someone new. Refusing to change his essential character does not mean that Forrest is inactive or incapable of carrying out significant actions. In Vietnam, he ignores his commanding officer’s orders and returns to rescue several of his comrades from certain death; against all advice, he insists on purchasing a shrimp boat out of loyalty to his dead friend Bubba. Forrest’s life choices and actions ensure he is in the position to make – however vague – anti-war statements, to ensure Richard Nixon’s downfall and, eventually, to become a good father to his son. Furthermore, both Forrest and Jenny also share similar personal life trajectories in the way that they are both challenge stereotypical views regarding the “correct” way for men and women to behave. Forrest plays the nurturing, home-loving character while Jenny leaves home in search of fame and fortune. Jenny embodies a typically masculine trait by living free and becoming the rebel. Neither lifestyle is criticised. It simply takes Jenny a little longer to discover that she does not need to become someone else to “reach people”. Like Forrest, Jenny is presented positively as being in possession of a countercultural mindset: she goes where the wind blows, shares Forrest’s tolerance of diversity and difference, and believes in peace and love.



Figure 5.4: Forrest and Jenny's emotional connection.

So why, asks *Forrest Gump*, does Jenny want to be a different person? When she appears in Playboy, or plays girlfriend to the hyper-macho SDS leader, her life is presented as one Sixties cliché after another. It is Jenny's desire to play a role rather than to be herself that lands her in such trouble. She escapes this fraudulent lifestyle only after she refuses to become an object in the service of men, whether they are sleazy nightclub owners (the man who hired her to sing folk songs in the nude), New Left activists, or heroin addicts. In many ways, Jenny's final homecoming – her return to Greenbow, Alabama, and to Forrest Gump – consummates her gaining of authenticity. Her return to Forrest is not a “retreat” from the world or a rejection of her countercultural past. Jenny returns to Greenbow in order to commit one final, and I would argue, political, act. Hurling a stone through the window of the house that once belonged to her abusive father, Jenny finally faces up to her childhood demons and, as was the case with Chris Taylor's killing of Barnes, attempts symbolically to destroy what this film has presented as the negative legacy of pre-Sixties America. Jenny's personal development reaches full-fruit with a symbolic rejection of her Fifties, not her Sixties past. Indeed, *Forrest Gump* does not insist that Jenny atone for her “sins”; she remains coded vaguely as a hippie right up to her death. It is notable that Forrest and Jenny enjoy two symbolic reconciliations, both of which take place surrounded by hippie-like iconography. The first occurs during the anti-Vietnam War protests in Washington D.C. In the midst of a sea of political activists and long-haired, beaded liberals, Forrest and Jenny embrace beneath the Washington Memorial. The second reconciliation occurs at the end of the film when Forrest and Jenny get married. During her wedding to Forrest Jenny, in true hippie fashion, even wears flowers in her hair. A countercultural spirit, according to this film, fosters a spirit of love and reconciliation.<sup>715</sup>

By the end of the film, Forrest, Jenny and Dan are all shown to have experienced the Sixties traumatically, but authentically. The childish, ignorant Forrest has taken on adult responsibilities, bringing up a young son. Jenny ended her life having confronted and begun to destroy the last remaining legacy of her Fifties childhood. Dan rejects his old militaristic background. In many ways, the presentation of *Forrest Gump* as the film's hero is not a celebration of ignorance,

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<sup>715</sup> Burton notes that Jenny “retains her countercultural identity as the very image of the ‘flower child’ at their wedding.” Burton, “Film, History,” p. 244.

inactivity and stupidity, but a celebration of positive transformation. Paul Grainge has argued that the film's conclusion bespeaks an attempt at "healing and reconciliation" and that "victims of the counterculture and Vietnam are brought together by Gump in a concluding allegorical scene of national restoration."<sup>716</sup> I would, however, suggest that this restoration is nevertheless premised on an attempt to evacuate negative political and philosophical tenets – a culture of militarism, sexism and abuse – from these characters' own psyches and, by symbolic extension, from American society. In the three protagonists' personal stories, the Sixties are celebrated as a period of positive transformation. Forrest has encouraged Dan and Jenny to break with lifestyles and philosophies that stunted their personal development. He teaches them not to be someone else, but to just be themselves. And, in doing so, both Jenny and Dan commit acts intended not only to improve themselves but also to improve society. For this reason, Forrest, like all other protagonists examined in the thesis, is promoted as an inspiration. And Forrest's inspirational qualities are not confined to his impact on Jenny and Lt. Dan.

A major change to the film script ensured that Forrest Gump's personal story would become a metaphor for a broader generational experience. Throughout the 1992 draft script, Forrest, for all his talking to various companions at the bus stop, remains isolated. No one pays any attention to him. He is treated as a weirdo, someone who is simply endured until the bus arrives. There are frequent scene directions such as "she nods, not much interested", "the man nods, not much interested", "the man doesn't know quite what to say", "she doesn't know what he's talking about".<sup>717</sup> The finished film, however, turns this feature on its head as each character listens intently to the protagonist's story, engaging actively with him, and/or adding their own recollections. *Forrest Gump* represents literally what *Platoon*, and *JFK* and, to a lesser extent, *Dirty Dancing* and *Malcolm X*, were reported as having stimulated in the public: communal reminiscence. It is almost as if *Forrest Gump* is predicting (or perhaps more like encouraging) its own critical reception. "I remember when Wallace was shot", says one lady after the protagonist has spoken of his unintentional involvement in the civil rights movement, "I was in college." Similarly, a man pre-empts Forrest's description of being shot in Vietnam

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<sup>716</sup> Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, p. 149.

<sup>717</sup> Roth, *Forrest Gump*, pp. 1, 56,



with, “it was a bullet that hit you, wasn't it.” For these older listeners, the narrative spurs them to remember their past. What seems to attract these listeners most to Forrest’s story is the opportunity to identify – they too, in their own ways, were involved in these historical events.

The film’s director Robert Zemeckis has said that he hoped that *Forrest Gump* would stimulate memories amongst people of his generation, the baby-boomers. In one interview, Zemeckis said that, while filming *Forrest Gump*, he “imagined Norman Rockwell painting the baby boomers.”<sup>718</sup> Speaking some years later, he said: “I knew why I loved this movie. It was because I was recreating sections of my own life. And I thought my friends would love it too for the same reasons.”<sup>719</sup> Zemeckis’s film back-catalogue contains other examples of ordinary people attempting to inject themselves into public history. His first feature film, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* (1978), focused on the attempts of a group of high-school students attending the Beatles’ first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show in 1964. A scene toward the end of the film features the pop group playing its hit song “She Loves You” (1964). The camera cuts frequently back and forward between images of the real Beatles on television and a staged re-creation of the Ed Sullivan Show’s studio audience. Drawing parallels between public events shown on television and the experiences of the film’s protagonists, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* begins to deconstruct the boundaries between the public and the personal, the “significant” and the “trivial”, which Sobchack argues is central to *Forrest Gump*’s representation.<sup>720</sup> Ordinary people become a part of history; the real Beatles (the Beatles that appear on television screens) appear to bow to fictional protagonists who, one might suggest, are supposed to be surrogates for those in the cinema audience that had their own memories of the Fab Four. Similarly, Zemeckis’ *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985, 1989, 1990) saw young protagonist Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) interact with famous and fictional characters from America’s past and even, in the case of *Back to the Future Part II*, the future.

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<sup>718</sup> Anon, “Generation Gump,” *The Economist*, July 30, 1994, p. 28.

<sup>719</sup> Robert Zemeckis, “Director’s Commentary,” *Forrest Gump: Special Collector’s Edition DVD* (Paramount, 2004).

<sup>720</sup> Sobchack, “History Happens,” p. 3.

*Forrest Gump* offers a similar opportunity for audiences to – as it were – enter history. The film's narrative – Forrest's story – is interrupted constantly by real television broadcasts of the historical events being portrayed, from Forrest teaching Elvis to dance to Elvis playing "Hound Dog" on TV to Forrest picking up a black student's school book to footage of the integration of black students at the University of Alabama. Indeed, most episodes in the film are accompanied by corresponding real archival footage. As Paul Grainge notes "*Forrest Gump* draws specific attention to the mediated nature of history."<sup>721</sup> Highlighting the numerous explicit and subtle intertextual references present throughout *Forrest Gump*, Grainge contends that the film's production of history "relies on the recycling of texts". The film invites audience interaction and identification by presenting a barrage of familiar images and iconography.<sup>722</sup> "Television becomes the site of memory, as personal memory, public memory, and media representation interweave", writes Marcus.<sup>723</sup> Television images are a repository of a shared national past, yet because they were viewed by many people during their initial broadcast they also encourage personal reminiscences.

In *Forrest Gump* television footage acts as a reminder for those people who were old enough to have grown up in the Sixties that they too were part of history. It facilitates, as Steven Scott puts it, the production of a "malleable history", one which can be shaped by different viewers depending on their own experiences and perspectives.<sup>724</sup> Drawing on Alison Landsburg's notion of the prosthetic memory (discussed in the introduction), Robert Burgoyne inverts what Landsberg viewed as the positive, progressive potential of such memories and argues that *Forrest Gump* invites viewers to join in a collective forgetting of the Sixties' progressive legacy. The film may promise viewers the opportunity to "live history" authentically, but the history viewers are actually experiencing is bereft of progressive political content. This film, according to Burgoyne, erases the notion of historical agency, and therefore can only encourage an apathetic response.<sup>725</sup> I would counter this claim and suggest that *Forrest Gump* had also the potential to evoke Landsberg's more positive

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<sup>721</sup> Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, p. 140.

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 140- 141.

<sup>723</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 116.

<sup>724</sup> Scott, "'Like a Box of Chocolates'," p. 25.

<sup>725</sup> Burgoyne, "Memory, History," pp. 228-231.

notion of a memory that can “produce empathy and social responsibility”<sup>726</sup> amongst cinema-goers. *Forrest Gump* promotes several positive legacies of the Sixties: openness to diversity, a revision of stereotypical gender roles and a tolerance of other people’s lifestyle choices. To change society, argues *Forrest Gump*, one does not have to have participated in public events of the Sixties, but, rather, one ought to be open to the era’s political and social transformations and to have applied these transformations to one’s everyday life.

In this way, the Sixties legacy, as was the case with *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Platoon* and *Malcolm X*, has the potential to endure and inspire. Grainge has argued that *Forrest Gump* “paints the 1960s as a ‘fall’ from which the nation must recover.”<sup>727</sup> While it might be said that events such as the Vietnam War and political assassinations are painted in these terms, the politics, values and philosophies promoted by denizens of the Sixties counterculture are demonstrated to have outlived the era. In these terms, the Sixties was not a fall but a positive contribution to America’s psychological and moral development. And, furthermore, of all the films examined in this thesis, *Forrest Gump* is the most self-conscious in its call for viewers to reflect on their own experiences of the recent past, and to etch their own Sixties stories upon its filmic canvas. This was a call heeded in many quarters.

### **The Sixties Has Left the Building: Promotion and Reception**

Soon after *Forrest Gump* appeared in cinemas, Frank Rich offered an interpretation of the film that gestured toward the Gump-Clinton parallels I have identified above. Like many public commentators throughout late July and August 1994, Rich was trying to account for the cultural phenomenon that *Forrest Gump* had become. “What is likable about this fictional hero” he wrote, “harks back to what many saw, or thought they saw, in the boyish Mr. Clinton as he, like ‘Forrest Gump,’ caught fire with an American public hungry for inspiration two years ago.”<sup>728</sup> However, while Rich observed these two figures’ similarities, many other commentators went out of their way to note their differences. July 1994 was not November 1992, times had changed and political arbiters that were intent on challenging Clinton and his cultural

<sup>726</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, p. 21.

<sup>727</sup> Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, p. 141.

<sup>728</sup> Rich, “The Gump from Hope,” p. A23.

authority also moved to claim *Forrest Gump* as representative of a sea change in American politics and culture. The film quickly became a touchstone in political debates as a host of competing voices sought to legitimise their ideological agenda and, indeed, to legitimise themselves.

Initially, *Forrest Gump* was not, however, promoted or received as a highly politicised text. The film was propelled into the public sphere on a wave of promotion that sought to obscure its politics and celebrate its universal resonance. *Forrest Gump*'s promotional poster (see Figure 5.5) was, much like *Dirty Dancing*'s poster, rather ambiguous in its representation of history. In fact, the poster bears no indication whatsoever of being about history, let alone having a political dimension. Featuring Hanks sitting on a bench against a white background, the poster seems intent on emphasising *Forrest Gump*'s "magical" qualities above its political or historical content. The promotional tagline reads: "The world will never be the same again once you've seen it through the eyes of Forrest Gump." There is something Disney-esque about this statement, as if the poster was intended to inspire childish "wonder" as opposed to serious historical reflection. Even the awkward manner in which Forrest sits on the bench is more suggestive of a small child than an adult.

Peter Krämer argues that *Forrest Gump* might be understood as part of a broader production trend of what he calls "family adventure movies". In analysing a number of films including *Star Wars* (1977), *ET* (1982), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Lion King* (1994) and *Forrest Gump*, Krämer contends that, since the late 1970s, many of the most financially successful films have been constructed and promoted so as to broaden audience appeal beyond Hollywood's prime teenage audience and to attract older adults and their young children. In Krämer's terms, one might suggest that the poster was intended to appeal both to children that were disinterested in, or overwhelmed by, the film's representation of politics and history and to adults that were perhaps hoping for an opportunity to reflect upon their own childhoods or even to re-live the sense of wonder commonly assumed to be associated with cinema visits in one's youth.<sup>729</sup> The poster implied that *Forrest Gump* could resonate across demographic lines, not just with those potential viewers that had experienced first-hand its history, or at least contemporaneous mediated versions of it.

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<sup>729</sup> Peter Kramer, "Would you take your child to see this film? The cultural and social work of the 'family-adventure movie,'" in Steve Neale and Muray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 294-311.



Paramount Pictures presents a Steve Tisch/Wendy Finerman production a Robert Zemeckis film Tom Hanks Forrest Gump Robin Wright Gary Sinise Mykelti Williamson  
and Sally Field with Charles Newirth and Joanna Johnston with Alan Silvestri music by Joel Sil with Arthur Schmidt editor Rick Carter director of photography Don Burgess producer Winston Groom executive producer Eric Roth  
READ THE EXPERIENCE FROM FOOTNOTES SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS BY INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC  
Wendy Finerman Steve Tisch Steve Starkey Robert Zemeckis  
A Paramount Communications Company  
© 1994 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

Figure 5.5: *Forrest Gump*'s promotional poster.

The promotional trailer, on the other hand, targeted members of the Sixties generation directly. It devotes more than half its duration to moments from America's recent past. The first historical figure introduced is President Kennedy. The trailer then follows a rough chronology through the Sixties. After Kennedy's appearance, the trailer quotes a line of dialogue that indicates an address to older baby boomers: "Maybe it's just me, but college was a very confusing time." The half-innocent, half-jocular tone with which Gump delivers this line might be viewed as a nudge toward those that had gone to college in the early-to-mid-Sixties. It is the first of many hints throughout the trailer that suggest that *Forrest Gump* is trying to stimulate memories in its older viewers. Next in the trailer comes a mention of the Vietnam War, which is followed by the anti-war protests. The final section is a whiz through Sixties generation history: Elvis Presley on television, more references to the anti-war protests and the Vietnam War, and President Richard Nixon makes a brief appearance.

The appeal to members of the Sixties generation was further emphasised by way of publicity surrounding cast and crew members, in particular that focusing on *Forrest Gump*'s star Tom Hanks. There are clear similarities between public discussion of Hanks and that surrounding Denzel Washington prior to and during *Malcolm X*'s release. In Hanks, the producers of *Forrest Gump* cast a star that already had begun to develop a strong appeal to many different segments of the American movie-watching public. A Gallup poll published in July 1994 asked 6,000 filmgoers what film star they: "1) always, 2) usually, 3) sometimes, 4) never, buy tickets to see their films". Hanks scored 30, 29, 34, and 6 percent respectively – thus making him the second most popular actor, just behind Kevin Costner.<sup>730</sup>

Hanks vehicles in the years leading up to *Forrest Gump* had included comedies such as *Big* (1988), *Turner and Hooch* (1989), *A League of their Own* (1992); the romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993); and more "prestigious" dramas such as *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) and *Philadelphia* (1993). The range of roles these films afforded the actor point to the development of a multifaceted star persona, elements of which were likely to appeal to a variety of demographics, psychographics and taste formations. While not all the films saw the characters Hanks played imbued with the kind of positive traits that would define

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<sup>730</sup> Leonard Klady, "Star Power Still Fuels H'wood Hits, Gallup Sez," *Variety*, July 25, 1994, pp.1, 75  
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Gump – his character in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, for example, was a corrupt adulterer who works for a Wall Street Bank – his appeal as a “nice guy” was firmly established through such films as *Big*, *A League of their Own*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and, even the more sombre-toned, *Philadelphia*. One *Boston Globe* article entitled “More Mr. Nice Guy from Tom Hanks” made explicit such an association. It also linked his perceived niceness to his personal life and to his role as a father. When questioned on the subject, Hanks replied: “I’m 38 and I’ve got three kids. I’d be a fool not to realize that that experience has altered my consciousness in a big way”.<sup>731</sup> Like Washington, Hanks comes across as an ordinary family man; someone who, like many members of the Sixties generation in the 1990s, had responsibilities to his children as well as to himself. While Hanks had just won an Academy Award for best actor in a leading role for what could be seen as quite a political film – *Philadelphia* sees him play a gay lawyer who contracts AIDS – the emphasis in this article, as it was in many others, was placed upon the actor’s family, not his political role. He was a “nice guy”, not an outspoken politico; he was someone with whom persons of different political affiliations could find sympathetic.

Hanks and director Robert Zemeckis went out of their way to stress that *Forrest Gump* was not supposed to contain any strong political message. “I don’t think there’s any big message that comes out of this”, Hanks informed one reporter in early July 1994, “other than, as a nation, we’ve been through a lot.” In the same article, Zemeckis stressed that the film was not attempting to be judgemental. Forrest’s life, according to the director, was supposed to represent a “Zen approach to existence, and it would be unfair to say that he represents anything else.”<sup>732</sup> Hanks and Zemeckis were thus employed to promote *Forrest Gump* as, if anything, a spiritual experience; an opportunity for personal reflection not for political editorialising.

It is notable that many of the early reviews of *Forrest Gump* emphasised the film’s ability to encourage personal reminiscence. As Krämer points out, a number of reviews implied “that the release of *Forrest Gump* became an occasion for baby-boomers to reflect on their generational identity and on the wider historical context

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<sup>731</sup> Jay Carr, “More Mr. Nice Guy from Tom Hanks,” *Boston Globe*, July 3, 1994, p. A7.

<sup>732</sup> Bob Strauss, “The Metaphor is the Message,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 8, 1994, p. 6.

for their individual biographies”.<sup>733</sup> Trade paper *Variety* noted in a review that the “pic[ture] offers up a non-stop barrage of emotional and iconographic identification points that will make the post-war generation feel they’re seeing their lives passing by onscreen.”<sup>734</sup> Other reviewers saw the film as a “boomerography”<sup>735</sup>, one that pushes “many nostalgic buttons” and “for viewers in their 30s and 40s, ‘Forrest Gump’ pushes almost every historical, cultural and sociological button.”<sup>736</sup> At this stage of its popular critical reception, *Forrest Gump* was discussed as providing the opportunity for older audience members to reflect on their own lives and their own experiences (much like *Platoon* was reported to have inspired amongst Vietnam veterans a similar communal reflection). Krämer cites a Gallup poll published in *Variety* that found 40 percent of a sample audience of *Forrest Gump* were aged 40-65, thus suggesting that a comparatively large mature audience had attended the film.<sup>737</sup> One cinema goer stated that the film is “about everybody’s life and how to live it” and, echoing Zemeckis’s spiritual interpretation of Forrest Gump’s character, said that the film “deepened the experience I was trying to achieve when I was practicing Zen actively.”<sup>738</sup> Linking Forrest to a form of personal spirituality was, for this viewer, a way of asserting *Forrest Gump*’s universal appeal.

Richard Corliss began his lengthy review of the film by stating: “You see them – folks of all ages and both sexes – floating out of the movie theatre on waves of honourable sentiment. The kids look thoughtful, the grownups wistful.”<sup>739</sup> Here the opportunities for personal reflection were broadened out to encompass not just members of the Sixties generation, but younger people as well. Several articles featured the responses of young people to the film. Those who had not lived through the Sixties felt that they could still identify with Forrest’s story. For one interviewee, the film was a celebration of the underdog: “I thought it was cool to see a guy who

<sup>733</sup> Krämer, “Would You,” pp. 306-307.

<sup>734</sup> Anon, “*Forrest Gump*”, *Variety*, July 11, 1994, p. 41.

<sup>735</sup> J. Hoberman, “*Forrest Gump*,” *Village Voice*, July 12, 1994, p. 41.

<sup>736</sup> David Ansen, “Hollywood’s July Foursome,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 1994, p. 50; Frank Rich, “The Gump From Hope,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1994, p. A23; Gary Arnold, “Fable of *Forrest Gump*,” *Washington Times*, July 6, 1994, p. C14.

<sup>737</sup> Kramer, “Would You,” p. 307.

<sup>738</sup> Sarah Lyall, “It’s *Forrest Gump* vs. Harrumph,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1994, p. E2.

<sup>739</sup> Richard Corliss, “Show Business: The World According to Gump,” *Time*, August 1, 1994, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981196,00.html> (Accessed April 2008).



was supposedly sub-ordinary become extraordinary.”<sup>740</sup> In perhaps the most sickly-sweet piece of *Forrest Gump* coverage, it was reported that one nine-year-old-boy watched the film and then informed his mother: “You know what Mom? I’m going to try to be a little nicer.”<sup>741</sup>

In general, the American popular critical reception of *Forrest Gump* in the first weeks of its US theatrical release tended to spotlight the film’s technical wizardry and its sentimentalised (for some, its over-sentimentalised) story. Few commentators saw a great deal of political bias in the film.<sup>742</sup> There were a couple of gestures toward *Forrest Gump*’s potential as a liberal critique of history: Jay Carr of the *Boston Globe* suggested that the film was “no less filled with rage than [Oliver Stone’s Vietnam War drama] *Born on the Fourth of July* ... reminding us that Forrest pays a heavy price for staying brave, sincere and loyal.”<sup>743</sup> The *Village Voice*’s J. Hoberman invoked Charles A. Reich’s sympathetic account of the counterculture’s legacy, *The Greening of America* (1970), by arguing that “Forrest is the perfect embodiment of Consciousness III, the place where countercultural and conventional Hollywood meet”.<sup>744</sup> I only discovered one critic who, during the first weeks of *Gump*’s release, explicitly asserted the film to be conservative, or “reactionary.”<sup>745</sup> David Sterritt of the *Christian Science Monitor* contended that the film raised “tough social problems that it has no intention of dealing with forthrightly” while still celebrating the film’s entertainment value and performances.<sup>746</sup> However, as July turned to August and the full extent of *Forrest Gump*’s commercial success became apparent, a new spate of articles began to emerge, which took a far more strident stance toward the film’s political content and themes.

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<sup>740</sup> Oldenberg, “Gumpin,” p. 1D; Nancy Krue, “The World According to Gump: A Film About a Simple Man Taps Surprisingly Deep Feelings,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 28, 1994, p. 1C.

<sup>741</sup> Jerry Adler, “Tis a Gift to Be Sweet,” *Newsweek*, August 1, 1994, p. 58.

<sup>742</sup> Janet Maslin, “Tom Hanks as an Interloper in History,” *New York Times*, p. C9; Rita Kempley, “*Forrest Gump*: Dimwitty Delight; Tom Hank’s Simply Sweet Nostalgia Trip,” *Washington Post*, July 6, 1994, p. B1; Steven Rea, “In *Forrest Gump*, Village Idiot’s Tour of U.S. Milestones,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 6, 1994, p. E01; Rich, “The Gump from Hope,” p. A23.

<sup>743</sup> Jay Carr, “*Forrest Gump*: Nobody’s Fool,” *Boston Globe*, July 6, 1994, p. 69.

<sup>744</sup> Hoberman, “*Forrest Gump*,” p. 41.

<sup>745</sup> David Denby, “*Forrest Gump*,” *New York*, July 18, 1994, p. 50.

<sup>746</sup> David Sterritt, “*Gump* Takes Optimism Too Far,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 7, 1994, p. 10.

Jennifer Hyland-Wang notes the appropriation of *Forrest Gump* by conservative commentators such as Newt Gingrich and Patrick Buchanan during the 1994 mid-term election. Buchanan first invoked *Forrest Gump* early in August, stating that *Forrest Gump* “celebrates the values of conservatism ... in *Forrest Gump* the white trash are in Berkeley and the peace movement”.<sup>747</sup> That month the conservative commentator Richard Grenier insisted that he disliked the film, but nevertheless highlighted how “the Berkeley chapter of the radical SDS” are “*Forrest Gump*’s truly repugnant people”.<sup>748</sup> Later in the year, Gingrich asserted that “in every scene of the movie in which the counterculture occurs, they're either dirty, nasty, abusive, vindictive, beating a woman, or doing something grotesque.”<sup>749</sup> Interestingly, James Burton notes that conservative commentators did not all respond positively to *Forrest Gump* immediately, and that some conservative reviewers, noting what they believed to be the film’s “politically correct” representation of single parents and comedic portrayal of the military, lambasted the film as another example of liberal Hollywood distortion.<sup>750</sup> Burton does suggest, however, that towards the end of 1994, after Gingrich incorporated *Forrest Gump* into his political electioneering in October, a broad consensus was established regarding the film’s positive representation of conservative values.<sup>751</sup>

I argue that *Forrest Gump*’s appropriation by politically conservative claim-makers was facilitated in 1994 by increasingly hostile public attacks against *Forrest Gump*’s former muse, Bill Clinton, and the President’s inability to maintain in the public sphere a positive image of his politics or himself. It did not matter what conservative commentators really thought about *Forrest Gump* politically; what mattered was that the film was well liked and optimistic and could be evoked and used against a president who rapidly was losing popularity and was unable to inspire the same optimism as he had done in 1992. Clinton’s use of the Sixties in the 1992 presidential election was coming under sustained fire throughout 1994, partly in response to legislative failures: Clinton’s unsuccessful attempts to pass legislation such as that which would have allowed openly gay people to join the army and that

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<sup>747</sup> Hyland-Wang, “A Struggle of Contending Stories,” p. 114.

<sup>748</sup> Richard Grenier, “Adam Smith on *Forrest Gump*,” *The Washington Times*, August 1, 1994, p. A19.

<sup>749</sup> Hyland-Wang, “A Struggle,” p. 104.

<sup>750</sup> Burton, “Film, History,” pp. 229-230.

<sup>751</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

which would have forced all employers (including small businesses) to provide full medical insurance for all employees proved nonetheless to be particularly divisive.<sup>752</sup>

According to Marcus, even the political and cultural references to Elvis and JFK, that had served the president so well throughout his election campaign, were dropped by the administration soon after Clinton took power.<sup>753</sup> “No longer buttressed by his lifelong cultural and political allegiances, Clinton’s persona became increasingly incoherent and suffered from the charges of inauthenticity that he had answered in 1992 with his links to Elvis and JFK”, argues Marcus.<sup>754</sup> The hip, rocking sex symbol that had been so intrinsic to Clinton’s popularity fell by the wayside. “What’s the difference between the Clinton health plan and Elvis Presley?” went one joke circulating amongst conservative commentators: “Elvis is the one that might be alive.”<sup>755</sup> With more allegations of sexual infidelities and financial wrongdoing – the Paula Jones and Whitewater affairs respectively – Clinton was branded increasingly as an inauthentic liar, bereft of a strong moral code and lacking a set of coherent political beliefs.<sup>756</sup> It was a case of, as one commentator wryly put it: “Elvis is dead and Slick is alive.”<sup>757</sup> With Clintonite uses of the past marginalised, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Forrest Gump*, the top grossing film of 1994, was adopted by some individuals that were able to contribute to, and to shape, public debate: the Republicans. Like *Platoon*, *Forrest Gump* ends on a note of optimism and with a look to the future. While in December and January 1986/87 (the time of *Platoon*’s release), Republicans, after Iran Contra, were associated with corruption and cynicism (discussed in Chapter One), in 1994 the tables had turned. Democrats had lost the political and moral high-ground; Gingrich’s new Republicans were, at least for a few months, the voice of the future. For this reason, and regardless of the film’s political content, conservatives were, in a sense, *Forrest Gump*’s rightful heirs.

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<sup>752</sup> For a discussion of public opinion see Lawrence R Jacobs and Robert Y Shapiro, “Public Opinion in Clinton’s First Year: Leadership and Responsiveness” in Stanley A. Renshon (ed.), *The Clinton Presidency: Campaigning, Governing & the Psychology of Leadership* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 195-211.

<sup>753</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, p. 174.

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>755</sup> William Safire, “Let’s Make a Deal on Health,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1994, p. A15.

<sup>756</sup> Marcus, *Happy Days*, pp. 174-179.

<sup>757</sup> Philip McMath, “Whitewater Oratorio...with prelude; Echoes in Arkansas,” *Washington Times*, April 17, 1994, p. B3.

In October 1994, a number of conservative commentators held a conference in Los Angeles entitled “The Dream Factory and the American Dream: Hollywood and American Culture”. The conference featured speakers such as film critic Michael Medved, radio host Rush Limbaugh and actor Charlton Heston. It focused on criticising the high levels of sex and violence that these commentators believed to be prevalent in much of Hollywood’s output. *Forrest Gump* was, according to the conference’s promotion materials, emblematic of a “new breeze in Hollywood ... conservative values of loyalty, decency, honor, duty.” Just as liberals had celebrated *Platoon* as an antidote to *Rambo* and symbolic as a new honesty and accuracy with respect to Vietnam productions, conservatives declared *Forrest Gump* to be an antidote to films made by the likes of Oliver Stone. Attendees at this conference were informed that “Gump’s girlfriend follows a countercultural path through radical politics, drugs and generally disordered life until she dies of AIDS”.<sup>758</sup> A few months later, David Horowitz announced *Forrest Gump* to be “the first film that has really repudiated the ‘60s in an explicit way”.<sup>759</sup> Horowitz was particularly pleased with what he saw as *Forrest Gump*’s denunciation of the Sixties African-American radicals the Black Panthers, a group about which he wrote a number of critical articles throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>760</sup> Republican Senator Bob Dole championed the film’s “portrayal of love, marriage, war and business.”<sup>761</sup> It is notable that Gingrich (b. 1943), Buchanan (b. 1938), Horowitz (b. 1939) and Medved (b. 1948) are all members of the Sixties generation. In many ways *Forrest Gump* became for these commentators what *JFK* had been for liberal commentators Todd Gitlin and Tom Hayden (discussed in Chapter Three) – a challenge to the “establishment.” While the latter had announced Stone’s film to be an attack on a conservative government and an apathetic media, Gingrich and his allies touted *Forrest Gump* as a countercultural challenge to a liberalised media and, furthermore, as an attack on the politics and values of a man whom they declared to be the

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<sup>758</sup> Quoted in Irene Lacher, “Hollywood Conservatives Taking a Stand Summit,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1994, Calendar, p. 1.

<sup>759</sup> Quoted in Gloria Goodale, “Movies’ Liberal Dose of Conservatism,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 5, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>760</sup> See, for example, Horowitz, “A ‘60s Revival We Don’t Need: Black Panthers, they Never Were Martyrs for Social Justice, but Murderous Thugs Who Brutalised Their Own,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1994, p. 7; Horowitz and Peter Collier, “Baddest: The Life and Times of Huey P. Newton,” *Destructive Generation*, pp. 141-165.

<sup>761</sup> Goodale, “Movies’ Liberal dose of Conservatism”, p. 18.

embodiment of Sixties liberalism: President Bill Clinton. Given that Hollywood films – none more so than *Forrest Gump* – do tend to celebrate the underdog, it is perhaps unsurprising that a political appropriation (whether it be liberals celebrating *Platoon* and *JFK* or conservatives discussing *Gump*) is often carried out by those who can claim, at that point in time, to be the “anti-establishment” spokespeople, or representatives of the underdog. For Republicans, *Forrest Gump* was a useful weapon in their attempts to discredit Clinton.

In early 1995, *Forrest Gump*'s production team sought to detach the film from public political debate. On receiving the Best Picture Oscar, one of the two producers, Steve Tisch, declared that “*Forrest Gump* isn't about politics or conservative values. It's about humanity.”<sup>762</sup> The adoption of *Forrest Gump* by Republican politicians would surely have riled Tisch, “a self-described ‘big-check writer’ to the Democratic Party”, as he was described by Irene Lacher of the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>763</sup> In another interview Tisch argued that “I don't want any political group to feel they have an ownership of ‘Forrest Gump.’”<sup>764</sup> Tom Hanks, the movie's star, argued that the historical content of *Forrest Gump* contained “no editorializing whatsoever ... No intellectual rationale.”<sup>765</sup> Conversely, the *Boston Globe*'s Jay Carr criticised liberal commentators for not recognising *Forrest Gump* as a “political football.”<sup>766</sup> Carr was particularly angry because, while numerous Republican politicians such as Patrick Buchanan and Newt Gingrich had referenced and utilised *Forrest Gump* in their campaigning, “nobody raised a protesting voice to argue that the film is closer to Clinton's values than Buchanan's.”<sup>767</sup> Indeed, if “it had been done in time to be released in 1992, it would have become part of the Clinton mini-steamroller – a populist creation that spoke of hope and endurance”,<sup>768</sup> and not a conservative celebration of military, business and war. Carr believed the film's focus upon endurance and, as he put it in another article, “unconditional love”, was more

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<sup>762</sup> Quoted in Byers, “History Re-Membered,” p. 420.

<sup>763</sup> Robert W. Welkos, “Cover Story: Can Bill Still Bank on Hollywood,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1995, Calendar, p. 8.

<sup>764</sup> Irene Lacher, “Hollywood Conservatives Taking a Stand Summit,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1994, Calendar, p. 1.

<sup>765</sup> Quoted in Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Robert Zemeckis* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), p. 139.

<sup>766</sup> Jay Carr, “The Politics of Gump: Forget the Simplicities, This is a Dark Portrait of America”, *Boston Globe*, March 26, 1994, p. B27.

<sup>767</sup> Carr, “The Politics of Gump,” p. B27.

<sup>768</sup> *Ibid.*

liberal than conservative.<sup>769</sup> Even the conservative critic Michael Medved doubted that “Bob Zemeckis started out to make a conservative testament.”<sup>770</sup> Yet, because of a public debate in which conservatives had reclaimed the Sixties as a descent into chaos, and Clinton (who for conservatives was *the* representative of political liberalism) was under fire on charges of inauthenticity, the film became prominently associated with conservative politics throughout its theatrical release.

## Conclusion

From production to reception, *Forrest Gump*, like *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, and *Malcolm X* before it, intersected with a network of debates concerned with framing the Sixties. Roth shaped his script into a gentle satire of the political and cultural discourses surrounding Clinton during the 1992 election campaign. Throughout 1993, the script was modified and certain scenes and sequences were cut so as to remove material that might have alienated viewers of a conservative disposition. Other visual and aural content was added that emphasised personal authenticity. *Forrest Gump* depicted its three main characters, Forrest, Jenny and Dan as having become authentic because of their participation in, and interaction with, various events, movements and persons from the Sixties. Furthermore, with the addition of vocal audience surrogates (the people sitting at the bus stop) and the emphasis on television as a mediator of a national Sixties experience, *Forrest Gump* was constructed so as to invite cinema goers to reflect upon their own experiences of the Sixties.

In promotional materials, *Forrest Gump*'s political content was downplayed in favour of highlighting its ability to stimulate personal reminiscence. Neither the promotional poster nor the film's theatrical trailer suggested that *Forrest Gump* was a film with a “message.” Rather, these materials aimed to assert the film's universal appeal and, in the case of the trailer, to appeal to members of the Sixties generation's nostalgia for their youths. During the first few weeks of its release, public responses to *Forrest Gump* focused on the film's sentimental representation of recent history,

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<sup>769</sup> Jay Carr, “‘Forrest Gump’, ‘Natural Born Killers’ and Quiz Show’ Couldn’t Be More Different. But They’re All Drawing in the Crowds by Exploring America’s Values,” *Boston Globe*, September 18, 1994, p. A9.

<sup>770</sup> Quoted in Lacher, “Hollywood Conservatives,” p. 1.

its special effects and, crucially, its status as a catalyst for others to reflect on the Sixties. However, from August 1994, *Forrest Gump* became increasingly associated with Republican and conservative discourse. Caught up in Republican electioneering and a turn to the right in political discourse, *Forrest Gump* was heralded as symbolic of a conservative renaissance in political electioneering.

There is an irony to conservatives' appropriation of a film that essentially promoted the values of the Sixties counterculture (if not condoning its excesses), that reversed traditional gender roles, that celebrated the single parent and that called for openness and freedom with regard to individual lifestyle choices. Gingrich and his Republican allies' embrace of *Forrest Gump* might be viewed less as a demonization of the Sixties than as evidence of the era's final legitimisation: If hard-line conservative commentators can find a positive message in a film that celebrates the Sixties' philosophical and moral legacy then who is left to convince? Perhaps for this reason, following *Forrest Gump*'s lead, Hollywood continued to produce positive, uplifting, liberal, representations of not only early Sixties popular figureheads, but also of the late Sixties and events and movements from this more controversial period of history. And, furthermore, Hollywood Sixties films in the wake of *Forrest Gump* were not subjected to quite the same levels of heated public conflict as many of those produced during the years 1986-1994.

## Conclusion

This thesis has argued that, during the years 1986-1994, a group of prominent filmmakers produced representations of the Sixties designed to intervene in large-scale public debates on the era's political and cultural legacy. Providing an extensive analysis of the five films' texts and a range of extra-filmic materials, I have illuminated the historical conditions that informed the production of political content and that influenced this content's circulation in the public sphere. The following pages summarise the thematic and historical preoccupations that governed the production and reception of this cycle of high-profile Sixties films, 1986-1994, before extending the thesis' focus to consider some comparable films that were released in the years succeeding *Forrest Gump*.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, a confluence of political, social and generational exigencies impacted the production and development of the five films examined in this thesis. Firstly, Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election intensified political conflicts over America's recent past, serving to mark the emergence of the Sixties as a central motif in politicians' campaigning; a motif that has held sway up to the present.<sup>771</sup> Secondly, the increased presence in the public sphere of members of the Sixties generation – those born between the late 1930s and late 1950s – saw many of this generation reflecting publicly upon their own experiences of the era's political and social transformations. Thirdly, the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s placed immense weight upon the notion that cultural products served as barometric gauges that could be used to measure the social and moral climate of the United States. Whether it was attacks against films like *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), Robert Mapplethorpe's art works in 1989 or historical exhibitions at the Smithsonian in 1991, these controversies served to promote cultural artefacts and their producers as important players in national debates.

An analysis of script development has revealed the attempts of screenwriters Oliver Stone, Eleanor Bergstein, Spike Lee, Zachary Sklar and Eric Roth to tailor

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<sup>771</sup> Bernard Von Bothmer highlights the centrality of "the sixties" in elections up until 2008. See Von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), pp. 131-232.



their historical portrayals in ways that reflected the ebb and flow of public political discourse. These screenwriters, along with other prominent creative and managerial personnel involved in the production of *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK*, *Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* held, I have argued, a liberal political outlook and intended their films to provide positive, inspiring accounts of movements and philosophies – the counterculture, the anti-war, civil rights and feminist movements – that the films positioned as being central to the Sixties. However, given the prominent perception that America was in the throes of a large-scale culture war, certain compromises were made with regard to political content. Material that had the potential to alienate those of a conservative disposition was cut or altered. Lines of dialogue in *Platoon* that emphasised Elias’ anti-war stance and his associations with the counterculture were removed; scenes in *Dirty Dancing* that explicitly referenced racism and white-on-black violence were cut. With regard to *JFK*, screenwriters Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar did not remove liberal content, but added a conservative demonization of the counterculture (that was not made explicit in Jim Garrison’s memoir, upon which their script was based). Furthermore, Stone’s addition of a cabal of gay villains (Sklar had not wanted to include this content) to the narrative provided what amounted to a right-wing interpretation of Sixties transformation. Lee’s scripting of *Malcolm X* is perhaps more complex, for in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, upon which the script was based, he already had a text that some critics have argued attempted to present its protagonist as a less divisive figure. Lee did, however, utilise editing techniques and incorporate documentary footage that aligned *Malcolm X* with the less controversial civil rights leader Martin Luther King. Eric Roth, who penned the script to *Forrest Gump*, altered Winston Groom’s novel greatly and provided a less cynical and less politicised *Forrest Gump* character than Groom had done. And, furthermore, scenes present in Roth’s script that suggested too explicit an anti-war stance were not shot or ended up on the cutting room floor.

The finished films invited both liberal and conservative readings of the Sixties. *Platoon* included 1980s liberal and conservative viewpoints on the Vietnam War; *Dirty Dancing* provided a complex and contradictory interpretation of issues such as abortion; *JFK* offered conflicting versions of post-assassination Sixties America; *Malcolm X* depicted both a critique of a racist system, while also carefully presenting its protagonist as a statesmanlike, universal figure of the civil rights

movement, not to mention a flag-bearer for a drug-free and nuclear family-oriented America; *Forrest Gump*'s script was tailored in line with Clintonite uses of the recent American past, offering an inspirational and uplifting account of the era's transformations while at the same time providing ambiguous representations of phenomena such as the counterculture and anti-war movements.

While their representations of public politics were diverse, the five films celebrated the Sixties' philosophical and moral contributions to American society by way of a narrative stressing their protagonists' search for personal authenticity. Each film's central protagonist (or, in the case of *Forrest Gump*, protagonists) became a human embodiment of the Sixties' positive legacy. *Platoon*'s Chris Taylor embarks on a personal quest that sees him attempt to evacuate a culture of militarism and racial prejudice from the platoon (which is presented as a microcosmic version of American society). Stone's other two Vietnam films offered a similar personal narrative: political activism is depicted as a pathway to spiritual enlightenment for both *Born on the Fourth of July*'s Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) and *Heaven and Earth*'s Le Ly Hayslip (Hiep Thi Le). Kovic becomes a prominent spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War; Hayslip concludes the film having established the East Meets West Foundation, a body devoted to fostering positive relations between the United States and Vietnam. Referring to *Heaven and Earth*, Stone stated that "Her's [Hayslip's] is a spiritual odyssey, a journey into freedom, enlightenment and social action."<sup>772</sup> This comment could very easily encapsulate the personal journeys of all three of Stone's Vietnam protagonists as well as *JFK*'s Jim Garrison.

As my analysis of script development has demonstrated, however, this personal narrative was less an exclusive authorial signature than a prominent strategy mobilised by many socially conscious Hollywood filmmakers. Just as Stone's heroes find personal authenticity in political activism so too did scriptwriter Eleanor Bergstein strengthen a narrative in which Baby Houseman's authentic awakening is premised on her making the personal political. Baby's challenge to the hypocrisy and blatant sexism of her father's generation of older liberals and to that of younger left-wing activists (represented by the character of Neil) shows her adopting principles and philosophies associated with the feminist movement, even if she does so in

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<sup>772</sup> Quoted in Michael Singer, *Oliver Stone's Heaven and Earth: The Making of An Epic Motion Picture* (London: Orion, 1993), p. 4.

1963, several years before the emergence of a large second-wave feminist movement.

*Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* also show that personal authenticity can be achieved through, recalling Jacob Golomb's phrase, a "life of significant actions."<sup>773</sup> Malcolm X's intellectual and spiritual development had already been presented in narrative form in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Lee largely followed this paradigmatic representation, but looked to add an extra degree of resonance to Malcolm X's post-Kennedy assassination life (thus aligning his film with broader Sixties generation narratives circulating within the public sphere). *Malcolm X* synthesises an encompassing struggle for African-American civil rights that stretches from the 1950s to well beyond Malcolm X's own lifetime. In this way, Malcolm is touted as an inspiration for others. *Forrest Gump* presented all three of its central protagonists – Forrest, Jenny and Dan – as having gained personal authenticity during the Sixties, and, furthermore, offered cinema-goers an opportunity to reflect on their own authentic Sixties experiences.

The public politics/personal authenticity formula served as the template for the construction of all five films' portrayal of the Sixties. Such a strategy suggests compromise: on the one hand, the filmmakers wanted to imbue their films with a political dimension that reflected their own views on Sixties politics and culture; on the other hand, they wanted to make pictures that would appeal to as wide an audience as possible. John Caldwell discusses the idea of the "screenplay-as-business-plan" whereby scripts from their very inception are often the product of negotiations between creative and executive personnel and are shaped and re-shaped in the hope of minimising production costs and maximising potential revenue.<sup>774</sup> The attempts on the part of filmmakers like Stone, Bergstein, Sklar, Lee and Roth to diversify public politics might be viewed in the light of Caldwell's observations as the work of shrewd businesspeople; all of these filmmakers were out of necessity required to make compromises so as to maintain positions in an industry that, like any other, does not look kindly on commercial failure. However, it would, I believe, be unfair to say that all creative decisions are driven by commercial imperatives. The

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<sup>773</sup> Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 201.

<sup>774</sup> John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, pp. 232-239.

narrative stressing personal authenticity was an alternative channel through which to convey a positive representation of Sixties politics and culture. Politics were, in a sense, transposed from the public arena onto private arenas.

*Platoon, Dirty Dancing, JFK, Malcolm X* and *Forrest Gump* therefore provided positive, politicised representations of personal authenticity at a time when, according to some scholars, authenticity as a political concept had been debased and commercialised. Both Doug Rossinow and Sam Binkley, who write sympathetic accounts of searches for authenticity embarked upon by members of the New Left and the counterculture, contend that by the 1980s authenticity had lost its activist and/or communitarian edge. For Rossinow, the search for personal authenticity remained a feature of late 1980s and 1990s America, “but in a less politically charged way than in the period between 1955 and 1975.”<sup>775</sup> Rossinow argues that after 1975, a search for authenticity became a solipsistic endeavour sought in communities uninterested in engaging with real social concerns.<sup>776</sup> Referring to what he calls the “loosening motif,” a countercultural directive which encouraged individuals to “enhance one’s authenticity through lifestyle choices”, Binkley claims that this directive actually “prospered during the cultural reforms of the Reagan period”. It was, however, “flattened out and made trivial” when “transposed from the collective project of a shared community of discourse to the solitary endeavour of the lone shopper.”<sup>777</sup> In a sense, both Rossinow and Binkley share with Fredric Jameson a view of the Sixties in which the era is said to have stimulated an “unbinding of social energies” and a “coming to self consciousness,” only for these energies to evaporate and the very notion of a stable personal identity to erode in a post-Sixties, postmodern wasteland of rampant consumerism and schizophrenic, devalued identities.<sup>778</sup> Jameson himself notes the challenges to Sixties notions of personal authenticity emerging in the early 1970s and, while Rossinow and Binkley

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<sup>775</sup> Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 340.

<sup>776</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>777</sup> Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 14-15.

<sup>778</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text*, no. 9-10 (Spring/Summer, 1984), pp. 208-209.

extend their narratives a little further, the 1980s are marked by all three as a period of retrenchment and reaction.<sup>779</sup>

Regarding the Reagan era's prominent political figures (not least Reagan himself) I do not dispute these scholars claims that the 1980s did see a rightward turn in public political discourse. Nevertheless, I have argued that the high-profile films examined in this thesis were developed with the positive, activist notion of personal authenticity in mind – a notion that synthesised self-fulfilment with social commitment and attempted to convey to audiences the Sixties ideal that the personal was very much political.

Other than *Malcolm X*, however, these films tended to assert that the quest for personal authenticity was the province of white people. More generally, Hollywood Sixties films produced during the years 1986-1994 did not focus on the personal development or spiritual growth of black men and women of the era. Blacks are peripheral characters in *Platoon*, and, as noted in Chapter One, the only black character given to making politicised statements about racism is portrayed as a coward. Blacks play no role in *Dirty Dancing* nor do they in *JFK*. *Forrest Gump's* Bubba is killed off early in the film. In fact blacks are largely absent from other Hollywood Sixties films of the 1980s and early 1990s such as *Four Friends* (1981), *A Small Circle of Friends* (1980), *The Outsiders* (1983), and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). Sharon Monteith has noted a displacement of black agency even in 1980s and 1990s films that represent the civil rights movement. *Heart of Dixie*, *The Long Walk Home* and, I would add, *The Lords of Discipline* (1983), a military academy-set film about racial integration, foreground white activism and white coming-of-age stories, which produced “movies that are really about a desire for forgiveness and regret for the loss of hope in interracial coalitions.”<sup>780</sup> It is notable that both *Heart of Dixie* and *Long Walk Home* focus on a white female protagonist, for it seemed that in 1980s and 1990s Hollywood Sixties films, a strong female protagonist often meant simultaneously playing down African-American agency in the civil rights movement. For example, one of the few other early 1990s films to deal with

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<sup>779</sup> Jameson, “Periodising,” p. 205.

<sup>780</sup> Sharon Monteith, “The Movie-made movement: Civil Rites of Passage,” in Paul Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 126. Of films released between 1986 and 1994, Monteith suggests two notable exceptions to this trend: *Malcolm X* and the 1994 television movie *The Road to Freedom: The Vernon Johns Story* (1994).

women's liberation in the Sixties, *Love Field* (1992), begins at the historical juncture where *Dirty Dancing* ended: the Kennedy assassination. Early on in the film, the actions of Lurene Hallett (Michelle Pfeiffer) are imbued with a political dimension; she aids a black man in his attempts to escape bigoted southern police. *Love Field* concludes with Hallett having transformed her own character, from the subservient housewife of the film's opening to an independent woman at the film's end. Racial issues are, however, relegated to a secondary status and the film focuses on a feminist coming-of-age story, much as Monteith argues to be the case in another early 1990s civil-rights themed film (this one set at the time of the 1955/6 Montgomery bus boycott), *The Long Walk Home*.<sup>781</sup> A rare high-profile black-centred Sixties feature film of the period 1986-1994 was the Tina Turner biopic *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993). Whether one could argue that this film deals explicitly with African-American civil rights is, however, questionable. Are civil rights central to this text, or does *What's Love* invest Turner's life story, especially her break from an abusive husband, with a more generalised feminist thematic? I would suggest the latter.

For all their liberal themes and content, the above noted films mediated a conservative aspect of 1980s and 1990s American popular and political culture in which the forging of identity through struggle was often promoted as the province of whites rather than blacks. Matthew Frye Jacobson has examined the "white ethnic revival" in late-twentieth-century America. Beginning in the 1960s and exploding in the 1970s, this phenomenon saw the production of a cultural nostalgia for one's roots – whether they were Italian, Irish, Jewish etc... The roots boom was influenced heavily by principles associated with the civil rights movement and, especially, Black Nationalism's celebration of African-American identity as distinct from a (white) American identity. While there certainly was the potential for progressive politics in the discovery of one's heritage and in the celebration of diverse cultures, a promotion of white ethnicity was also used by some prominent claims-makers as a way of eliding questions of racial inequality. Jacobson notes how mythic success stories featuring white immigrants became ever prominent in the public sphere,<sup>782</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> Monteith, "The Movie-made Movement," pp. 125-130.

<sup>782</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 320.

and that the so called “Ellis Island saga”<sup>783</sup> was sometimes utilised in political rhetoric to denigrate African-American claims for governmental assistance such as affirmative action and, later, for reparations for slavery, the message being: if white immigrants struggled to make successes of themselves without government assistance then so should blacks. Indeed, Jacobson cites national survey data compiled between 1986 and 1992 that found 76.1 percent of white Americans either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.”<sup>784</sup> In a sense, then, white America was reclaiming its own tales of struggle-against-the-odds and self-made success as a way of shoring-up white privilege in the face of demands for racial equality.

With their white protagonists, *Platoon*, *Dirty Dancing*, *JFK* and *Forrest Gump* featured narratives that offered whites – and even WASP whites (WASP becoming an increasingly derogatory term in the white ethnic revival, for it connoted privilege and elitism)<sup>785</sup> – an opportunity to reflect upon their own trials and tribulations, their personal and political struggles, and, importantly, the fact that they survived them and had made a success of their lives.<sup>786</sup> While not wishing to dismiss white experiences of the Sixties as un-traumatic, there is a distinct sense in viewing the bulk of the Sixties pictures produced from 1986-1994, whether they be Vietnam-centred, or set in America, that they promote whites as the demographic who were the real Sixties “survivors.”

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Central to this thesis has been an attempt to emphasise the new perspectives one can gain on historical films from analysing promotional and reception materials.

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<sup>783</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, p. 334.

<sup>784</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>785</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>786</sup> It is notable that the first two Sixties-set films produced in the 1980s, *A Small Circle of Friends* (1980) and *Four Friends* (1981), explicitly coded their central protagonists as white ethnics: *A Small Circle of Friends* had Italian protagonist Leo Da Vinci (Brad Davis) and Jewish protagonist Jessica Bloom (Karen Allen). *Four Friends* featured Yugoslavian Danilo (Craig Wasson) and Jewish character David (Michael Huddleston). In a sense the post-*Platoon* Sixties films featured less explicitly-coded ethnic characters (although *Baby Houseman* was read by many reviewers as Jewish) and in this way perhaps attempted to broaden their appeal to a more generalised white audience.

Examining *Platoon et al*'s promotion, I have highlighted the manner in which marketers sought to diversify the films' potential political and, often, generational, appeal. *Platoon* was promoted as a stimulus for conflict over the Vietnam War, as a film designed to commemorate the Vietnam veteran and, primarily after the Iran Contra scandal, as a direct attack on Reaganite foreign policy. *Dirty Dancing* was promoted as a "good-time," hedonistic movie, and in this way some promotional materials reflected post-feminist discourses in which women's liberation had been evacuated of political significance. Bergstein's public statements and elements of the press kit attempted, however, to inject some political weight back into the film. *JFK* was promoted as a challenge to the political establishment, one that could open a hornet's nest of corruption at the highest levels, but also as a lament on America's descent into political and social chaos in the wake of the Kennedy assassination. *Malcolm X* was touted as a filmic representation that would appeal to the hip-hop generation, as a serious slice of African-American history, as a restrained, prestigious biopic and, in the publicity surrounding Denzel Washington, as a symbol of the Sixties generation's experiences of recent American history. *Forrest Gump*'s promotion was largely evacuated of political content, instead focusing on the film's cross-generational appeal to older members of the Sixties generation and to their children.

Reception of these films indicates that the majority of culture wars conflicts surrounding Hollywood's Sixties films focused upon films that featured a white middle-class male protagonist. *Platoon* in many ways was dealing with a subject closer to working-class men's experiences (the majority of middle-class Americans avoided the draft either by going to college or by obtaining a medical certificate from a sympathetic doctor). Yet *Platoon*'s protagonist Chris Taylor is middle-class – a volunteer rather than a draftee. Furthermore, discussing this film actually offered many commentators the opportunity to reflect not so much on memories of conflict but on memories of the Sixties more generally. As Chapter One demonstrated, those that did not fight discussed the film as a metaphor for divisions in American society at the time. It was a cinematic representation that male political and media elites in particular used to reflect upon their own experiences of the era.

*JFK* and *Forrest Gump* were also incorporated into public debates of national significance. *JFK* was incorporated into broader debates reflecting on the validity of



what Peter Knight refers to as “conspiracy thinking” as a valid form of political critique.<sup>787</sup> In this way, *JFK* became a fulcrum around which two different interpretations of the Sixties circulated: one argument posited that the Sixties had brought about a negative mainstreaming of paranoia, more in keeping with right-wing extremists than political progressives; the other suggested that conspiracy thinking was a necessary or valuable form of political protest to have emerged in the Sixties. *Forrest Gump* became embroiled in a political contest between Democrats and Republicans in which, by 1994, the latter had taken the upper hand. Providing a very selective reading of the film’s content and themes, Newt Gingrich and his Republican allies appropriated *Forrest Gump*, employing that reading as a beacon of conservative values and as a direct rebuttal to Clintonite uses of the recent past.

One might suggest that the high levels of public commentary surrounding these representations of a white, middle-class males’ experiences of the Sixties were in part down to the fact that a sizable majority of political and media elites were white middle-class men. Furthermore, the middle-class was, in public debate, frequently upheld as America’s defining demographic. As Binkley notes “this group has succeeded in establishing its anxieties and concerns, its modernities and its projects of identity as *the* experience of a time, the backdrop to that of all others.”<sup>788</sup> In many ways the middle-class has come to stand in for America; thus representations of middle-class Americans could be easily incorporated into broader national historical narratives.

*Dirty Dancing*, another representation of a white middle-class person was not, however, incorporated into public debate to anywhere near the same degree as *Platoon*, *JFK* or *Forrest Gump*. *Dirty Dancing*’s political content was on the whole ignored in favour of discussing its melodramatic qualities, resulting in the film being prominently understood as vacuous entertainment, devoid of lasting resonance. Or to recall reviewer David Denby’s comments: “you may enjoy *Dirty Dancing*, but you’ll hate yourself in the morning.”<sup>789</sup> Although *Dirty Dancing* shared numerous formal and thematic similarities with *Platoon*, media and political elites did not reflect

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<sup>787</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X Files* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>788</sup> Binkley, *Getting Loose*, pp. 11-12; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>789</sup> David Denby, “The Princess and the Peon,” *New York*, September 7, 1987, p. 60.

publicly on a young woman's coming-of-age against a politicised Sixties backdrop to the extent that they had done with Stone's first Vietnam drama.

The suggestion that *Dirty Dancing* embodied mindless and disposable entertainment is all the more ironic given that this film, in terms of its cultural profile, has gone from strength to strength. Given its success on VHS and on DVD, not to mention the new musical which, as I write, is still touring the world, and the constant *Dirty Dancing* revival screenings at cinemas, one could make the argument that *Dirty Dancing* has had the most long-lasting impact of *all* the films examined in this thesis. Nevertheless, in the context of 1980s debates on the Sixties, *Dirty Dancing* did not inspire much political commentary. "According to the prevailing cultural history of our times," argued Susan Douglas in 1994, "the impact of boys [in the Sixties] was serious, lasting, and authentic." On the other hand, she continues, the "impact of girls was fleeting, superficial, trivial."<sup>790</sup> It would seem that public commentators subscribed to this view, ignoring *Dirty Dancing*'s explicit engagement with political issues and instead highlighting what they believed to be the film's melodramatic qualities. And, while further research is required, it would seem to me that female-centred films throughout the period 1986-1994 did not receive the same kinds of intense national attention as their male-centred contemporaries.

The reception of *The Long Walk Home* is a particularly interesting example, because some reviewers highlighted the film's interlinking of the civil rights movement and women's liberation. *Newsweek* for one suggested that "we're seeing the genesis of the link between feminism and civil rights."<sup>791</sup> More critically, *The Washington Times* noted that "*The Long Walk Home* is less about racial justice than consciousness-raising and female solidarity."<sup>792</sup> The outpourings of think pieces that emerged after the release of *Platoon*, *JFK*, *Forrest Gump* or even *Mississippi Burning* (1988) were not present, however, during the US critical reception of *The Long Walk Home*.<sup>793</sup> *The Long Walk Home* was also described by one reviewer as a "TV-like drama", perhaps unwittingly encapsulating the prevailing notion that the

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<sup>790</sup> Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>791</sup> David Ansen, "History a la Hollywood," *Newsweek*, January 14, 1991, p. 54.

<sup>792</sup> Gary Arnold, "'Walk' Gets Stuck in a Virtuous Rut in Alabama," *The Washington Times*, March 22, 1991, p. E1.

<sup>793</sup> Much commentary, in fact, seemed to focus more upon the film's star Sissy Spacek's marital life and the fact that she had spent several years away from filmmaking in order to raise a family.

“correct” place for women’s histories was on television.<sup>794</sup> Television series such as *China Beach* (1988-1991), which was set in Vietnam and featured a number of female characters, and made for TV movies such as *Roe vs. Wade* (1989) and *A Private Matter* (1990) both of which focused on abortion, suggest that women’s stories are more often likely to be green-lighted by executives working in this branch of the media. Perhaps television’s association with the domestic sphere – and by extension with women – led to a greater openness toward female-centred Sixties histories during the years 1986-1994. Again, an analysis of Sixties television programmes at this time may well find a different set of political and cultural issues to have been prominent in these productions than those found in Hollywood feature films.

An examination of *Malcolm X*’s reception has demonstrated that, while this film received much commentary during its production, it was not incorporated into public debates on the Sixties to the same extent as was *Platoon*, *JFK* and *Forrest Gump*. I argued that *Malcolm X*’s pre-release publicity was contingent on several factors: the increased urgency apparent in debates on race-relations after the LA Riots of April and May 1992; fears that *Malcolm X* would act as a catalyst for racial violence (particularly after the media had created a moral panic around the outbreaks of violence in cinemas screening *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* [both 1991]); and a general hang-over from the furore that had greeted the release of *JFK*. After *Malcolm X*’s release, however, there were not the same attempts to use the film in broader conflicts over the Sixties. This I argued was because an African-American experience of the Sixties was framed in the media as being more a case of “special interest” rather than of national resonance.

The methodological framework used in this thesis has allowed me to provide an extensive analysis of the historical conditions that shape a film’s script content and its operations in the public sphere. Such an approach can enrich the historical and ideological analysis of cinema, for it places creativity within a precise context and sheds light on the kinds of representational strategies filmmakers employed (bolstering, as it does, information that can be gleaned from filmmakers’ retrospective comments with actual evidence gleaned from the script development process), and the changes and compromises made during the film’s journey from

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<sup>794</sup> Desson Howe, “Steady Steps of ‘Long Walk’,” *Washington Post*, March 22, 1991, p. N51.

script to screen. Following scholars such as Janet Staiger, Barbara Klinger, Thomas Austin and Mark Jancovich, I have also conducted reception studies that offer reasons why these five films were interpreted as they were at a distinctive point in time.<sup>795</sup> Linking an examination of script development and critical reception provided explicit evidence that, while similar strategies were mobilised by key filmmakers involved in *Platoon et al*'s production, prominent discursive practices present in the 1980s and 1990s public sphere ensured that not all of the films were subjected to the same levels of political debate.

There were, however, limitations to my methodology. Most obviously, I was only able to examine five films in any great depth. Further analysis of Hollywood's Sixties during the years 1986-1994 might consider the script development of other films produced at this time in order to ascertain if the public politics/personal authenticity formula was a common strategy. Secondly, and James Burton's thesis has already begun this process, further exploration of Sixties films' reception would offer insight into how other films were used publicly and what political and cultural exigencies may have influenced the interpretive frames in which such films were discussed and understood.<sup>796</sup> Thirdly, a consideration of actual audience responses to Hollywood Sixties films would offer a new perspective on these films' public reception. Examining the ways in which audiences interpreted *Platoon et al*'s political and historical representation at the time of their theatrical releases may now be impossible due to the lack of freely available contemporaneously retrieved audience response information, but further research on audiences reception of more recent Sixties films would provide a clearer picture of the ways in which viewers respond to, and engage with, political and historical content. Is a film's historical and political content important to a viewer? Are the primary audiences for Hollywood's Sixties films self-declared liberals or conservatives or both?

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<sup>795</sup> Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Mark Jancovich, "'Two Ways of Looking': The Critical Reception of 1940s Horror," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3 (Spring 2010), pp. 45-66; Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>796</sup> James Burton, "Film, History and Cultural Memory: Cinematic Representations of Vietnam Era America During the Culture Wars, 1987-1995" (University of Nottingham: Unpublished Thesis, 2007)."

An audience-based analysis may well require a rethinking of the relationship between Hollywood cinema, American politics and the culture wars. While the standard culture wars narrative suggests that the period from mid 1980s to the mid 1990s constituted a time of intense conflict amongst elites, political scientists such as Alan Wolfe and Morris P. Fiorina demonstrate that the general public was far less divided on most issues than were political and media elites.<sup>797</sup> As Fiorina puts it, the “belief that a culture war rages in the United States” is based on observing “discourse and behaviour within the political class.”<sup>798</sup> Furthermore, “the media are part of the political class and talk mostly to and about the political class [and so] the myth of popular polarisation took root and grew.”<sup>799</sup> While political elites have become increasingly polarised since the 1960s, there is very little evidence of the public following a similar path. In fact, some scholars argue that, if anything, the culture wars have been won primarily by liberals.<sup>800</sup> In the light of this research, one would have to consider what it was about *Platoon et al* that appealed to audiences. Did audiences read *Platoon et al* as conveying an explicitly liberal message? Did these films appeal because they promoted the Sixties impact on individual lives as the era’s positive legacy? Was it simply because audiences do not like being bombarded with a political “message” and therefore appreciated these films’ ideological diversity? Maybe audiences prefer to be able to make up their own minds on issues that directly impact upon their everyday lives.

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Given that this thesis’ methodology has stressed the insight that can be gained from examining in detail several stages of a film’s production, promotion and reception, as well as its content and themes, my concluding analyses of post-*Forrest Gump* Sixties films will refrain from providing too strident conclusions as to the films’ political

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<sup>797</sup> Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All* (New York: Viking, 1998); Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture Wars: The Myth of a Polarised America* (Pearson Longman: New York, 2006).

<sup>798</sup> Fiorina *et al*, p. 167.

<sup>799</sup> Fiorina *et al*, *Culture War*, p. 167.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123; James Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush V. Gore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 269-271; Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 248-250.

and historical content. I will, however, offer an overview of Hollywood productions over the past fifteen years and raise a few questions that might be considered in future research.

The year after *Forrest Gump*'s release, three high-profile Sixties pictures made it to cinema screens: Oliver Stone's biopic of Richard Nixon, *Nixon*; the Ron Howard directed chronicle of an aborted mission to the moon, *Apollo 13*; and *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the story of a music teacher's bitter-sweet relationships with family members and students from the 1960s to the 1990s (all 1995). *Nixon*'s failure at the US box-office and the comparative successes of *Apollo 13* and *Mr. Holland's Opus* were, I suggest, influential in determining the future production strategies mobilised by filmmakers in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Produced on a budget of \$43 million while garnering only \$13 million at the US box-office, *Nixon*'s poor performance alerted Hollywood filmmakers to the commercial risks involved in producing overly-dark and despairing representations of the Sixties. This film presented Stone's hypothesis that America had descended into chaos after JFK's assassination (but in far bleaker terms than *JFK*). The "rough beast" of Yeats' poem (noted in the introduction to my thesis) becomes the rough reality of Watergate-era America.<sup>801</sup> The film ends with Nixon's funeral in 1994 and a voiceover from Stone himself informing of the destruction of Cambodia during Nixon's Vietnam campaign and the increased hostilities between Russia and the United States after Nixon's resignation. Unlike *JFK*, this film does not conclude on a note of optimism. "When they look at you, they see what they want to be" Nixon says to a portrait to John F. Kennedy towards the film's end. "When they look at me, they see what they are." A "Nixon America" of corruption, war and death is what *Nixon* envisions for post-Sixties America.

Few other films of the 1990s and 2000s have attempted to depict the recent past in such depressing terms as did *Nixon*. Perhaps *Bobby* (2006), a film focusing on the lives of several fictional characters during the day of Robert Kennedy's assassination in August 1968, is a rare attempt to follow *Nixon* and paint the Sixties as an all encompassing rupture in the national narrative. Ending with a montage of images of Robert Kennedy and Sixties events and accompanied by Simon and

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<sup>801</sup> Stone himself has referred to his vision of post-assassination America as "the beast." See Charles Kiselyak, *Oliver Stone's America*. DVD available with the Oliver Stone DVD box set, *The Ultimate Oliver Stone Collection* (Warner Home Video, 2004).

Garfunkel's brooding tune "The Sounds of Silence", *Bobby* does for Robert Kennedy what *Nixon* did for John F. Kennedy; it presents RFK's assassination as the death of idealism. Whereas Stone's *JFK* suggested that there was the potential for others to take up John F. Kennedy's mantle and continue the struggle for a better society (see Chapter Three), *Bobby* sees the death of JFK's younger brother as the last gasp for American optimism. After RFK, says *Bobby*, hope and idealism evaporated.

I would argue that such bleak interpretations of the Sixties legacy are, however, few and far between. In different ways, *Apollo 13* and *Mr. Holland's Opus* were the direct heirs to *Forrest Gump*'s more positive representation of the recent American past. *Apollo 13* garnered \$172 million at the domestic box office, becoming 1995's third highest grossing film in the United States. I would argue that this film provides an optimistic, but quite conservative representation of the Sixties. Directed by Ron Howard and starring *Forrest Gump*'s star Tom Hanks, *Apollo 13* begins in 1969, with a crowd gathered to watch Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin land on the moon. This film turns viewing the moon landing into a generational clash of sorts. A room full of astronauts and their wives (including Jim and Marilyn Lovell [Tom Hanks and Kathleen Quinlan]) mingle in the Lovell house awaiting news of the successful disembarkation. The younger generation are, however, seemingly disinterested. Lovell's hippie daughter hides in her bedroom dressed in tie-dye shirts and listening to Jefferson Airplane. The youngest astronaut, Jack Swigert (Kevin Bacon) seems more interested in flirting with young female guests than in watching his country's moment of glory.

The rest of *Apollo 13*'s action sees Lovell and his crew begin a journey to the moon, only to suffer technical difficulties forcing them to return home. As family and friends wait for their safe return, it becomes clear that the astronaut's homecoming is being coded visually as a symbolic return from the "turbulent Sixties." Captain Jim Lovell's (Tom Hanks's) daughter, who began the film dressed in hippie beads and listening to rock music, awaits nervously the spacecraft's re-entry in a demure polka dot dress; Lovell's son sits amongst fellow well-turned-out teenagers at military academy. Precise side partings and Jackie Kennedy bobs are the order of the day at the Lovell family house as a crowd prepare for the patriarch's triumphant return. The image of a stereotypical "Fifties" family reunion, the safe

return of Lovell and company serves to reverse the Sixties, as if all of the era's transformations are turned back again, and everyone returns to their "proper place."

Given that much of the content noted above appears in the film's visual as opposed to aural representation it does raise some interesting questions with regards to *Apollo 13*'s production history. Firstly, it would be worth considering whether these references were present in the memoir upon which the film is based (called *Lost Moon* and co-written by the real Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger). If not, then were they present in early drafts of the script? Or, were they added during the shooting stage? If the latter is the case then one might consider why this conservative material was added and whether, in the wake of *Forrest Gump*'s commercial success (and widespread assumption that *Forrest Gump* was a conservative film), director Ron Howard was tempted to align his picture with this broader political culture where conservative voices dominated? Considering such questions would again offer insight into the processes of negotiation taking place during a film's production. Did Howard, Hanks, their collaborators or their backers set out to provide a conservative representation of the Sixties or were they simply tailoring their film to what they believed to be the current political/box-office climate?

At the same time, it is difficult to argue that Sixties films released in the immediate wake of *Forrest Gump* were all attempting to align their films with the political Right. Indeed, the same year as *Apollo 13*'s release, another commercially successful picture appeared, one that, in my view (and again based on textual analysis alone), had a longer lasting impact on the production of Hollywood's Sixties films than did the Howard-Hanks picture. *Mr. Holland's Opus*, though taking a solid if not earth-moving \$82 million at the box office (to rank in 14<sup>th</sup> place in the annual domestic theatrical gross table for 1995) is, given its lack of popular stars, perhaps the more surprising success story of 1995. This film presents what – for want of a better phrase – can be described as a wishy-washy liberal representation of the Sixties. Mr. Holland, played by *American Graffiti* (1973) star Richard Dreyfuss, who had not starred in a commercially successful film for many years, arrives at the newly named John F. Kennedy High School a cynic. The year is 1965 and Holland has accepted a teaching post in the hope that it will give him enough spare time to write his own music. It soon becomes clear that Holland's dreams of a career as a composer will have to take a back seat. Dashing through thirty years of American



history – the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, John Lennon’s assassination etc – *Opus* reveals its central protagonist to be a flawed, yet ultimately compassionate man, who quickly learns that his real contribution to the world is as a music teacher.

In many ways, *Mr Holland’s Opus* presents the figure of John Lennon as the most inspirational figure to have emerged from the Sixties. Lennon’s assassination in 1980 serves as a key moment in the film during which Holland quarrels, but finally reconciles, with his son Cole (Anthony Natale). Just as Jim Garrison in a sense “becomes” JFK in Stone’s film, Holland “becomes” Lennon toward the end of the film. He sings the dead musician’s “Beautiful Boy” in honour of Lennon, but also in honour of Cole. “We are your symphony, Mr. Holland”, says a former student at a concert arranged in honour of Holland’s thirty years as a teacher, “we are the melodies and notes of your opus.” Mr. Holland’s contribution to the world has been instilling a love of music in his students, and his fight to promote the value of music education in an increasingly cynical school system. In a sense, Holland’s search for a life that is personally authentic sees him accept his shortcomings as a composer and devote his life to the less prestigious profession of high-school teaching. No wonder this film was viewed in some quarters as a dead cert for the Sixties generation. “The populous baby boom generation”, wrote one reviewer, “has reached, or will soon reach the Mr. Holland stage of life, when one begins to reflect on the mismatch of youthful hopes and actual achievement.”<sup>802</sup>

Other critically and commercially successful Hollywood Sixties films of the 2000s have focused on the school and university as a site of positive Sixties experiences. Set in 1971, against the backdrop of controversial federal government sponsored civil rights legislation – affirmative action policies and the desegregation program of public school “busing”<sup>803</sup> – *Remember the Titans* (2000) chronicles how a successful championship football season helped assuage the racial conflicts ignited by these forced integration programs. As I have argued elsewhere, *Remember the*

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<sup>802</sup> William Grimes, “Mr. Holland Succeeds Almost Despite Itself,” *New York Times*, February 21, 1996, p. C9.

<sup>803</sup> Busing refers to the transportation of black and white schoolchildren to schools not in their neighbourhoods. This was done so as to ensure racial diversity.

*Titans*' representation of affirmative action and busing is politically ambiguous.<sup>804</sup> The film invites viewers to interpret these policies in line with their own outlook, as either positive and necessary tools in the struggle for racial equality (both policies lead to improved race relations within the local town); or, conversely, as rather irrelevant (if one subscribes to the view that it was the football team and Coach Herman Boone [Denzel Washington] who did the *real* integrating). Nevertheless, this film, much like another civil rights-themed sports film *Glory Road* (2006), provides positive representations of the civil rights struggle in that they highlight African-American roles in this struggle. Far from the passive victims of 1980s and early 1990s civil rights cinema such as *Mississippi Burning* and *Heart of Dixie*, these films seem to emphasise collective action and the agency of white and black characters.<sup>805</sup>

One feature of the post-*Forrest Gump* cinematic landscape is the increased number of black-centred productions. The release of films such as *The Hurricane* (1999), *Ali* (2001), *Ray* (2004), *Dreamgirls* (2006) and *The Express* (2007) support Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo's findings that, since the 1990s, Hollywood biographies have focused increasingly on people of colour.<sup>806</sup> The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen an increased number of Sixties films in which black characters take a central role. With this in mind, further research might consider if these films imbue their central characters with the same political agency as 1980s and 1990s civil rights films imbued their white characters. *Ali* would seem to provide a reasonably positive representation of boxer Muhammad Ali's anti-war stance. I would suggest the opening forty minutes of this film utilises a number of formal and narrative techniques intended to present Ali as the literal heir to Malcolm X's political activism (almost redressing the fact that Lee's *Malcolm X* does not mention Ali and Malcolm X's relationship). *Ray* highlights the musician Ray Charles' civil rights activism (his refusal to play at segregated venues). It does not, however, depict Charles' more controversial decision to play in apartheid South Africa in 1981. One might ask whether, given that both *Ali* and *Ray* essentially conclude in the "Sixties"

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<sup>804</sup> Oliver Gruner, "You're Only As Good As Your Last Game: *Remember the Titans* Remembers Civil Rights," in Andrew Leiter (ed.), *Beyond the Plantation: Southern Identities in Contemporary Film* (McFarland and Company Inc), forthcoming.

<sup>805</sup> Gruner, "You're Only As Good As Your Last Game."

<sup>806</sup> Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo, "Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century," in Steve Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: bfi, 2002), 92-95.

– *Ray* ends in 1966 and *Ali* ends after the famous “Rumble in the Jungle” fight of 1974 – biographical narratives, especially those made by baby boomer filmmakers, have simply become vehicles in which to explore the Sixties as a generational experience (as Stone and Sklar attempted in *JFK*), as opposed to attempts at representing real individuals. It would therefore also be worth considering these films’ public receptions. Did commentators criticise the elision of controversial subject matter, or were such films seen as more metaphorical attempts to make meaning of the Sixties? Certainly, films such as *Ali* and *Remember the Titans* were, on their US theatrical releases, incorporated into political debates on the Sixties and on race relations in contemporary America.<sup>807</sup> One can therefore say that Hollywood’s Sixties films continue to resonate powerfully in the public sphere.

The final question I would like to raise with regard to Sixties films of the past fifteen years is whether, alongside an increased number of black-centred films, there has been a concurrent increase in politically conscious films featuring female protagonists. Does, for example, *Dreamgirls* make any gesture toward civil rights or, in general, politics of the Sixties? I am inclined to suggest that it avoids a great deal of political commentary. Indeed, it would seem to me that many of the above noted civil rights films have contributed to a masculinisation of public memory in which black and white men become active agents in social change while women are either sidelined (*Ali*, *Glory Road*) or even presented as impediments to this change (football player Gerry Bertier’s [Ryan Hurst’s] girlfriend in *Remember the Titans*, for example). The early-Sixties set film, which had proven reasonably fertile ground for examinations of women’s Sixties experiences (*Dirty Dancing*, *Peggy Sue Got Married* and the television movie *A Private Matter*, for example) has received fewer outings in recent years. Tom Hanks’ 1964-set directorial effort, *That Thing You Do!* (1996) relegates Faye Dolan (Liv Tyler), the one female character, to a bit-part love interest role. One could certainly make an argument for independent films such as the biopic of Sixties radical Valerie Solanas *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), quasi-biopic of singer songwriter Carol King, *Grace of My Heart* (1996) and even the family melodrama, *Eve’s Bayou* (1997), which focuses on a young girl and her relationship with, and eventual murder of, her womanising father, as providing a forum for the representation of feminist issues. Finally, the 2007 remake of John Walters’ 1988

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<sup>807</sup> For *Remember the Titans*’ reception see Gruner, “Last Game.”

film *Hairspray* is a rare Hollywood production to feature a strong and politically active female protagonist. Perhaps the commercial success of this film will inspire other filmmakers to produce similar representations.

I hope that the interdisciplinary methodology and public politics/personal authenticity critical framework utilised throughout this thesis may provide a useful starting point for future analyses of Sixties pictures. As I write, another well-known baby boomer director, Steven Spielberg, is developing no less than three new Sixties films: biopics of Jackie Kennedy and Martin Luther King and a picture about the 1969 court trial of the radical activists known as the Chicago Seven. Long-circulating rumours that films on the lives of Janis Joplin and Timothy Leary and Phil Ochs are in the pipeline further indicate a desire on the part of industry insiders to explore diverse aspects of Sixties politics and popular culture. Much the same can be said about producers of cultural artefacts more generally, as those of the Sixties generation continue to “retell their coming-of-age stories and reinvest in the era.”<sup>808</sup> And, with politicians, journalists and public commentators continuing to mobilise the Sixties as a rhetorical weapon and/or as an inspirational call to arms, Hollywood’s operations in this public debate remains a timely subject of analysis. How will the next batch of Sixties films depict the era’s political transformations? Whose lives will be declared “authentic”? For as long as powerful interests continue to shape recent history for their own ideological ends, what is past, to paraphrase *JFK*, is but the prologue.

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<sup>808</sup> Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 200.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Given the large quantity of primary documents consulted throughout the thesis, I have refrained from re-citing every single newspaper and magazine article in this bibliography. Readers will find all of these articles fully referenced within my footnotes. My bibliography contains every book and journal article cited in the thesis. I have also listed and provided details for every published and unpublished script examined in the thesis.

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## Online Resources

Box Office Mojo. URL: [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com)

*The Guardian* website. URL: [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

Internet Movie Database. URL: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

“Jezebel.” URL: [www.jezebel.com](http://www.jezebel.com)

RogerEbert.com. URL: [www.rogerebert.suntimes.com](http://www.rogerebert.suntimes.com)

*The Times* website. URL: [www.thetimes.co.uk](http://www.thetimes.co.uk)

*Time* magazine website. URL: [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)