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Oliver Stone's Aristotle: heroism, displacement, and Aristotelian form in *Alexander*

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This essay will argue that Aristotle is central to Oliver Stone's Alexander *films, both as theorist and as character; that in fact the Aristotle character (rather than the protagonist) can be read as the hero of the narrative; and that this displacement of heroism from the protagonist to a secondary character is typical of Oliver Stone's films, and results from a deep anxiety over traditional notions of heroism and the role of paternal authority figures.*

Even Oliver Stone did not know what *Alexander* (2004) was about. In an afterword to a 2010 collection of scholarly papers devoted to discussing his epic film, Stone (2010: 348) claims that

> Dr. Paul, in pointing to Aristotle's 'single action,' has opened my eyes to what I missed at the time. It was there certainly in my subconscious from the beginning, struggling to be heard, but its implications frightened me. The theme, the main action of this piece, was always murder – the murder of Philip – and whether Alexander was involved or not. But, in hindsight, I think I subconsciously avoided going to the bottom of this murky pond because I was scarred from the numerous personal attacks on me as a conspiracy theorist after *JFK* and *Nixon*... I truly feared that the movie would have been murdered in its cradle, as had a previous project of mine on Martin Luther King Jr., where I was trying to illustrate a man's character under pressure rather than the possibility of a conspiracy behind the murder.[1]

In this quote, Stone refers to a paper by Joanna Paul in the same volume, in which she recalls Aristotle's construction of an ideal tragedy as one that is unified not by a single character or set of characters but rather by a single action (Paul 2010: 27–8).[2] There is a strange ambiguity to Stone's retroactive reconstruction of the main theme of *Alexander*, insofar as he claims both that 'the main action of this piece... was always murder' and that he 'avoided going to the bottom of this murky pond', both because of subconscious hesitations and because of his conscious lack of awareness of

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1 He further discusses Paul's idea on page 343.

2 It is on page 28 that she cites Aristotle *Poetics* 1451a and 1459a on the distinction between plots centred on a single hero and those centred on a single action.

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the actual theme. The murder theme is thus both present (it is allegedly the recognizable essence of the film) and absent (it was not followed through, it was expressed unconsciously, etc.), and we might be forgiven for taking Stone's current opinion with a tremendous grain of salt, even when he claims to hope (2010: 343) that his third iteration of the film (the so-called 'final cut', which we are now being told will not be final after all; a fourth cut is expected in the near future) finally 'finds that focus', the 'single action to unite the drama of disparate themes (murder, revenge, victory, love, loss, etc.)'. In fact, Stone's oscillation within the same afterword between arguing for a single murder theme and multiple 'disparate' themes might caution us all the more strongly against accepting the primacy of any one of these articulations.

What is not in question, however, is Stone's devotion to Aristotle in matters of form, both in *Alexander* and elsewhere. This is no doubt why he is so ready to be convinced by Paul's brief mention of the *Poetics*. Jon Solomon (2010: 46) describes a common pattern in Oliver Stone's *oeuvre*:

> Most of the films of Oliver Stone upset the equilibrium of both the protagonist and the viewer by rendering the former as an untraditional tragic figure and forcing the latter down the tragic slope with him. This was certainly true of Jim Morrison in *The Doors*, Richard Nixon in *Nixon*, John Kennedy as well as Jim Garrison in *JFK*, and Alexander in *Alexander*.

This idea of the tragic hero is, of course, based on Aristotle's reading of tragedy in the aforementioned *Poetics*. So, for that matter, is the emphasis on *Oedipus Rex* as the pre-eminent example of tragedy — and no one could miss the Oedipal element in Stone's body of work as a whole or *Alexander* in particular.[3]

This essay will argue that Aristotle is central to Oliver Stone's *Alexander* films, both as theorist and as character; that in fact the Aristotle character (rather than the protagonist) can be read as the hero of the narrative; and that this displacement of heroism from the protagonist to a secondary character is typical of Oliver Stone's films, and results from a deep anxiety over traditional notions of heroism and the role

3 Cf. e.g. Prasch (2013: 5) on the 'mostly distracting Oedipal subplot of Alexander's relationship with his parents... [which] is familiar territory for Stone, whose *Platoon* framed its hero's struggle as the war between two fathers'; Lavington (2004: 3–4) on Stone's early screenplays about incest, *Dominique: The Loves of a Woman* and the classically inspired *The Wolves*, about 'a young prince returning home to kill his mother and her lover', and the incest motif which 'can be glimpsed in *Scarface*, *The Doors*, and *U Turn*, as well as the dysfunctional child-parent relations in *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Nixon*'; or Stone (2010: 350) himself when he writes 'I have read accounts to the effect that at Issus, in his first great battle with the Persians, Alexander blundered in his tactics (somewhat like George W. Bush trying to show up his father in modern Iraq)...'. Stone, of course, also wrote and directed the film *W*, an attempt to humanize George W. Bush.

of paternal authority figures. Oftentimes psychoanalytic language and methods will be used to investigate the aforementioned displacements, defences, anxiety, and Stone's self-admittedly subconscious purposes.

Heroism, Stone style

Heroism is one of the subjects about which David Breskin pressed Oliver Stone in a series of interviews that took place over the course of 1990–91.[4] Breskin (1997: 34) quotes Stone to himself as saying apropos of *Born on the Fourth of July* that he 'wanted to show America being forced to redefine its concept of heroism', but goes on to argue that Stone has failed to do so. Breskin contends that 'the concept of the individual heroic action – the male animal attempting to change the world in a traditionally heroic way – is preserved at the end of the film every bit as much as it's offered in the beginning, with Ron [Kovac, Tom Cruise's character] in the diner with his buddies, talking about going to Vietnam to stop the spread of Communism' (36). The ensuing conversation, in which Stone (who has not only forgotten his previous statements on the topic, but who is now obviously at a loss in trying to explain them) and Breskin converge upon the idea of heroism as a courageous response to fear, has clear resonances for *Alexander* and its recurring theme of mastering one's fear in e.g. the scene where Alexander sacrifices to Phobos on the eve of Gaugamela. Nevertheless the tension between Stone's desire to present alternative readings of heroes and heroism and his apparent inability to stray from the formula of 'the male animal attempting to change the world in a traditionally heroic way' remains on full display even in the latest iterations of *Alexander* such as the 2010 *Final Cut*.

This basic insight needs to be unpacked and expanded. For all their contrarian tendencies, Oliver Stone's films remain basically conservative in style and values. This is especially evident in his choice of subject matter. While Stone has denied being a cinematic historian,[5] Prasch (2013: 5) is right to point out that 'Stone's historical vision has always gravitated to the biopic, telling his historical stories through the prism of the Great Man (and yes, in Stone, it's always one gender that gets to be great).' The canon of Stone's Great Men is a rather conventional list of real-life presidents, generals, and war heroes: JFK, Nixon, W, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Ron Kovac, and Alexander the Great, along with the occasional embattled journalist (*Salvador*'s Richard Boyle) or lawyer (*JFK*'s Jim Garrison) and, of course, a rather lionized Jim Morrison in *The Doors.* The Great Man style of historical storytelling is not just a matter of conservatism in form and content, but

4 Breskin (1997). The interviews were originally published in 1992.

5 Cf. Stone (2000: 40), where he is unambiguous: '. . . let me make this as plain as I possibly can: *I do not think of myself as a cinematic historian now or ever and, to the best of my knowledge, have not made that claim*' [italics in the original].

also in value judgements and presuppositions.[6] Great Men are Great according to a traditional cultural canon and to accept their identity is to accept the values that make them generally understood to be Great. Breskin expressed this neatly by placing his 'male animal' in apposition to 'the concept of the individual heroic action' — the two exist in a mutually synecdochic relationship.

And yet Oliver Stone's portraits are not mere conventional expressions of hero worship. For one thing, modern audiences and filmmakers, Stone included, tend to read naked hero worship as biased, boring, immature, or infantile, even as they feel the pull of its attractions.[7] Heroic projections are thus generally dealt with in one of two ways: either they are placed within genres that convey a certain ironic distance, such as the summer popcorn flick or children's movie, and which thus act to neutralize the discomfort that larger-than-life heroes can produce by repackaging them for quick and disposable escapist identification; or they are 'nuanced' into a dramatic genre by emphasizing one or more conspicuous flaws or failures. This latter technique is Stone's stock in trade. Kunz wrote prophetically in 1997 (long before *Alexander* was released) that

> Stone's problem films typically identify and explore some conflict between an individual and a social institution, and they may advocate some change, but they rarely show any amelioration. . . He does not show his audience a social ill being cured by some heroic protagonist

6 The 'Great Man theory of history' is most often associated with Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), where he claims that 'Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones' (1904: 3). Although Carlyle has sections on the hero as prophet, poet, priest, and man of letters, the capstone of his work is the chapter on 'The Hero as King', in which he states, 'The Commander over Men. . . may be reckoned the most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of *all* the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here. . .' (1904: 257). In all these cases a feature of the Great Man is his obvious eminence as the head of a group. Thus the identity and character of Great Men was not at issue for either epigones (e.g. Woods with his 1913 *Influence of Monarchs*) or critics (notably Spencer) of Carlyle; rather, criticism centred on the Great Man's relationship to the broader society.

7 There is both a social and a personal dimension to this, with Stone's experience as a disillusioned Vietnam veteran reflecting the doubts and frustrations of many in his generation. Roberts and Welky (2000: 6–7 and n. 27) write that Stone 'had lost all faith in the government, largely due to the trauma of Watergate. . . Watergate also convinced him that "the government was a lie" and "hammered home the point" that it had "lied to us about Ho Chi Minh and it lied to us about the Vietnam War" '. Prasch (2013: 8) sees this disillusionment in *Alexander*, writing that it 'reflects the deeply conflicted, highly ambiguous feelings Vietnam-veteran Stone brings to the arena of war'.

played by a likeable movie star... In fact Stone's penchant is for using unsympathetic protagonists who fail to do much more than convey his messages with a special air of desperation. They are almost always young males who are quasi-adolescent risk takers; they seek adventure, are prone to violence, eager to prove their manhood to their fathers, think of themselves as martyrs on a redemptive quest which becomes an obsession, and they seem driven by testosterone.[8]

It is little wonder that when David Breskin (1997: 36) asked him about redefining heroism in the above-mentioned interview, Oliver Stone's first response is about failure: 'Well, maybe what I meant by redefinition was taking loss and making it into victory. Most people would regard loss... as a negative, and it's not.' Stone manages to make his traditional Great Man heroes palatable by making them unpleasant failures.[9]

It is also little wonder that Stone is attracted to (pseudo-)Aristotelian tragedy as the basic structure for many of his films. According to popular misreadings of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the tragic hero is a larger-than-life character who suffers from a tragic flaw and is thereby doomed to suffer an unpleasant end. It is precisely this pseudo-Aristotelian narrative arc that informs Stone's cinematic reading of e.g. the historical Nixon: 'Nixon is a giant of a tragic figure in the classic Greek or Shakespearean tradition. Humble origins, rising to the top, then crashing down in a heap of hubris... That's great drama' (Singer 1995: xvii). The same arc of rise and fall is evident in *Alexander* as the titular hero pushes on too far, attempts too much, and begins to claim divine status, thus alienating his supporters.[10] As Ptolemy's voiceover has it, 'his failures towered over other men's successes', precisely because of the outsize ambition that they represent. In addition to *Alexander* and *Nixon*, one might think of the tragic arcs of e.g. *The Doors* and *JFK*, or the slight variations found in *Born on the Fourth of July* (tragedy early, then primary focus on the aftermath) or *W* (primary focus on the rise, with the tragic reversal left on the horizon at the film's end).

To recapitulate, Stone chooses his protagonists from the pool of famous Great Men of history; he valorizes them not only by choosing them as film subjects, but also by 'humanizing' them and focusing on their conventional achievements; and his

8 Kunz (1997: xv–xvi). The applicability of this description, especially the last sentence, to Stone's Alexander narrative requires no elaboration.

9 Bundrick (2009: 81) highlights the tremendous difference between the confident Alexander of Robert Rossen's 1956 film *Alexander the Great* and Stone's version of the hero, whom he describes as 'haunted by... forces – anger, pride, self-doubt – that threaten to consume him.' The film, meanwhile, is 'a tragedy riddled with ambiguity and questions'.

10 It is by now a well-documented fact that Stone drew heavily on Greek tragedy in writing the script for Alexander; cf. Lane Fox (2004) and Bundrick (2009: 81 and 93 n. 28) for an account of Stone's readings in Greek tragedy, including Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, especially the *Bacchae*.

filmmaking is often devoted to exploring the greatness and daring of these heroic actions. The traditional male hero looms large in Stone's *oeuvre*, but so does an anxiety that results in a variety of defensive reactions. The most salient of these is the one discussed above, namely a kind of 'reaction formation' (to use the psychoanalytic language of defences) in which a figure felt to be excessively heroic is presented as the opposite of that, as a problematic failure. This is far from the only defence mechanism Stone and other filmmakers employ in order to deal with the compulsion to represent anxiety-inducing ideal egos on the screen in excruciating detail, over and over again.

It should be said that this is in no way an attempt to psychoanalyse Oliver Stone, but rather to use the organizational schemes provided by psychoanalysis under the heading of 'defence mechanisms' to come to terms with a diffuse social phenomenon: the unacknowledged (and unacknowledgeable) compulsion to represent idealized heroes in 'serious' adult contemporary drama, and the resulting repression of content. Anna Freud (1946: 47) listed the ten defence mechanisms mentioned in her father's work, of which the most relevant for this study are repression and reaction formation (already described); as well as regression, isolation, and projection. Isolation is the divorce of attention from affect, so that the desire to present the hero is (seemingly) transformed into a purely affectless, objective 'historical' enterprise. Projection is the well-known attribution of one's own negative or unacceptable feelings to others, so that ambivalence or hostility to a Great Man might be projected onto a variety of dramatic figures on screen who simply cannot deal with the Great Man's vision, and who voice a variety of 'shortsighted' perspectives. Finally, regression is perhaps the most interesting defence mechanism from the perspective of modernity. It is the return to a simpler, childlike state and a hallmark of contemporary biographical approaches to historical figures that, in film at least, succeed in literally transforming the Great Man into a simple, helpless, unobjectionable child. This regression is of course almost always accompanied by another projection or displacement since the child will have parents or guardians onto whom can be projected many of the disturbing traits the repressed presentation is attempting to avoid. In short, a focus on childhood and Oedipal drama is itself a symptom and a defence mechanism.[11]

In summary, films about historical heroes that ground claims to historical objectivity by focusing on the male hero's vulnerable childhood and difficult family relations (including Oedipal tensions with the mother and one or more overwhelming father figures); the resulting character flaws; and an arc of achievement followed by failure driven by the hero's unquenchable thirst for achievements to fill a yawning void within themselves, all highlighted by a chorus of in-film naysayers and doubters — such films, it may be said, are more easily read as artificial and

11 This is not as strange as it sounds; for example, Jacques Lacan has himself referred to psychoanalysis as a symptom (Skinner 2014).

conventional than 'naturalistic' or 'objective'; and as defensive rather than revisionist.[12] They are respectable counterparts to the nakedly hero-worshipping naïve genres of action or children's films, and constitute the flip side of such films rather than the remedy to them. This is not a new development.

Another kind of hero? Or: Aristotle to the rescue!

In his discussion of the perfect tragedy, Aristotle admonishes his audience 'in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us' (*Poetics* 1452b34–6).[13] After ruling out the other obvious combinations of virtuous and villainous, rising or declining fortune, he concludes: 'There remains, then, the character between these two extremes – that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous – a personage like Oedipus. . .' (1453a7–11). There are a great many ways to read these passages from the *Poetics*, yet one of the major strands is clearly concerned with the problematic of the superior man (just as in the case of Oliver Stone, there is no question of Aristotle's ideal protagonist being a woman[14]). The protagonist of the tragedy must be a conventionally understood Great Man, but he cannot be too good.

Or rather, he must not be presented as being too good. Aristotle is well aware that it is the auteur who decides what the protagonist is 'really' like with an eye to the

12 These are claims about technique and effect. If a film or painting provides an objectively truer representation than others, then it could with justice be said to be the more realistic or naturalistic option. How this would be judged is epistemologically problematic in itself, and especially so in the case of Alexander the Great, about whom we know very little (hence the scare quotes around 'naturalistic' and 'objective'). If, however, what the artwork is doing is communicating in terms which a given culture at a given time accepts as realistic, then it is operating according to conventions; and providing, not an objectively 'real' portrayal, but creating through artifice the impression of the natural and real. It also follows that a film might be made because substantial new facts have come to light, which demand a retelling of an old story, but with no ideological agenda whatsoever. This would be a revisionist work in the most objective (and therefore unattainable) sense. Another use of 'revisionist' implies the attempt to retell an old story in accordance with a liberal or radical agenda. If, however, a film offers a new interpretation of established facts based on changing cultural conventions that are not moving in a politically progressive direction, it might be more accurate to pinpoint the nature of these cultural shifts than to simply (and misleadingly) label it 'revisionist'. The argument here is that the cultural shifts informing key aspects of Oliver Stone's *Alexander* are defensive in nature.

13 All translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* in this article are by S. H. Butcher.

14 *Poetics* 1454a is notorious for telling us both that 'a woman may be said to be an inferior being' (20–1) and that 'valor in a woman or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate' (23–4).

overall dramatic conception and social ideas of propriety.[15] This is true in spite of the fact that the tragedian will employ 'real names' (*Poetics* 1451b15) and that he must thus respect the broad outlines of their stories: 'They [i.e. tragedians] are compelled, therefore, to have recourse to those houses whose history contains moving incidents like these' (1454a12–13). This ideal of historical objectivity is handily superseded by an obligation to the tragedy's technical craft, with *Poetics* 1450a21–2 making it clear that 'character comes in as subsidiary to the actions' or plot. In this way the two-fold injunction to historicity and the supremacy of plot (both objectifying devices that contribute to isolation as defence mechanism) manages to coexist with the drive to both artificially aggrandize ('make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful') and denigrate the protagonist ('a man not eminently good and just', reaction formation) without resulting in contradiction. If one also considers the active role which Aristotle envisions for the ideal chorus at *Poetics* 1456a25–7, 'the chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action', one sees that there is a ready-made niche for negative projections in the form of comments on the flawed hero's actions by the chorus. In short, Aristotle's matrix for tragedy as described in the *Poetics* readily lends itself to defensive re-appropriations meant to counteract the threat of the heroic figure, such as Oliver Stone's.[16]

This is not to mention the obvious requirement of ultimate failure that is a hallmark of the best tragedy in Aristotle's definition. In section 1453a of the *Poetics*, readers are told that the protagonist's fortunes must change 'from good to bad' (15), and ideally be drawn from the stories of a few famous houses 'who have done or suffered something terrible' (22). To these Aristotle opposes tragedies of 'the second rank', which unfortunately 'some place first' and which feature 'an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad' — in short, a happy ending for the heroes and an unhappy ending for the villains. This is the alternative way of dealing with the problematic of the superior man: where tragedy shows such men in declining fortunes, this would show them in rising fortunes. Aristotle is scathing on this sort of populist and naïve entertainment: 'It is accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to comedy' (30–6). This diatribe against auteurs selling out to please ignorant audiences who do not wish to be challenged could hardly sound more

15 *Poetics* 1454b10–3 enjoins tragedians to follow the example of painters who 'make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. So too the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it'; and 1451b8–10 on conventional propriety in expectations, 'by the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speaks or acts, according to the law of probability and necessity; and it is this probability at which poetry aims. . .'

16 Recent manuals of screenwriting such as Tierno (2002) and Hiltunen (2002) use Aristotle as their basis, thus attesting to the continuing relevance of the *Poetics*.

contemporary, and it serves to highlight that the class tensions which necessitate two approaches to the stories of Great Men are age-old. Already in the fourth-century BCE the 'serious' dramatic biopic/play was the complement and companion to the 'comic' (in the classical sense) crowd-pleasing action or children's tale, and already the former was earning critical acclaim while the latter forms were mercilessly panned.

The structural parallels between Aristotle's theory of tragedy in the *Poetics* and Oliver Stone's biopic conventions may be noteworthy, but they must be read dialectically in order to be understood properly. That is, it would be a mistake to apply a simple causal or mimetic model whereby the similarity depends on Stone's adoption or imitation of Aristotle's earlier theory *tout court*. The matter is considerably more complex, since it rather obviously entails a reinterpretation of Aristotle as well as a re-appropriation of his work: there have been tragedies based on Aristotelian models before, but they looked quite different from the tragic tales of the later twentieth century's 'nuanced', 'adult' biopics. These recent appropriations thus illumine aspects of Aristotle's theory that were heretofore latent because they had not yet been activated within the confines of a new critical practice.

This has real interpretive consequences for the remaining question of the hero's location: after all, where does the 'hero' go when he is displaced or replaced by the figure of the tragic protagonist? For it is clear from the foregoing that the hero does not and cannot disappear, since the tragic biopic is not different in kind from the naïve Great Man entertainment, but is rather merely a variation on the theme. This is evident in both the Aristotelian formulation (tragic and pseudo-comic Great Man dramas are in fact the first- and second-best varieties of the same category) and Stone's practice. The only true 'overcoming' or alternative to the Great Man biopic is not the tragic variation, but the fundamentally different choice of subject; not the 'nuanced' or revisionist biopic, but the choice of a subject either inferior to or similar to ourselves (in Aristotle's terminology) or (perhaps more significantly) the complete abandonment of mimetic genres in favour of something else entirely. To continue to approach the figure of the Great Man, especially in an elevated mode such as tragedy or serious drama, is to continue to be fascinated by its aura, and to contribute to its perpetuation.[17] The true difference is that, where the 'naïve' options openly present

17 It is Walter Benjamin who first described how film can destroy the aura in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (Benjamin 2002). The 'uniqueness – that is, its aura' of 'the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition... Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult' (105). This applies to the cult of personality surrounding a traditional Great Man, a fact not lost on Benjamin:

> The social significance of film... is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most apparent in the great historical films... When Abel Gance fervently proclaimed in 1927, "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films... All legends,

the protagonist's heroic aura for immediate consumption and identification, the 'nuanced' alternative represses and displaces the aura which nevertheless is instrumental in attracting both author and audience. In spite of the help with rigorous theorization which Aristotle's work has provided, one must continue treating the problem dialectically, which means first looking for the missing aura in Stone's films, and only then tracing the discovery back into Aristotle, rather than the other way around.

Only the Good Die...

There is surely no better place to begin than with what is still probably Oliver Stone's best-known film, *JFK*. The tragic protagonist of the piece is the flawed and embattled District Attorney for New Orleans, Jim Garrison, who gets a boost of star power from the savvy casting choice of Kevin Costner; but it is undoubtedly not Jim Garrison who provides the aura for the film, or who truly represents the more ideal Great Man superior to ourselves. That figure is hidden in plain sight in the film's title. Medhurst (1997) cannily describes the film's 'mythopoetic discourse' as played out in its narrative pattern: Garrison's search and sacrifice replicates, in a smaller register, the original search and sacrifice of an idealized John F. Kennedy.[18] As he points out (210),

> ... in the film, John F. Kennedy is a new man on the political scene. He is young, vibrant, and possessed by a desire to bring justice and peace to the world... His death changes the world forever. Gone is the desire for peace and the pursuit of justice. Gone is the spirit of cooperation and détente. The death of President John Kennedy plunges the world into darkness, a darkness from which it has yet to emerge. Yet there exists hope. That hope is embodied in a second Kennedy, a man who also believes in truth and justice and who, through his investigation of the assassination, will resurrect the spirit that was stolen from the American people on 22 November 1963.

In short, this early Stone effort scarcely conceals the dynamics of duality and displacement at its core, whereby viewers are offered the flawed protagonist in lieu of (but informed by) the overwhelming heroic figure who is, by dramatic necessity,

> all mythologies, and all myths, all the founders of religions, indeed, all religions... await their celluloid resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates," he was inviting the reader, no doubt unawares, to witness a comprehensive liquidation.
>
> The traditional cult of personality surrounding Alexander the Great has always been about his eponymous Greatness — indeed, in a sense Alexander the Great was the prototype of every Great Man insofar as e.g. Pompey the Great and others laying claim to the title of 'Great' were doing so in imitation of Alexander. It is thus revealing that Stone's film divests him of his title — here he is merely Alexander.

18 Pages 210–15 deal with the film's narrative strategy, which Medhurst reads as 'Adamic' rather than Aristotelian. The quote is from page 207.

permanently foreclosed. If anxiety is indeed a motivating factor for this slippage then it will be no cause for surprise that the overwhelming figure should be neutralized in the film by being always already excluded from its domain. The opening montage of the film, true to its title, gives viewers John F. Kennedy, but only in what is clearly documentary footage — that is, in retrospective and as a part of history, permanently past.[19] Then he is killed, and Kennedy's charismatic-chivalrous but flawed double can begin to safely re-enact his sacrifice in the rest of the film. As in Freud's mythologizing, it is the sacrifice of the primal father that inaugurates the functioning system for his merely mortal simulacra or male offspring.

This motif had already appeared in 1986 in *Platoon*, where Elias, who represents good and tutors the young narrator-protagonist, is betrayed and killed in a scene overtly meant to recall Christ's crucifixion.[20] It is then up to young, vulnerable Chris Taylor to decide whether to inherit Elias's aura or not; in the end he shoots the evil Barnes, thus proving himself a flawed copy of the semi-divine original. Taylor himself expresses the key to this flaw in the film's epilogue narration: 'There are times since [the end of the war], I've felt like a child, born of those two fathers.' Interestingly, he is referring to both Elias and Barnes as father figures.[21] The decision to present two fathers, a good and an evil one, is a logical one: if one can push the heroic figure back in time and split off a lesser, more flawed version for the foreground (as occurs in the case of John F. Kennedy and Jim Garrison), what is to stop one from repeating the split and foreclosure an infinite number of times into the past? The good dad/bad dad/flawed child Oedipal triangle is a familiar *topos* of film entertainment, appearing in films from *Star Wars* (Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Darth Vader, with the latter splitting respectively into pairs with Yoda and Emperor Palpatine) to *The Karate Kid* franchise (Daniel, Mr Miyagi, and a variety of Cobra Kai sensei), and many more. Of course, many of those good fathers die as decisively as John F. Kennedy or Elias.

It might be said in passing that this reading of the protagonist as a mean between good and bad extremes could provide the necessary clue to tracing the displaced hero in Aristotle's work, not to another sort of mimetic entertainment but to philosophical discourse (and the defence mechanism of isolation which it can represent) as expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a work in which the traits of the truly virtuous man are described as the mean between excess and deficiency in virtue, which might be read as a way of bringing the heroic figure from the height or limit of achievement into a more median configuration. More important is the fact that Book 4, with its discussion of magnanimity or *megalopsychia*, gives some insight into the unsuitability of the virtuous character for the stage. It was seen above

19 Cf. Medhurst (1997: 210–11) on the dichotomy of present and past in the film.

20 Cf. Whaley (1997: 120) on Elias as Christ.

21 Ibid., 118–22, on Chris as a character who draws on Barnes and Elias to go 'beyond good and evil', an interpretation supported by Oliver Stone.

how in the *Poetics* Aristotle chastised audiences for their poor taste in tragic plots, and tragedians for pandering to them. Presumably tragedians should instead cater to the tastes of the virtuous and great-souled man; but a man of this type, we are told, 'cannot build his life around another, except for a friend; for that would be slavish. . . And he is not easily wowed; for nothing is great to him' (1124b–1125a).[22] Clearly it would be impossible for a man of this type to partake in the naïve pleasures of heroic identification, or even to bear the sight of a virtuous man held up for imitation or emulation on the stage — he would wonder what all the fuss was about and refuse to fashion himself after a role model. This is tantamount to foreclosing completely the possibility of presenting the heroic aura on stage (or screen, for that matter). In its stead, it is only through the abstract discussion of virtuous traits deprived of concrete characterization in the philosophical treatise that the truly virtuous figure may be safely encountered. Aristotle finds himself in a similar quandary to Stone's in his refusal of the Great Man as spectacle, and both men resort to foreclosure as an ideal defence in the face of an overwhelming presence.

The use of foreclosure, through death or otherwise, to exorcise a Great (or simply excessively good) Man follows a recognizable pattern in Stone's films, so long as one keeps one's eye on the problematic aura. Seen from this perspective one can categorize the biopics by defence mechanism. The first category is the one I call 'not-so-Great Men', which includes *Nixon*, *W*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Salvador*; it is a matter of opinion whether one considers them instances of reaction formation which minimize the protagonists' 'greatness', or whether one thinks that the all-too-obvious flaws and unpopularity of their subjects mean that little defence is required to reduce what, in the end, is a fairly insignificant degree of aura. None of these require major displacements of the type described above, although they all follow the pseudo-Aristotelian tragic pattern. The second category deals with living Great Men whom Stone obviously admires, but these films take the path of isolation to present them in cinema's most 'objective' form, the documentary: this category includes Stone's films on Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez. Finally, the third category comprises biopics of dead great men with overwhelming auras: *JFK*, Jim Morrison in *The Doors*, and *Alexander*. All of these movies tell a pseudo-Aristotelian tragic tale and displace onto dead fathers as needed; but it is interesting to see to what extent the need to displace the protagonist's charismatic aura varies from film to film.

On one extreme end of the spectrum lies the story of Jim Garrison and John F. Kennedy which, as previously described, does nothing short of foreclosing the problematic figure altogether as though to safeguard filmmaker and audience from gazing directly upon their too-bright aura. The audience instead is asked to focus on a reflected, 'safe' bit of aura, and the Great Man himself becomes the dead father. On the other extreme is the story of Jim Morrison, which begins with a cursory dead father scene in the form of a flashback to Morrison's childhood. The family is shown driving past an accident in which a number of Navajo have been

22 Translations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in this article are my own.

killed; it is later revealed that Morrison believes that the soul of one of these Navajo has passed into his body. As it turns out, only the most token of displacements is necessary for a movie like *The Doors* which, for all its Aristotelian tragic trappings, basically slips into the mode of hero-worship/identification that Aristotle reviled as only the second-best kind of tragedy. While Morrison does, indeed, die, this death as well as his life is cast as a resounding success by Stone, who says 'I would like to believe that he [Morrison] went out smiling, he liked it, he enjoyed it as it happened, because he was in love with the death experience. . . He had success, he was God on earth for a while, he had everything he wanted, and he got bored with it. I think he became enamored of failure' (Breskin 1997: 61).

In between these two modes, the complete rejection and the complete embracing of the Great Man's aura, lies Alexander, on whom the film is completely focused (as it is on Morrison in *The Doors*) even as it employs all the tools of defence to problematize his character (as it did in the case of Garrison in *JFK*). But if Alexander, in his own film, has become something of a Jim Garrison,[23] where then is his John F. Kennedy to be found?

On *Wall Street*

Oliver Stone's Alexander has a bad dad: a bad, dead dad. Such dads have always tended to be overpowering presences in film, obscuring both their progeny and the 'good dad', who in any case must be got out of the way for the young protagonist to take up their mantle. It is instructive for any structural analysis of Stone's film *oeuvre* that the mythical drama of good and bad dads writ large plays out primarily in his fictional morality tales, *Platoon* and *Wall Street*. It is little surprise that he makes use of this mythical dimension in his one biopic set in the ancient world, and that he hammers it home within the film in the scene where Philip II takes young Alexander through an underground primitivist art gallery stocked with thematically portentous images.[24]

It is evident from these movies that bad dads take up a lot of space (Sgt Barnes, Philip II, and especially Gordon Gekko) while the good dads take up less space, varying in inverse proportion to the size of the bad dad (Elias is a close match for Sgt Barnes, while nobody is a match for Gordon Gekko who, far from being overcome by the first movie's protagonists, recently made his triumphant return in 2010's *Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps*). But small as his screen-time may be, Alexander does get a quickly disappearing Obi-Wan to his grotesque father's Darth Vader in the dignified, white-haired person of Aristotle.

23 Lavington (2004: 268): '. . .[T]he story of Alexander is basically one of glorious victory over external obstacles offset by internal turmoil. Heavy drinking, a refusal to accept limits on his conquests, a fixation on the Homeric values of Achilles, and a brutal nervous collapse after the death of Hephaistion. After attempts to deify Jim Morrison, Stone has moved on to the story of the true Dionysian hero: a man who lived for excess in all aspects of his life, with the ongoing conflict with himself and others that this implies.'

24 For a full exegesis of this scene, see Platt (2010).

While Christopher Plummer's Aristotle certainly looks the part of the wise, wizened advisor (it is no coincidence that Plummer was asked to play Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* film franchise), this might still seem a rather dubious claim. Unlike Obi-Wan or Gandalf, Aristotle's rhetoric in the film is anything but straightforwardly 'good' and wise. By claiming that Aristotle is the displaced 'hero' to Alexander's troubled protagonist, this essay is basically stating that he forms the moral centre of the story with a strength of certitude that precludes him from being an interesting protagonist (with all the moral conflict that position now implies). But his reactionary and often incorrect statements would seem to completely belie that fact. Enter Elias and especially Carl Fox, a.k.a. Bud's dad from *Wall Street*, to show that for Oliver Stone there is more to being the moral centre of the story than screen time and conventional Hollywood platitudes of what it means to be good and wise.

For instance, not only is Elias a skilful killer in a war of which Stone basically disapproves; he is also anything but bourgeois Hollywood's ideal of a wholesome family hero. This is especially evident in the scene where he offers young Chris Taylor marijuana smoke from the barrel of a shotgun. Elias, though, is at least edgy and interesting. The biggest problem with Carl Fox, in both the audience's and his son's eyes, is that he is reactionary and boring. He still calls pasta 'spaghetti', much to young Bud Fox's embarrassment, and his tastes are homey and middle class. He thus forms a perfect foil for the morally corrupt but exciting and glamorous Gordon Gekko. What this means is that Aristotle cannot be dismissed as the film's moral centre simply because he is not at first glance a twenty-first-century PC character. Rather the question is, does the film 'prove' his world view to be essentially correct?

Aristotle serves to verbalize some of the central themes of the film: there is a deep divide between Greeks and Persians, between reason and self-control on the one hand and the cruelty and lack of restraint of the East and its people on the other; women are creatures of passion and thus inferior; the old myths of travel to the east are not true; and there is a hubris inherent in the wish to rule the world which the gods are likely to punish. The East, like women, like ambition, like recklessness, 'has a way of swallowing men', in the film Aristotle's phrase. There is much here that is unpalatable. Yet, from the film's standpoint, it is indeed the unpopular truth.

Stone himself (2010: 345) has much to say on the matter:

> An important shift in Alexander's trajectory and development comes in Babylon, where he is, indeed, lost. His dream is now clouded. . . With his fiercely original mindset, the enemy was there to learn from and grow with, to build upon, and win over; and in so doing he would change – or let's say, for those who prefer Persian to Greek rule, 'improve upon' – an empire built on a corruption, loss of freedom, and cruelty repellent to most Greeks.[25]

25 This idealistic vision of Alexander as a civilizer can be traced back to the work of W.W. Tarn by way of the film's historical consultant, Robin Lane Fox; cf. e.g. Harrison (2010: 220–1and 224–5); and Lavington (2004: 269–70).

These words could have come straight from (Stone's) Aristotle's mouth. In case viewers missed the point, Ptolemy also makes it in his voiceover when he says that Babylon was 'a far easier mistress to enter than it was to leave', as does Alexander himself when he exclaims on seeing Darius's harem that 'Aristotle was perhaps prescient' and that these women and the eastern luxury which they represent threaten to 'degrade our souls'.

The film's Orientalism has been widely discussed, especially because of its resonances with then-current affairs (i.e. America's aggressive involvement in the Middle East).[26] Llewellyn-Jones (2010: 252–3) is particularly convincing in his discussion of how gender has always been 'an essential component of Orientalism', and how 'in *Alexander*, Babylon also represents feminine excess', precisely according to the chain of associations formed earlier by Aristotle. From the harem of Darius to the wild Roxane and even wilder Olympias,[27] conquest of the east is interchangeable with women and the irrational. Furthermore, Llewellyn-Jones (2010: 258) cuts to the heart of the question of the film's 'resonances' with modern instances of Western interventionism in the East:

> Orientalist art, and by extension Orientalist cinema, prioritizes male visual pleasure, a form of gratification bound up in imperial identity. Adding the gloss of antiquity to the Orientalist image, especially the decadence of Babylon and the ubiquitous image of the harem, supports the ideology and gives Western prejudice a rich pedigree, seemingly steeped in historicity. In this regard, Stone's *Alexander* has to be seen as the latest in a long line of beautiful, if deeply misunderstood and dangerous, Orientalist clichés.

If the film (as Llewellyn-Jones effectively argues and Stone himself corroborates in his assessment of the Persian Empire as corrupt, servile, and cruel) constitutes an Orientalist intervention, then it is the character of Aristotle who most directly acts as spokesman for Stone's and the film's position. One is put in mind of Kunz's description of 'Stone's penchant... for using unsympathetic protagonists who fail to do much more than convey his messages with a special air of desperation', which, desperation aside, seems an admirable description of Aristotle's character and role in the film.

It would be difficult to explain why Stone chooses to trace Alexander's irreversible decline to the moment of his entrance into a highly sexualized Babylon except on Orientalist grounds. It would likewise be difficult to explain why both the women who get the most screen time in the film share a clearly artificial exoticism and penchant for murder over sexual jealousy, except by light of Aristotle's misogynistic

26 Cf. both Harrison (2010: 219–24) and Llewellyn-Jones (2010) on the film's complex portrayal of Persia vis-à-vis the Greeks, and Prasch (2013: 6–8) on modern resonances. Carney (2010: 154–7) deals with gender and Orientalism in the film.

27 Cf. Carney (2010: 156): 'Stone consciously and often heavy-handedly constructs the character of Roxane as a second but lesser Olympias.'

mission statement. Elizabeth Carney (2010: 154–5) has observed that Olympias and Roxane both possess

> . . . a fictional accent, but no male characters in the film do. Although both Stone and Jolie insist that these fantastic accents simply indicate Olympias's and Roxane's status as outsiders, the telling implication seems to be that Stone and the two actresses saw their characters as less real, less historic than the male roles. Moreover, Olympias, apparently, much like her daughter-in-law, was generically barbaric, something clearly related to their many dark looks, suspicious glances, tendency to skulk, and (in the film) uniquely murderous ways.[28]

Perhaps a more forgiving way of putting the matter would be to say that Stone subordinates his female characters *qua* characters and historical personages to the perceived needs of his mythical-Oedipal plot in *Alexander*.[29] While still misogynistic, this would at least give some rationale for the choice beyond Stone's own personal beliefs and baggage. More interestingly, however, this would render Stone's decision characteristically Aristotelian as described in *Poetics* 1450a, which advises playwrights to subordinate character to plot. This brings the discussion back to Aristotle as literary theorist rather than moral philosopher, an association which the film Aristotle's talk of hubris and divine punishment seems to invite.

Aristotle dismisses talk of ancient heroes conquering in the East as mere myths, choosing instead to frame the contemporary historical situation in terms appropriate to tragedy. No longer is it the case that a proper tragedy shows a protagonist whose error or (in Stone's popularizing take) hubris results in their inevitable downfall — now it is within the bounds of everyday life that the hubristic will supposedly get their comeuppance directly at the hands of the gods. In fact, Aristotle's injunction to avoid hubris and rising too high lest the gods retaliate smacks more of the *sententiae* of tragic choruses than of tragedy's theorization in the *Poetics*. It is also an instance of mythologizing history even while seeming to disclaim the practice.

Of course, as far as Oliver Stone is concerned, this version of the life of Alexander the Great is both history and tragedy, the Oedipal tragedy of Alexander and the single act of his possible involvement with the murder of his father (at least according to his latest reformulation in 2010, quoted above). Just as in his treatment of Persians and women, Aristotle acts as Stone's mouthpiece on the topic of the film's quasi-historical narrative structure. Meanwhile, Alexander remains as inconsistent and unknowable as Oliver Stone and John Keegan, among many others, have acknowledged he is, a mere theatrical 'Mask of Command' appropriate to the tragic stage.[30] Staying put, as he does, in the West, and staying out of the fray, it

28 See also page 156 on how both women 'apparently commit murders out of petty sexual jealousy'.

29 But not just *Alexander*; see Carney (2010: 142).

30 Keegan (1988); Stone in commentary to Director's Cut DVD. Both references found in Carney (2010: 136 n.4).

is Aristotle alone who voices a cogent, rationalizing (rather than rational or even reasonable) opinion and sticks with it, declining to descend into madness and excess with the Macedonian generals and their troops. And his opinion, palatable or not, is corroborated at every turn and plot twist of Stone's screenplay. Even when he is shown having to correct his geographical knowledge in a late letter to Alexander, he is alone on a barren plain, the proverbial voice crying out in the wilderness, big enough and wise enough to grant he was wrong on a minor point while remaining right about everything that is essential to the action within and without the film. In his role of transcendental authority for Stone as tragedian and Alexander as Greek(-ish) regime changer alike, it is Aristotle alone who remains a viable moral centre (and incidentally technical guide) for the film, unpalatable as his Orientalizing 'truths' might be; and it is because of this tremendous presence within the very fabric of the film that he must also be kept out of the mise-en-scene, merely infusing it with his aura rather than overwhelming it with his voice and presence.

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