THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

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by

David Shea B.A.

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ABSTRACT

Historical films interpret the past in creative ways. Not only do they engage our intellectual expectations, but they also attempt to appeal to our emotional understanding of the past. This thesis asks if we can consider the results of such attempts to entail experiences of historical feeling. Through an analysis of the effects of duration and temporality, identification, and emotional orientation in *JFK* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Che* (2008), we will discover that historical films do indeed construct specific experiences that convey a sense of the significance of past events and individuals. Because the practice of history demands imposing some form of order on the past, we will discover that the experiences these films provide are directly connected to each filmmaker's particular perspective on the past. This subjectivity can contribute to the diverse ways we conceive of the past by acknowledging the mediation inherent in historical representation.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late father, John T. Shea, whom I lost earlier this year. He had an impossibly positive attitude toward knowledge and life, and if I can only be half as inspired as he was I will be a very happy man.

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INTRODUCTION

Films act on spectators in a variety of ways, whether intellectually, sensuously, emotionally or otherwise. Film theories drawing on cognitive science attribute the variety to the diverse ways humans receive and respond to informative input. Some of these experiences involve top-down cognitive processes, employing higher level reasoning that uses memories of past experiences, calculated adaptation and projected logic to interact with stimuli and data. Others involve bottom-up processes, which develop externally to conscious cognition and are the result of perceptual interactions and emotional engagement. These two types of information processing reveal that spectators will not react to films in a singular way; instead of responding purely intellectually or emotionally, they will tend to react in a combination of both. The capacity a spectator has to respond to a film in a particular way is largely due to the expressiveness of the medium. While the film experience is largely a sensuous one in terms of the visual and aural experience, more critical attention is typically given to its intellectual effects (the comprehension and interpretation of its narrative design, characterization and symbolism). But the modes of representation in film are often, overall, less intellectual and more emotive; combinations of certain effects and cues are employed to construct a field of expression that best supports (or contradicts, depending on the desired effect) whatever textual discourse the film engages. These are formal qualities that contribute considerably to a film's particular structure.

Formal strategies of representation are typically employed in mainstream films according to certain norms and patterns, such as the use of orchestral music to affect dramatic tension, or accelerated pacing of shots to contribute to a sense of suspense. Certain genres make use of certain effects consistently because they tend to rely on a specific type of spectator engagement, and the accomplishment of a genre film dependant on spectator reaction is judged by its achievement in eliciting a particularly consistent response across spectators. Historical films comprise a genre likewise defined by a particular response. Loosely defined as “fiction films that have a meaningful relationship to historical events,” these films engage with historical discourse in a range of ways with the intention of conveying to the spectator a particular perspective on the significance of the past.¹ By referring to an actuality beyond the fictive boundaries of film, historical films make their appeals to spectators intellectually, as well as emotionally. Leger Grindon comments:

Historical fiction films interpret and comment on significant past events, as do historians; this interpretive role places historical films in a context of historiography and enables them to have an impact on the public that often exceeds that of scholarship in range and influence.²

These films are thus different from texts produced by professional historians in the sense that they engage the spectator’s previous knowledge of the historical subject and appeal to popular intellectual understanding while continuing to employ a sensuous array of stimuli.

¹ Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 2.

² Ibid.

If the reference to external knowledge enables historical films to invite spectators to partake in historical thinking, can the emotive strategies of the same films be examined in terms of eliciting historical feeling? This will obviously depend on how we define historical feeling separately from feeling; for the purpose of this study we take the former to imply a sense of the past, a feeling that not only accompanies an understanding of these films' subjects, but also conveys an impression of their historical significance.

Marita Sturken observes:

Cinema is a particularly powerful tool in the incitement of desire and the fantasy of history precisely because of the classic ways in which it invites us to view the past as if we were there. The apparatus of cinema provides the spectator with an *experience* of the past, one of duration, identification, and emotion, of both anxiety and pleasure.³

Sturken's statement is important because it identifies the cinema's specific function in providing access to an experience of the past, one that is governed by specific elements that, when combined, can express both historical distance and immediacy. It seems possible that we can use this statement as a guide for examining the particular experience that historical films provide in support of the historical information they impart: duration provides a temporal relation between the spectator and the historicity of the represented individual or event; identification enables the spectator to acquire a subjective perspective within the past, one that personalizes the apparent objectivity of official history; and emotional engagement permits a specific response to the subject that enables the spectator to associate his or her emotional responses with an actual experience. Therefore, due to the experience of the passage of time as well as sensing a connection

³ Marita Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas," *History and Theory*, 36:4 (December 1997), 73.

with historical individuals and feeling a certain way about them, the spectator is able to experience historical feeling.

Because the historical film conveys a sense of the significance of the past and does so by appealing to both the intellect and the emotions, we can call the overall approach the film's 'history effect.' Without substantial quantitative research it would be impossible to determine the specific result of a film's history effect on spectators, because it would require surveying reception tendencies to acquire a sufficient understanding of the direct experience of individual spectators. Prior to embarking on such research, however, we can gain a sense of how certain historical films orient spectators through the experience of time, identification, and the emotional schemes that underlie them. The purpose of this study is to examine this orientation by analyzing three mainstream historical fiction films and asking how each appeals to spectators through the construction of a specific historical experience. In order to engage in such an analysis, we first need to understand what it is about time, identification and emotional orientation that enable spectators to be subjected to a particular experience; by understanding how the spectator acquires information while watching a film, both intellectually and emotionally, we will be in a better position to assess the historical experience that such films provide. We will begin by considering the impact of time on our ability to process information while watching a film. This will be followed by an overview of how narratives position spectators to identify with certain characters and situations, which will lead us to consider other ways spectators are positioned, particularly in terms of emotional orientation. After introducing these components that affect the spectator's historical experience, we will be

able to apply our discoveries to case study films. These analyses will reveal that historical films tailor not only their appeals to rational thought but also their sensorial stimuli to convey a sense of the past and its significance. Through an examination of the historical experiences provided by *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992) and *Che* (Steven Soderbergh, 2008), we will discover that each filmmaker's formal choices have a significant impact on spectators' abilities to interpret meaning. It will become evident that each film's approach to representing the past is predicated on that filmmaker's particular historiographical interest, which reframes each respective subject according to a specific perspective on the past. Therefore, the ways in which these films orient spectators are directly determined by their respective viewpoints and historical concerns. This underscores the particular subjectivity that motivates any historiographical effort, which must assign significance to certain elements of the past while deemphasizing others. Interestingly, the impulse to historicize is similar to the way films portray fabricated narratives because each exerts substantial control over the selection and presentation of information. As Deanna Schultz observes:

Some analysts argue the role of the film's audience in determining the designation [of films as historical]. The idea that a historical film is historical because the audience confers that status upon it is perhaps tautological, but importantly acknowledges the palimpsestic quality of our understanding of history—and of our experience in the cinema.⁴

Before we discuss components that may facilitate historical feeling, we should briefly address the role of history in historical films. Historical representation in film has been approached in various ways: as a genre, ranging from the biopic to the costume

⁴ Deanna Schultz, *Filmography of World History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), xii.

drama to the epic; as an indication of the underlying social, cultural or ideological conditions of the film's production; or in terms of the function of narrative and the cinematic apparatus conveying a sense of something real.⁵ Critics concerned with genre analysis have tended to accept the representation of the past as generally unproblematic and meeting the requirements of the genre, while others have considered such representations to be intertextual discourses that perform a particular socio-cultural function.⁶ What these views have in common is they agree that the form of the historical film is a condition of its function, whether as a genre or as a cultural object. This consideration also underlies the approach taken in this study, which argues that because both film and history are representative expressions that require interpretation, the way they are constructed is more relevant to their function than the authenticity of the information they provide; while they make claims about conveying authentic history, historical films do not provide an open view of the past and the impulse toward authenticity occurs only if it supports the filmmaker's particular argument. Leger Grindon remarks:

Both filmmakers and commentators regularly invoke authenticity as a standard for evaluating historical films... The function of authenticity in historical fiction films is generally misunderstood as a disinterested reproduction of the past... Whether a fictional narrative, a film, or a discursive essay, history bases its interpretation on a body of evidence, description, and argument. When artists join

⁵ In terms of genre, see George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992); for history as conditions of production that affect the public sphere, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel in Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); and in terms of narrative and the cinematic apparatus, see Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (cited earlier).

⁶ See also Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans., Naomi Greene (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988); Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflict and Division* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

history and fiction, the play of interpretation becomes more expansive and explicit.⁷

In our analysis of the films, we will frequently come across criticism that takes issue with the accuracy of the historical information they provide. This is largely due to the popularity of their subjects: each of the films in our study seeks to engage with the common public conception of their protagonists as popular individuals who enacted great change in the face of great odds. This results in the films appearing as monuments to the legacies of their subjects, each filmmaker constructing his tribute accordingly from the overt romanticism of *Malcolm X* to the withdrawn paucity of *Che*. Because historical films tend to use the past in multiple ways, they are frequently criticized for being inadequate as historical texts. On one hand they claim to draw from academic historical information, often referring to their reliance on a certain amount of historical research that formed part of their development.⁸ On the other hand, especially in the case of Hollywood productions, the public's desire for history as story is given prominence, often resulting in a narrativization of the past that appropriates individuals and events to fit classical ideals of character and plot. To this end they also employ the use of technical devices that attempt to align the spectator's interest and sympathies with the event or individual being represented. This combination of academic and popular practices is not unique to film; it is also a necessary component of most historical discourses, which must balance information about the past with the language they use to reconstruct and represent that information. Historian Hayden White claims this activity must conform to

⁷ Grindon, *Shadows on the Past*, 3-4.

⁸ Vivian Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," in *Representations* 29 (Winter, 1990), 31.

the rules of emplotment and fiction, which will always result in a subjective version of the past.⁹ Therefore, despite the inherent fabrication of historical films, they act similarly to other historical texts by relying on a variety of representational devices to support their particular views of the past. What is important to acknowledge is that when the past is represented it is not simply a matter of it being repeated, if that were at all possible. Instead, historical films require an awareness of the formal qualities that mediate the past and imply significance, which as we shall see is largely achieved through the spectator's temporal and emotional experience. Such awareness will ensure the film makes a contribution to a historical discourse, not necessarily as evidence but rather as another framework for considering the past. Whether the spectator has the ability to comprehend the past as a result of such strategies is a separate issue, but it is certainly enhanced by cinematic experiences of temporality and emotion.

Tweaking the Model of Viewer Activities

We can begin to understand how the past is mediated by historical films by considering the spectator's capacities for processing information and how they are affected by time. In his argument for a new poetics of cinema, David Bordwell discusses the relevance to film of the distinction made in classic cognitive psychology between two manners of informational flow: top-down and bottom-up processing.¹⁰ Top-down processing is concept-driven, as with the activity of problem-solving, while bottom-up processing is data-driven, more common in experiences that have an absence of pre-

⁹ Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 99.

¹⁰ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 44.

conditional information to draw from.¹¹ As a result, top-down processing varies significantly from spectator to spectator, while bottom-up processing can find consistency across spectators because it deals less with cognitive performance than with perceptual immediacy. In order to demonstrate the directions of information flow, Bordwell constructs a Model of Viewer Activities with three stages of information processing activities by the spectator.¹² The lowest tier is Perception, a somewhat automatic activity whereby the spectator is able to acquire information but has almost no ability to affect the information as it is being perceived. The middle tier is Comprehension, an activity that enables a spectator to understand the information he or she has perceived; in the case of a film, the spectator can comprehend the story as “representing a hierarchical pattern of actions, a conception, or simply a train of sensual elements.”¹³ What is perceived can thus be organized in different ways that affect comprehension. The highest tier in Bordwell’s model is that of Appropriation, which signifies the activity by which the spectator uses the filmic information for a particular end. This tier is at the apex of top-down processing, where concepts drive the spectator’s understanding of a film. This is the domain of the majority of film scholarship, which appropriates certain elements from films to support particular arguments; any reading is not possible at the level of comprehension, but it could be at the level of appropriation. Bordwell shows that with the bottom-up process a spectator first perceives, then

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 46.

¹³ Ibid., 47.

comprehends, then is able to appropriate the data for some other use.¹⁴ Alternatively, a top-down process involves starting with a concept or argument, which affects an understanding of what would be required to support it, followed by the spectator looking for those very elements in one or more films. The act of appropriation is well described by another film scholar, Edward Branigan, who states that instead of believing “that meanings exist in the world, hidden inside objects and texts... it is in the mind, where knowledge is being represented, manipulated and revised.”¹⁵

The top-down component in Bordwell’s model is worth a closer look in the case of historical films because most spectators bring some previously acquired information to the film, however rudimentary or complex that information may be (it is often the former because the information frequently derives from public or popular history). The filmmaker typically anticipates some amount of audience familiarity with the subject of a historical film and tries to engage with these expectations of popular knowledge to appeal to spectators in particular ways. For example, the visual re-creation of famous photographs is a common strategy in historical films that bridges what we know and expect from the past with how the filmmaker chooses to comment on the popular depiction (as seen throughout *JFK*). Here one can draw a parallel with Bordwell’s description of how filmmakers are able to affect the spectator at the various stages of processing activities; he suggests that as we move up the model the filmmaker’s power

¹⁴ It should be noted that Bordwell also cautions that in practice this sequence of operations is less linear and he allows for a certain amount of feedback between tiers. *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵ Edward Branigan, *Projecting A Camera: Language-Games in Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.

diminishes and the spectator's power increases.¹⁶ In the case of historical films the filmmaker cannot control what information the spectator's state of appropriation will have privileged, thus yielding a certain amount of control to the spectator over how the information in the film will be interpreted. It is therefore only at the lowest level of perception that filmmakers have the most power to affect their audience.

By making a slight modification to the model, we can gain a better understanding of why this is so. If we consider Bordwell's model visually and add the element of time, we may then understand how the effects of duration as well as temporality affect a spectator's experience:

The passage of time can apply to both top-down and bottom-up processes: the longer we have to process information, the more we are able to intellectualize it; the less time, the more our immediate emotional reactions take precedence. While the effect of time on the top-down conceptual process is a given, it is particularly significant when applied to bottom-up processes, because if we do not have enough time to turn our brief perceptions

¹⁶ Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 50.

into comprehensive ideas for ultimate appropriation, there is the potential for a film to be more spectacular than intellectually engaging. Accordingly, phenomenological film scholar Vivian Sobchack has described the spectator's engagement with Hollywood's historical films as "pre-reflective," which pertains directly to the spectator's temporal experience.¹⁷ This is an important phenomenon to consider if we are going to understand not only how historical films convey a sense of the past but also how they can contribute to a historiographical discourse. With *JFK*, Oliver Stone juxtaposes numerous shooting styles (black and white versus colour, shaky hand-held versus static camera; newsreel versus fictional narrative versus the Zapruder film) that work in coordination with a barrage of sound to overload the spectator's senses; there is too much information and not enough time to process all of it. This results in the spectator's inability to drive that stimuli higher up the chain of his or her bottom-up process in order to comprehend it beyond its perceptual effects, effectively reducing his or her opportunity to appropriate the information. Conversely, with *Che*, Steven Soderbergh frequently suspends many typical perceptual expectations, allowing the spectator more time to reflect. One example is his separation of sound and image (e.g. omitting the sound of gunfire over an action sequence of guerrillas firing guns while storming army barracks) which achieves the opposite effect from Stone's film; in Soderbergh's case the temporal partition of cross-modal input interrupts the cohesion of the film's spectacle and allows the spectator more time to intellectualize and reflect.

¹⁷ Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor," 26.

The experience of time is particularly significant in historical films, within the films as well as externally to them; not only is there the mental requirement of time to process information, but there is also the physical experience of time with respect to both the film's duration and the historical scope of the film as representative of time passed and experienced. These films are typically longer than other films, and this seems to impact the spectator's sense of the passage of time. Vivian Sobchack observes:

The genre expands and extends the temporality of 'ordinary' textuality into an extensive and excessive temporality which literally transcends the film frame, the text, and the time of the spectator's immediate presence to the film in the theatre.¹⁸

Our case study films are no exception: *Malcolm X* runs 201 minutes, *JFK* runs 205 minutes, and *Che* runs a whopping 271 minutes. It is a challenging move by the filmmakers that risks alienating audiences by boring them. But it also seems to be a generally accepted requirement of the genre, and is related to a sense of temporal magnitude. Sobchack observes that the Hollywood historical film "constructs a 'field of historicity' by objectively mimicking temporal excess..." and she finishes with a clever observation: "And at 188 minutes, *Ghandi*'s patience must be matched by the spectator's."¹⁹ Her statement suggests that the spectator must be physically subjected to a lengthy experience to gain an impression of historicity by "enduring the film in the present, [which] imprints the body with a brute sense of the possibility of transcending

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁹ Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor," 36-37.

the present.”²⁰ In describing the experience of time in this way, Sobchack appears to agree with the potential for historical feeling that we have been contemplating.

Types of Identification

As the earlier comment from Marita Sturken claims, another component of the cinematic apparatus that affects an experience of the past in historical films is related to identification. The concept of identification is central to many theories of emotion in cinema because of how the relationship between characters’ goals and desires and our associations with them enables spectators to respond in an emotionally corresponding fashion. Such strategies are employed so that the spectator not only sympathizes with the correct character, but also achieves an “assimilation of the character’s situation.”²¹ Carl Plantinga, Murray Smith, and Noël Carroll, among others, reject identification as a term because they consider it ambiguous and because it implies that spectators are capable of becoming the characters they observe.²² Plantinga prefers to speak of the “relationship” spectators have with the characters and their perspectives. He sees this relationship consisting of two particular levels of association, one internal and the other external. The former position allows for the spectator to become aligned with what the character might be thinking or feeling, while the latter allows the spectator to sympathize more deeply with the character through an awareness of circumstances to which the character cannot be privy.²³ This distinction clearly reveals more than one straightforward way that a

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and The Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 103.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 103-104.

spectator can relate to a character. Murray Smith takes this a step further by outlining three levels of engagement, which he identifies as recognition, alignment and allegiance. Recognition refers to our ability to distinguish characters and the way we can “individuate and re-identify” them; we are able to recognize characters, which is essential if we are to sympathize with them.²⁴ The next level is that of alignment, which refers to how the cinematic apparatus is employed to ensure that spectators become familiar with a character in terms of “spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access,” the latter referring to our relative position with the character through point of view shots, subjective framing, devices that suggest internal states, and so on.²⁵ The third level, allegiance, is the way the film’s moral positioning coaxes spectators to accept and internalize a sympathetic attitude toward certain characters over others. This would include our disapproval of characters who contravene a moral code, or who represent negative values. Such attitudes are not elicited strictly according to the spectator’s personal morality, but rather by the way a film portrays its comparative range of the morality of its characters. Greg Smith’s take on identification is to propose “feeling for” and “feeling with” a character.²⁶ Feeling for refers to the spectator’s emotional response due to his or her being aware of factors that the character is not privy to, while feeling with refers to the spectator’s orientation with the character so that the spectator can empathize with the character’s feelings.

²⁴ Murray Smith, “The Battle of Algiers: Colonial Struggle and Collective Allegiance,” in *Terrorism, Media, Liberation*, ed. David J. Slocum (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 97.

²⁵ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 142.

²⁶ Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89-91.

For the purposes of this study it is more important to be aware of the various concepts of identification than to determine which method is better or more accurate; as Murray Smith suggests, “the word itself is less important than the model of experience to which it points.”²⁷ What is important is that spectators can become attached to characters by sympathizing with them from both internal and external perspectives. But Marnie Hughes-Warrington cautions: “There is no agreed, neatly packaged concept of identity in historiography and historical film studies.”²⁸ Emotional engagement is often considered obstructive to historical understanding because it proposes “‘entering’ the world of a film as a form of identification that entails identity of thought and emotion *and* the loss of a viewer’s separate selfhood.”²⁹ This is one explanation for the tendency of academic historians and critics to criticize historical films. The success of many mainstream films relies largely on the spectator’s ability to identify with characters and situations, but with historical films such tactics risk collapsing the distance between the worlds of the represented event and of the spectators watching the film. This results in the implication that the psychological mindsets and personal opinions of past individuals are accessible, knowable and explicable from a non-academic position in the present; if the spectator can share an experience with the character, the meaning of the past loses its detached nature and becomes an extension of the familiar present. Because of this, we will discover in our film analyses that those historical films that rely on the spectator’s identification with the protagonist have less to offer in terms of an open consideration of the past and are more

²⁷ Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 1.

²⁸ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 96.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

inclined to convince the spectator that a particular rendering of a past individual is accurate and true (as is the case with Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*). It would seem that a sense of historical feeling is thus denied to spectators of this latter model of historical film because spectators are encouraged to experience familiarity with the past instead of acknowledging how it is separate and distinct from the present. But the concept of identification is central to the way the cinematic apparatus constructs a particular experience for the spectator and in this respect it deserves attention if we are to contemplate how filmmakers orient spectators toward their subjects. One of its positive functions in historical films concerns how spectators are able to access the past through identification with a character who is able to witness it firsthand, even if this is through a flashback or a reenactment. As we will see with *JFK*, the character of Jim Garrison functions as our surrogate in witnessing multiple versions of the Kennedy assassination, and our persistent alignment with his attempt to uncover what is hidden reminds us that all historical work is fundamentally investigative.

This quality requires us to consider for a moment a concept that was raised earlier: the role a spectator's prior knowledge plays in the experience of a historical film. It should not be ruled out that spectators have certain expectations when they watch a historical film, and that these influence how the film is processed and experienced. In his work on the cognitive effects of Bollywood musicals, Patrick Colm Hogan describes the "gradient of emotional change."³⁰ Essentially, the steeper the gradient of change from a

³⁰ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Understanding Indian Movies: Culture, Cognition, and Cinematic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 186.

particular bodily or emotional state to another, the greater the intensity of its accompanying emotional response.³¹ We have certain expectations of situations based on our projections of prior knowledge. This concept suggests that the more the actual experience differs from those expectations, the more there will be a significant shift from one emotion to another. It seems possible that we can modify this model to consider the intellectual expectations of spectators as well. If a spectator ‘knows’ what happened (e.g. that Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald), this is the expectation (upon seeing *JFK*). But if the actual experience encompasses a large and frequently steep gradient of change (e.g. a range of seemingly outlandish variations of that popular knowledge, only some of which involve Oswald), then it seems that the intensity of intellectual shifts would also be relatively increased. We may call this the gradient of *intellectual* change; that these shifts have an emotional counterpart may be a possibility, but what is important to notice is that the steeper the gradient of change from the spectator’s expectation to their experience, the greater the spectator’s sense that he or she has miscalculated, which in turn affects the sense that he or she is not in control. This is yet another area in which the historical film affects the spectator’s sense of the past, encouraging an engagement with the meaning of the past that affects the spectator personally.

Orienting the Mood

In addition to temporal and identification considerations, we need to consider the perceptual effects that influence a spectator’s emotional experience of a historical film. A

³¹ Ibid.

spectator's ability to respond to the information a film provides has much to do with the employment of what film scholar Greg Smith calls "genre microscripts."³² These microscripts tend to align us with the genre tendencies of a particular film so that we are able to react in a generally typical manner as well as anticipate what might occur next. Smith alternatively calls them "genre signposts," because they are indicators that orient us toward reacting with particular responses to certain moments in a film.³³ Elements of *mise en scène*, cinematography, lighting, and music, to name but a few, not only contain genre information but also act beyond our cognitive recognition and encourage our activation of related triggers in our emotion system.³⁴ These formal components are the prototypical emotion cues that we have come to expect and identify in films, but where Smith's research furthers our understanding of the emotional effects of films is in his consideration and inclusion of non-prototypical emotion cues. These include elements that do not evoke emotions themselves, but rather contribute to a state of emotional attentiveness, or mood. These might include a character's facial and body information, or natural conditions like a rainy or sunny setting. By including non-prototypical emotion cues, Smith's approach is able to incorporate situations in which an emotion is directed to an object that was not its cause.³⁵ This is significant in that it approaches cinema's expressive field as a network of associations that contains both emotional and intellectual markers, allowing for the coordination of both bottom-up and top-down processes. The interconnected nature of the brain's limbic system is important for Smith, and he uses it

³² Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, 48.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 49.

³⁵ Ibid., 22-23.

as a base to construct an associative model that links the emotion system's associated receiver mechanisms that ensure we will have some kind of response or reaction; it is its interconnected nature that ensures the chance to react is not missed.³⁶

Smith calls his comprehensive model the “mood cue approach.”³⁷ Its central purpose is to understand the emotional appeal of films through a variety of triggers and receptors, not all of which are necessary for a response to occur. As the name suggests, this is highly dependent on the construction and maintenance of a particular mood. Moods are the emotion system's equivalent of attention and consist of expectant states in which we believe we will encounter cues to elicit a particular emotion.³⁸ A mood differs from an emotion in that the former signifies a subject's extended propensity to experience a range of related emotions, while the latter consists of shorter bursts of emotional reactions; interestingly, we again encounter an issue of duration—emotions are short bursts while moods are longer lasting. They also feed each other, with occasional bursts of emotion sustaining a mood, and mood orientation maintaining the propensity to feel those shorter bursts.³⁹ What does this mean for film? Using Smith's mood cue approach we can analyze how moods are encouraged and sustained over time, enabling the spectator to feel a certain range of emotions at certain times. This is impacted by the employment of genre microscripts, because they influence the particular mood one expects based on generic tendencies. By applying Smith's approach, we can analyze a particular film's sensory field and better understand how it functions.

³⁶ Ibid., 27-29.

³⁷ Ibid., 43-44.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁹ Ibid.

According to the mood cue approach, films are texts that are composed of a series of emotion cues, including facial and body information, music, sound, mise en scène, lighting, etc. They are cross-modal, often fed by both visual and auditory stimuli, which are often employed redundantly to sustain a particular mood. Carl Plantinga is not satisfied with Smith's mood cue approach and claims it is too focused on moods instead of other structuring mechanisms.⁴⁰ He argues that the narrative situation and our related expectation or anxiety are what affect our emotional responses, because the latter are what he calls "concern-based construals," emotions that derive from a cognitive function.⁴¹ It seems that if Smith's model is limiting because of its specific emphasis on moods, it still has value in how it contributes to a wider conception of the spectator's propensity for reaction, which allows for both top-down and bottom-up processing activities. Ultimately, the two must work together—narrative situation and mood development. If Plantinga is able to assert that "narrative provides top-down coherence," it seems reasonable to propose the logical inverse by stating that mood provides bottom-up coherence.⁴² Despite Plantinga's reservations with Smith's approach, his particular perspective contains elements that we might apply to Smith's model that may improve it. For instance, in addition to considering narrative situation, Plantinga suggests we also look at shot type and proximity, important orienting devices that affect emotional engagement as we will see in our analysis of *Che*; he also makes assumptions about the spectator's experience of viewing a film in terms of emotional contagion as well as motor

⁴⁰ Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 142.

⁴¹ Ibid., 132.

⁴² Ibid., 143.

and affective mimicry, which are clearly significant, non-prototypical cues that influence the spectator's emotional response.⁴³ While the latter comprise elements of a spectator's experience that this study will not cover, they demonstrate the extent to which studies of this nature can venture.

In order to recognize how a film's expressive network orients spectators, Smith advises the film scholar to: pay attention to large emotional cues (that are occasionally required to sustain moods); pay close attention to emotion cues at the beginning of a film that work together to create mood (and also set the genre); and pay attention to "later bursts of highly coordinated cuing that bolster or alter a mood."⁴⁴ Each of these should be considered if we are to better understand the emotive appeal of our case study films. Mood orientation will be illustrated primarily in the opening credit sequences and how they prepare us for the emotional requirements of the ensuing film. As we will see, these opening sequences are extremely important because they situate spectators in very specific ways that are determined by the filmmaker's particular interest in the past, and the striking difference between the style of each film's credits is evidence of this. Beyond this, we will conduct our analysis of each film according to the various prototypical and non-prototypical cues that are employed to create a specific experience of the past for the spectator, in addition to also considering the impact of time for reflection and duration as well as the spectator's alignment with specific characters. What our analysis of each film's emotional orientation will demonstrate is that something happens to the spectator

⁴³ Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 146.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, 42.

that allows for a connection with the represented situation, beyond personal identification and moral preference, and the cues that each film employs ensure that the spectator is in line with the filmmaker's particular perspective on the past. By identifying how the cinematic apparatus is manipulated to provide a specific emotional experience, we are able to develop an understanding of how the past is made meaningful. Because mood orientation can occur in non-prototypical ways, the filmmaker retains much of the control over the type of experience to which the spectator is subjected. As we saw with Bordwell's model, if the spectator does not have enough time to reflect, and if the components that feed a particular mood orientation are less obvious, the spectator's experience of the past will be heavily persuaded by the filmmaker's perspective. It becomes evident that a historical film's power to shape emotional orientation exerts a strong influence over the spectator's capacity for historical understanding. Even when there is more time to reflect, as we will see with *Che*, the spectator is still at the mercy of the filmmaker's formal choices.

Case studies

The elements we have been considering affect the spectator's mode of engagement and provide a grounding from which to understand how our case study films construct a specific, tailored historical experience that conforms to each filmmaker's intentional perspective. The three case study films have been chosen because they share certain qualities but also because they differ sufficiently to ensure a dynamic study. As American mainstream historical films produced with the resources of Hollywood, all three are expected to reach and impress many people, which is desirable for each film's

success as well as necessary for financial recoupment. This has an effect on production decisions like casting recognizable actors and providing narrative structures that appeal to spectators. But no matter how popular these films may be in a position to become, their creative use of history guarantees they will be subject to a more critical lens that many mainstream films escape: the close inspection of academics and historians who are easily disappointed, especially those who are not aware of Leger Grindon's observation quoted earlier: "When artists join history and fiction, the play of interpretation becomes more expansive and explicit."⁴⁵ Despite the differences in approaches and agendas, all three of these films are attacked for eliding or manipulating the historical record, although some are more deserving of criticism than others. This form of critical response can be constructive because it contributes to the ongoing discourse to which the films are only recent additions. Such criticism is also desirable because of the biases that underlie each film's formal approach.

The first chapter looks at Oliver Stone's *JFK* and argues that Stone's particular approach to the past attempts to reproduce the traumatic impact of John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, encouraging Americans to reconsider the event from multiple angles instead of passively accepting only the official account. The second chapter examines Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, beginning with an overview of the function of biography in historical films, and continues to demonstrate Lee's specific agenda that seeks to present a normalized Malcolm X while downplaying his more hostile and extra-American characteristics. The third chapter concerns Steven Soderbergh's *Che*, which

⁴⁵ Grindon, *Shadows on the Past*, 4.

stands in opposition to a number of strategies discussed in the previous chapters. By contravening our expectations of many genre and cinematic conventions, including many striking omissions for a historical film, Soderbergh draws our attention to how the past is mediated, which has an impact on the way we conceive of the film's protagonist. The conclusion of this study will consider our own biases in analyzing the films, and will suggest areas for further study and comment on those that already exist, namely DVD commentaries that tend to complement the filmmaker's creative license by providing a scholarly counterweight. These different approaches allow us to consider the diverse ways historical films convey an experience of the past, and the distinctiveness of each ultimately compels us to reflect on the function of history in culture and society. It is interesting that all three films concern historical individuals who died within four years of each other; in this sense we are faced with three alternatives for considering a similar period, the mid-1960s. The films were each made from a similar distance as well; they were each produced roughly one and a half generations after the deaths of their subjects. This suggests that there may be some correspondence between the films because they each share a similar position of hindsight. Of course, each takes a different approach: Stone tries to reconstruct the past in order to draw attention to it; Lee attempts to immortalize it; and Soderbergh endeavors to alter the traditional object of historical focus. But we also need to factor into this each individual director's interest in their subjects: both Oliver Stone and Spike Lee are very attached to theirs, with Stone pushing an anti-right-wing conspiratorial agenda and Lee attempting to convince spectators that Malcolm X should be admired, perhaps even sanctified. Steven Soderbergh's interest is

not as severe as his two peers, and as we shall see his portrait of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara has more to do with studying what drove the man than focusing on what he accomplished throughout his life.

The diversity in the films’ approaches despite their comparable distance from their respective subjects ultimately contributes to an ongoing historical discourse as well as an evolving conception of who we are, and this leads us to consider the function of myth in culture and its role in historical accounts. As we will discuss further in each chapter, historical films often have more to do with contemporary concerns than simply revisiting a past individual or event. As Leger Grindon observes: “The historical film indulges its contact with the immediate... As a result, history in the cinema is seldom disinterested, but rather constitutes an address to the present.”⁴⁶ Such addresses occur for various reasons, whether to draw on the historical precedents of contemporary incidents, to celebrate an origin or expose a source of current malaise, or to revisit an influential figure whose impact can be applied to present day affairs. This impulse to search for meaning in the past is related to the way myths are employed to make sense of the world around us. In fact, narrative historiography and myth are connected because their shared “systems of meaning production ... are distillates of the historical experience of a people, a group, a culture.”⁴⁷ Hayden White also explains that this is due to the specific way the historian approaches the past, because there are an infinite number of stories that can be derived from historical facts:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁷ Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 44-45.

What the historian must bring to his consideration of the record are general notions of the *kinds of stories* that might be found there... In other words, the historian must draw upon a fund of culturally provided *mythoi* in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must appeal to the same fund of *mythoi* in the minds of his readers to endow his account of the past with the odor of meaning or significance.⁴⁸

This statement reveals that the kinds of stories that can be told depend on an expansive mythic understructure that supports the potential for social imagination and allows us to conceive of ourselves in historical terms. Narrative and myth are thus equally dependent on an imaginary relation to a real existence, and they both function to cultivate a sense of social belonging and ambition. This suggests that aside from their entertainment value, historical films also have a socio-cultural function that is concerned with speaking of the past in such a way that it allows for us to believe in a particular representation and accept that it refers to who we really are (or really should be). It will therefore also be important for us to consider our case study films as contributions to the development of socio-cultural identity, as well as the filmmakers' positions as potential myth makers. As the next chapter will show, appeals to desires for myth can have a positive impact on how we conceive of the past and how we are affected by it.

⁴⁸ Hayden White "Interpretation in History" in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 60.

1 *JFK*: FANTASY AND TRAUMA

Historical films appeal to spectators' desires for historical knowledge. This knowledge is not limited to discovering 'what really happened,' but also includes assumptions of what the experience of the event was like, how it felt. Speculation is necessary when a dramatic work portrays the past because there are numerous details that cannot be captured by historical records, ranging from the specific content of conversations to particularities of physical behaviour. As with any historical film, Oliver Stone's *JFK* engages with this desire for history; the project concerns a subject that many consider sacred, appealing to spectators' desires to know what really happened when American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. The incident has been mythologized in American culture as a pivotal moment, one that signaled an irreversible shift from the innocence of the 1950s to the cynical pessimism that replaced it after his death.⁴⁹ It has also been the focus for certain critics who argue that various forces have conspired to mislead the public with respect to the facts of the assassination. These conspiracy theories, which range from minor revisions of the official version of events to substantial alternatives that alter major factors (e.g. Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone, the suggestion of collusion between government forces and anti-communist groups), have contributed to how the assassination has been understood by the public. Stone's film attempts to expose the hidden truth behind potential conspiracies that led to the president's assassination and were responsible for its subsequent cover up.

⁴⁹ Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History," 71.

He also takes his investigation to another level by proposing how it could have occurred. The potential scenarios he proposes coincide with the official version, so that there is not always a clear delineation between fact and fiction. This approach aggravated a number of journalists and historians who spoke out against the film; Stone's purported intention to uncover the truth through a fictional film and his ability to do serious historical research within the scope of a dramatic work seemed to them ridiculous and arrogant.⁵⁰ These critics also attacked him because his conjectures interfered with their own accounts of the assassination and risked upending their status as objective, trustworthy reporters and scholars.⁵¹ This underscores the fact that the film's speculative engagement with history has a direct impact on the social function of historiography, while also calling into question the legitimacy of official history.

It is this skepticism of the legitimacy of historical accounts that enables *JFK* to intrude into the territory of academic historians to make claims about the historical past. Stone provides spectators with impossibly privileged perspectives, sitting in or eavesdropping on private conversations that may or may not have occurred. Not only this, but his level of speculation often refigures facts and theories into visual sequences that literally rewrite the historical record. These sequences demonstrate that history and fantasy are often inseparable, especially in the absence of an uncontroversial account of

⁵⁰ Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and The Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 19. See also George Lardner Jr., "On The Set: Dallas in Wonderland," *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1991, reprinted in Zachary Sklar and Oliver Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film* (New York: Applause, 1992), 191, and Tom Wicker, "Does JFK Conspire Against Reason?" *The New York Times*, December 15, 1991, reprinted in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 241.

⁵¹ William D. Romanowski, "Oliver Stone's 'JFK': Commercial Filmmaking, Cultural History, and Conflict," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 21:2 (Summer 1993), 63.

the past, if such a thing ever exists. The film also employs a variety of techniques that create a historical experience for the spectator, engaging with each of the elements outlined in the introduction: duration and temporality, identification, and emotional orientation. Therefore, it is the aim of this chapter to examine them in greater detail. Stone not only manipulates the linearity of time, he withholds the time necessary to allow spectators to reflect; he attempts to align the spectator with the ever-inquisitive, steadfastly heroic protagonist Jim Garrison whose investigation serves as a conduit for the historical desires of spectators; and he orients the emotional expectations of spectators so that, despite not having the full ability to distinguish specific truths from general assumptions, they are indeed impressed by an overarching sense of right versus wrong. Stone chooses to overwhelm spectators' senses in order to convince them that the official version of the assassination should not be trusted. As suggested earlier, this approach limits spectators' intellectual abilities to appropriate information so that they are less able to make their own suppositions about the assassination.

It is not sufficient to identify the techniques that historical films employ; we must attempt to understand the larger strategy behind the employment of these techniques in order to gain a sense of the filmmaker's particular intention. Works of history are typically more characteristic of the time in which they were produced than the time they depict, and historical films are no exception. The techniques used to create the historical experience imply an intention to represent the past in a specific way. In the case of *JFK*, Stone's intention was to excavate the details of the assassination so that America can

acknowledge its trauma and potentially attempt to recover from it. Despite attempts by the Warren Commission to provide closure through the Lee Harvey Oswald/‘lone gunman’ theory, the assassination is considered by many to remain unsolved.⁵² Because the incident occupies such an important position in America’s history, the perceived lack of resolution contributes to the traumatic effects of the assassination. Marita Sturken describes the persistence of a “cultural trauma” due to the inability for photographic evidence to provide answers to its cause, and “a film like *JFK* responds to the inability of the image to provide answers by ‘filling in’ what the image could not tell, and attempting to complete the fragmented images of memory.”⁵³ From this standpoint, the film functions as a cathartic *aide-mémoire* that serves a social need in addition to providing entertainment. While this combination may be found in many historical films, it is significant in *JFK* because it attempts to expose information needed to make sense of the assassination, forcing spectators to acknowledge the traumatic incident so that they may acquire the ability to finally move on. The techniques for creating a historical experience are thus employed to emphasize this sense of trauma: the manipulative use of time in the film traps the spectator by demanding a captive witness to Jim Garrison’s various theories; the alignment with an investigative protagonist allows the spectator to become implicated in a search for origins and answers; and the emotional orientation of the film includes forms of stimuli that mimic a traumatic experience, such as numerous split-second shots that appeal to the spectator’s subconscious. Ultimately this approach provides the spectator with a sense of historical difference that emphasizes the pastness

⁵² Lardner Jr., “On The Set,” 198.

⁵³ Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History,” 73.

of the past, a perspective that may provide a release from the traumatic impulse of repeating the past without acknowledging its distinct separation from the present.

Fact and Fantasy

In order to discover how *JFK* creates a historical experience for the spectator, it is necessary to begin by examining the film's method of engagement with the past, which it does through various forms of interrogation. This approach appears to treat the past as a source of truth but one that has been obscured, perhaps irrevocably. The film revisits the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. The spectator is aligned with New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) who is unsettled by the 'lone gunman' conclusion of the Warren Commission Report, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the president.⁵⁴ Garrison discovers that many of the Commission's findings do not add up. As he retraces the steps of key figures and uncovers significant information about their political and military activities and affiliations, he decides to reopen the case and ultimately brings a charge against New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones). The narrative focus of the investigation and trial of Shaw is employed by Stone to explore various theories about the assassination and the alleged conspiracy that made it possible and covered it up. Relying on various sources that often combine official versions and personal memories, the film provides a number of scenarios that rival popular accounts of the event of President Kennedy's assassination. At issue is not so much the specific event of his death, but rather the underlying plot that allegedly shielded the real perpetrators. Stone's film

⁵⁴ Frank Mankiewicz, "About The Debate," in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 188.

argues that the ruse was carried out because a large number of those it protected worked for the government and its agencies, thereby implying that the American government is crooked, criminal, and has propagated lies to its people in order to wage wars in foreign lands, particularly Vietnam. Thus the film treats the past as the privileged keeper of a number of secrets. By probing and uncovering these secrets the film grants itself a position of authority, albeit one that must also be questioned according to its own logic of the dangers of an authoritarian perspective. Stone uses this position of omniscience to revisit the events from multiple perspectives throughout the film, choosing to foreground this multiplicity instead of trying to organize the range of possible scenarios into a unified and coherent narrative trajectory.

While Stone juggles several theories in *JFK* without identifying any of them as the most truthful or probable, the excessive style with which he presents the multiplicity of the various scenarios draws attention to his engagement with the collective fantasy as he takes the spectators behind historically closed doors, allowing them to become witnesses to that which could not have been (and can no longer be) witnessed. Resisting the urge to blend the look and sound of reenactments with the main narrative, Stone instead uses both hard and soft lighting, black and white mixed with colour cinematography, fifteen different film stocks, multiple flashbacks within flashbacks, and a highly stylized soundtrack that emphasizes subjectivity and personal impressions.⁵⁵ Each of these devices works to provide an alternative to the official history. Moreover,

⁵⁵ Robert Sam Anson, "The Shooting of JFK," *Esquire*, November 1, 1991, reprinted in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 220.

the alternative account displays a level of distortion, and is in keeping with a past that is personalized and emotional and therefore questionable. This distortion appears both in the resistance to blend various aesthetic styles described above as well as in the use of grainy and blurred images, collapsed sonic hierarchy, and rapid cutting that leaves certain elements unidentifiable; each of these affects the clarity of the film's historical message.

As Marita Sturken suggests, it is this excessive style that "interrupts any notion that history can be told outside of fantasy—the fantasy of knowing what really happened, what people were really thinking, what took place, and what could have been."⁵⁶

Sturken's comment wisely identifies a distinction that must be made between actual events and their creative representations. The ways the film engages with the past call into question how any form of mediation can be trusted. Stone emphasizes this by also presenting certain sequences that occur in the film's present in a distorted manner, as is evident when Garrison first reads the Warren Commission Report and its ambiguous content inspires him to investigate further. His physical engagement with the report takes on the appearance of a private nightmare, complete with canted camera angles and unflattering, overhead lighting consisting of harsh white spotlights with very little fill lighting, and the white light occasionally shifts to dominant red and back again. The effect portrays Garrison as uncomfortable and disturbed, and the spectator is reminded that even mediations of the present can be subjective and biased, which suggests we must also question our own subjectivity when asking questions of the past.

⁵⁶ Sturken, "Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History," 79.

In and Out of Time

Stone employs the temporal device of the flashback, whose defiance of linear notions of cause and effect activates the fantasy of this particular history. The most obvious example is the representation of the assassination. The incident is shown six times in the film, and each instance either serves to support another theory of the assassination or reveals a previously unacknowledged piece of information. The first time we see the assassination is near the end of the opening credit sequence, when we are expected to experience it “the way we heard about it.”⁵⁷ The soundtrack of this particular representation contains one gunshot and two ricochets, which are consistent with the three shots that the official Warren Commission Report claims were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone. As the film progresses, Garrison’s investigation requires him to re-imagine the event from a variety of perspectives and to revisit the assassination with new details and witnesses’ accounts. Personal retellings lead to subjective reenactments and reveal new viewing angles that complement former versions by expanding the spatial potential of the available experience of the original event. Gradually moving away from the official version with its three shots, we later find ourselves watching the same assassination with more than five shots from more than one shooter, calling into question earlier representations that we have been witnessing and mixing conjecture with fact. The frequent shifts from popular history to alternative histories weaken the status of the official version because of our function as witnesses; as Stone pursues new theories he revisits the past each time as if it were actuality. This occurs because of the way we

⁵⁷ Oliver Stone, Audio commentary, *JFK*, 205 minutes. Director: Oliver Stone, Performers: Kevin Costner, Tommy Lee Jones. Warner Brothers Pictures, 1991. DVD: Warner Home Video, 2003.

experience events when watching a film. Regardless of being told that a particular event is a recollection or a fabrication, we experience a representation of an incident as it happens. Our ability to distinguish between alternative versions of the past is thus hindered by our observation of events firsthand. This demonstrates the suggestion that in addition to representing the past historical films also give spectators a sense of how the past feels.

An interesting consequence of this effect appears in Stone's own recollection of recreating and filming the assassination several times over the course of three weeks:

But actually, nobody has ever heard that assassination and seen and felt it as we did, with all those extras, with the sound, the excitement, the echoes of the shots, the pigeons flying off the roof. It's a very rare thing. It was a privilege to see it from so many different angles.⁵⁸

This statement is odd for many reasons, not least because Stone seems to assume the recreation is the same as the original event. How exactly could the 'privilege' of viewing the original event occur through its reconstruction? This statement suggests that Stone considers history to be a window onto the past, and that it is possible to reassemble the components to such a degree that one could be privy to the past again. It seems that in the first part of his comment he is also suggesting that the degree to which he and his crew reconstructed the past made it more real than the original event. These assumptions reveal an attitude toward the past that considers it to be accessible, and if history is done correctly the past has the potential to become transparent. And yet, Stone's technique of constantly reenacting the assassination with new data contradicts this pursuit of transparency. By repeatedly calling into question the authenticity of the historical event,

⁵⁸ Stone, Audio commentary, *JFK*, DVD.

the spectator is left unsure of which version is the actual one. This supports Stone's intention of raising awareness about the potential for conspiracies and alternative theories by leaving the spectator somewhat skeptical of all versions; he attempts to acquire privilege over the past by refiguring it and presenting alternate versions as if they were authentic. With this in mind, it becomes clear why Stone has referred to his film as a 'counter-myth' to the Warren Commission Report.⁵⁹ Instead of providing answers, Stone prefers to expose the myth making mechanisms that underlie American society, a point to which we will return.

Opening Credits – No Time for Reflection

The manipulation of the experience of time allows Stone to take command of the narrative because it restricts the spectator to a passive position, as he or she must have the historical variations explained instead of acquiring the ability to make sense of things for him or herself. As proposed in the introduction, when a spectator is not given sufficient time to process information that spectator lacks the time to reflect on what has happened, and the filmmaker has more control over the spectator's impressions. The spectator will respond more emotionally than intellectually and will therefore be more easily swayed by the film's mood orientation. In order to examine Stone's particular agenda and to understand how the film orients the spectator emotionally, we need to remember Greg Smith's approach to mood establishment and maintenance. In particular we need to recall his advice that we pay particular attention to the establishment of mood at the beginning

⁵⁹ Lance Morrow and Martha Smilgis, "Plunging Into The Labyrinth," *Time*, December 23, 1991, reprinted in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 298.

of a film. Because opening credit sequences play a large role in setting the mood for a film, and also because they (typically) occur at the beginning when a mood needs to be established, it seems proper to look at these sequences in our case study films in order to consider how this approach functions and how each builds a mood that is particular to that film's perspective on the past.

Opening credits are interesting because they combine direct production information with indirect forms of representation, even in cases where there is simply a non-diegetic score accompanying them. Relevant here is an idea proposed by Patrick Colm Hogan who defines a "juncture" in a text as an "elaborated, authorial intrusion" that works "paradiegetically" to the narrative.⁶⁰ Although he uses the notion of a juncture to refer to the function of dance numbers in Bollywood films, it would not be incorrect to apply the same concept to credits for virtually any film; in fact, his description appears to fit quite well. Junctures can interrupt the flow of the narrative, but because credits are typically at the beginning of a film this interruption is more of a bridge that joins the outside world, including the production personnel (or "authorial intrusions"), to the world of the diegesis. This is another way of saying that they are "paradiegetic," or "alongside the story without quite being part the story."⁶¹ This is typical in Oliver Stone's films; his credits often span opening sequences and can last up to twenty minutes.⁶² Therefore, his credit sequences are instrumental in setting the mood and ensuring the spectator is drawn into the diegesis organically.

⁶⁰ Hogan, *Understanding Indian Movies*, 162-163.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶² See the opening sequence of *Any Given Sunday* (Oliver Stone, 1999) for a prime example.

Throughout the film, Stone prefers to assail the spectator with a barrage of visuals and sounds rather than allow enough time for reflection, and this is as clear in the opening credits as anywhere else in the film. The opening credits of *JFK* are the longest of our three case study films, approximately three times longer than the other two films (they run almost seven and a half minutes). They consist of an elaborate, documentary-style overview of President Kennedy's election and career, presented in a traditional 1.33 aspect ratio and complete with narrator and archival footage, which lend the sequence an authorial quality; by employing a format that resembles a newsreel, the spectator is encouraged to treat the information as actuality. The sequence is extremely well constructed, and upon closer inspection Stone appears to be contrasting war and peace, deriving from his belief that American involvement in the Vietnam War was a major mistake as well as an underlying motive for the president's assassination. It begins with President Eisenhower's final speech that warns Americans about the increasing power of the military-industrial complex, over sounds of military drumming and brass marches. This is accompanied by footage of that same complex, including detonating bombs and military personnel, but Stone cleverly inserts occasional shots of families either leaving church or having a picnic. These provide a counterpoint to the discourse of war, suggesting that there are purer things beyond warmongering that are worth embracing. This discourse frames the ensuing presentation of President Kennedy's rise to power, which focuses on his dedication to freedom despite his inheritance of a war against Castro and communist Cuban forces. The incoming president's embrace of freedom over war is supported by a shift in the score from a military march to a pleasant orchestral

piece, over shots of Kennedy being candid and playful with his family. The marching drums shift to become occasional accompaniment for a single trumpet line that evokes a sense of glory and honour. As Eisenhower's speech ends with a rousing appeal for the preservation of democracy and liberty over the quest for war, the trumpet is joined by a significant orchestral swell, signifying a shift to a more optimistic time. When the narrator mentions Kennedy's involvement in the Bay of Pigs incident of 1961, suspense builds in both the soundtrack and choice of images to emphasize the looming threat of war. The music shifts from halcyonic symphony to brooding piano, and this is accompanied by atypical newsreel shots, like those of people looking to their sides quickly, or a missed handshake between the president and a C.I.A. representative; the general impression becomes one of suspicion, mistrust and fear. To this point the opening sequence has been dominated by actual footage of historical events, lending it a historical authenticity despite the fact that the selection and inclusion of certain shots over others reveals a specific reading of history. How spectators will engage with this part of the sequence will depend on their respective knowledge of the footage and events being portrayed. The level of engagement is significant, as it separates an emotional reading from one that is more intellectual. One could simply observe the missed handshake and assume it represents conflict, disagreement, or lack of communication, but if the spectator's knowledge permits he or she may recognize that the missed handshake occurred between President Kennedy and Allen Dulles, the former head of the C.I.A. whom the president fired over the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Given that one of Stone's alternative theories implicates the C.I.A. because of the president's desire to "splinter [the

agency] into a thousand pieces,” this image of a missed handshake takes on a much deeper meaning.⁶³ The former reading privileges an emotional impression while the latter requires a more specific level of intellectual engagement. The end results are similar, and yet they differ substantially, especially with respect to the historical information that is being absorbed.

After this part of the opening sequence Stone starts to take greater liberties. He inserts staged shots of a beaten woman, who, after being thrown out of a car on the side of a dirt road, curses her assailants. We see her again in a hospital room as she moans and warns the men in suits who stand over her that the president is going to be assassinated. These scenes were obviously shot separately by Stone, but they have the same quality of film stock and grain as the rest of the archival footage. In addition to the use of a brooding and menacing score here, the woman’s heavy breathing and moaning stand out over most of the following shots. These consist of more archival footage, but we are in Dallas now, on the day the president is going to be assassinated. The music again gives way to an escalation of military snare drumming and kettledrum beating. Shots of the president’s motorcade are repeated from various angles, turning what appears to be a celebration into a confusing melee that foreshadows the tragedy we expect to occur. The repetition of these shots, along with the disappearance of the narrator, the addition of a fabricated sequence and the sparsity of historical information, combine to steadily increase the sequence’s emotional value.

⁶³ Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 2.

The director's credit, typically the last in opening credits, is followed by a significant swell in the soundtrack, and shortly after the increasing pounding and rolling drums halt as a shot of an outdoor clock displays 12:30pm. This is immediately followed by a shot of a man and a woman from behind; the man is holding a film camera and is filming the motorcade, and we hear the noise of the camera quite loudly in the soundtrack. This is obviously an imagined depiction of Abraham Zapruder, whose footage of the assassination became famous afterwards; the prominence the sound of the camera is given in the soundtrack signifies its historical importance, and is another instance of a filmmaker engaging with the spectator's prior knowledge of historical evidence. The tension in the soundtrack continues to escalate after the Zapruder shot, with eerie and ambient effect, but no longer grounded by the rhythm of percussion. It builds to a climax when the president in his car approaches the camera, and when he is head on with the camera we hear the cocking of a gun and the shot cuts to black. Seconds later there is a very loud gunshot that echoes twice, signifying the three shots acknowledged by the official version, with a low angle view of a building with birds flying away, as if due to the shot. The loudness of the shot shocks the spectator, despite having expected it. After we hear the iconic broadcast of Walter Cronkite's report of the shooting, we see the final shot of Zapruder's short film, panning with the car as the First Lady climbs over the seat. The aspect ratio has stretched from 1.33 to widescreen, and this shift bridges the newsreel style with the diegetic world we will now accept as actuality.

It is clear that Stone tries to balance an invitation for the viewer to not only feel the emotion of the times leading up to and including Kennedy's assassination, but also to consider the implications of the existence of aggressive forces within the president's administration and their possible role in his murder, as well as the legacy of military might in American politics in general. But the pace of cutting, the content of shots, the soundscape that builds intensely, the frequent cuts to elements that signify the president's impending final moment (the digital clock that is about to strike 12:30pm, the speeding motorcade, the masses of crowds, the streets that appear strangely unprotected), all of these elements give prominence to the spectator's emotional investment in the sequence; regardless of whether or not the spectator recognizes Allen Dulles, the emotional experience is the same. Instead of having the time to intellectualize what he or she is seeing and hearing, the spectator becomes part of the momentum of the sequence, being thrust toward its inevitable climax and unable to stop its onslaught. It is quite a deft opening, one that supports the notion that if the spectator does not have sufficient time to reflect, he or she will be more likely to participate emotionally rather than rationally.

The film runs 205 minutes without providing a break for intermission, which further enforces the suggestion that the spectator should not reflect during the film. Just past mid-way through the film, Garrison meets with Mr. X (Donald Sutherland), a well-connected informer employed by the military. Until this point Garrison has been in a position of relative control despite his inability to procure hard evidence of a conspiracy. As mentioned earlier, the film engages in a variety of interrogations with Garrison as the principal interrogator. This puts him in a central position not only as a protagonist but

also as someone who is bold enough to ask the difficult questions. His meeting with Mr. X marks a shift in this state of self-confidence. Throughout this lengthy scene Garrison is suddenly quiet and for the first time does not seem to be in control or exude his familiar poise. As Mr. X injects a massive amount of information into the film, revealing the conspiracy to run much deeper than Garrison could have imagined, the latter seems dazed and overwhelmed, even sickly; the information is stultifying, and Garrison's paralysis seems to echo that of the spectator throughout the film. Stone comments in the director's commentary on the DVD: "There should have been an intermission after this because so much is going to be told to you that... it takes time to grasp the whole meaning of it and how it ties back."⁶⁴ This direct acknowledgment by Stone that there could have been more time added to allow spectators to reflect on the information supports the notion that ultimately his goal was to appeal to spectators emotionally. Elsewhere in the commentary Stone makes reference to some of the editing techniques he used to convey a sense of disarray and discomfort with the various theories that appear to contradict each other. He mentions the term "fractured edits" to describe the rapid use of multiple camera angles and witness sources to disrupt the spectator's sense of spatial and narrative cohesion, meant to suggest inaccuracies in the popular version. These fractured edits are similar to jump cuts, except they use different camera sources; in a scene where Oswald is being arrested outside a theatre, Stone cuts from Oswald entering the police car to a similar angle but from a different source that shows Oswald exiting the car. He also refers to the use of layers in editing, like the insertion of a very quick establishing shot of a lightning

⁶⁴ Stone, Audio commentary, *JFK*, DVD.

storm in the middle of an interior scene in which Garrison interviews David Ferrie (Joe Pesci). He calls these instances “blips of subconscious” that serve to suggest ideas without directly identifying them; he claims “these are drops that will combine and become an idea later.”⁶⁵ This provides further evidence of Stone’s interest in affecting the spectator on a more subconscious level, and his expectation that the spectator’s ability to appropriate the information will come *later*. In another article, Stone refers to the time needed for reflection: “I think you will leave the theater ready to think about things and, I hope, rethink them, and begin to wonder about some of the givens, some of the sacred cows, some of the official story.”⁶⁶ This statement is noteworthy because Stone only expects the film to *prepare* spectators to become ready to think upon leaving the theatre, *after* seeing the film. Therefore his film is a prelude to that intellectual exercise, which is further supported by his decision to conclude the film with the quotation: “What is Past is Prologue.”

Dealing with Prior Knowledge

If spectators’ experiences are reduced to emotional reactions, what happens to the prior knowledge of history that they bring with them to the theater? Surely these pre-conceptions will play a role in how the spectator responds to the historical experience onscreen. We might consider the impact of these shifts with respect to what is referred to in the introduction as the ‘gradient of intellectual change.’ Historical knowledge can range from individual to individual, and can depend on a number of factors including

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Anson, “The Shooting of JFK,” 216.

level of education, personal interest, attention span, and memory capacity. The range of potential historical conceptions that accompany theatergoers will inevitably come against the particular historical perspective of the film. The greater the variation from a spectator's conception to the version proposed by the film, the greater the spectator's sense of historical understanding will be affected. Obviously this will have different effects on different people, depending on a number of variables like the particular value of the historical information to the individual's life, or how willing the individual is to accept alternatives to popular history. Regardless, there is definitely a relation between particular intellectual expectations and texts that challenge them. The subject of *JFK* abounds with such instances, in large part because the assassination holds such a prominent position in American history. Lee Harvey Oswald, the grassy knoll, Jack Ruby, the lone gunman, the Texas School Book Depository: most Americans should be somewhat familiar with each of these, even if they have only a basic education. Therefore when Stone suggests these elements had different roles to play than those declared by the popular historical record, the effect on the spectator is disorienting. Add to this the lack of time the spectator has to drive information higher up the cognitive chain to make sense of and appropriate that different information, and the effect is doubly unnerving because the spectator does not have time to reflect on how to deal with the challenge to his or her personal beliefs.

A significant example of the effect of the gradient of intellectual change occurs in the scene where Garrison and his assistants are having lunch in a restaurant while they discuss Oswald's life and theorize about his involvement in the conspiracy to kill the

president. As they discuss various theories, Stone cross-cuts the scene with another scene in which an unknown person meticulously doctors a photograph of Oswald, pasting his head onto another's body. As the scene progresses we begin to get a better look at the photograph and eventually discover that it is the iconic photograph of Oswald that appeared on the cover of *LIFE* magazine in 1964.⁶⁷ Contrasting the popular notions that Oswald was the killer, that this photograph is genuine and that *LIFE* magazine can be trusted to report only authentic news, this scene leaves the spectator stunned that the conspiracy could have run so deep that even *LIFE* magazine could be implicated. The discussion around the table also confuses the spectator because Garrison and his assistants debate alternate versions of Oswald's involvement, including suggesting he had nothing to do with the assassination and was set up, that he could not fire a gun very well, that he was trained by the American military and was a top agent, and that there were in fact three Oswalds, each of whom showed up at various locations across North America in the same week. As these theories are being discussed, we are shown the discussion via a camera that rotates around the table, swirling around and around like a vortex. The combination of the faking of the famous photograph, the discussion of multiple potential versions of the same event and the dizzying camera movement leaves the spectator unsettled and confused, trapped by the rapid dissemination of conflicting information and powerless to do anything about it.

The spectator lacks control because she or he requires Stone to explain the various theories instead of relying on her or his own sense of history to makes sense of the

⁶⁷ Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 75.

information. This inability to apply historical knowledge immobilizes the spectators, leaving them powerless to act. According to a psychological study meant to gauge the effects of viewing *JFK* on spectators' voting habits, this immobilization had a specific consequence. Spectators interviewed before and after seeing the film had become "significantly more angry and less hopeful" upon leaving the theatre.⁶⁸ The surveyors were also surprised to discover that after seeing the film spectators indicated they would be less likely to vote and less likely to give money to political campaigns.⁶⁹ Certainly this could not have been Stone's desire, to have effectively stunned spectators into a catatonic political apathy. But it does demonstrate the effect of such a disrupting and emotionally rich representation of the past; as the study states, these effects "suggest to us a response of helplessness to the film's provocative message."⁷⁰ How could someone who has seen the film be interested in voting when the film has called into question the legitimacy and reliability of political mechanisms? This is another consequence of the film's interruption of the intellectual activity that is required to make sense of the past in order to be able to move forward. It is important that this interruption is only temporary, and that once the spectator is free of the emotional barrage the time for reflection can begin. This is supported by the commitment most post-viewing spectators who were surveyed made to become better informed in the future.⁷¹ If the film limits the intellectual capacity of spectators, it appears to do so only during the film; while spectators may emerge with a

⁶⁸ Lisa D. Butler, Cheryl Koopman, and Philip G. Zimbardo, "The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film 'JFK': Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioral Intentions," *Political Psychology*, 16:2 (June, 1995), 249.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

feeling of helplessness and anger, this may eventually translate into a motivated desire to become more acquainted with the production and dissemination of official information in the future. An interesting result of this intention to becoming better informed reached all the way to Congress, when in 1992 the Assassination Materials Disclosure Act was passed so that sealed archives concerning the assassination could be opened and made available to the public.⁷² Therefore despite Stone's overwhelming presentation of conspiracy theories that leaves spectators stunned and confused, the film eventually succeeds as a call to action. Heeding the call may take time, but as we have seen there will always be a need for sufficient time to reflect in order to make informed resolutions.

Myth, Trauma, and Going the (Historical) Distance

The formal historical experience that Stone provides in *JFK* has a purpose: as mentioned previously it is to help ease the trauma that the assassination provoked in American society. The eventual ability for spectators to appropriate the information, despite coming much later, enables them to treat the past as time that has passed and that can no longer exert its traumatic influence over the present. It is the resolution of trauma that the film's provocative format and ensuing debate make possible, should spectators be willing to engage with it. Because the importance of the assassination has been mythologized and because its object not only involves a lack of sufficient explanatory information but also is responsible for instigating a significant form of cultural trauma, any attempt to understand exactly what happened cannot replace what was lost; as

⁷² Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 557.

Sturken has noted, “the narrative of national and emotional loss outweighs empirical investigation.”⁷³ Stone also notes:

[*JFK*] does not purport to ‘solve’ this murder mystery. What I hope this film will do is remind people how much our nation and our world lost when President Kennedy died, and to ask anew what might have happened and why.⁷⁴

One of the few points of agreement among theorists is that the assassination and its aftermath stunned Americans. One critic wrote: “How we make sense of the assassination of John F. Kennedy is directly related to how we make sense of American public life.”⁷⁵

Another noted:

The assassination of President Kennedy occupies a singular role in American history not merely for its monumental political impact... The tragedy has always straddled twin peaks: national significance and popular intrigue. The fact that the murder was never satisfactorily solved has been a large part of its allure.⁷⁶

The episode is thus rife with significance for Americans, and any attempt to provide another version of the events is met with anger and vitriol. Numerous newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, printed editorials accusing Stone of having dubious intentions.⁷⁷ It can be shocking to read many of these pieces because they attack Stone as if he has committed a capital crime. These editorials suggest that artists must conform to parameters set by the non-artistic community, no less in Stone’s case with his revisionist approach to Kennedy’s assassination. More than this, however, is evidence of a concern that Stone’s film has misappropriated a sacred subject,

⁷³ Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History,” 72.

⁷⁴ Oliver Stone, “Stone’s *JFK*: A Higher Truth?” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1991, reprinted in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 199.

⁷⁵ Jefferson Morley, “Opinion: The Political Rorschach Test,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1991, reprinted in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 231.

⁷⁶ Bob Katz, “*JFK*: Is History That Which Gets Broadcast The Loudest?” *Chicago Tribune*, December 20, 1991, reprinted in Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 280.

⁷⁷ See Lardner Jr., “On The Set,” 191-198, and Wicker, “Does *JFK* Conspire Against Reason?,” 241-246.

a concern that stems from the subject's status as a foundational historical event. Stone himself admits that his film is a 'counter-myth' to the official version of the events presented by the Warren Commission Report in 1964.⁷⁸ In an interview with *Time* magazine, Stone states: "So I'm giving you a detailed outlaw history or counter-myth. A myth represents the true inner spiritual meaning of an event. I think the Warren Commission was a myth...."⁷⁹ It is interesting to notice that the first page of the first chapter of the Warren Commission Report employs mythological overtones, which supports Stone's position:

The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22, 1963, was a cruel and shocking act of violence directed against a man, a family, a nation, and against all mankind. A young and vigorous leader whose years of public and private life stretched before him was the victim of the fourth Presidential assassination in the history of a country dedicated to the concepts of reasoned argument and peaceful political change.⁸⁰

The language used in this passage is significant. The assassination is portrayed as a major source of evil against the world, extending its influence well beyond American borders. The suggestion that it poisoned what was formerly a good and peaceful country employs a Manichaean binary that is often found in origin myths (good vs. evil, order vs. chaos, etc.). Stone intentionally refers to his film as a counter-myth because he is aware of its function as yet another interpretation of the events, and his retention of the myth designation illustrates that he too considers the film's subject to be tied to the origin of the current state of affairs. In his description of the many functions of myths, David

⁷⁸ Morrow and Smilgis, "Plunging Into The Labyrinth," 298.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Warren Commission, "Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy: Chapter 1," accessed March 2, 2011, <http://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/warren-commission-report/chapter-1.html>.

Adams Leeming notes: "In each case we are considering something intangible, perhaps not literally real, that is nevertheless 'true' in some higher sense."⁸¹ In one of the more reasonable editorials that commented on the film, Bob Katz noted: "The Unsolved Murder of the Century has entered the realm of myth. As myth it will be internalized, digested, maybe even understood."⁸² It is therefore cathartic to exercise the implications of the event's mythological status. This suggests that Stone's 'counter-myth' has a socio-cultural function, one that revisits the past in order to understand it.

This function is necessary because the experience of trauma inhibits historical understanding. The cultural trauma triggered by the assassination can be seen as a cognitive disruption that "cannot be conceived of within the logical parameters of time and space; thus the grief is experienced as perpetual anguish with no tangible cause."⁸³ It is this lack of connection between the source and its consequences that troubles the traumatized individual and prevents recovery. Historian Hayden White explains this limitation:

Some of these 'holocaustal events' ... function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.⁸⁴

⁸¹ David Adams Leeming, *The World of Myth: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 4.

⁸² Katz, "JFK: Is History That Which Gets Broadcast The Loudest?," 281.

⁸³ André Loiselle, "The October Crisis and the Transformation of Quebec Nationalism," in *Cinema and History: Michel Brault and Modern Quebec* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 2007), 118.

⁸⁴ White, "The Modernist Event," 20.

This lack of psychic distance from the past forces the individual or group to repeatedly experience the event without being able to move past it. In an article on the experience of historical distance and its psychological impact, historian Adam Phillips refers to the difference between a subject who acknowledges his or her personal past as memory and another who, due to some form of trauma, lacks that distancing mechanism and can only repeat actions in lieu of awareness of time passed.⁸⁵ The latter case is one that lacks historical distance because the act of repeating returns the subject to the original event as if no time has passed; in such a case the subject is not able to differentiate between the past and the present.⁸⁶ It is ultimately the ability to reflect that is hindered by the effect of trauma, which is largely due to the subject's limited awareness of time. If the subject is timeless and therefore not able to use the passage of time to make sense of things, we have here another instance of the relationship between time and the processing of information. The breakdown that Phillips refers to results from a traumatic incident that stuns the subject and thus inhibits him or her from processing that information normally.

This description of the effect of trauma on historical distance is helpful when considering Stone's approach to the past in *JFK*. The impact of President Kennedy's assassination on America was unprecedented. The American public had been sold a particular vision of the Kennedy administration and the presidential family that was shattered by the assassination. By representing (literally 're-presenting') the past in a myriad of contexts and through various devices, Stone tries to exacerbate that trauma by

⁸⁵ Adam Phillips, "Close-Ups," *History Workshop Journal* 57:1 (Spring, 2004), 142-149.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

raising doubts regarding the officially sanctioned account of the assassination. His film frequently collapses the sense of detachment to mimic the effects of trauma, rejecting the relative comfort provided by the official version and attempting to replace complacency with doubt. The credits start with an aspect ratio of 1.33 that replicates the television image size that reported the event originally. This strategy situates the spectator within a former way of seeing; complete with fuzzy transmission, the effect is one that emphasizes historical distance by employing an antiquated style of presentation. Shortly after, as the film stretches to widescreen, we move from the medium of television to that of film. Our sense of critical distance shifts as we move from the hearsay of single source reportage to become witnesses with privileged perspectives inside the event; our position shifts from being able to see the contours to becoming absorbed by the diegetic world. It is an interesting technique, because once the spectator is ultimately plunged into the diegesis the effect is normalizing, despite the fact that the story continues to occur in the past. The experience should be one of arriving at a vantage point from which we can reflect properly on the events in question, but because *JFK* concerns an unsolved investigation the use of a later position (1966 instead of 1963; the final trial occurs in 1969) alters the spectator's proximity to the event in question. It is quite effective as it encourages the spectator to identify with Garrison, who is also removed from the original event and must 'dig up the past' to arrive at any potential explanation. This position places the spectator in line with Garrison as pseudo-historian, which further emphasizes the historical goal of the film.

The experience of watching the film is like reviewing a body of evidence. The event and its aftermath are shown again and again, from multiple angles, forcing the spectator to repeat them in new ways in order to fully acknowledge the event and its impact. Stone's constant and formally varied repetition of events in *JFK* speaks directly to this experience of trauma that the Kennedy assassinations triggered.⁸⁷ In the DVD commentary, Stone comments on his own experience representing the assassination for his cameras: "Three weeks ... to blow the President to pieces each time, ... we did it to death. We did it over and over and over again, over many days. It was exhausting."⁸⁸ Stone is reacting here to the emotional impact of repeating the assassination over and over; the act of representing a traumatic event can also be disturbing because in order to do so one must repeat it as if it continues to occur. Add to this a central protagonist who is constantly and repeatedly looking at the evidence and the film's attempt to acknowledge what has occurred becomes clear. The quintessential example of repetition occurs during the courtroom scene when Garrison finally presents his exhaustive theory. As he takes the jury and, by extension, the audience on a journey through his conception of how things played out, he finishes his presentation with a repeated shot of the Zapruder film, showing the result of the final fatal gunshot that split apart Kennedy's head and made it rock forcefully back and to the left. This is the main evidence against all shots having been fired from behind the car (by Oswald from the Texas School Book Depository) because his head moved not forward but backward. Garrison shows this

⁸⁷ There were, of course, two Kennedy assassinations that occurred less than a few years apart, and both are represented in *JFK*. John F. Kennedy was killed on Nov. 22, 1963, and his brother Robert F. Kennedy was killed on June 5, 1968.

⁸⁸ Stone, Audio commentary, *JFK*, DVD.

footage over and over, gradually reducing it to its most digestible size; as he shows it over and over, the Zapruder footage is eventually cropped to only show a tight portion of Kennedy's head reacting to the bullet, and the sequence is looped so that the short burst occurs repeatedly. Garrison shows this sequence six times, and each time he notes the movement of Kennedy's head, repeating the phrase "back and to the left" four times while Kennedy's head explodes each time. His final use of the phrase is accompanied by shots of people in the courtroom who appear to be genuinely uncomfortable and try to look away. This repetition by Garrison becomes a cathartic call for the people to look at the footage, to see it and acknowledge it and resist the familiar urge to look away.

An Appeal to Think (Later)

The use of a trial at the end of the film seeks on one level to provide narrative closure but on another level attempts to rationalize, in an institutional setting no less, the interrogation of the past. The trauma that the event may have instigated is gently massaged in this final scene. The massive amount of information is neatly organized into a concise perspective, one that can be explained by Garrison in order to convince a jury, or the spectators, of his convictions. In a review of the film, critic Pat Dowell concludes by noting that Stone's "stylistic attack [is] bent on knocking us out of complacency and complicity with the image."⁸⁹ We might be able to read into this a little further if we consider what happens to us when we are 'knocked out of complacency and complicity with the image.' Dowell's comment suggests that our mere perception of the images is not the limit of our engagement with the film; somehow, we are being forced to engage

⁸⁹ Pat Dowell, "Last Year at Nuremberg: The Cinematic Strategies of *JFK*," *Cineaste* 19.1 (1992), 10.

with the film on a deeper, more comprehensive level. The question is, when are we expected to act in this way: during or after the film? If we require sufficient time to be able to process information and make rational sense of it, then it seems that the courtroom scene in the final act of the film functions as a brake that slows down the sensorial barrage and prepares the viewer for the time to process. It is not a coincidence that this act is almost entirely dedicated to Garrison's perspective on the assassination. The only time in the film when we are able to take a moment to think is devoted to Garrison's (and Stone's) version of the assassination and the conspiracy, thus ensuring that we are able to think the right thoughts. This is emphasized when the spectators merge with the jurors near the end of this final scene, as Garrison turns to them but looks directly into the camera and says, "It's up to you." The call to action has been made, and now it is up to the spectators to find some way of preserving the democratic ideals identified by Garrison.

The courtroom scene provides a release for spectators by revisiting the main points proposed throughout the film, leading them back through the darkness, and then emerging in the light of a new day after the past has been properly acknowledged; this is also evoked physically when the blinds in the courtroom are closed to view the Zapruder film, and then reopened for Garrison's final argument. The film has constantly put the trauma up front, subjecting spectators to an ideal traumatic experience before liberating them and allowing them to leave the trauma behind. Not only does the cessation of the film allow that time for reflection to settle in, but there are also other elements that suggest a release. Although the trial in the final act becomes a conduit for Garrison to put

forward his most convincing evidence through more image and sound manipulation, it ends with his closing speech, which is bereft of any cutaways or anti-realist effects. Despite Garrison's subsequent loss of the trial, the film allows him to get the last word, making his appeal to the jury/spectator an impassioned call for democracy and justice. It does not seem to matter that he loses the trial, because his convincing argument has served the purpose of introducing doubt in the official version and calling on the people to take a stand against it. Garrison's relative triumph is also signaled by the fact that throughout the trial the judge has sustained Shaw's lawyer's objections to Garrison's speculations, but by the end of the trial he overrules the lawyer's complaints, allowing Garrison to continue and giving the impression that Garrison's theories have value. As he leaves the courtroom afterwards, Garrison walks down the huge hall that is bright with warm sunlight, flanked by his wife and son; it is as if a new day has dawned and order has been restored, even though the case has been lost and the family would not last (Jim and Liz Garrison divorced soon after, in 1978).⁹⁰ The impression that the film provides is that the worst has passed and there are better times ahead; this appears to be an attempt to move past the trauma, into the brighter future.

Oliver Stone's *JFK* engages with the past in order to encourage spectators to come to terms with the large body of evidence that has been the subject of significant controversy since President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. By suspending the necessary time for reflection, Stone renders spectators helpless to appropriate the information for themselves, and must instead become passengers to Stone's emotional

⁹⁰ Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of The Film*, 185.

journey. This is necessary if they are to engage with the trauma that the assassination and its aftermath triggered. Stone's technique is to immerse the spectator in the past, jumping from place to place, time to time, and theory to theory without providing a clear delineation between fact and speculation. This has the effect of stunning the spectator into a state of immobility that allows Stone to exploit the various theories as if they were generally accepted. Spectators may also have to contend with information that contradicts their own beliefs, without sufficient time to weigh the respective value of each. All of this illustrates the film's goal of impressing spectators emotionally by suspending their capacity to process information in time to make their own assumptions. This is evident from the outset, as the credit sequence controls the spectator's immersion into the diegesis with such a level of sensory stimuli that the spectator cannot help but be consumed by its emotional momentum. The trial scene at the end of the film acts somewhat inversely to the opening credits, gradually slowing down the sensorial barrage to enable the spectator to emerge ready to begin to process the information and rationalize it. The film is thus carefully constructed to provide a historical experience for the spectator that is directly related to its perspective on the past and its attempt to provide a sense of historical distance.

2 *MALCOLM X*: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS MYTHOGRAPHY

In the same way historical films appeal to spectators' desires for historical knowledge, the subcategory of biographical films appeals to spectators' desires for biographical knowledge. These explorations of the lives of famous people typically act as conduits through which to examine the impact of history on particular cultures and societies. Just as historiographical strategies are intrinsically linked to contemporary concerns, the decision to revisit a particular historical individual is often prompted by an impulse to remember and perhaps reconsider that individual's impact on present day affairs. These films tend to revisit a historical individual at a time when that person's particular insights or experience may be applicable to current situations. This is the case with Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, which examines the importance of its title character by revisiting how he became an influential figure in American civil rights history so that his legacy can inspire others to demand and potentially enact the social and political change necessary to eliminate racial discrimination. In addition to Lee's typical emphasis on race in the majority of his films, the issue of race relations in America was reaching a crisis during the time of this film's development, production and release. Increasing racial tension was exemplified by the famous incident in which Rodney King was videotaped being beaten by white police officers in Los Angeles in April 1991, which culminated in race riots in Los Angeles the following year.⁹¹ After screening a shorter version of the film during post-production in May 1992, Lee recalls: "South-central L.A. was burning

⁹¹ Frank P. Tomasulo, "I'll See It When I Believe It," in *The Persistence of History*, 74-75.

as I got up in front of everybody and said, ‘This film is needed now, more than ever.’”⁹²

Revisiting *Malcolm X* in this period was seen as desirable to remind both white and black America of his firm rejection of racial oppression and his demand for dignity and equal rights.

This chapter concerns how Lee portrays the historical Malcolm and how his softening of Malcolm’s image avoids questions that interfere with his portrayal as a moderate everyman. Lee presents Malcolm’s life as an example to be followed by others, borrowing quite heavily from the famous *Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*. This approach allows Lee to present Malcolm’s life as a series of challenges that he was able to overcome. Many of these challenges did occur: the young Malcolm struggled as a drug addicted petty thief and hustler in a society that privileged white people’s rights over those of black people; he tried to conform socially by denying his own blackness, straightening his hair and pursuing white women; he wound up in jail and was eventually forced to confront his beliefs, giving up his vices to become a Muslim within the Nation of Islam. Upon becoming a public figure under the tutelage of Elijah Muhammad, he became a target of both institutional forces and jealousy within the Nation. Following his break with the Nation, Malcolm pursued a wider agenda of human rights and devoted himself to the betterment of black people in America through the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Gerald Horne suggests: “This is part of the value of Malcolm X as a historical figure. He is an integral part of the scaffolding that supports

⁹² Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992), 160.

a contemporary African-American identity.”⁹³ By exposing the trials that Malcolm had suffered to become the man for whom he is best remembered, Lee attempts to demonstrate that Malcolm’s experience is shared by many in America and therefore his personal journey can be understood because it is familiar. It is this sense of familiarity that guides Lee’s portrait, which often chooses to soften the historical Malcolm as well as exclude his more radical characteristics in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. This strategy has a negative effect on Lee’s ultimate message for social and political change, because his generalized approach to Malcolm does not supply spectators with sufficient understanding of how such a change may occur.

We can appreciate *Malcolm X* as a historical film by identifying Lee’s approach to the subject and acknowledging the particular historical experience he attempts to provide for the spectator, just as we did with Stone’s approach in *JFK*. This chapter will continue the analysis of how a film can create a historical experience for the spectator, touching again on each of the three factors identified in the introduction (duration and temporality, emotional orientation, and identification). Of these, we will pay particular attention to how identification is constructed and utilized in the film, noting how the historical Malcolm, played by Denzel Washington, is mediated through casting, character situation, camera and editing techniques, and sound. Lee’s film employs many typical techniques common to the Hollywood biopic to portray Malcolm X as a hero instead of a complex and multi-faceted personality: Lee purposefully associates radical elements

⁹³ Gerald Horne, “Myth and the Making of *Malcolm X*,” *The American Historical Review*, 98:2 (April 1993), 448.

historically attributed to Malcolm with the controversial Nation of Islam; he presents Malcolm's personal trajectory along the lines of a hero's journey and omits elements that do not fit this ideal; he also ignores the more complex, internationally-inclined Malcolm in order to tell a specifically American story. The ultimate goal is to introduce Malcolm to a generation who may not know him, and in order to do this Lee has chosen to provide a streamlined, easily digestible version. Regarding Lee's motives, Gerald Horne provided an important observation at the time of the film's initial release:

A recent poll reported by the black press states that 84 percent of those African Americans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four who were queried felt that he was "a hero for black Americans today." However, that same poll found that a substantially smaller percentage of that age cohort knew much about him. This circumstance presents both a situation ripe for myth making and an indictment of how history is taught in this nation.⁹⁴

Horne is wise to identify the potential for myth making because this is exactly what Lee attempts to do, and his reliance on the *Autobiography* instead of academic historical sources is evidence of this; it reveals that Lee is more interested in creating a hagiography than providing a balanced interrogation of the historical man. It is very important to Lee that black Americans value Malcolm X as much as he does, and this is why he does not shy away from elevating Malcolm's accomplishments and the circumstances of his death to characterize him as a martyr. This approach suggests that Malcolm X should be remembered with reverence and awe, and it allows Lee to ignore additional details that may otherwise appear in a purely historical account. It is this saintly portrayal that Lee is focused on providing because if he can convince spectators that Malcolm was a martyr then it follows logically that he should deserve as much attention as do other martyrs and

⁹⁴ Ibid.

saints. This results in legitimizing Malcolm's life and legacy, which in turn validates the continued struggle for racial equality in America.

From Autobiography to Biopic

As mentioned above, Lee relied primarily on the autobiography written by Alex Haley that was the result of several discussions between Haley and Malcolm X over the course of two years.⁹⁵ As a self-examination, and because it was written from the viewpoint of the latter portion of Malcolm's life, the book is not entirely factual; certain episodes of his life are inflated or enhanced for dramatic impact while others are either downplayed or omitted altogether. The major events are certainly historical, but Malcolm took a number of liberties in order to provide a certain kind of narrative, one that would convince the reader of its subject's message by demonstrating the extreme lows from which he was able to reach great heights. Alex Gillespie has observed that Malcolm and Haley craftily employed a "narrative template of conversion," a particular narrative design that portrays its protagonist as having been saved from the depths of destitution and despair; in Malcolm's case it is used to show how he achieved a transformation from being brainwashed to seeing "the greatest light."⁹⁶ The template is actually employed twice in the autobiography, first to show how he rose from the depths of being a self-hating street hustler and drug addict to become a proud preaching Muslim, and later to show how he was misguided by the controversial and narrow teachings of Elijah Muhammad's particular brand of religion in the Nation of Islam and was able to move

⁹⁵ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told To Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 392.

⁹⁶ Alex Gillespie, "Autobiography and identity: Malcolm X as author and hero," in *The Cambridge Companion To Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 30.

beyond it and discover the potential for universal fraternity and human rights. As Spike Lee notes, "The description in the book was not so much to build himself up but to lower the depths from which he rises."⁹⁷ Malcolm's ultimate intention was to inspire others to learn from his experiences and to recognize the need for change in their own lives as well as the society they live in. As an inspiring call to action the *Autobiography* certainly fulfils its function, but because of its various narrative liberties it is not always a reliable source of history. According to Nell Irvin Painter:

Both *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the film *Malcolm X* simulate history by purveying autobiographical rather than biographical truths, for the source for each representation is Malcolm's own recomposition of his life from the vantage point of 1964.⁹⁸

Therefore, Lee's decision to use the *Autobiography* as the basis for his film must succumb to similar shortfalls; in fact it is doubly so because Lee transfers that subjectivity to the cinema, which is, as noted earlier, replete with invention and speculation. The result is a prejudiced work that is even less historical than the *Autobiography*. As John Locke writes:

Lee's *Malcolm X* does no better as history than the autobiography, but refines the book's agenda for a modern audience needing contemporary relevance and streamlined heroes. The Malcolm X of the film is less self-conscious, less square, more romantic, less dogmatic, and less divisive than the autobiographical Malcolm X.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas, "Our Film Is Only a Starting Point: An Interview with Spike Lee," *Cineaste*, 19:4 (Fall, 1993), 22.

⁹⁸ Nell Irvin Painter, "Malcolm X Across the Genres," *The American Historical Review*, 98:2 (April, 1993), 433.

⁹⁹ John Locke, "Adapting The Autobiography: The Transformation of Malcolm X," *Cineaste*, 19:4 (Fall, 1993), 7.

Lee's use of Malcolm and Haley's book is also related to his own experience of reading it. Its impact on him is evident in the fact that the cover of one of the more common paperback versions of the book features a quote by Lee himself: "The most important book I'll ever read..." which speaks to Lee's personal investment in Malcolm's self-narration.¹⁰⁰ Because it has moved him so, and also because Lee believes that black Americans can achieve greater self-respect and understanding through an appreciation of Malcolm as a role model, he wants to make Malcolm into a larger-than-life character, a mythic hero to be idolized but not overly scrutinized, and this is conveniently achieved by borrowing Malcolm and Haley's use of the conversion narrative template. As suggested in the last chapter, and expressed by Gerald Horne, "... myths are not necessarily lies, they are explications. These narratives extracted from history perform a symbolic function essential to the culture that produced them."¹⁰¹ It is this function that Lee's film attempts to perform, choosing to portray Malcolm as a hero whose life was pervaded with meaning and worthy of imitation. Robert Rosenstone sees this as a common trait of biographies:

To do biography is to make the case that individuals are either at the centre of the historical process – or are worth studying as exemplars of lives, actions, and individual value systems we either admire or dislike.¹⁰²

The focus on individuals as exemplars is also part of the Hollywood tradition of 'biopics,' feature films of various genres that typically follow the lives of historic

¹⁰⁰ Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, cover (paperback edition). There is something strange with having Spike Lee make a film based on a book that has a quote by Spike Lee on its cover. It seems circular, perhaps even self-referential.

¹⁰¹ Horne, "Myth and the Making of *Malcolm X*," 440.

¹⁰² Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 90.

individuals, constructing narratives that are centred on the socio-cultural value of their subjects' accomplishments. Of all possible filmic approaches, and in light of the alternative approaches to filmmaking that Lee's previous films have employed, it is interesting that Lee chooses to use the biopic to validate Malcolm X; one critic praised the film but identified "a central irony that it is Lee's most conventional film yet, despite the fiery subject matter and Lee's reputation for innovation and independence."¹⁰³ On one hand, the genre fits his narrative agenda; as Glenn Man states: "A biopic is a mythic expression in which several textual and contextual factors often play a part."¹⁰⁴ Lee's film seeks the mythic Malcolm and so he tailors his expression by carefully choosing which factors should be included and which should be omitted, and his attempt to control the depiction of Malcolm dominates these choices. This is also in line with the form of the traditional biopic: "moral lapses, character flaws, and unmentionable proclivities were tactfully omitted from Hollywood's lives of the secular saints..."¹⁰⁵ But on the other hand, traditional biopics of the Hollywood studio system tended to focus almost exclusively on "the great *white* men of science, politics, and the arts, and the loyal women who stood behind them," and "the specifically African American models are sparse and one-dimensional."¹⁰⁶ Lee's use of the biopic is thus intriguing considering his penchant for creating racially charged films, and one would expect him to revise its traditional use and propose alternatives to its typical form. Thomas Patrick Doherty also notices this contradiction when he writes:

¹⁰³ Brian Norman, "Bringing Malcolm X to Hollywood," in *The Cambridge Companion To Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Glenn Man, "Editor's Introduction," *Biography*, 23:1 (Winter 2000), v-vi.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Patrick Doherty, "Malcolm X: In print, on screen," *Biography*, 23:1 (Winter 2000), 37.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37. Italics are mine.

Lee's film is at one and the same time a revision of the condescension and white control of the biopics of African Americans of the 1950s, and an aping of the Hollywood hagiopics of the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁷

To the uninitiated spectator, as well as numerous critics, Lee's attempt at revision is much less apparent than his adherence to the traditional function of the biopic that seeks to raise its subject high enough to imply greatness.

Ultimately, it appears that Lee employs the biopic format to fulfill a specific goal, which is to highlight continued tensions between black and white relations in America, and to make a firm statement for black rights. His strategy is to use Malcolm X as a model of someone who refused to accept the status quo, and by presenting Malcolm as an example to be followed Lee encourages others to emulate him. George F. Custen notes in his groundbreaking work on the biopics of Hollywood's studio system:

In making the lives of the famous fit particular contours—and thereby controlling normative boundaries of actions and lives—these films cultivate the interests of their producers, presenting a world view that naturalizes certain lives and specific values over alternative ones.¹⁰⁸

This statement is significant in respect of *Malcolm X* for a number of reasons: it suggests that Lee is prescribing a certain form of behaviour that black Americans should conform or aspire to; it reveals that the purpose of portraying Malcolm X in a biopic format serves to convey something the director feels is important; and it proposes that to place Malcolm X at the centre of a biopic is to naturalize or legitimize his historical relevance, despite the focus on certain elements at the expense of others. It is therefore the biopic format that enables Lee to pursue his racial agenda; by following the *Autobiography* he can

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁸ Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 4.

highlight elements of Malcolm's life that are associated with the struggle for black rights and social power while overlooking elements that may complicate that message.

Throughout the film, as we shall see, Lee strives to communicate a message of unity that becomes synonymous with the personal transformations and heroic trajectory of its title character; at several critical points Lee chooses to emphasize this general concept instead of providing a more specific interrogation of Malcolm X that may threaten the potential for racial unity. As Robert Rosenstone wisely observes of biographies: "The resulting work is ultimately based less on the raw data than on that data incorporated into a vision created by the literary (or filmic) skills of the biographer."¹⁰⁹ It is in this sense that the biopic is relied upon; not so much to explore the complete man, but to treat him as a symbol of civil rights in America. William Lyne writes:

Lee's focus on discrete, epiphanic events is an American storytelling tradition (Columbus discovered America, Lincoln freed the slaves...) that combines with the creation of an isolated, messianic personality to obscure the ongoing, but less dramatic, forces and patterns that lie beneath official history.¹¹⁰

As if to emphasize this particularized view of history, right after the opening credits are shown (a sequence to which we will return in a moment) we are introduced to the narrative via an elaborate crane shot that descends from an elevated train, crosses the street underneath its tracks, and tracks in on the shoe of a man in a zoot suit and large-brimmed hat whose head is lowered to obscure his face. The spectator expects this to be Malcolm X, due to the title of the film, the elaborate shot that brings us to him, and the obvious attempt to hide his face while in plain view. We discover, however, that it is in

¹⁰⁹ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 92.

¹¹⁰ William Lyne, "No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office," *African American Review*, 34:1 (Spring 2000), 54.

fact the character Shorty, Malcolm's accomplice and friend from his hustling days, played by none other than Spike Lee himself. Shorty proceeds to cross the street, enters a barbershop, and begins to prepare a solution that will 'conk,' or straighten, hair. When he is finished, Shorty asks, "Where's homeboy?" Out of the backroom emerges Malcolm and as he walks into the room another patron announces, "There he is." This elaborate sequence introduces spectators to Malcolm and plays with their expectations of where or when he will appear, expectations that are connected to the biographic nature of the film's title and its publicity. What is significant is that we have been introduced to Malcolm X via Spike Lee. Lee's portrayal of Shorty therefore serves more than one purpose, and it could be argued that this method of introduction functions primarily to inform us that it is Lee's version of Malcolm X we are going to see. This insinuation is reinforced by Lee's elaborate crane shot that literally takes us down the street and into a barbershop where the unassuming Malcolm is waiting; just as Alex Haley mediated the *Autobiography*, Lee uses the full power of his cinematic prowess to introduce us to his particular perspective on Malcolm X.

Opening Credits – Igniting Emotions

Before we look at the way Lee portrays Malcolm X to convey a particular experience of him, we should look at opening credits again to observe how the spectator is oriented emotionally toward the film and how duration and time for reflection play into this. As stated earlier, Malcolm's life holds great significance for Lee, and the way he provides access to the historical Malcolm through a biopic format echoes this sense of significance. Lee orients the spectator so that he or she is also impressed by Malcolm's

presence and charisma, and the impression is primarily emotional due to the subjectivity of the source material, Lee's personal interest and the sentimentality of Malcolm's portrayal. Lee makes it known from the outset that this is a film about the trials of black Americans at the hands of white Americans, and he does not hide his feelings that it has been unfair, unjust and absolutely unacceptable. His involvement in the film has always been racially motivated; in fact, the film was originally set to be directed by Norman Jewison and, despite Jewison's eventual independent decision to turn it down Lee was adamant that someone who was not a black American could not direct this film.¹¹¹ It is worth repeating some of Lee's comments regarding the film to demonstrate his bias:

When it got out that Norman was going to direct this film, that's when I started to speak out about it... No way was I going to let it go without saying something about it;¹¹² The story of Malcolm X belonged to black film, and there's no other way to look at it;¹¹³ I want our people to be all fired up for this. To get inspired by it. This is not just some regular bullshit Hollywood movie. This is life and death we're dealing with, this is a mindset, this is what black people in America have come through.¹¹⁴

This attitude is also directly evident in the film's opening credits, and if we compare them to the opening credit sequence in *JFK* Oliver Stone's approach seems downright cerebral. Lee is obviously aiming for a figurative effect that appeals to spectators' feelings, and the result is quite successful. The sequence is much simpler and shorter than in *JFK*; the soundtrack consists of a brief Muslim prayer, then the introduction of Malcolm X to a congregation whom we also hear. Over Malcolm's speech and the crowd's spoken approval and clapping we are shown a tight shot of an American flag; it is so tight that

¹¹¹ Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 10.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁴ bell hooks, "Consumed By Images," *Artforum International*, 31:6 (February 1993), 6.

the flag reaches beyond the screen. The first time we see the flag coincides with a cymbal crash, followed by music that resembles a mournful dirge, with jazz touches and a lead trumpet accompanied by other brass instruments. Malcolm's speech consists of a series of criminal accusations against "the white man," spoken with vitriol and conviction. Major cast and crew positions appear over shots of the flag, but these shots are interrupted periodically by the notorious footage of Rodney King being beaten by police in Los Angeles in 1991 – from the flag, to the beating, and back and forth several times. Halfway through the sequence, with Malcolm's voice rising with anger and the crowd shouting with approval, the flag starts to burn. Upon closer inspection, the flag gets engulfed in flames just as Malcolm says "the white man said *nigger* get down in the bottom of that boat." The symbolism is obvious: Lee is suggesting that the highly offensive term and its circumstances are the sparks that set fire to America. Once the flag starts to burn, choral voices begin to moan with the music, like a communal lament. By the end of the credits the flag has burned down to the shape of an X. It is interesting to notice that the X has not erased the flag entirely; it is a hollow X that retains the flag's colours and pattern. This is our first indication that Lee's agenda is primarily American in scope. Rather than have the X totally replace the flag, Lee is satisfied with having it contain a remnant of the American signifier. After this, the image disappears along with the soundtrack to make way for a single title card for Lee as director. This is interesting because rather than bridge the figurativeness of the credits with the following narrative as Oliver Stone did, Lee's credit interrupts the intense emotion of the credits long enough to shift the mood in the next sequence to happy swing music and the introduction of the

main characters. However, despite the interruption, the intensity of the anger that the spectator is subject to during the credits is not easy to forget, and its effect lingers in the following scenes. And rightly so, because these scenes will focus on Malcolm before his interest in the plight of black Americans, so the lasting impression of the emotional credits provides significant counterpoint.

There is another interesting observation to make about this credit sequence that relates to the temporal modification of David Bordwell's model of narration outlined in the introduction, which suggests that our experience of a film is less intellectual if we lack the time required to process the information and appropriate it. As the footage of the Rodney King beating continues the shots gradually increase in length until the flag begins to burn. There are four shots leading up to the burning flag and the duration of each is four, five, seven and nine seconds. Once the flag begins to burn, the following four shots of Rodney King last eight, six, four and three seconds. This is particularly interesting because as the footage clips increase in length, the spectator is able to make sense of them and has more time to reflect, relatively. Once the flag starts to burn, the clips of video footage decrease in length, and the reverse effect occurs. Because a burning American flag is an aggressive anti-patriotic symbol, spectators, especially those in the U.S., would be affected quite emotionally. The decision to decrease the shot length of the Rodney King footage after the flag begins to burn seems to be a further tactic to keep the experience emotional, thus reducing the ability for spectators to reflect or intellectualize, and instead forcing them to take a personal, emotional position in relation to the film. It is a very clever move by Lee, one that calculates how emotions are affected by the

representation of symbols, as well as the controversial legacy of Malcolm X. In an interview with *Cineaste*, Lee noted: “What’s interesting for me now in reading a lot of the reviews of *Malcolm X* is how so many critics had predetermined that the film was going to be inflammatory,” a comment not supported by the film itself.¹¹⁵ It is a strange statement given the style of the opening credits, which are literally inflammatory, incendiary, explosive; these words all refer to being on fire while also implying violence or aggressiveness, and thus it cannot be a coincidence that Lee builds on this trope. Lee introduces the spectator to his portrait of Malcolm X via this provocative sequence and he is obviously engaging with the expectations of spectators. He provides a vile symbol for Americans, the burning of their flag, on which he superimposes a speech by Malcolm calling the white man a murderer, a kidnapper and a destroyer, and inverting the phrasing of the ‘American Dream’ to call it the “American Nightmare.” There is no doubt that these credits use a confrontational style and therefore it is Lee’s intention to shock the spectator.

Lee has admitted that his film was directly influenced by Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, especially the way Stone uses editing to suggest multiple perspectives that deserve equal attention:

I gotta give my props here to Oliver Stone. Barry Brown and I saw Oliver Stone’s *JFK* the first day it came out, and I said, “Barry, man, look what they’re doing. C’mon!” That film gave us great inspiration.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Crowdus and Georgakas, “Our Film Is Only a Starting Point,” 21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24. Lee goes on to discuss his attempt to mimic the opening newsreel montage in *JFK* for the end of *Malcolm X*, and he also admits that he was “directly influenced” by Stone’s film.

This comment is intriguing because not only is Lee obviously not interested in showing more than one version of Malcolm, there are no competing histories in the film that need to be sorted through. Lee's *Malcolm X* represents the Malcolm Lee wants to portray; when asked if there were any elements he would have liked to include but could not due to budget or production difficulties, Lee replied, "No, this is it, this is the movie I wanted to make."¹¹⁷ This attitude reflects Lee's goal of providing a generalized Malcolm for a specific purpose, but it seems inconsistent in light of other acknowledgments by Lee. For example, "We've never said that anyone who sees this film doesn't need to know anything else about Malcolm X. I mean, the man had four or five different lives, so the film is really only a primer, a starting point."¹¹⁸ This implication that the real investigation should begin after the film is similar to Oliver Stone's 'What is Past is Prologue' as well as an indication that the spectator is not expected to reflect while watching the film. Yet it raises the question of why Lee would borrow the style of *JFK* and how it relates to his historical intentions. With Stone's film we observed the lack of sufficient time necessary for the spectator to reflect. With Lee's film, there is also a lack of time for reflection, but there are no competing narratives. The spectator is hardly tasked with interpreting meaning after seeing *Malcolm X*, and therefore it can be stated that Lee's film does not attempt to contribute to a historical discourse. His goal is to move the spectator to appreciate and gain respect for Malcolm as an important figure in American civil rights, not to openly contemplate how one should interpret the historical Malcolm. The resulting effect is one that casts Malcolm as a typical Hollywood hero,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

who must overcome great odds and recognize the error of his ways before he can lay down a legacy for others to follow.

Lee noted in another interview that he chose to open the film with the Rodney King footage to show that “little had changed in America since Malcolm’s time.”¹¹⁹ Lee’s particular use of the *Autobiography* illustrates his claim that “little has changed” and this is most evident in how he approaches the beating of Brother Johnson (Steve White) in the film, which figuratively connects an incident in Malcolm’s life to the Rodney King beating. The sequence begins with Malcolm being told that the police have beaten Brother Johnson. Arriving on the scene shortly after, a group of black citizens compete for Malcolm’s attention in describing Brother Johnson’s beating by white police officers, which was instigated by no more than Brother Johnson’s disregard of a command to move on. The description of the event quickly gives way to one man asking what Malcolm is going to do about it, claiming that, as a Muslim, Malcolm will probably only make a speech. The shot then pans to a woman on the other side of Malcolm who echoes the man’s accusatory tone, “Muslims talk a good game, but they never do nothing. Unless somebody bothers Muslims.” This verbal challenge is followed by a very slow pan back to Malcolm, lasting almost ten seconds. The camera rests on Malcolm for effect and, together with the long pan, suggests this is a significant turning point for him that represents a shift from only defending black Muslims to defending all black people. This scene is followed by another in which Malcolm and several others march to the police

¹¹⁹ Julius Lester, “Black Supremacy and Anti-Semitism: Religion in *Malcolm X*,” *Cineaste*, 19:4 (Fall 1993), 16.

station where Brother Johnson is being held, and Malcolm's defiance of white power has its first major test. He emerges an obvious hero for all black people through his demand for the fair treatment of Brother Johnson, his boldness in standing up to the policemen's disrespect and racism, as well as through the police captain's concern for Malcolm's power in commanding the Nation of Islam members to move on, muttering: "That's too much power for one man to have." While this sequence is meant to show Malcolm's acceptance of the challenge to take on black rights beyond solely black Muslim rights, Lee has cleverly staged the details of the incident to provide a heroic scenario.

Primarily due to the way the man and woman accost Malcolm for being passive to anyone but Muslims, we are led to believe that Brother Johnson is not a Muslim, and that Malcolm's decision to intervene amounts to his rising above a religious barrier to defend an entire race. But according to the *Autobiography* and not disputed by critics, not only was Brother Johnson actually a Muslim, he was also a member of the Nation of Islam.¹²⁰ Lee's version of this incident is therefore not so much to explore the historical Malcolm as it is to construct a racially driven Malcolm who can appeal directly to contemporary audiences who have recently watched the Rodney King beating on television and learned of the acquittal of its white perpetrators. The effect is similar to spectators having prior knowledge of the historical event depicted in a historical film, but in this case it is less specific in that spectators arrive at the theater conscious of both historical and contemporary racial tension, hence the concern of Los Angeles police that there would be

¹²⁰ Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 238.

race riots at screenings of the film.¹²¹ The Brother Johnson beating sequence is thus an extension of the notion introduced in the opening credits, that ‘little has changed.’ Lee’s revision of the facts is unfortunate because it renders his film as little more than romantic propaganda. Even the position of Malcolm in this scene and of this scene in the film speaks volumes; Malcolm is at the centre of the group of animated black citizens who either compete for his attention or admonish him for being narrow or passive. As the camera pans from person to person on either side of him, the spectator is subjected to viewing rapid swish pans and is unable to discern Malcolm between the final positions of these shots. This is perhaps why the final pan takes so long to arrive at Malcolm, as if to suggest he has been caught in the middle of bickering but he is finally accepting his position at the centre of these people’s plights. It is also significant that this sequence occurs exactly midway through the film and therefore can be considered as a fulcrum upon which the entire film’s balance is supported. Nell Irvin Painter notes:

Spike Lee’s film heightens Malcolm’s confrontation with the police over the beating of Brother Johnson, as though it were a major turning point rather than one of many steps (sideways and backward as well as forward) in the emergence of the Nation of Islam.¹²²

Softening Malcolm for General Consumption

As we have seen, Lee’s particular version of Malcolm X does not shy away from adjusting the historical record in order to provide a certain kind of historical experience that serves a larger purpose, a practice common to most historical films. Lee’s approach attempts to mediate the spectator’s experience of the past primarily through an alignment

¹²¹ Crowdus and Georgakas, “Our Film Is Only a Starting Point,” 21.

¹²² Painter, “Malcolm X Across the Genres,” 434.

with his particular characterization of Malcolm. In order to appeal to the majority of spectators, Lee chooses to soften Malcolm's more hostile characteristics and degrading experiences so that the end result is someone whom spectators, regardless of race, can agree is worthy of emulation. Manning Marable writes, "[Lee's] approach to Malcolm was the construction of a mythic hero figure, not an actual political leader who made mistakes, assessed his errors, and went in new directions."¹²³ And bell hooks, one of Lee's more unapologetic critics, writes:

But, like other bad movies with powerful subjects, it touches the hearts and minds of folks who bring their own meanings to it, connecting it with their own experience. Young black folks can brag of the way the fictional Malcolm confronts white folks, even as young white folks leave the theater relieved to see that Malcolm was a good guy.¹²⁴

Lee achieves such a generic Malcolm by aligning the spectator with Malcolm's perspective, so that at almost every turn we are oriented to identify with Malcolm's particular experience. This is evident throughout, but a few examples include: the occasional freeze frames on Malcolm's face while he narrates a past experience; our restricted position inside the solitary confinement cell in prison with Malcolm while he is incarcerated; Malcolm's first meeting with Elijah Muhammad (Al Freeman Jr.)—as we ascend the stairs with Malcolm the orchestral score rises in pitch as if to underscore the spiritual value of this meeting for him, reaching its ascendant peak when Elijah is revealed to him.

¹²³ Manning Marable, "Malcolm as Messiah: Cultural Myths vs. Historical Reality in *Malcolm X*," *Cineaste*, 19:4 (Fall 1993), 9.

¹²⁴ bell hooks, "Consumed By Images," 6.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are various levels of character engagement that encourage spectators to identify with a film's protagonist. Whether it is Carl Plantinga's internal/external relationship, Murray Smith's three levels of engagement (recognition, alignment and allegiance), or Greg Smith's feeling with and feeling for a character, what is important for our study of historical films is that spectators are oriented toward a protagonist in more than one way. This enables the spectator to feel a certain way in relation to a character while also maintaining a certain, perhaps different, orientation toward the larger context that surrounds him or her. The only times we are not aligned with Malcolm's perspective are therefore also related to our identification with him, because these few instances concern secret plots being formulated against him by either the Nation of Islam or covert government operations, and thus they provide us with information that Malcolm cannot know that nonetheless enable us to feel for him. It is this constant character alignment with Malcolm that makes Lee's film less intellectual and more sentimental because it omits additional perspectives and tailors the narrative to convince the spectator that Malcolm is a hero. While *JFK* uses an accelerated temporality and a sensorial barrage to convey a sense of the past, *Malcolm X* entices the spectator to see and feel as Malcolm did and thus it is through character identification that a sense of his significance, and by extension the significance of the past, is achieved.

The historical Malcolm X is softened in numerous ways to achieve this effect. To begin with, the decision to cast Denzel Washington has struck certain critics as an

attempt to make Malcolm less hostile and more likeable for mainstream audiences.¹²⁵

Given his desire to educate spectators, Lee's claim that this is exactly the film he wanted to make suggests that he has achieved a certain level of authenticity, but it is complicated by his use of the older Washington for the younger Malcolm's hustler sequences when Malcolm would have been in his teens. In fact, most of the events in the film occur in Malcolm's life between his teens and his death at 40 years old. It seems that sticking with Washington throughout helps Lee to streamline the purpose of the narrative, which is to acknowledge the legacy of Malcolm's teachings for the black community without delving too deeply into the specifics of his life. The result is only a handful of events that shape Malcolm, instead of an entire range of causes that should include his family life and his active involvement at an international level to further the cause of civil rights. Sticking with Washington allows Lee to present a consistent image; throughout the film he is more interested in presenting Malcolm's views or politics as being coordinated with those of the majority of black people in America. Perhaps Lee does not trust spectators to be able to appreciate that Malcolm was human and thus capable of pursuing his own interests and beliefs while still contributing to the betterment of black rights in America. Using Washington for the whole film conveniently projects a relatively static vision of Malcolm, which suggests his transformation from street hustler to Muslim minister was destined and inevitable. We identify the latter Malcolm as the true individual, as opposed to the Malcolm before his conversion whom we recognize as pre-Malcolm, or not-quite-

¹²⁵ For example, see Norman, "Bringing Malcolm X to Hollywood," 56; and hooks, "Consumed By Images," 6.

Malcolm-yet. This is tied to the audience's prior knowledge of him, but it is exacerbated by Lee's use of Washington.

Malcolm's transformation occurs in an instant; after he discovers Elijah Muhammad's teachings in prison, the first time we cut to him outside of prison he wears glasses, speaks slower and more plainly, and suddenly he is correct, listened to, brave, and righteous. The shift is immediate, which gives credence to the notion that this is indeed a hagiography; similar to stories of saints, Lee treats Malcolm's religious conversion as a major turn.¹²⁶ Portraying Malcolm in such a way creates a dilemma for Lee: how can he portray Malcolm's criminal activity that included hustling, drug use and petty theft with some level of authenticity while retaining the sympathy of the audience? The answer for Lee was to cast these criminal elements as either naïve or comedic, which enables him to keep the audience's focus toward expecting the reformed Malcolm who will emerge later. These early sequences are therefore not to be taken too seriously. When Malcolm and his cohorts rob a rich couple the scene is played as if it were light comedy. Appropriately for our discussion, Shorty is seen doing most of the stealing. When we finally see Malcolm take something it is when he tries to remove a ring from its sleeping owner's finger, and Malcolm's two bumbling attempts appeal to our sense of hope that he succeeds more than our disdain for his corrupt behaviour. John Locke observes a contradiction because of Lee's choice:

While entertaining, the light treatment of Malcolm's purported sins undermines his future role as a man returned from the brink... What remains is a kind of

¹²⁶ Todd Boyd, "Popular Culture and Political Empowerment: The Americanization and Death of Malcolm X," *Cineaste*, 19:4 (Fall 1993), 13.

romantic victimization that protects Malcolm's image from the ravages of true degradation. We're told of his suffering but we don't have to see it.¹²⁷

Lee's decision to retain Washington throughout, to have his prison conversion enact an immediate physical change and to downplay or completely omit Malcolm's less honourable traits and experiences creates a Malcolm X who is not only admirable but also more iconic than a closer inspection may reveal. While it is Lee's goal to create such an icon, it does little to contribute to an ongoing historical discourse about the actual man behind the symbol.

Malcolm X's early post-conversion period as a Muslim minister who demanded an end to systematic oppression was not only defined by his determination and aggressiveness but also by his belief in the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam's peculiar view of history. This view claims that the original humans were a black race and that white men were gradually bred as a 'devil race' to challenge them. This 'devil race' was inherently weaker and thus more susceptible to evil and to performing immoral deeds. They were to rule the world for six thousand years, around which time they would destroy themselves and the original race would then rule, led by a 'chosen one' whose wisdom and power would be infinite.¹²⁸ This version of history that Malcolm subscribed to, at least during his years at Elijah Muhammad's side before he was dismissed, is an example of the extremism that Malcolm believed in and preached, among many tenets of the Nation of Islam that tend toward radical fanaticism. It is significant because Malcolm's beliefs at this time demonstrate that he was not the

¹²⁷ Locke, "Adapting The Autobiography," 5-6.

¹²⁸ Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 167-171.

streamlined everyman who Lee makes him out to be. In order for Lee to orient diverse audiences toward accepting Malcolm as reasonable, balanced and worthy of emulation, he finds it necessary to downplay such extremism or to divert it from Malcolm entirely.

As John Locke states:

In general, the film burdens others with the peculiarities of the Nation of Islam and leaves Malcolm with the universal messages of pride and self-discipline, though in reality Malcolm covered the spectrum.¹²⁹

A blatant example of this concerns the historical Malcolm's repeated use of the term "white devils" to refer to white people. The phrase appears throughout the *Autobiography*, but in the film it is rarely heard. The closest he comes to saying it in the film is when a reporter asks him about the term and he responds: "I've said white people are devils." John Locke notices a subtle difference:

The past tense [leaves] his current views ambiguous. By separating the 'white' from the 'devil,' Lee removes the racial philosophy underpinning the Nation of Islam's concept of evil, further distancing Malcolm from the 'religion' of the Nation of Islam.¹³⁰

This is all done to soften the extremism of Malcolm and make him more appealing for a mixed contemporary audience.

The most obvious example of this strategy is a scene in which Malcolm and his future wife Betty (Angela Bassett) are on a date. According to the *Autobiography*, there were no dates; in the book Malcolm explains he had little interest in romance or courtship, and the idea of marriage with Betty was a practical move that respected their

¹²⁹ Locke, "Adapting The Autobiography," 6.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

faith in the Nation of Islam.¹³¹ Malcolm's description in the book of his decision to help her, to instruct her in her faith, to perhaps marry her because it would meet the Nation's conditions of proper unions, is very clinical, as if he is choosing a doctor to treat a medical condition. Lee ignores this description because it risks alienating the audience from Malcolm and instead passes on any non-romantic motivation to the Nation or Elijah Muhammad himself. As Malcolm and Betty sit next to each other at a cafeteria counter and eat lunch, they discuss him coming to one of Betty's classes to teach the women about their role in the Nation of Islam. Malcolm warns her that he is harder on the women. When Betty asks why, the shot cuts midway through Malcolm's response to another location where Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm are talking and Elijah's comments correspond to the conversation in the cafeteria. This is Lee's most intriguing artistic effort in the film because he has Elijah speak the more controversial statements while relying on a shot/reverse shot pattern that places Malcolm and Betty on the same 'side,' in a much more passive, listening position, and Elijah on the other 'side.' The following excerpt demonstrates Lee's deft approach:

(Interior Cafeteria)

(Malcolm is screen-left, Betty is screen-right)
MALCOLM: You see, we have to be very careful when it comes to women...

(Interior Elijah's House)

(Elijah is screen left, Malcolm is screen-right)
ELIJAH: Too many of our women have too much of the devil in them.

¹³¹ Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 230-236.

(Malcolm assumes the same position as Elijah in a medium shot, looking screen-right)

MALCOLM: We don't protect, we don't value, we don't even support them. You see, the building of a new nation begins with the woman.

(The shot cuts to Betty listening, looking screen-left)

Because the mother is the first teacher of the child. The message she gives that child, the child gives to the world. So we have to be very careful.

BETTY: Should I tell my sisters then that we don't believe in marriage?

MALCOLM: No, no, no, no. We don't oppose marriage.

MALCOLM: Mr. Muhammad teaches us, if a woman is the right height for a man, the right complexion...

(The shot cuts to Malcolm listening as Elijah details the immoral activities of women – Malcolm looks screen-left, occupying the same perspective as Betty does in the cafeteria – the shot then cuts to a reverse of Elijah speaking and looking toward screen-right)

ELIJAH: ... Running around in the streets half naked, talking too much, listening to the wrong men, making them deceitful, untrustworthy, fresh, ... mind you, men are to blame too.

ELIJAH: When it comes to choosing a mate... Samson, the strongest man that ever lived, was destroyed by the woman that slept in his arms.

ELIJAH: We're not Catholic priests. We don't believe in celibacy, no, no.

ELIJAH: ... if she's half the man's age plus seven, and if she understands that man's essential nature is strong and she's willing to support that. And if she can sew and can cook and loves children and stays

BETTY: I think you've made your points
 Brother Minister Malcolm. You haven't
 any time for marriage.

MALCOLM: No.
 (They share a chuckle)

out of trouble...

The only motivation for the cross cuts from one location to another is to have Elijah speak the more controversial statements, which results in an odd back-and-forth between the two locations that emphasizes a separation between what Malcolm thinks and what he says. It also emphasizes the intellectual dependence Malcolm had on Elijah at this time, despite the fact that Malcolm was Elijah's most devoted spokesman. Lee's skillful style in this scene implies that Malcolm was merely a mouthpiece for Elijah Muhammad's views. When Elijah speaks, Malcolm echoes Betty's position as listener in the shot/reverse shot scheme. Through the clever use of shot/reverse shot conventions, Betty begins to reply as if directly to Elijah, culminating in her cutting him off at the end ("I think you've made your points..."), despite her saying this to Malcolm. It is a subtle but very effective manipulation of the shot/reverse shot device that distances Malcolm from the extremism of the Nation of Islam. The fact that Malcolm and Betty share a chuckle at the end also serves to further align them against the seriousness of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. This is emphasized again soon after when Malcolm and Betty eat ice cream (another instance of the courtship that did not occur) and he asks her how tall she is. Referring to the Nation's rule that couples must be the right height for one another, she replies, "Well, Brother Baines says that I'm tall enough for a tall man," and Malcolm says, "Hmm, he's briefed you also," and the two share a laugh. This is another example

of how the Nation's radical elements are attributed to someone other than Malcolm, and even Malcolm finds them silly or laughable. This makes Malcolm more normal and thus more deserving of our respect and admiration.

Lee's decision to alter Malcolm's autobiographical account of his relationship with Betty serves his larger purpose of portraying Malcolm as an everyman and portraying him and Betty as a normalized romantic couple. There is another element of their relationship where Lee takes certain liberties, this time choosing what is realistic over what is historical, and his decision to do so has a significant impact on the film as a work of history. In his book on the making of the film, Lee speaks of how Malcolm's widow Betty had been asking him repeatedly for a copy of the script but he delayed because he was certain she would find problems with it.¹³² Once he gave it to her his fears were confirmed:

She said it was the worst piece of shit she'd ever read in her life. She came and she told me she and Malcolm never fought. Now what married couple in the history of the world has never had an argument? There was never any tension about money, about their financial status? Ever? Was this some kind of Disney, Merrie Melodies, Archie and Betty life they led? Myself, I don't think so. I just—I'll have to handle it. We're trying to approximate the truth. How are we going to tell a realistic story about Malcolm X if we have it so that he and Betty never fought, never had words? What kind of film is this supposed to be?¹³³

This passage is extremely interesting. What kind of film, indeed! Lee is very clear that he prefers to present an approximation of the truth even when privileged access to the truth is possible. Historical films typically achieve no more than an approximation of the truth, but it is rarely central to the motivation of their creators. Furthermore, Lee is suggesting

¹³² Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 98.

¹³³ Ibid.

that the 'truth' and a 'realistic story' are contradictory. Regardless of hearing the truth (that Malcolm and Betty never fought) from a primary source, Lee is adamant that spectators will not be convinced and will require falsification in order to believe the story is 'realistic.' He cites animation, cartoons and comic strips to suggest that Betty's claim is the stuff of make-believe. It shows he has little interest in historical accuracy and is not overly concerned with providing frequent acknowledgment of a historical discourse. Historical accuracy is certainly not mandatory, let alone sufficiently achievable, but historical acknowledgement is an important component of the production of a history effect. There are many filmmakers who portray historical events or individuals who are also concerned with dramatic cohesion, but of these it is the films that acknowledge the existence of a historical context and an ongoing discourse that provide an interesting contribution to our conception of history. Otherwise the narrative gets reduced to what can be realistic and thus is separated from the actuality of history. Lee's statement shows that what is realistic has little to do with actuality; instead, it is through fabrication that one can convey the semblance of a real thing. In fact, it seems that Lee's entire concern with orienting the spectator toward Malcolm is to avoid a history effect, opting instead for sentimental impact and narrative integrity.

Lee's desire to be realistic takes on new meaning if we compare it to an incident in Malcolm's early life, portrayed in both the book and the film. In junior high school, when young Malcolm Little tells his teacher that he wants to be a lawyer, the teacher's response is that it is not possible because of Malcolm's skin colour; he says, "Now the important thing is to be realistic." He suggests Malcolm become a carpenter, because

“that’s a good profession for a colour.” He finishes by saying, “Nothing succeeds like success, as long as you’re realistic.” This incident had a profound effect on Malcolm; he states in his autobiography: “And then one day, ... something happened which was to become the first major turning point of my life.”¹³⁴ It had the effect of awakening him to racial prejudice, a realization that would impact the rest of his life and determine the path of his career. If we consider the message in the teacher’s advice and how it had an adverse effect on young Malcolm, it seems strange that Lee would be satisfied with merely being realistic in his depiction. To be realistic is to stay within the confines of what is possible and typical; it implies adhering to the status quo. Because of this, it becomes evident that Lee has not provided an alternative to the traditional Hollywood biopic, nor is he interested in doing so despite any claims he has made to the contrary. His reluctance to engage with the historical Malcolm and his satisfaction with showing what is narratively acceptable chokes Malcolm’s historical legacy and substitutes it with the portrait of a hero. The spectator’s experience is thus less historical than it is dramatic, characterized by its realistic correspondence to common dramatic structures that portray individual protagonists as heroes who overcome great odds and charismatically ‘get the girl.’

Omissions and Incongruities

In order to adhere to such a dramatic structure, Lee not only reshapes Malcolm’s character to be more evenhanded, he also refashions Malcolm’s life by omitting certain important details that would require the spectator to make her or his own assumptions

¹³⁴ Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 37.

about the specific value of the man. As mentioned previously, these omissions allow Lee to emphasize a specific message: that Malcolm X sought to elevate black rights in America, and therefore his legacy concerns American racial unity against American social and political oppression. This particular message requires Lee to downplay certain historical events that risk diluting its geographical and racial scope. Important among these events is Malcolm's experience abroad, specifically in Africa. Lee has no choice but to show part of Malcolm's trip to join the annual pilgrimage (the 'hajj') to Mecca in 1964; it was such an important trip for Malcolm that Lee would have been remiss to exclude it. It was on this trip that Malcolm started to gain a new understanding of civil and human rights that looked beyond racial boundaries, and Malcolm was beginning to shift his thinking beyond the borders of America. This feature of Malcolm's life reaches beyond Lee's specifically American scope and therefore the significance of this international episode is minimized and used to expose domestic issues facing Malcolm rather than to consider the implications of his political transformation on an international level. Todd Boyd remarks:

Lee refuses to address Malcolm's transformation from an archetypal 'race man' to an internationalist and pan-Africanist. The film merely honours Malcolm as a humanist, and this incomplete portrait of a complex man sets the stage for his enshrinement as a true 'American.'¹³⁵

Lee's strategy falls short of appreciating the breadth of Malcolm's legacy and thus reduces the film's capacity to inspire others to follow his example, particularly because Lee focuses on the iconic Malcolm X instead of pursuing a deeper exploration of the man.

¹³⁵ Boyd, "Popular Culture and Political Empowerment," 13.

As if to emphasize his particular goal of racial unity, Lee has Malcolm declare it just before he leaves for his overseas pilgrimage. Having just left the Nation of Islam, Malcolm declares his intentions at a news conference. Speaking of his plan to establish the Muslim Mosque Incorporated, he says:

Whites can help us, but they can't join us. There can be no black-white unity until there is first some black unity. We cannot think of uniting with others until we have first learned to unite amongst ourselves. We cannot think of being acceptable to others until we have first proven acceptable to ourselves.

Malcolm then announces that he is going on a pilgrimage to Mecca and the next sequence is devoted to the trip. It is significant that Lee introduces the trip by having Malcolm remind us of the message of black unity; it has the effect of relegating the trip's relevance to that of a mere interlude, an effect enhanced by both the visual and aural style of the sequence. There is an aural pattern that is followed: the sequence begins with music, followed by a Muslim prayer, more of the same music, and concludes with Malcolm praying. There is no dialogue in the sequence, although at times there is a voiceover of Malcolm and Betty reading a letter he wrote to her, which will be discussed shortly. The music and praying act as a soundtrack for the sequence, and because of the lack of dialogue produces an effect similar to that of a musical interlude, raising a concern regarding how seriously the spectator should treat this event. The type of music is also significant. It is Duke Ellington's "Arabesque Cookie" (also known as "Arabian Dance"); it is thus grounded in an American jazz tradition, despite its exotic touches that evoke non-American musical scales and dissonant instrument pairing. In terms of visuals, Lee stylizes the footage of the trip to make it different from the American sequences; he mixes regular film stock with smaller gauges of film that are blown up to 35mm, which

give the sequence a more personal feel, reminiscent of home movies made with Super 8 film. Throughout the sequence there are two men in suits whom Malcolm makes reference to in his letter to Betty, noting his concern that they are following him. We see them using smaller handheld cameras and thus we are expected attribute the personalized style of footage to their cameras. But because of the variety of camera angles used, including shots of Malcolm smiling and waving at a camera at very close range, the use of this style seems broader, and it would not be incorrect to assume that the personal nature of the look of this sequence is meant to cast the entire episode as a private interlude, not one where Malcolm changes significantly enough to alter his public persona. This reading is confirmed by the fact that the main dramatic development in this scene is to expose American forces spying on Malcolm, foreshadowing a specifically American fate that awaits him.

Lee's strategy for maintaining an American scope also requires that he exclude Malcolm's many meetings with various African leaders, meetings that expanded his worldview and contributed to his anti-racist and anti-imperialist agenda. In an interview with *Cineaste*, Lee responds to the criticism that he did not provide enough focus on the international component of Malcolm's development:

But people don't know who [former leader of the Republic of Ghana] Kwame Nkrumah is anyway... I don't know if we would have gained anything by showing him meeting with Nkrumah or others. Besides, at that point in the film, we're trying to build some momentum.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Crowds and Georgakas, "Our Film Is Only a Starting Point," 20.

Lee's disinterest in providing an open historical exploration of Malcolm X is evident in this statement. Historical films are typically undertaken to provide access to an experience of people and things that cannot be known firsthand. By only addressing topics that are familiar to spectators his agenda seems to be less historical than romantic, which is supported by his desire for a realistic narrative. Following Malcolm to Africa later in the film is therefore simply to 'build some momentum' that will return him to America and have him confront American challenges. It is interesting to abstract this and consider that the film relegates Africa to a background role in the portrayal of racial strife in America. When the historical Malcolm X went to Africa (more than once) he gradually shifted his consideration of race relations to the point where he could envision a universal fraternity of men that was contrary to the restrictive racial boundaries he had subscribed to in the Nation of Islam. For this intellectual shift to have occurred, Malcolm needed to leave America. If Lee ignores the ideological potential of Malcolm's African period, it seems that he risks trivializing the larger context by reducing Malcolm's impact to a specific application; surprisingly, by treating the African trip as an interlude instead of identifying its potential for expanding the scope of civil rights, Lee does not follow Malcolm's example. In this context, it is also interesting to consider Lee's casting of contemporary Black Nationalist leaders Al Sharpton and Bobby Seale in an earlier scene where Malcolm competes with other street preachers. Lee comments, "Not that many viewers know who these people are, and for me it just added weight to the stuff."¹³⁷ This was also his excuse for *not* including Kwame Nkrumah in the film. It is therefore

¹³⁷ Ibid., 24.

revealing which black figures ‘add weight’ and which do not, and the choices speak directly to Lee’s particular historical, geographical and cultural interest.

The film’s portrayal of the actual letter Malcolm wrote to his wife while on his pilgrimage is one of the few moments in the film when the historicity of the film’s subject is imparted to the spectator. Perhaps to distract the spectator from what is happening around Malcolm in Africa, Malcolm reads the letter in voiceover during the pilgrimage sequence, as does Betty to students and friends back in America. The effect can be quite cacophonous, with Malcolm and Betty occasionally speaking over each other. It seems that Lee is trying to assert that this was an actual historical event; Malcolm’s reading represents the writing of the letter, while Betty’s reading represents the acquisition of that historical document and the dissemination of its message to fellow Americans. The effect is interesting because Malcolm and Betty’s diction and enunciation differ from one another, and her verbal interpretation of Malcolm’s words reminds us that historical interpretation cannot be purely objective. The cacophony of the competing readings is also exacerbated by the accompanying music by Duke Ellington. What makes this sequence so important is the variety of styles that challenge rather than complement one another: two voices speak similar words, often at the same time, connecting the original event and its subsequent interpretation; a dissonant jazz song accompanies the voices; a variety of film stocks and gauges suggest different levels of subjectivity. It is unfortunate that Lee does not exercise this type of juxtaposition more often in the film, because it is very successful in achieving a historical effect that acknowledges the complexity of historical discourses.

The choices made by Lee in order to pursue his particular goal have a direct impact on the kind of historical experience to which spectators are subjected. As one critic lamented, "...[the film] came to be the kind of prestige project more respected than enjoyed: a 201-minute hagiography that possessed all too little of the energy, passion, or wit of the man who inspired it."¹³⁸ Is it because of Lee's avoidance of the larger historical discourse that this discrepancy exists? Or is it a combination of Lee's dramatic emphasis with the subject's social reputation that leaves the spectator unable to look past Denzel Washington and experience something more substantial about Malcolm X? Either way, it appears that Lee's pursuit of a 'realistic' narrative results in a less powerful evocation of the historical subject. While Oliver Stone encouraged spectators to look at the past, to turn toward it and acknowledge its complexity, Lee discourages spectators from engaging with that complexity and prefers the method of romantic identification instead of historical investigation. This results in much less of a historical experience for the spectator and more of a strategic alignment with a central protagonist that follows the tradition of the biopic, which converts historical information into a dramatic portrayal. Such a conversion requires Lee to choose elements from the historical record that support his particular agenda, which as we have seen is tailored to promote black racial unity in America. Lee certainly orients the spectator emotionally, as the opening credit sequence boldly indicates. But his method of orientation and his reliance on character identification are more successful at convincing spectators of the realistic nature of the narrative than in encouraging them to consider how the past is mediated and how this can affect

¹³⁸ Doherty, "Malcolm X: In print, on screen," 43.

continually evolving conceptions of the historical Malcolm X. Lee's portrayal is not a failure, but rather needs to be understood in relation to his desired outcome, just as Stone's approach was tied to his own motivations. Lee's goal of uplifting Malcolm X to the status of an icon compels him to focus on how the man became heroic, which will be more likely to convince spectators of the value of his legacy. The drawback of such an approach is that there is less historical engagement; in fact it is the opposite, in the sense that historical discourse requires more than one opinion whereas iconography and mythography can only suffer and become diluted by conflicting arguments. We can learn very little from an iconic portrayal because it reveals more about its creator than its subject, and it is only through an interrogation at the closest range that we can find specific lessons and apply them to ourselves. However, regardless of its historical emphasis there is still cultural value in Lee's method, as Horne's quote earlier in this chapter identifies; the myth is not a lie but an explication, one that seeks to use a historical figure to inspire spectators to recognize parallels with contemporary concerns for the sake of better understanding certain origins and their consequences.

3 *CHE: THE TREES FOR THE FOREST (AND JUNGLE)*

Both *JFK* and *Malcolm X* represent different examples of a similar strategy for representing the past on film. Their common approach seeks to revisit the past through its narrativization, following a protagonist who is either responsible for providing access to that story or who is portrayed as being at the center of the historical process. In both cases the function of the protagonist is paramount; not only does this character have a relationship with the past, but he also personalizes the notion of cause and effect. This leaves the spectator with an understanding of the relevance of the historical individual via that individual's personal involvement with the past, a connection that is intensified when used in combination with the biopic genre. One might also expect this to be the case for Steven Soderbergh's two part *Che*, which at first glance appears to be a biographical exploration of the life of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (played by Benicio Del Toro), the Argentine born Marxist whose outrage toward capitalist oppression motivated him to become a revolutionary and dedicate himself to taking part in the struggles of the exploited in countries that included Cuba, the Congo, and Bolivia. Arguably one of the most iconic figures of the last century, his widely circulated photograph taken by Alberto Korda in 1960 has been used for a variety of purposes, from calls for revolution to symbolizing anti-authoritarian rhetoric to representing any form of defiance.¹³⁹ The iconic status of the portrait and the range of interests that have been associated with it demonstrate that there are competing ideas of who Guevara was and what he stood for,

¹³⁹ Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 442-443.

and suggest that the creation of a mainstream film called *Che* is an attempt to resolve this discrepancy. Contrary to this expectation, however, Soderbergh approaches his portrayal of Guevara from an alternative angle, choosing to dispense with typical biopic conventions that place the protagonist at the centre of the historical process. Instead, Soderbergh crafts his film to mimic the difficulty of representing the past by creating and maintaining tension that places demands on spectators by interfering with their expectations of historical films. Aaron Baker notices this feature in much of Soderbergh's work:

[His] formal style is varied, fitting together incongruent tendencies: the objective realism and stylization to express character psychology that coexist in the art film, but also a contemporary version of the continuity form typical of Hollywood linear narrative.¹⁴⁰

His dynamic style continues with *Che*, but he also pushes the boundaries further by: avoiding narrative strategies that separate the protagonist from his peers and elevate him to heroic status; establishing mood and pace that do not necessarily obey the rising and falling of narrative milestones; and attempting to withhold historical judgment by focusing on smaller incidents and events that do not define Guevara as much as they reveal his approach to guerrilla warfare.

Soderbergh has certainly confused more than his share of critics by assuming a biographical position and then refusing to conform to expectations, but the deeper issue is one of form. Many of these critics have been stunned by the amount of time the film spends on certain episodes of Guevara's life while ignoring others that they claim are far

¹⁴⁰ Aaron Baker, *Steven Soderbergh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 61.

more relevant to an understanding of who he ‘really’ was. Soderbergh has been accused of various failures, including making a boring film, an unconvincing war movie, a hagiography, as well as propaganda that purposefully omits the darker side of Guevara’s revolutionary idealism. Interestingly, other critics argue the inverse: that it is an immersive experience, it conveys a heightened sense of realism, it avoids hagiography, and its focus on minutia instead of ideology keeps it from becoming propaganda. How is it possible that this film can provoke such diverse reactions? The answer lies in Soderbergh’s formal approach to his subject, which avoids the iconic Guevara and his major historical contributions and instead provides a specific sense of his quotidian experience in the Cuban and Bolivian campaigns. Soderbergh’s approach to historiography is atypical for Hollywood productions; instead of representing the popularized accomplishments and horrors that Guevara has become famous for, what we might term ‘big-H History,’ Soderbergh chooses to look at the smaller details within the campaigns as an alternative way of encouraging a historical understanding of Guevara, through what can be called ‘small-h history (or histories).’ Mainstream historical films tend to conform to the first model, which concern historical descriptions that have been widely circulated and re-circulated. As Deanna Schultz notes, “History is often popularly imagined as the clash of great nations, the story of exploitation by elites, or the uprising of the victimized.”¹⁴¹ Each of these examples of popularly imagined history can be found in some form in the actions and legacy of the historical Guevara, and Soderbergh’s film does not deny their significance. But Soderbergh chooses not to focus on them as

¹⁴¹ Schultz, *Filmography of World History*, xxi.

defining moments in Guevara's life primarily because the film does not engage with that master narrative. It is here that the film confuses certain critics and spectators:

Soderbergh's film attempts to do 'history' without doing 'History.' By resisting the impulse to replicate the master narrative, Soderbergh's approach appears to avoid engaging in myth making. This creates a unique experience for the spectator because many expectations are either bypassed or denied.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Soderbergh's unique type of cinematic historiography conveys a different experience of the past. As with the previous chapters, we will again look at the techniques that contribute to this experience. Each of them (duration and temporality, identification and emotional orientation) will again be at the heart of our examination, and we will discover with *Che* that alternatives to the mainstream historical film must also contend with these elements, however creative or unconventional their approaches may be. *Che* is similar to the other two case study films in that it provides a historical experience for the spectator that affects an understanding of its historical protagonist. But *Che* is also formally distinct from the other two films, and in order to properly assess how Soderbergh manipulates the spectator's experience it will be helpful to understand what motivated him to make this film. He has suggested that what attracted him to Guevara was the revolutionary's sustained outrage at the actions of oppressive regimes toward their citizens; every day Guevara awoke just as committed to doing whatever was necessary to make change occur as he had been the day before.¹⁴²

¹⁴² David A. Andelman and Silvana Paternostro, "Toward a Universal Cinema: A Talk with Steven Soderbergh," *World Policy Journal*, 27:3 (Fall 2010), 64.

Soderbergh's emphasis is thus on Guevara's perpetual commitment to revolutionary struggle, and this sense is achieved, not through the spectator's psychological access to Guevara's mindset, but by observing his behaviour over time. The film is therefore not exactly a biography of Guevara; instead, it provides spectators with a chance to observe and contemplate his unwavering will. This means that traditional narrative techniques that tend to centre and normalize the protagonist and contribute to an appreciation of him are less important than our ability to become witnesses of Guevara's stalwart determination.

When an interviewer suggested that some spectators may feel ennobled after seeing the film, a typical expectation from a Hollywood biopic, Soderbergh replied, "Well that would be bad. The only thing that I would hope is that people come out of it asking themselves, 'What in my life am I that passionate about?'"¹⁴³ This is an intriguing statement that illustrates the shift of the spectator's focus from identifying with Guevara for the purpose of affirming his legacy to observing him in various activities and becoming impressed by his consistency and determination. Unlike *JFK* and *Malcolm X*, whose directors expect spectators to take on the task of further study once the films have ended, Soderbergh's attitude suggests that he wants his film to motivate spectators to apply the determination they have observed in Guevara to themselves; instead of looking outwards, he wants us to look inwards. This goal is also supported by his avoidance of a master narrative that hinges on popularized events; as he noted in another interview:

¹⁴³ Ibid.

I'm interested in detail, in one-on-one encounters, in situations where Che was teaching the others—not teaching a large-scale macro-ideology but a day-to-day practical lesson in how to be a guerilla fighter.¹⁴⁴

The combination of Soderbergh's particular interest with a concentration on the procedural aspects of Guevara's two revolutionary campaigns requires an alternative formal approach that emphasizes the passage of time, avoids internal psychological judgment and orients spectators expectations for a gradual historical account by imposing a sense of detachment and distance. These factors inevitably contribute to divergent opinions; where one critic may find the information Soderbergh provides lacking and unmoving, another will find the sparseness more evocative of a historical experience and will claim that its underplayed emotion gives the spectator more opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the representation. It is evidence that Soderbergh has created a truly moving historical work; whether it bores, angers, or invigorates spectators, the tension that persists in both the film's form and its reception indicates the potential for an ongoing discourse.

Double Vision

The tension is imposed before the film begins, because where we would typically expect one film there are in fact two. The first is devoted to the successful Cuban revolution (1956-1959) and the second to the failed revolution Guevara attempted to carry out in Bolivia almost a decade later (1966-1967), culminating in his death at the hands of the Bolivian army. This is the first of several dualities that problematize a single

¹⁴⁴ David Sterritt, "Steven Soderbergh Starts a Revolution," *Moviemaker*, 79:16 (Winter 2009), reprinted in Baker, *Steven Soderbergh*, 111.

reading of Guevara; not only does each film concern different events with different results, each film employs different formal techniques that affect the way Guevara is presented. The first part is titled *The Argentine*, which emphasizes Guevara's foreignness despite the fact that we see almost nothing of Guevara as specifically Argentine. The second part is titled *Guerrilla*, which removes the geographical reference as well as the definite article and suggests a less particular, more universal sense of Guevara's importance, a deliberate shift from individualism to the collective that parallels Guevara's ideological development.¹⁴⁵ These additional titles contribute to the tension between notions of how Guevara should be considered. Throughout the first film Guevara initially finds himself frequently in the shadow of Fidel Castro's (Demián Bichir) leadership and vision; Guevara acknowledges not being Cuban and early on expresses a certain timidity because of it, despite Castro's insistence that he is just as worthy a revolutionary as the rest of them. Because of this viewpoint, in the first film we witness Guevara's gradual development from foreigner to comrade, as he eventually exchanges introverted timidity for composed confidence. The narrative trajectory of the first film shares an upward thrust with the maturing Guevara; it moves from the relative obscurity of the small band of rebels who plot to overthrow the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista's government to their eventual victory that would be celebrated in Havana, an objective we are periodically reminded of by intertitles that inform us of the distance remaining between the rebels and Cuba's capital city. In order to provide another level of tension, the first

¹⁴⁵ Although there are two parts, this chapter will refer to the combination of both as "the film," except in cases where one part is discussed specifically, where we will use "the first film" and "the second film" respectively.

film also employs flash forwards to contrast the early Guevara as a soldier, slightly apprehensive and suffering from asthma, with a more stylistic portrayal of him five years after the Cuban campaign's success, in separate interviews in Havana and New York in 1964. The flash forwards are in black and white, juggle different camera proximities (including the only close-ups we see in the first film) and feature a self-assured Guevara who pontificates on the nature of revolutionaries and guerrilla warfare. These flash forwards emphasize the iconic Guevara, occasionally represented by a tight shot of his army boot, his cigar, or his beret, and the tension exists in the gaps between his plodding portrayal in colour in Cuba and his objectification in black and white in 1964. The first film is thus constructed to give the spectator a sense of Guevara's rise, although the tension that persists ultimately undermines any singular consideration of him.

Before we start to assume that the first film has simply applied the conventions of the biopic to its subject (the following analysis will show that this is not necessarily the case), the second film counters our expectations by dispensing with the flash forwards, as well as the framing device of intertitles that announce the distance to victory. Because the second film concerns Guevara's last attempt at revolution and ends with his death, the intertitles that indicate chronology do not anticipate an outcome and only refer to the number of days that the revolutionaries have been undertaking the campaign. The second film also moves physically closer to Guevara and his comrades by using a tighter aspect ratio (the first film is 2.39:1 and the second is 1.78:1) that results in a slightly taller, less wide frame than the first film. These technical differences affect the portrayal of Guevara, who is up against different odds in Bolivia. Without Castro around, Guevara

must fill the role of both leader and soldier, and it becomes evident that he is in over his head. Without the help of local farmers and peasants, and denied the support of Bolivia's Communist Party, the conditions in Bolivia seem insurmountable compared to Cuba. Unlike the acceptance he experienced during the Cuban campaign, Guevara's foreignness is a major problem in Bolivia. Whereas in the first film we observed Guevara's ability to negotiate between factions and to inspire others with his revolutionary fervor, the second film leaves us wondering what went wrong and how the powerful forces of change evident in the first film could dwindle so significantly in the second. Amy Taubin has suggested that the first film practically "mirrors" the second film, which further complicates the effort to identify a straightforward message for both films overall.¹⁴⁶ This mirroring effect is convenient because it proposes two ways of looking at the same historical figure in alternate circumstances. Moreover, this effect is an intriguing device because films teach us how to watch them by establishing and applying conventions and creating patterns that appeal to our expectations and prepare us to receive information about the narrative in specific ways. In the case of *Che*, the first film establishes the patterns and expectations, so that upon watching the second film spectators are naturally applying the same formula and lessons from the first film. Because both films include similar events (military campaigns that comprise meeting new recruits, establishing bases and protocol, seeking local help, engaging in battles, as well as the similar activities of the antagonists: Batista's army in Cuba and René Barrientos and his American-backed forces in Bolivia), they invite comparison. But while the first film establishes a certain

¹⁴⁶ Amy Taubin, "Signs of Life," *Film Comment*, 44:4 (July/August 2008), 55.

visual and narrative strategy for representing Guevara's great victory, the second film proposes a similar scenario but with a different result. Yet, the differences in formal technique and perspective are quite effective in capitalizing on those misdirected expectations and unnerving the spectator.

The source material that underlies each film performs a significant function in how each campaign is mediated for the spectator. The first film is based on *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (*Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, originally published in 1963), a collection of writings by Guevara described as "personal reminiscences of the skirmishes, attacks, and battles" and based on notes in his campaign diary.¹⁴⁷ Many of the episodes in the book had already been published a couple of years earlier as serial installments in the Cuban armed forces magazine *Verde Olivo* with the intention of sharing the history of the revolution with the Cuban people as well as offering insights into the techniques of guerrilla warfare.¹⁴⁸ The second film is based on another diary of Guevara's, reprinted as *El diario del Che en Bolivia* (*The Bolivian Diary*, originally published in Cuba in 1968).¹⁴⁹ This diary had been found on Guevara at the time of his capture and was eventually returned to Cuba by Bolivian authorities. It is important to note the differences between the two sources because they illustrate contrasting perspectives that will impact the way the information is presented in each film. The first book is told with the benefit of hindsight, which allows Guevara to pick and choose those incidents that best express the guerrilla's experience and the steps that

¹⁴⁷ Ernesto Che Guevara, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁴⁹ Ernesto Che Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary* (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 10.

led to victory in Cuba. Because many of these episodes were originally published separately in a magazine, they might also be considered to be forms of propaganda that seek to sell the revolution to Cubans and to impress them with the intelligence, courage and skill of the revolutionaries. The second book is much more limited in its perspective because it represents what Guevara was thinking as he was writing it, since he died before he could revisit it and refine it for an audience. This results in *The Bolivian Diary* lacking context that would enable us to evaluate it beyond its own terms. Without it, the situation in Bolivia seems less knowable and the setbacks more hopeless than what occurred in Cuba. It is interesting to note that this is a result of a different voice in *The Bolivian Diary*. Soderbergh stated in two different interviews, “We were trying to duplicate his writing voice,” and “the two parts mimic the voice of the two diaries that they were based on.”¹⁵⁰ This accounts for the two films conveying alternate impressions of Guevara; it stems from two different instances of Guevara’s self-narration, one public and the other private. Soderbergh’s decision to maintain the distinctiveness of each book and translate those differences into formal strategies for representing Guevara is quite clever because Soderbergh resists the urge to pass judgment on the common ground between each voice. This is the reason why in the first film he uses intertitles that count down the number of days to victory in Havana, while in the second film he only indicates how many days have passed in the campaign; it is why in the first film he uses a fixed camera and a wide frame to give a sense of balanced, traditional composition, whereas in

¹⁵⁰ First interview: Kim Hendrickson (producer), *Making Che* (documentary), 49 minutes. Included in “Supplements” to the Criterion Collection release of *Che*. Director: Steven Soderbergh, Performers: Benicio Del Toro, Demián Bichir. Guerrilla Films, LLC, 2008. DVD: The Criterion Collection, 2009; Second interview: Anthony Kaufman, “Decade: Steven Soderbergh on ‘Che,’” *Indiewire*, December 27, 2009, accessed August 6, 2011, http://www.indiewire.com/article/decade_steven_soderbergh_on_che/#.

the second film he uses handheld camera and a taller frame that is less polished, constrains the characters and imparts a sense of unease to the spectator; it is also why in the first film he uses flash forwards to convey a sense of context outside the action on the ground in Cuba, as opposed to the second film which lacks the external framing device of public perception of Guevara outside his context. Because one film relies on classical cinematic form to orient the spectator toward the inevitable victory in Havana and the other uses a less conventional approach and denies the sense of an anticipated outcome, Soderbergh has drawn attention to the formal mediation of Guevara, which in this case allows the spectator to perceive differences and reflect on their significance with respect to the historical Guevara.

Setting the Mood

The spectator's attention is drawn to this mediation at the outset of each film, in the opening credit sequences. As we have seen previously, the credit sequences of both *JFK* and *Malcolm X* make appeals to spectators' emotions by establishing moods that encourage them to engage emotionally with the subject matter. They are constructed to appear seamless, and it is difficult on the first or even second viewing to identify the clever design that underlies their emotional appeal. *Che* employs a different strategy, establishing and maintaining an emotional distance from its spectators. The opening of *Che* is immediately distinct from the other two films because there are no credits for production personnel. There are names, but they only refer to geographical locations superimposed over maps. The first film shows a map of Cuba, which initially appears in a speckled red hue against a black background as the name "Cuba" appears over it. The

map's colour then shifts to a muted, variegated green while six Cuban provinces are successively named and highlighted in brighter colours from left to right. The map then shifts to speckled red, and next to green, yellow, orange and back to red while four cities are indicated from left to right. Because they replace the names of cast and crew members, it is as if these locations are the stars of the film. This is fitting because the locations Soderbergh chooses to indicate have significance for Guevara in the period represented by the film, regardless of whether or not they will receive screen time (they follow the reverse order of victory like the intertitles that will come later: Havana, Santa Clara, Santiago, Sierra Maestra). The images are accompanied by suspenseful orchestral music, with a predominance of string instruments: it begins with percussive, military snare and kettle drums; strings gradually take over as the drums fade away; another shift pairs piano and coronet while cellos and violins swell behind them; finally there are timorous strings that are punctuated by occasional, erratic kettle drum beats while the Sierra Maestra is indicated on the map, associating a suspenseful tone with the importance of that location for the revolution.¹⁵¹ The music acts as an overture, suggesting a sample of the musical themes that will be explored later, and is reminiscent of the overtures that precede epic films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). It has the effect of subduing the audience, which is the inverse of the effect sought by both *JFK* and *Malcolm X*. The sequence lasts two and a half minutes, which feels like a very long time given the absence of typical credit information; it is

¹⁵¹ J. Hoberman refers to Fidel Castro's excellent sense of strategy and comments that he recognized "that whoever takes the Sierra Maestra takes Cuba." See J. Hoberman, "Behold The Man: Steven Soderbergh's Epic Film Biography of Che," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 85:1 (Winter 2009), 207.

only seven seconds shorter than the emotionally-charged credits in *Malcolm X*, but the difference is significant because the spectator is encouraged to reflect and prepare itself for an intellectual exercise.

The opening sequence of the second film repeats this format, but this time over maps of regions and cities in Bolivia and countries in South America, preceded by three still photographs of Bolivian miners working. These photographs may suggest that we should consider assigning at least some credit to the exploited and nameless whom the photographs not only depict but also symbolize. These are followed by the now familiar method of depicting a map of Bolivia with shifting colours as specific locations are indicated (Catavi, La Paz, Ñancahuazú), but despite their significance in the ensuing film they are incomplete; in keeping with the second film's sense of an unanticipated outcome, the locations do not reveal a sense of direction. This map is then replaced by a larger one of South America, and the technique is repeated with shifting colours as each South American country is highlighted in a clockwise direction around Bolivia. This pattern emphasizes the landlocked position of Bolivia on the continent; it is literally surrounded. The clockwise direction in which this information is revealed also suggests a spinning vortex with Bolivia in its centre, foreshadowing the difficulty and entrapment Guevara will face. This theme is also suggested by the musical score, which is much more ambient and haunting than the opening sequence of the first film because it lacks percussion and any hint of melody.

It is convenient to recall our description of the courtroom scene at the end of *JFK* and how it acted as a brake to slow down the flow of information in order to prepare the spectator to become ready to reflect. Oliver Stone used it near the end of a lengthy and elaborate film that juggled multiple narrative trajectories and film techniques. With *Che* Soderbergh uses a similar effect at the beginning of each of his two films, suggesting that he wants to apply a brake and slow the spectator down before each film begins. He claims:

[The map sequences were designed] to kind of orient you physically and also to orient you dramatically, to kind of put you in the mood... [It's] the movie equivalent of scented candles, to get you in the right headspace, to calm you down, give you something to look at and get you ready to dive in.¹⁵²

This comment supports our position that opening credits are important in orienting spectators' moods, and his choice of words also speaks to their various sensory effects. While *Che*'s opening sequences do not match the thrilling immersiveness of *JFK*'s credits or the provocativeness of the credits in *Malcolm X*, they still function to set the appropriate moods. Their measured tempo suggests that a contemplative pacing will follow and they employ suspenseful strings and eerie ambient tones to introduce a sense of foreboding. Calling them opening credits may be a bit misleading, but the fact that they provide geographical names where we would expect the names of artistic and technical personnel suggests the convention of credits is being challenged. It is interesting to notice that the emotional intensity of the opening sequences in *JFK* and *Malcolm X* may actually prevent the spectator from noticing the names of cast and crew that appear on the screen. With *Che*, Soderbergh's slow opening sequence design would

¹⁵² Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

have assured that spectators would have noticed any mention of creators' names, but he avoids this, preferring to exclude any authorial intrusion. Combined with the semblance of an overture, this avoidance of production information suggests that Soderbergh does not want to waste any time getting to the subject, and suggests that the latter has as much to do with Guevara as it does the geographical conditions of Cuba and Bolivia.

Extending the Experience

Challenging the convention of credits in such a way also establishes a structural tension from the outset of the film that must be considered when evaluating the portrayal that follows. Perhaps the most effective function of the opening sequences is that they convey the impression that what follows will be gradual and protracted. As we have seen in earlier chapters, if the spectator is going to be able to appropriate information from a film there will need to be sufficient time for reflection. Something that the openings of *Che* do that those of the other two films do not is allow the spectator to become aware of the passage of time, an effect that continues throughout the film. This indication of duration alerts the spectator that the kind of representation that will ensue will perhaps be more analytical than spectacular. This awareness is not as obvious in *JFK* and *Malcolm X* because our focus while watching them is mostly preoccupied with narrative information that moves steadily toward exhilarating climaxes. Conversely, Soderbergh claims he is not interested in pandering to spectators' needs for gratification and prefers to maintain some kind of tension between the subject and its representation. He claims that, in general, American films should be more challenging:

What I think is frustrating about watching how the business works is how it's not really designed to reward risk-taking on the part of the audience. We're making it more and more difficult for people to take a chance when they go buy a ticket to a movie, and that's really unfortunate.¹⁵³

This risk-taking refers to efforts made by spectators to make sense of a film that eschews or alters conventions, and the way Soderbergh combines long duration in *Che* with an episodic narrative and an avoidance of psychological insight makes it quite clear that he has "no desire to have the film cuddle up to people."¹⁵⁴ Unlike *Malcolm X*, which placed the emphasis on a realistic narrative, *Che* draws attention to how the past is mediated and therefore, as discussed below, allows for evolving conceptions of its titular character.

As mentioned in the introduction, Vivian Sobchack has observed that the Hollywood historical film "constructs a 'field of historicity' by objectively mimicking temporal excess."¹⁵⁵ Of our three case study films, this is most applicable to *Che* because the film takes its time to convey its narrative information through its plodding pace and narrative development. It is the only film of the three that allows for temporal excess to occur without filling that excess with distracting information. The experience of time is important in *Che*, not only because the films concern lengthy struggles, but also because of Soderbergh's interest in observing the day-to-day activity of the revolutionaries. This activity of observing and witnessing their activities is important if we are to get a sense of Guevara's unwavering commitment to the revolution. Instead of using the narrative to set up scenarios that will lead to dramatic payoffs, the attention of the spectator is directed to the mundaneness of the guerrilla's experience. Commenting on the length of scenes that

¹⁵³ Andelman and Paternostro, "Toward a Universal Cinema," 65.

¹⁵⁴ Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

¹⁵⁵ Vivian Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor," 36-37.

depict the application of revolutionary justice to traitors of the movement, Victor Wallis notes, “The challenge is sometimes as much to the patience of the participants as it is to their courage. It would be difficult to convey this on film without some slow-moving passages.”¹⁵⁶ The extended length suggests that these actions cannot be reduced to symbolic gestures as we might find in typical heroic narratives and must instead take screen time to impress upon spectators, not only the weight of the situations, but also their banality. This excessive experience causes the spectator to acknowledge the film’s form because it not only makes for an extended encounter with Guevara, but it also informs the way he is represented. As Wallis suggests, because the film encourages reflection, “what we come to see is that the moral dimension of those battlefield choices is fully recognized.”¹⁵⁷ It is an interesting observation to make. Wallis is proposing that longer duration does not simply allow for more reflection, but it also allows spectators to gain a sense of the disposition of the characters toward their actions. This is an intriguing way to consider the effect of duration on the spectator, one that provides a sense of the characters’ psychological states without resorting to subjective devices.

The films reach their maximum durational potential in the so-called Roadshow Edition, a special theatrical release that combined both films and exhibited them together as one film, complete with an intermission between both parts. At a total duration of 271 minutes, this version of the film challenges spectators to suspend their expectations of concise, digestible narratives. Soderbergh claims:

¹⁵⁶ Victor Wallis, “Interpreting Revolution: Che: Part I and Part II,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 51, Spring 2009, accessed September 2, 2011, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/Che/text.html>.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

The reason the Roadshow was appealing to me was not just because of the unusual nature of it, that it was an event that you really did have to devote a lot of time to. But also, the feeling of immersion that you got from being in one place for that long watching one story.¹⁵⁸

The film takes an enormous amount of time to convey its information, which due to the restricted focus on two military campaigns and the eye-level perspective often appears quite sparse and repetitive. Our attention is often directed toward observing the guerrillas carrying out daily operations, occasionally interrupted by incidents that force them to alter those activities. But because Soderbergh repeatedly restricts himself to master shots and dispenses with first person perspective (until one instance at the end of the second film), his portrayal is frequently characterized by the detachment it establishes between the experience of Guevara and the vicarious participation of the spectators. Amy Taubin observes: "The character of Che Guevara ... gives rise to the push/pull experience of both films, the sense that one is both immersed and distanced."¹⁵⁹ Soderbergh creates tension by providing an examination of what the protagonist experienced and yet keeping him distanced enough so that one cannot mistake proximity for intimate knowledge. Joshua Clover agrees:

[It] ends also with the death of an idea, that of a Bolivarian revolution uniting South America. The film's length is a gesture toward the historical *durée* of this idea, this hope, with its own trajectory distinct from anecdote and from any one man's life: a wide arc with some majesty even in its miserable cancellation.¹⁶⁰

Because of its length, the Roadshow edition is the quintessential format for experiencing the tension between immersion and distanciation, and between the long and short of

¹⁵⁸ Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

¹⁵⁹ Amy Taubin, "Guerrilla Filmmaking on an Epic Scale," *Film Comment*, 44:5 (September/October 2008), 26.

¹⁶⁰ Joshua Clover, "Cinema For a New Grand Game," *Film Quarterly*, 62:4 (Summer 2009), 6.

history. Moreover, the existence of different versions allows the spectator to experience the text differently depending on the method of access; the spectator has several options for viewing a 271 minute work: in one sitting; successively but separately (immediately or with a delay between the two); in reverse order (which impacts the pattern the first film establishes for viewing the second); or only one part and not the other. It would be impossible to do this with a single film. What is important is that the various experiences are available, which suggests that there may be more than one way of engaging in a historical discourse about Guevara.

This opportunity for discourse was not welcomed by several critics, who were either offended by the film's length or perturbed that it spends such a long time on few events while the rest of Guevara's life is ignored. Soderbergh mentions that a lot of cinephiles attacked the film for being too long, and he was surprised that these attacks were against the form of the film more than its content. He wonders how different formats can be attempted if cinephiles are always going to demand familiar formal structures: "[They were] slamming just the idea of making it."¹⁶¹ The titles of a sample of articles and reviews in certain periodicals are also evidence of this dismay: "Boring From Within;" "Ponderous 'Che' Could Lose Its B.O. Battles;" "Rebel Without a Point."¹⁶² These titles are interesting because they reveal expectations of excitement, levity and directness to which Soderbergh's film does not conform, and they expose concerns that the film's commercial success may be affected. The latter ties the production of revenue

¹⁶¹ Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

¹⁶² Ross Douthat, "Boring From Within," *National Review*, 61:3 (February 2009), 46; Todd McCarthy, "Ponderous 'Che' Could Lose Its B.O. Battles," *Variety*, 411:2 (May/June 2008), 19, 25; Michael Chanan, "Rebel Without a Point," *Sight & Sound*, 29:1 (January 2009), 38-39.

to the relative excitement of viewing the film. It suggests that the more time for reflection that a film may offer, the less likely that film will make more money. What these critics are responding to is Soderbergh's refusal to create a typical Hollywood biopic that elevates its hero and tells spectators exactly what to think about him. It is this attitude that Soderbergh was referring to when speaking of American films not rewarding risk-taking audiences. But aside from the occasional venomous rhetoric, some of these critics make a similar important observation. The constant effort to keep the spectator distanced despite making historical claims begins to suggest that there is something missing, a higher level of commentary that should accompany the diegesis. Without it, there is only the repetition of historical details, and at first glance there does not appear to be any judgment.¹⁶³ Ultimately, what separates history from a simple chronicle is that history applies some form of judgment, even if it is simply by assigning more narrative importance to one detail over another.¹⁶⁴ The extra duration of the Roadshow edition is an extreme example of providing time for reflection, but without discriminating commentary has the film failed to offer insights into the past? Since we are positioned as witnesses to the historical events, and we have ample time for reflection, the important question becomes: with all this extra time, is there enough for us to think about?

Challenging Expectations

Recalling that this is a film, and its formal qualities and structure are interpretive features just as important as its narrative, it can be argued that there is indeed enough to

¹⁶³ See McCarthy, "Ponderous 'Che' Could Lose Its B.O. Battles," 25, for an example of this criticism.

¹⁶⁴ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 5.

reflect on while watching *Che*. From its episodic narrative design to Soderbergh's creative technical choices to the unromantic function of the protagonist, each of these features affords a substantial opportunity for reflection, as well as challenges biopic protocols. Michael Atkinson remarks:

Biopic crises, dramatic epiphanies, romantic subplots, psychological insights, ironic sociohistorical markers – all of these are elided... It's a stupefying, daring strategy: Soderbergh has built the narrative entirely as a series of expository scenes, the type of unexciting informational moments we'd expect between the sequences of powerful drama and revelation.¹⁶⁵

From the outset, Soderbergh chooses to follow a different narrative strategy: "In terms of narrative, we weren't really talking about arcs at all. We were kind of talking about modules, sort of narrative modules... We would talk about these blocks."¹⁶⁶ This statement clarifies some of the confusion over *Che*'s plodding narrative that often gives the impression that it is not moving anywhere. Without this knowledge, spectators may become disoriented by the narrative's apparent lack of coherence; instead, we are often presented with short vignettes that concern smaller incidents than we would expect from a historical biography. Amy Taubin comments: "Both films break at least as many Hollywood codes as they obey. The first half of *The Argentine* is highly elliptical, leaving it to the viewer to fill in the gaps in the action."¹⁶⁷ Focusing on modules instead of arcs results in an absence of a typical narrative flow that rises and falls from beginning to middle to end; Soderbergh often shows the middle of something but does not always complete it, thus avoiding the pattern of cause, effect, and consequence. One example

¹⁶⁵ Michael Atkinson, "Che Part One," *Sight & Sound*, 29:1 (January, 2009), 57.

¹⁶⁶ Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

¹⁶⁷ Taubin, "Guerrilla Filmmaking on an Epic Scale," 28.

occurs just after the Battle at El Uvero, when Guevara uses his medical training to help with the wounded (he was trained as a doctor before he joined the revolutionary cause). Following the battle, as others take stock of their losses, we observe a man on a stretcher being treated by Guevara with the help of two others. As soon as this shot begins another man in fatigues enters the room from screen right and says, “Excuse me, doctor. I have no experience in this kind of situation. There’s a man over there who is choking.” We expect that this information will be important not only because the shot begins with information about something happening off screen, but also as a result of the prominence of the statement on the soundtrack and the way the focal attention of the majority of characters on screen is immediately directed toward the speaking character. Instead, the next shot jump cuts to another angle of Guevara and the others still working on the man on the stretcher, now with the help of the one who informed them of the choking man. There is nothing to connect the announcement from the previous shot to what occurs next, leaving the spectator wondering about the narrational value of the information delivered in the previous shot. Because dialogue such as this does not necessarily advance the narrative, it gives the impression that it is meant to be more representative of the experience and contributes to the film’s distancing effect, forcing spectators to make sense of the structure without being lulled by the narrative’s seamlessness.

The spectator’s active participation in constructing meaning from the frequently sparse details also applies to the film’s editing. Amy Taubin remarks: “The editing is designed to keep the viewer mentally alert—you have to put together the pieces of a

puzzling life—and to create narrative tension.”¹⁶⁸ As with the above example, our awareness of screen space, body type and personal distinguishing characteristics are important tools for comprehending the narrative; without these, it would be difficult to distinguish one character from another, such as our recognition in the second shot that the man who announced another was choking is now helping Guevara but on the opposite side of the screen. Another example begins with a brief incident at the end of one of Guevara’s speeches to his troops when he calls to a soldier named Luis (Luis Rosario), gives him a rifle and tells him to take good care of it. This scene is followed by three different scenes consisting of very few shots, but they are significant nonetheless. The first shows Guevara stop on a hillside to catch his breath, but when a comrade asks if he needs help Guevara pretends he has been checking his watch; the second shows Guevara reading and ordering another to take out his books and study, and despite the man’s fatigue he eventually complies with the order; the third is a sequence of medium shots of individual soldiers hiding, waiting and observing, complemented by a voiceover that features Guevara describing love as being the most important quality in a revolutionary. These incidents are followed by the sudden eruption of combat, and we observe a young soldier running in the direction of the attacking troops and he is shot dead before he can fully raise his weapon. Alert spectators may recognize that the man is Luis, and they will appreciate the irony that he is killed before he can fire the gun he just received. This elaborate series of scenes and shots is very important in constructing the figure of Guevara as one who is at once a leader, an ordinary human, a teacher, and a philosopher.

¹⁶⁸ Amy Taubin, “Why Che?,” in separate booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection release of *Che*, 15. DVD: The Criterion Collection, 2009.

Despite the fact that this entire sequence lasts just over two minutes, there is a significant amount of detail and innuendo regarding Guevara's different roles. But the brief story of Luis and his rifle also draws attention to the fact that while the figure of Guevara is the main protagonist there are numerous lesser known individuals who participated in the revolution. It gives the impression that there are many levels at work, from the official biographical subject to those under his command who do not have surnames and appear and disappear in a couple of minutes. But in order for this awareness to occur, we must be able to recognize Luis from one shot to another, otherwise the shot of him being killed is less poignant. Therefore, minor characters like Luis are equally important in making sense of the overall narrative.

The attention that secondary characters receive reveals another aspect of Soderbergh's approach that emphasizes the collective nature and requirements of the type of revolution Guevara was dedicated to achieving. Speaking at Havana University in 1960 after the success of the Cuban revolution, Guevara informed the students:

I think one has to think on behalf of masses and not on behalf of individuals... It's criminal to think of individuals because the needs of the individual become completely weakened in the face of the needs of the human conglomeration.¹⁶⁹

Soderbergh builds on this ideal by pulling the camera back from Guevara and frequently featuring him as part of a collective, analogous to a theatrical ensemble. In the first film, Guevara is rarely alone in a shot, and Soderbergh avoids using close-ups that would separate or isolate him from the others. Except in the flash forwards, where the goal is to present the iconic Guevara, he is usually among fellow soldiers but rarely in the centre of

¹⁶⁹ Reprinted in Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 448.

the frame. There is also an economical use of space in the frame, both laterally and in terms of depth, with characters often receding into the background while others appear closer to the camera; it is a compositional effect that underscores the collectivity that naturally connects people despite the distances that exist between them. In order to achieve this, Soderbergh frequently employs only master shots, often dispensing with the typical Hollywood convention of gradually moving closer to an important character. While the effect is employed to distance the spectator from the characters, it also impacts the performance of the actors. Benicio Del Toro comments that an actor usually gets to start with a master shot, which is a bit of a warm-up because the camera is far enough away that the actor cannot be completely scrutinized, followed by a combination of full shots and medium shots, and typically ends with a close-up.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, whereas actors usually expect to be able to gradually build up to their best emotional performance, the conditions of *Che* frequently allowed only for that first master shot. This suggests that the general approach to the performances was also somewhat distanced, further emphasizing the importance of the collective over the individual performance. This approach also accounts for the lack of close-ups in the film. Soderbergh states:

It never occurred to me to isolate [Guevara] the way you would in a normal movie because it felt, frankly, un-Che-like. His attitude was that this is bigger than any of us individually, this is a collective effort. And therefore, to isolate him in close-ups is in ideological opposition to his entire set of principles.¹⁷¹

In the second film, there are two notable changes. First, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to exclude Guevara from a number of scenes. While we rarely leave

¹⁷⁰ Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

¹⁷¹ Taubin, "Guerrilla Filmmaking on an Epic Scale," 28.

him in the first film, the second features a number of scenes in which he does not appear, whether it is because he is off on patrol or in another troop. His growing absence further reinforces the collective requirement for a sustained revolution and gives the impression that if revolutions such as these are to be successful they cannot be limited to one man's vision or skill. Guevara's leadership during these absences is usually in the hands of another, such as Inti (Cristian Mercado), whose function is similar to the first film in which Guevara acted as Castro's surrogate. It is interesting because Soderbergh uses a formal technique to convey a historical condition: this emphasizes the lack of a suitable leader in Bolivia able to match Guevara's dedication and passion; it also shows that the collective was not as self-aware as to the need to assume control of their own revolution. The other notable change is the introduction of close-ups once Guevara and his troops become increasingly cornered by the Bolivian army in the final section. This shift from an emphasis on the collective to the personal experience of Guevara culminates with the film's only subjective point of view shot from Guevara's perspective: when he is executed and his body slumps to the floor, and the image blurs and fades to white while a high frequency hum on the soundtrack slowly increases in volume. Recalling that the second film is based on diary notes that were devoid of any external context or hindsight, this sudden shift at the end of the film grants the collectively-inclined Guevara a brief, personal moment before dying at the feet of his enemy.

Not only does the general lack of close proximity maintain the sense of the collective (aside from the end of the second film, once the collective has been vanquished), it also keeps the spectator distanced and makes it harder to identify

personally with each character, freeing us to consider historical relevance beyond the personal. This effect is also achieved by the large number of secondary characters who share similar wardrobe and physical characteristics. Many are unnamed as they are introduced to Guevara and others in successive processions. By the time Guevara meets new recruits near the beginning of the second film, the repetition of the process of him shaking an endless line of hands carried over from the first film is not as informative as it is tedious. Without being aware of the historical details behind these revolutions it can be very difficult to distinguish between the people involved. Some, like Matilde Zimmermann, find that it is a challenge to “make sense of the blur of secondary characters.”¹⁷² Others are a little more crude, like Ross Douthat’s remark that “it’s awfully hard to tell one bearded, mud-splattered guerilla from the next...”¹⁷³ These comments reveal that spectators are affected by the film’s emphasis on the collective because it challenges their ability to interpret meaning. Without narrative cohesion that over time would typically inform us how (and why) to differentiate between characters, spectators must discover much of that information for themselves. It is certainly achievable, and it results in quite an interesting and enriching experience, but it is not the exercise many expect from a Hollywood biopic.

This approach also applies to the orientation of the spectator toward the protagonist. Instead of becoming aligned with a psychologically privileged portrayal of Guevara, the spectator is left with master shots, numerous characters of various historical

¹⁷² Matilde Zimmermann, “Che Part I and Part II,” *The Sixties*, 2:1, June 3, 2009, 83, accessed July 11, 2011, <http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/doi/full/10.1080/17541320902909748>.

¹⁷³ Douthat, “Boring From Within,” 46.

importance, and narrative modules instead of arcs, all of which impose distance between the subject and his representation. As we saw with *Malcolm X*, biopics typically align the spectator with the mindsets of their protagonists by consistently placing them at the centre of the historical process, both physically and ideologically, which provides a normalized view of them and legitimizes their actions within a larger historical context. Soderbergh chooses to have others share the frame (and the fame) with Guevara in order to call attention to the collective. Refusing to impress us with Guevara's importance by consistently placing him in the centre, we are oriented to observe his consistency over time, his unwavering will. He is seen constantly applying himself to meet the needs of the campaign, always planning, marching, and leading, and his continuous smoking is a symbol of this perpetual routine. These depictions do not merely represent the past, they repeat it, impressing on spectators the mundaneness of the guerrilla's life. Guevara's consistency is made more apparent in the first film, which marches steadily toward an inevitable victory, whereas the second film emphasizes his periodic absence by exposing gaps in his strategy. He is also un-romanticized, which further challenges us to maintain an emotional distance. This is evident from the beginning of the first film, in the way Soderbergh contrasts the black and white footage of a confident Guevara, who is shown in fetishized close-ups that evoke his popular image, with a full colour shot of him in Cuba, coughing and struggling to fight his asthma. By shifting the focus to his suffering human condition, the second shot undermines the iconography that immediately preceded it. Soderbergh explains:

I liked the idea of showing him at the absolute apex of his fame and notoriety, and juxtaposing that with him having an asthma attack in the jungle – sick and lost and still only a medic, not ‘Che’ yet.¹⁷⁴

It is the first of many instances when the impulse to portray the protagonist as a hero is substituted by a more detailed, but less contextual, observation of him in action, and the tension that is established between the icon and the man acts as a warning to the spectator that what follows may not adhere to convention and biopic expectations.

Devices that typically serve to normalize the subject of a biopic are also avoided, challenging our acceptance of his universality. Not only is Guevara un-romanticized, he is also un-romantic. We are now familiar with the use of female partners to humanize protagonists in our case study films. Oliver Stone employed the family unit and a loving wife to convince us of Jim Garrison’s honesty and integrity, and Spike Lee normalized Malcolm X by inventing a courtship with Betty Shabazz. Soderbergh avoids such a device in *Che*, enabling him to sustain our observation of Guevara’s behavioural consistency during the Cuban and Bolivian campaigns. There are very few moments when Guevara is seen with Aleida March (Catalina Sandino Moreno), who became his second wife after the victory in Cuba. Her obvious attraction to him, revealed through her prior knowledge of him and her desire to be his guide, does not result in a romance, except for one brief moment near the end of the first film when he tells her he will need a guide to get to Havana. This exchange insinuates a connection between becoming a guide and a potential lover, but the avoidance of any romantic development reveals that the film is more concerned with observing the actions of individuals than depicting their internal

¹⁷⁴ Sterritt, “Steven Soderbergh Starts a Revolution,” 111.

desires and feelings. This approach is further supported in the second film by his brief visit with Aleida, who is now his wife, before he will depart for Bolivia; instead of focusing on their love for each other the scene is marked by silence and concern and conveys their sense of apprehension toward an uncertain future. Victor Wallis remarks:

The task... is not to feed into a legend of heroism but rather to develop an awareness of both the objective hurdles and the positive human qualities that are involved in dismantling structures of oppression.¹⁷⁵

This awareness is gradually developed by Soderbergh's calculated contravention of many biopic conventions. When we are denied the directional development of the narrative from beginning to middle to end, and we lack the psychological insight required to align ourselves with the protagonist, we have less to internalize with respect to what the characters are thinking or feeling, and why. Instead, the sparse information informs us of the character's experience without expecting us to participate in it. In this respect, Soderbergh strives to make us witnesses, and in keeping with his disinterest in spoon-feeding audiences it is a role we must work to fulfill.

The Bigger Picture

The difference in Soderbergh's method, which favours observation over participatory experience, exposes the issue of context. Because Soderbergh focuses mainly on smaller, quotidian details, there is often a lack of the sufficient context necessary for spectators to understand what to do with the information in the film. Mick LaSalle writes:

¹⁷⁵ Wallis, "Interpreting Revolution: Che: Part I and Part II."

The invitation is not to think but to admire, and maybe to worship. Soderbergh and his screenwriters barely dramatize scenes. Rather they present them in an uninflected way, as though to re-create a textured, real-life sense of what it must have been like to actually be there, on the ground, in this supposedly amazing time with this supposedly great man.¹⁷⁶

While much of LaSalle's criticism in his article is directed at Soderbergh's folly for spending so much time and money portraying a man whom LaSalle would rather forget (which leads to his assumption that a spectator, such as he, should not be expected to think), he may have a point regarding the film's appeal to spectators. If the biographic form is relied on but there is an absence of biographical material, the spectator may assume that the filmmaker has chosen to omit the information because it detracts from the specific portrayal he or she wants to depict. LaSalle's comment that "the invitation is not to think but to admire, and maybe to worship" may ring true if there is little to contextualize the information the film provides. If the spectator has acquired knowledge of Guevara in the past, even in a limited capacity, then there will be a benchmark against which to evaluate the information that is presented. But if the spectator has only encountered pop culture images of Guevara prior to seeing the film, a situation that may be more typical considering his iconic popularity, then the plodding portrait will do little to inform the spectator of Guevara's historical importance. The question becomes: does the combination of Soderbergh's sparse portrayal of Guevara and his noticeable exclusion of defining portions of Guevara's life amount to hagiography, or does his supposed interest in simply observing the procedural elements of both campaigns avoid taking sides? The latter is practically impossible in historiography because of the choices

¹⁷⁶ Mick LaSalle, "Move review: 'Che' a bloated biopic," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 16, 2009, accessed August 14, 2011, http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-01-16/entertainment/17196637_1_che-guevara-steven-soderbergh-epic.

one must make concerning what to include and exclude, which perspective to speak from, what order to impose, and so on. It will become evident that despite his techniques for imposing distance, Soderbergh's final product is indeed hagiographic, but differently than Spike Lee's portrait of Malcolm X. Soderbergh's choices reveal his disinterest in reproaching Guevara, leaving open the opportunity for others to apply their own judgment of the man, something Lee would not allow. By focusing on quotidian details and by not providing sufficient context, spectators are able to view the represented campaigns as mere episodes in a larger life and they are still able to judge Guevara according to their own opinions of his significance.

Although Soderbergh contravenes many biopic conventions in order to prevent emotional identification with the protagonist, it would not be entirely accurate to suggest that he has avoided the biopic form altogether. He certainly upends many of its core strategies, but if we look at the film's larger framework it seems that he actually adheres to some of its most important orienting features. It is helpful to recall Robert Rosenstone's statement that, "To do biography is to make a case that individuals ... are worth studying as exemplars of lives, actions, and individual value systems we either admire or dislike."¹⁷⁷ Despite the protracted emphasis on daily routine, Soderbergh does not resist the urge to make Guevara into an exemplar; in fact, it is this plodding focus that exhibits Guevara's dedication and reveals him to be the ideal example of a revolutionary guerrilla fighter. Over the course of the film we are oriented toward this assumption by literally following Guevara as he adapts to the needs of the revolution: he changes

¹⁷⁷ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 90.

progressively from civilian to soldier, foreigner to comrade, medic to revolutionary, and from obscurity to notoriety, all the while exhibiting the same unforgiving idealism. That these changes occur in a particular order, from Guevara being less to becoming more of a revolutionary, tells us that they are indeed meant to convey, if not a sense of him as a hero, then at least a sense that he is following his destiny. The shifts are not expressed as dramatically as one might expect from a Hollywood film: they are not accompanied by musical stingers, dramatic lighting or different camera angles. The goal is to orient spectators toward the evolving Guevara in subtle ways over the course of the film. Because the film takes so long to convey its message, many of these orienting moments are not immediately discernible, leaving the spectator with the impression that there is little variation throughout the film. But however subtle, they undoubtedly function to feed our appreciation of Guevara.

We can recognize that he is special and thus worth appreciating by looking at two strategies that orient us toward him: the way adversaries are portrayed differently than him, and the way he is portrayed as fulfilling his destiny. We often witness the steadfast determination of Guevara in his daily activities, whether he is administering medicine to peasants, ending a disagreement between fellow soldiers, or dealing with traitors to the revolution by ordering their execution. If this consistency tells us anything, it is that Guevara is fair, no matter how strict his underlying system of beliefs may be. But his adversaries are often portrayed differently with an emphasis on their willingness to do whatever it takes to beat the rebels, including violating common notions of fairness and compassion. Because we spend so much time with Guevara we are naturally more

attuned to his fairness, and not spending the same amount of time with his opponents makes their actions appear harsh, unjust, villainous and individualistic. A good example is the brief sequence that shows Batista's army's attack on the rebel base at El Hombrito. As Batista's military planes begin to approach, Guevara is yelling for the sick and wounded to be taken to another shelter, and as bombs hit the base we see the rebels' and peasants' faces huddled in a dark shelter with sticks in their mouths to help them withstand the deafening noise of the bombardment. By showing that Guevara's primary concern is for the sick and by putting a face on the victims, we are expected to sense compassion for their situation. After the attack Guevara tells his comrades not to mistreat the prisoners they have taken, and Camilo Cienfuegos (Santiago Cabrera) enters and informs him that the army has killed one of their comrades: "They shot him in the head. We couldn't recover his body." This contrasts Guevara's consistent fairness with the army's ruthlessness and dishonour, and given the way the revolutionary was killed and the absence of his body we can assume that the army is not as principled and chooses to mistreat its prisoners. When Batista's army arrives after the attack, the officer in charge is told that the rebels were much better organized than expected. The officer smiles, but begins to frown as he is told that the camp the rebels had built included a school, a hospital, a printing press and a power plant. His response is quick and unsympathetic: "Torch it." His callousness is contrasted with the rebels' actions during and after the raid, which was spent protecting and caring for the sick and wounded. Moreover, the army officer's decision is even more heartless because the rebel base is like a small village. By ordering its destruction, it is implied that Batista does not care about his people,

compared to Guevara who made an effort to build institutions for them. The discovery of the organized nature of the rebel base also creates an effect that is nearly identical to the police officer's statement in *Malcolm X*: "That's too much power for one man to have." Not only does it raise the status of the subject, it also reveals his rising importance. The privilege of observing Guevara's fairness and consistency has the effect of subtly convincing us that his methods are more effective, that fighting on behalf of a collective is more honourable, and that dictatorships are oppressive instruments, incapable of understanding or providing for the needs of their citizens. The strategy continues in the second film, contrasting the Bolivian army's merciless determination to exterminate Guevara with the latter's attempts to convince local peasants that they should have more economic power.¹⁷⁸ Although the film's emphasis on the mundane aspects of the campaigns prevents us at times from seeing this larger picture, it is indeed sympathetic to Guevara, and it is through our position as witnesses that we become aware of such differences in ethics and ideology.

The other strategy portrays Guevara as being gifted and possessing a visionary quality. It is a common device in mainstream films to separate the protagonist from other characters by demonstrating that he or she possesses a more advanced and principled skill set or mentality, but because of the alternative approach of using narrative modules and placing the emphasis on collective effort in *Che*, its function of separating Guevara from the others creates another level of tension in the text. Again, there are several instances,

¹⁷⁸ Despite Guevara's failure in Bolivia, this sympathetic device is still convincing. Instead of suggesting that Guevara is less admirable, the second film works hard to expose other factors and conditions that prevent that revolution from achieving success, from the lack of local and political support to the lack of one as passionate as Guevara to drive the collective toward victory.

two of which include Guevara's discussions with factions regarding a unified approach to reform and his vision of a greater Latin American revolution. The first sequence concerns the existence of many rival factions in Cuba interested in creating change but disagreeing on the method, leadership, and agrarian reform that would follow. The sequence contains several scenes and characters and begins with Guevara discussing these problems with another faction. Despite the many shifts that occur in the conversations, from one faction's competition with another to the many divergent ideas of how to address land ownership, Guevara succeeds in convincing all of them to follow his faction in less than three minutes of screen time. The sequence ends with Guevara declaring to a large number of assembled troops that he is now their sole commander, and the spectator is similarly impressed by his organizational achievement. The second instance is a more common device in biopics, one that uses a flashback later in the film to inform the spectator that the protagonist has always possessed a farsighted vision. Near the end of the second scene in the first film, Castro and Guevara are on a balcony in Mexico in 1955, dressed in civilian clothes, and they speak of the plan to revolt in Cuba. Castro asks, "Do you think I'm crazy?" Guevara replies, "A little." Castro answers, "Well, some craziness is good." This exchange emphasizes Castro's central position leading into the Cuban revolution. Near the end of the first film, once the imminent victory of the Cuban revolution has been assured, we are transported back to the balcony scene in Mexico from the beginning of the film to hear the rest of Castro's conversation with Guevara:

CASTRO: So then. Are you coming with us?

GUEVARA: Yes. Under one condition.

CASTRO: Which?

GUEVARA: When we're done in Cuba, you let me bring the Revolution to all of Latin America.

CASTRO: You, too, are a little crazy.

By returning to the conversation, our knowledge of Guevara's motivation and vision shifts. Where once the notion of craziness was applied to Castro's ambition of carrying out a revolution in Cuba with very few resources, it is now applied to Guevara as he is about to act on his own ambition, setting the stage for the second film. But because of our prior knowledge, as well as the knowledge gained by watching the film, Castro's craziness is no longer associated with madness. Instead, it describes his vision and level of commitment to an idea regardless of its apparent impossibility. Soderbergh's decision to return to the balcony scene at the end of the first film and transfer that notion of craziness to Guevara suggests he has the same quality that Castro had at the outset of the Cuban campaign. As the film's only flashback, it draws attention to its function as a device that reminds the audience that the protagonist has always carried at least a kernel of his future greatness.

If Soderbergh has gone to the trouble of suspending many biopic expectations, what are we to make of these broader forms of sympathetic alignment with Guevara that occur throughout the film? Add to them the omission of negative or controversial portions of Guevara's life that are often central to discourses about him and it may appear that Soderbergh has intentionally created a compassionate portrait of him. But if we consider that Soderbergh's historical interest is not to examine how the man became the legendary hero but rather to provide an iterative perspective that demonstrates Guevara's sustained outrage and unwavering will over time, the omissions are not as ideological as

they are necessary to support his approach, resulting in a representation that does not satisfy spectators' expectations of popular history. Todd McCarthy comments:

If the director has gone out of his way to avoid the usual Hollywood biopic conventions, he has also withheld any suggestion of why the charismatic doctor, fighter, diplomat, diarist and intellectual theorist became and remains such a legendary figure; if anything, Che seems diminished by the way he's portrayed here.¹⁷⁹

This should be a positive achievement for a historical film. Instead of losing sight of the individual within the larger myth, Soderbergh attempts to look closer at his subject by downplaying Guevara's popular image. He achieves this goal by avoiding certain dramatic and spectacular payoffs that would have shifted the spectator's focus from detached observation to sensational enjoyment. Such avoidance affects the potential for narrative resolution, which as we saw with the use of narrative modules provokes spectators to shift their expectations accordingly.

Of the numerous omissions, there are three significant examples that would have changed the impact of the film had they been included, and thus their absence is fundamental to Soderbergh's novel approach. The first is the landing of the *Granma*, the boat that carried Castro and Guevara and eighty others from Mexico to Cuba in 1956. It is an interesting omission that reveals the kind of film Soderbergh did not want to make. The incident was extremely dramatic: there were major bouts of seasickness with no medicine to relieve the victims; having veered off course, the navigator fell into the water while trying to spot land without being seen, while the day was rapidly dawning on the Cuban coast; the boat hit a sandbar instead of land; due to the confusion of a hasty

¹⁷⁹ McCarthy, "Ponderous 'Che' Could Lose Its B.O. Battles," 19.

disembarkment the rebels became disoriented and separated, and a number of vital supplies were lost; and a few days after their botched landing they were ambushed, losing 75% of their troop.¹⁸⁰ Had it been filmed, such an inauspicious beginning would have revealed them to be underdogs, a common opportunity in mainstream films that would typically align spectators with the rebels' cause. It could have been used to demonstrate that despite the setbacks luck was on their side, suggesting their success was predestined, as when Guevara believed he was following the North Star in the Gulf of Mexico but instead mistook it for another, and luckily it led them in the same direction anyway.¹⁸¹ But Soderbergh is not interested in cinematic thrills such as these, and it is telling that all he shows is Guevara peeling an orange on the *Granma* while the voiceover informs us that of the 82 men only 12 would see the revolution's success. The omission of the *Granma*'s dramatic landing also affects the film's narrative structure, because it delays the first action scene until about twenty minutes into the film. Given that Soderbergh has said he wanted the first film to feel like a traditional Hollywood war movie, it seems strange to exclude an exciting incident and wait so long to show a battle.¹⁸² Furthermore, once the film's first battle at El Uvero finally gets underway, after just over a minute into it the sound of the battle disappears and we hear Guevara in voiceover speaking to an interviewer about military strategy. The thrill of the spectacle of war is subverted once the voiceover begins, because the absence of sound effects disconnects us from becoming engrossed in the battle that we continue to watch. By this early point in the film, it should

¹⁸⁰ Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 206.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 208.

¹⁸² Hendrickson, *Making Che* documentary, The Criterion Collection DVD.

already be clear to the spectator from the meditative credits, the exclusion of part of the historical record, and the diminishment of the exhilaration of battle that Soderbergh does not intend to appeal to expectations for spectacle.

Rather than thinking that Soderbergh did not include the landing of the *Granma* because it revealed the rebels' weakness while the purpose of the first film was to follow them to victory, there is another omission in the first film that is worth considering, but for opposite reasons. The triumphant march into Havana that ended the war and confirmed the rebel victory is also excluded. Throughout the first film occasional intertitles inform us that the rebels are a certain number of miles "from Havana." These are important orienting devices that remind us of the eventual victory without mentioning it. To the extent that the film began with the intertitle "Havana, May 1964," followed by a shot of a relaxed Guevara being interviewed, we can assume that Havana represents a significant achievement, but without knowledge of the history of the revolution and its aftermath the significance of Havana may not be obvious for all spectators. Because mainstream films tend to explain as much as possible, the repeated use of the intertitles feeds our expectation of finally arriving in Havana and discovering what happens there. But the payoff is avoided, and the last scene of the first film is in fact blatantly anti-climactic. As Guevara and others drive to Havana following their victory in Santa Clara, an American convertible drives past them and the driver, Rogelio (Victor Rasuk), yells, "See you in Havana!" His glee expresses the excitement we expect and await in the non-existent Havana scene. But Guevara quickly halts the car and orders its occupants to return it to Santa Clara because it does not belong to them. When Rogelio tries to explain

and make Guevara understand, the latter replies, “Don’t ‘Che’ me, Rogelio.” This echoes Soderbergh’s disinterest because it suggests that Guevara himself has little interest in the appeal to his popular persona. When Guevara returns to his jeep, he utters the final word of the first film, “Unbelievable.” It is a fitting word to end on, because the incidents that have preceded it have challenged popular beliefs and expectations. Considering that many of the popularized incidents of Guevara’s life and the Cuban war, including entering Havana, have not been shown, this last line appears to challenge spectators and encourage them to look beyond the representation and set aside their desires for narrative resolution. Following the success in Santa Clara, which functions cinematically as a surrogate for the victory in Havana, Guevara speaks to a soldier who wants to return home now that the revolution is over; Guevara denies his request, replying, “We only won the war. The revolution starts now.” This attitude validates the refusal to show Havana—because it is just another milestone in a developing history, not a final victory. Avoiding Havana also allows Soderbergh to resist representing the budding romance between Guevara and Aleida that would have built on her new role as his ‘guide.’ Therefore, the suspension of the final celebration shifts the film’s conclusion from emphasizing cinematic resolution to suggesting that the struggle, including Guevara’s, will continue after the film has ended. In this sense Soderbergh implies that the film’s boundaries cannot contain the totality of its subject, an implication that acknowledges the limitations of the cinematic apparatus to portray history.

The third omission concerns the final words that Guevara speaks before being executed by a Bolivian soldier. Jon Lee Anderson writes:

There are different versions, but according to legend, Che's last words, when Terán came through the door to shoot him, were: "I know you've come to kill me. Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man."¹⁸³

But close to the end of the second film, Guevara simply says, "Shoot. Do it." One critic expressed his disappointment with Soderbergh's dialogue choice and his refusal to capitalize on the legend: "But even in terms of an epic film, it seems to miss the chance for a great cinematic moment."¹⁸⁴ This choice of words is quite significant and is consistent with the whole film. Anderson is an expert on Guevara and acted as chief consultant for the film, so we can assume that Soderbergh was fully aware of his opinion of Guevara's final words. By avoiding a 'great cinematic moment,' it would appear that Soderbergh has steered clear of the legend and resisted turning him into a generic hero. Soderbergh keeps the popular representation of the subject at a distance, denying us the resolution necessary to affirm his legendary status. This is supported by the following lone point of view shot from Guevara's perspective after he is shot. Suddenly there is no distance between us and Guevara. Not only is the legendary heroic utterance avoided, but we cannot observe Guevara in his final few seconds. We must acknowledge his humanity, not the myth, in this final personalized moment. It is another instance where Soderbergh shifts our attention away from memorable narrative moments for the sake of conveying something specific about the historical individual.

Soderbergh's avoidance of 'great cinematic moments' lies at the heart of his strategy for examining the determination of Guevara without romanticizing his historical

¹⁸³ Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 709-710.

¹⁸⁴ Dani Barley, "Soderbergh's Che biopic falls short of its subject," *Direct Action*, 8, February 2009, accessed August 15, 2011, http://directaction.org.au/issue8/soderberghs_che_biopic_falls_short_of_its_subject.

impact. It may be convenient to recall Spike Lee's decision to omit certain portions of the life of Malcolm X, which he did because he considered them insignificant to the realistic story he was interested in telling. But instead of being realistic at the expense of being historical, it can be argued that *Che* is realistic because it chooses the historical over the impulse to create a closed narrative that serves to elevate its protagonist. While Lee omitted things because he considered them insignificant, Soderbergh omits them because their popular significance prevents us from putting them in perspective. It is a risky method because the perspective it employs is frequently incomplete and its allusion to the biopic form forces the spectator to question the lack of biographical information. But Soderbergh maintains that his film does not attempt to rewrite the historical record nor does it pretend that Guevara was either a hero or a villain. Instead, the portrayal respects competing opinions of Guevara by constructing an examination that attempts to complement them, not reject or contradict them. While this may have been easier with other less controversial figures, it is a tough sell with Guevara because Soderbergh omits perhaps the most contentious period of Guevara's life, the years immediately following the success of the Cuban campaign when he was appointed by Castro to oversee the revolutionary tribunals. Jon Lee Anderson notes that through his role as "supreme prosecutor," Guevara was ultimately responsible for the executions of hundreds of Cubans.¹⁸⁵ Soderbergh's decision to exclude this period in a film that purports to examine the historical Guevara has irked the ire of a number of critics and spectators. During a lively Q&A session posted on YouTube following one of the film's screenings,

¹⁸⁵ Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 368-371.

Soderbergh tries to explain to the audience that while it was not his intention to show the interwar Guevara, he wanted to portray him in the campaigns, particularly in Cuba, in a way that would make the bureaucratic Guevara accused of mass murder a definite possibility. As Soderbergh looks for the right word to describe Guevara's consistent quality that would allow for an equally negative interpretation, he settles on calling him a "hard-ass." Someone in the back of the theatre yells another suggestion: "Murderer!," which instead of unsettling Soderbergh actually proves his point, and he takes the opportunity to propose that his portrait allows for both of those labels.¹⁸⁶ In another interview, Soderbergh explains further: "... We do see him supervise the execution of deserters, and he does say at the U.N. that 'we kill people, and we're gonna keep on killing them.'"¹⁸⁷

The anger caused by Soderbergh's decision to exclude Guevara's interwar prosecutions is evidence of the pervasive disagreement of certain people (anti-Cuban activists and exiles) that what Soderbergh shows is history. Like that of the man who yelled in the Q&A session, their belief is that 'Che was a murderer' is the true history. But this is a narrow view that focuses on a controversial portion of Guevara's life while implying that it is representative of the rest. In a way, this position is similar to the narrow focus of Soderbergh's film, except that the film leaves open the possibility of accepting Guevara as a determined leader, friend and collaborator as well as a fiercely idealist authoritarian. The two positions are not at odds, and it is the assumption that they

¹⁸⁶ "Soderbergh Q&A: Is Che a Murderer? A Revolutionary?," YouTube, accessed September 10, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_dhBaPD7wQ.

¹⁸⁷ Sterritt, "Steven Soderbergh Starts a Revolution," 112.

are opposites that results in a narrow understanding of Guevara. As suggested earlier, Soderbergh's scope is devoted to 'small-h history,' a perspective that looks beyond widely circulated notions of history to consider the smaller events and actions that contribute iteratively to the historical record. It can be tedious to consume because history is not 'Che was a murderer' but rather a series of events and circumstances in which people have acted in specific ways. To fixate on a single interpretation of Guevara is to assume that he is unchanging and limited to one function. It is judgment, not history, and while the practice of history requires the application of a particular perspective, judgment and history are not mutually exclusive. The focus on 'small-h history' explains Soderbergh's omissions, particularly his avoidance of 'great cinematic moments.' By favouring minor details over the expectation of a dramatic payoff, the director diminishes the influence of popular history and proposes a less familiar view. This affects the way spectators experience the past, because when they become aware of the strategy and stop waiting for spectacular dramatic resolution they can potentially become more engaged with the process of history.

Despite the various attempts at avoiding biopic devices that tend to separate a protagonist and indicate his or her greatness, it would not be incorrect to suggest that Soderbergh sympathizes with Guevara, evident in the way he is frequently contrasted against the ruthlessness of his adversaries. Add to this the deliberate avoidance of Guevara's notorious interwar activities, regardless of the underlying reason for doing so, and we can say that the approach is moderately hagiographic. But it is different than Spike Lee's hagiography. Lee's film did not allow for competing versions of Malcolm X,

and it was designed to give the spectator a sense of Malcolm's social importance and impact in order to raise him to a level of admiration. Soderbergh's film is hagiographic because it does not provide a balanced view of Guevara's life and the method with which it portrays him generally leans more toward sympathy over condemnation, but he also avoids popular history by offering a sparse portrayal that allows for competing discourses and avoids many opportunities for spectacle. This is evident in the final moments of the film, after Guevara has been killed and his body is mounted on the skid of a helicopter. As it flies away, the camera stays on the corpse as it crosses land and water. But the corpse is covered with a blanket. This image appears to be a final ambiguous comment by Soderbergh, but it is consistent with his avoidance of the icon. He could have chosen to recreate the photograph of Guevara's corpse surrounded by Bolivian soldiers, or he could have ended by revisiting Alberto Korda's famous portrait.¹⁸⁸ What separates these two photographs from the shot of the corpse on the helicopter is that they both highlight the piercing gaze of Guevara with his eyes open. The Korda photograph depicts a living Guevara, eyes burning with passion, while the corpse photograph shows his body to be lifeless but his open eyes reveal a certain vivacity despite their inanimate state. Instead, Soderbergh turns the camera toward a covered Guevara, and his eyes can no longer inspire others to follow his enthusiasm. In a final effort to avoid popular history, Soderbergh shields us from that lasting image instead of enabling the visionary Guevara to live on with opened eyes.

¹⁸⁸ According to Jon Lee Anderson, the photograph of Guevara's corpse was taken by Freddy Alborta. Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 819.

As this chapter has shown, *Che* is quite complex and is a fitting portrayal of a man who has been remembered both favourably and negatively. The spectator's experience is subjected to similar dualities in many ways throughout the film: there are two films that mirror each other with different formats; it is an anti-biopic but also sympathetic to its protagonist; the title invokes one man but we are faced with a collective; and we engage in the close observation of a distancing narrative. The tension that exists between these elements creates an experience that explicitly rejects a clear, digestible form of history. Soderbergh's approach favours the quotidian experience of the guerrillas over the typical spectacle of war films, and his interest in minutia contradicts our expectations of popular history. By shifting our focus to less narratively cohesive modules, we become detached from the need to have everything explained; for instance, when Guevara suddenly appears with a cast on his arm near the end of the first film, we are not surprised when it is not explained by the narrative, and instead we quickly accept it as a historical detail. By not showing certain things that may be considered important, Soderbergh suggests that the film does not represent the entirety of the past but only a small portion of it. This is important because it allows the spectator to treat the film as a text among other texts, and to treat its protagonist as an individual among other individuals. By consistently avoiding the iconic Guevara, except when he is portrayed in black and white flash forwards in the first film that draw attention to this iconicity, Soderbergh successfully avoids myth making. The refusal to show the famous photograph by Alberto Korda as well as the Bolivian photograph of his corpse underscores Soderbergh's desire to keep his examination at eye-level; interestingly,

Korda's photograph is titled "Guerrillero Heroico," or "Heroic Guerrilla."¹⁸⁹ Not engaging with that photograph and the cultural baggage that accompanies it highlights Soderbergh's refusal to dwell on the hero in more ways than one. The final product reveals that historical accounts in mainstream films do not need to conform to traditional narrative designs in order to convey a sense of the protagonist's significance. It also illustrates that there are other ways of considering origins without resorting to myth making. The distance Soderbergh maintains between the subject and its representation enable the spectator to engage more freely with the underlying discourse. It is this opportunity for detached historical engagement that marks Soderbergh's achievement and will ensure the film earns a place among the discourses that concern the historical Guevara.

¹⁸⁹ Richard L. Harris, *Che Guevara: A Biography* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), xi.

CONCLUSION

The historical film is an intriguing object to analyze because it straddles purposes of entertainment and edification. Largely due to industrial circumstances, mainstream historical films will typically attempt to strike a balance between fulfilling the spectator's escapist desires and appealing to their expectations for historical information. These two tendencies are not opposed to each other; each acknowledges the status of the spectator as central to the purpose of the film's production. As we have seen, filmmakers tailor the way they represent history depending on what they think is significant and what they think spectators will be interested in experiencing. This is not only applicable to film; any historical account must select and discard elements in order to craft a specific story out of the assorted details of the past. It would be prudent to include this study in such a consideration; the way we have chosen to speak of the case study films in one way and not another reveals a similar bias, and therefore it is both necessary and desirable to ask questions of our particular approach. Is it fair to consider *JFK* as a cathartic text that seeks to engage with cultural trauma while overlooking its clearly left-wing demand for the vilification of conservative forces in the American government? If the analysis suggests that Oliver Stone is trying to help Americans deal with the past, does this place him in a favourable light while ignoring his near fanatic obsession with conspiracy theories? Similar questions can be asked of the other two films, and when the three analyses are compared the bias becomes more evident: this study clearly positions itself in agreement with the formal strategies that underlie *JFK* and *Che*, while obviously

taking issue with Spike Lee's method in *Malcolm X*. It would be easy to claim that the films themselves are to blame for such readings, but as we have seen throughout this study it is more a matter of form and perspective. The reason Lee's film is criticized more heavily than the other two films is because its form lacks distinctiveness from its content.¹⁹⁰ This is yet another judgment, because another scholar may argue differently. But it is this scholar's perspective that the way a historical film creates a particularly historical connection is by acknowledging the mediation inherent in representing the past. Of the three films, Lee's does not dwell on such formal considerations, although on the rare occasion when he does, as we saw with the dual reading of Malcolm's letter to Betty, the results can be quite stimulating.

We also need to return to the question of whether there is such a thing as historical feeling. The analyses of credit sequences reveal how the establishment of a mood at the outset of a film can have a substantial effect on preparing the audience for the particular strategies of representation that will follow, and the effects of duration and identification appear to provide an opportunity to cause the spectator to interact with the past beyond simply historical thinking. Even the possibility of the effect of an intellectual shift by the spectator over the course of a historical film seems to have non-intellectual potential, in that it may interfere with the spectator's comfort level and introduce a sense of disorientation, which can provoke anger and outrage as is evident in much of the popular criticism that has been railed against these films. These are important features of

¹⁹⁰ We should recall from chapter 2 that *Malcolm X* has been called Lee's most conventional film, because his other films often draw attention to form in ways that this film does not. See *Do The Right Thing* (1989) for comparison.

historical films that affect the way we interact with the past. Beyond the precision of the information they contain, these films have the capacity to make us sense the magnitude of history and to experience the past in an emotionally participatory manner that cannot be matched by written accounts. The condition of time also affects the experience significantly, from the duration of the film to the impact of time on the ability to process information to our capacity to reflect on the significance of what we have seen and heard.

While it is evident that the spectator can be physically affected by the experience that historical films provide, is it accurate to claim that this comprises a *historical* experience? The way that a range of formal strategies is employed to affect spectators with consistency is similar to other genres, each establishing the genre signposts necessary to keep the spectator in a particular state of expectation based on common tendencies. Does the historical status of the underlying source material render the spectator's contact with the film historical? It seems that there is a separation between the form of the film, which can affect the spectator in less direct ways, and its content. The reason should be clear from the preceding study: regardless of historical data, the case study films were shown to appeal to spectators in specific ways that reflected not so much the uniqueness of their historical objects as the filmmakers' perspectives on those objects. The particular effect that a specific film can convey appears to be the sum of genre components, narrative design, and some form of correspondence to the real world, whether the film's relation to it is fictional or not. Historical representation has much in common with this combination: it is subjective, it must rely on formal devices to convey a particular sense of the past, and it refers to an actuality beyond its structuring

mechanism. We should recall Hayden White's comment in the introduction that historians must conform their interpretations to the 'kinds of stories' that can be told, because they must fit certain contours in order to impart meaning or significance to the reader. The same applies to film, and this exposes the influence of form over content because form is the container that alters the shape of that which it contains. Because we can imagine different contents in the same container, we can become aware of how the dynamic interaction of form and content motivates us to think and feel in specific ways. This suggests that if there is potential for experiencing historical feeling, it relies on a combination of form and content to affect the spectator's capacity for acquiring a sense of historicity. Vivian Sobchack's comments on the effect of extended temporality that is part of the spectator's physical experience during a historical film are accurate, but such an effect in and of itself does not necessarily denote history. Nor does the formal apparatus allow us to experience the past directly—we can only do so vicariously as a result of identification and emotional orientation. It becomes clear that our ability to think and feel a certain way is largely a product of how form and content interact to orient us toward a particular mediation of the past. This is not to say that there is no such thing as historical feeling, but rather there is a more complex relationship between what we learn about the past and how we feel along the way.

This is why it is so important for a filmmaker to draw the spectator's attention to the historical film's form, to the way the past is being mediated. It is this attention to the accompanying construct that affects the meaning of the subject matter, which also implies that meaning can vary from one interpretation to another. As we saw with our

analysis of *Che*, it would appear that the more complex the form the more it resists traditional models, and as a result it creates more opportunities for interpretation. Further evidence of this is the way the form of *Malcolm X* avoided drawing attention to itself, diminishing the opportunity for historical interrogation and consideration. The form of *Che* is much more intriguing as a historical text because it acknowledges the incompleteness of history, evident in Soderbergh's exclusion of most of Guevara's life and major accomplishments. Choices such as these indicate the existence of other information and other perspectives that should be explored to avoid fixating on a singular understanding of Guevara's significance. One of the ways spectators can complement the experience is by listening to DVD commentaries while watching the films in private viewing conditions. Often recorded by the director and another important member of the creative team, these additional soundtracks convey a range of information to the spectator, from background details regarding the production of the film to supplementary information concerning its content. In the case of historical films we often hear the commentators defending their particular historical perspectives or providing more detail to support them. Oliver Stone discusses the meaning for him of little details in the film's sound design or the casting of a particular actor for symbolic purposes, but he also takes the opportunity to defend many of his claims by suggesting specific incidents and perspectives not covered by the film. In the *Malcolm X* commentary, Spike Lee and his closest crew members also discuss similar production details while occasionally reflecting on the social importance of making a film about Malcolm X.

The commentary for *Che* stands apart from the other two in a couple of ways. First, it is not provided by Soderbergh nor is he or another member of his creative team involved. Instead, it is recorded by prominent Guevara scholar Jon Lee Anderson, who was also involved with the team who discovered Guevara's remains near a Bolivian airport in 1997.¹⁹¹ Second, the commentary mentions nothing of the film's production techniques, except the occasional reference to something Anderson wishes Soderbergh had done differently. These are significant differences from the other two commentaries; Soderbergh's interest in engaging the historical record is revealed in how he supplements his plodding, incomplete portrait with a mammoth, four and a half hour lecture. What quickly becomes evident with Anderson's commentary is that the spectator must make a choice between watching the film or listening to Anderson speak, because it would be futile to try to do both. This is because the cinematic experience requires a captive spectator, just as the appropriation of information requires a high level of concentration in order to understand context and relevance and to make connections and associations. DVD commentaries for films such as these are important components because they expose the inability of creative interpretations of the past to stand on their own; listening to the informative and intense description of historical detail in Anderson's commentary makes one realize that there is a massive amount of information that underlies a historical film, and the latter can only be a specific and unavoidably brief interpretation of the past. The inclusion of commentaries such as Anderson's in DVD releases of historical films underscores the fact that history cannot be consumed in one sitting from only one source,

¹⁹¹ Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 726-728.

and encourages an active spectator who is prepared to do the work necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the past.

The three films are also accompanied by books, and the differences between them also reflect the attitudes of the filmmakers. Both Lee and Stone have books that bridge their films with different types of historical information. Stone's book contains the screenplay and provides a lot of background material to show that he has done his homework: government documents and memos are reprinted, the screenplay is annotated throughout with footnotes that reference historical documents, official policies and other sources, and there is a substantial sampling of media and academic criticism of the film that points to the debate it provoked (and at 593 pages it is a substantial accompaniment that prolongs the film's protracted format).¹⁹² Lee's book includes the screenplay, and the remainder is organized like a production diary, with the chapters charting developments from pre-production through to the film's premiere.¹⁹³ There are also a few sections written by other cast and crew members, and these are also reflections on the production itself. What is interesting is that Lee's book focuses primarily on Lee himself; by calling it *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*, Lee appropriates the manner in which Malcolm X presented himself in his autobiography and Lee casts himself as the one who is now struggling against oppressive forces by describing the various setbacks and difficulties he encountered while trying to make the film. Alternatively, Stone's book is very specifically intended to enable the

¹⁹² Sklar and Stone, *JFK: The Book of the Film*.

¹⁹³ Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*.

spectator/reader to learn more about the events represented in the film, encouraging them to do some actual research. There is also an accompanying book for *Che*, but instead of containing any information about the film, its screenplay or its creators, it consists entirely of excerpts from Guevara's Cuban and Bolivian diaries.¹⁹⁴ Not only do the case study films reveal each filmmaker's different agenda for representing the past, but even the support material that they provide for the spectator exposes subjective tendencies; Stone wants to back up his argument with factual evidence, Lee wants to draw attention to his own efforts in making his film; and Soderbergh removes himself from the ensuing discourse altogether. It is also fascinating to notice that Soderbergh provides three distinct objects (the film, the DVD commentary by Anderson, and the diary excerpts by Guevara) instead of repeating the same object as Lee does (the DVD commentary reflects on the film's production and the book is autobiographical about Lee making the film). This shows that Soderbergh recognizes the multiplicity of historical accounts and does not shy away from enlarging the frames of reference for the spectator.

Ultimately, there are historical effects and there is spectator orientation, but whether or not there can be historical feeling depends on the filmmaker's intentions and how important conveying a historical experience is to him or her. Some choose to indicate that a film is historical just to give credence to its dramatic elements, while others find it necessary to highlight an underlying discourse and attempt to ensure that spectators gain a sense of the significance of the past. Further research into this area

¹⁹⁴ The book was a limited release by Ocean Press to coincide with the release of *Che*, and indicates inside and on the back cover that the contents formed the basis for the film. Because it features excerpts from his diaries, the book's authorship is attributed to Guevara. Ernesto Che Guevara, *Che: The Diaries of Ernesto Che Guevara* (New York: Ocean Press, 2009).

would be valuable to better understand the relationship between an individual's capacity for experiencing a text and how that can affect conceptions of the past. What enables us to distinguish between historical and non-historical details in creative representations? How is the availability of time for reflection affected when provided in respect of accounts of popular history versus accounts of less widely circulated histories that do not cater to familiar expectations? How is the spectator able to cultivate a consciousness concerning the place of his or her present in a pattern of historical development, and how is this impacted by evolving notions of historical distance? What is the ideological potential of emotional orientation and how is it propagated? How have historians conceived of emotion and affect in historical accounts, and to what degree do they accept the central role of the spectator/reader in determining what a historical experience feels like? After all, there is no use for a historical account if there is no reader or spectator to receive it, and thus the participation of the user is paramount and should be better understood. It therefore warrants further study to broaden our understanding of the intellectual and emotional experiences that historical films provide, toward an eventual appreciation of their comprehensive history effect. Such research can have a positive impact on the study of both film and history and can provide considerable insight into how we conceive of film as a historiographical tool.

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