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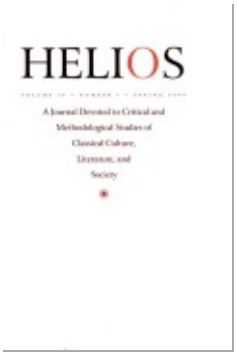

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SHERAMY D. BUNDRICK

Depicting the life of Alexander the Great on film presents many challenges, a fact that may explain the few attempts at it. The most notable cinematic treatments are Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956) and Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004); although grounded in history, each film conveys a very personal interpretation of Alexander's life. Rossen's film lies within the cinematic epic tradition of the 1950s, featuring a mostly stoic hero who is confident in his own destiny, favored by the gods, and who gloriously follows in the footsteps of heroes. Oliver Stone, crafting his own artistic vision nearly fifty years later, introduces a tragedy riddled with ambiguity and questions. His Alexander stands in the vortex of a series of dualities: masculine/feminine, Greece/Asia, god/man, vision/blindness, moderation/excess, reason/madness. While possessing strength and resolve, Stone's Alexander is haunted by other forces—anger, pride, self-doubt—that threaten to consume him.

Stone's use of mythological paradigms in *Alexander* helps elucidate the film's meaning.[1] Myths, gods, and heroes form an essential part of Alexander's story for Stone, just as they had for Rossen; but where Rossen introduced a predominantly heroic interpretation, Stone highlights tensions and contradictions in an ultimately tragic portrayal. The gods are not benevolent beings in his film, and the suffering of heroes becomes a major theme. Although figures such as Heracles, Prometheus, and Achilles have roles to play in Stone's complex web of symbolism, I shall focus in this paper on the god Dionysus, who is invoked repeatedly through narrative and visual allusion as a means to explore Alexander's darker side. Indeed, Oliver Stone (2005 personal communication) has confirmed the influence of *The Bacchae* on the script, and the film does seem to owe much to the play in respect to Dionysus and its themes of transformation, wildness, and madness.[2] The Dionysian theme is not unique to *Alexander*, however, as it reverberates through other films of Stone and is clearly a special interest of the filmmaker.

Articulating Dionysus

A dominant theme of Stone's *Alexander* is the quest for balance within the self, a quest in which Dionysus plays a strong metaphorical role. The prologue, which takes place at the Library of Alexandria years after Alexander's death, sets up the film's larger themes through dialogue and, more subtly, through visual references. The older Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins, previously seen in Stone's *Nixon*) dictates to a scribe as he passes among statues of deities on the Library's terrace; not only do the statues signal the importance of the gods for Alexander's story, but the choice of *which* gods are depicted is highly significant. Prominent among them is Dionysus, shown onscreen as bearded, longhaired, crowned with ivy, and draped in a lion skin and voluminous *chitōn*, in a variation on the so-called Sardanapalus statue type of the late fourth century B.C.E.[3] In the context of late classical and Hellenistic art, the Sardanapalus-type Dionysus presented an indelible image of *truphē* (luxury) and contrasted with the youthful, beardless Dionysus more in vogue at that time (Ridgway 2002, 238). Opposite Dionysus on Ptolemy's balcony stands a nude, cithara-wielding statue of Apollo, the god youthful and beardless as typical in Greek art. These two statues frame the doorway into the Library proper, with one, the other, or both appearing in the background at various points during the older Ptolemy's speech. He moves from Dionysus to Apollo, touching the former's *thyrsos* and delivering these lines: "How can I tell you what it was like to be young, to dream big dreams, to believe that when Alexander looked at you, you could do anything, *anything*. In his presence, by the light of Apollo, we were better than ourselves."[4]

The visual juxtaposition of Apollo and Dionysus personifies at the outset the themes of moderation versus excess, and reason versus passion, so crucial to the film's drama. Apollo is not as overtly present in *Alexander* as Dionysus, but his role and influence are nonetheless acknowledged. The early scene of the taming of Bucephalas, for example, establishes a sun/shadow duality that repeats visually and metaphorically throughout the film. Characters swear "by Apollo" in key scenes of conflict, characters who disagree with Alexander and arouse his immoderate temper.[5] Apollo is invoked as a figure of reason.

It is tempting to see reflections of Nietzschean philosophy in Stone's usage of the Apollo/Dionysus opposition. Robin Lane Fox (2004, 11, 13), the film's historical consultant, reports that Nietzsche was part of script discussions between Stone and the film's producer, Thomas

Schühly, from the beginning, the idea that "the human being carries within him a dreadful double-face." Nietzsche gets a nod in some of Stone's earlier films, especially *The Doors* (1991), thanks to Jim Morrison's own interest in the philosopher.[6] As James Farr (2000, 156–7) notes in his analysis of *The Doors*, Stone interprets the "Apollonian" as "characterized by 'the cold light of reason' . . . while [the 'Dionysian'] is marked by emotion, impulse, and feeling." This sentiment is more a filtering of Nietzsche through time than what is actually outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but it was a concept familiar to some ancient authors as well (e.g., Plutarch, *Mor.* 388–9).

Dionysus and Apollo are not the only deities present on Ptolemy's Alexandrian balcony; a statue of Zeus receives equal camera attention. Whereas Apollo tends to remain a quiet presence throughout Stone's film, Zeus plays a prominent role and also stands in opposition to Dionysus as another emblem of reason. The Zeus statue on the balcony is bare-chested with a *himation* wrapped around his waist, wears a wreath as conspicuous as that worn by Dionysus (they are the only two statues to wear wreaths), and carries a thunderbolt. When the older Ptolemy solemnly intones, "All men reach and fall, reach and fall"—a key theme in the film—Zeus with his thunderbolt stands behind as if in judgment.

As the theatrical version of the film proceeds in flashback from the prologue to the first act set in Macedon, the older Ptolemy says of Alexander in voiceover, "Some said he was a child of Dionysus, others Zeus," a none-too-subtle way of setting these deities against one another.[7] Historically, Alexander never claimed to be Dionysus's child, although the Ptolemies later asserted he had an ancestral connection to the god. In the film, this line articulates the theme of balance between opposing forces: on one side, Zeus, Apollo, Philip, the sky, the eagle, light, and reason; on the other, Dionysus, Olympias, the earth, the snake, shadow, and passion.[8] Both sides possess positive and negative aspects, both equally drive Stone's Alexander.

Olympias's bedroom at Pella, the first room we see in Macedon, features several visual references to reinforce the Dionysian theme. A marble statuette of the god stands in a corner while others line the walls; the curtains of her bed are decorated with grapes and grapevines; and a small bronze statuette of Dionysus hoisting a wine cup is shown in close-up. These and other iconographic details of the set decoration appear to have been consciously chosen and act as thematic signposts throughout the film. The careful viewer will spot images of Dionysus at key moments. For example, among the wall mosaics of the Alexandrian Library appears

Dionysus riding a leopard, a copy of an actual Hellenistic floor mosaic from Pella.

A scene of Aristotle teaching the young Alexander and his friends represents a critical point in the film's Macedonian sequences. As part of a larger discourse on moderation, the philosopher proclaims, "Excess in all things is the undoing of men!" This line foreshadows the action to come, for by the film's end, the viewer sees that excess—even though it becomes a driving force for Stone's Alexander—ultimately proves his undoing. The scene with Aristotle also sets up the film's third act by introducing India and Dionysus's connection with that land. The young Alexander, speaking enthusiastically about the heroes and "the Greek dream to go east," describes India as the place "where Heracles and Dionysus traveled." Historically, a connection between Dionysus and India is unattested before Alexander's conquests, but the line establishes Alexander's desire to explore unknown worlds and emulate great figures of the mythological past.[9] In response, Aristotle warns his young pupils, "The East has a way of swallowing men and their dreams," another line that serves as a premonition.

In structuring the cinematic representation of Alexander's life, Stone departs from a linear narrative and employs numerous back-and-forth jumps in chronological time. He also departs from the structure used by Robert Rossen in his *Alexander the Great*. Rossen devoted considerably more attention to Macedon and the political intrigues therein; used short scenes and montages to fill in the action between Macedon and Gaugamela while maintaining a linear thread; then spent less time on the last years of Alexander's life, after the death of Darius. Alexander's foray into India is limited to a voiceover, a shot of a map, and only one scene, the death of Cleitus. Alexander's death is set not in Babylon but in Susa, immediately following the mass marriages between Macedonian soldiers and Persian women (an episode not used by Stone). Rossen's film implies that Alexander's death comes at a fated but inopportune time, interrupting his grandiose plans for the unity of mankind. "Not yet," Rossen's Alexander says when he realizes death is near, "there is still so much to do."

In contrast, Stone's film places narrative weight on the period following Gaugamela. His choices reveal his interest in what happens to Alexander after initial success is obtained—in other words, the effects of power on Alexander's character. In the theatrical version and director's cut of the film, scenes set in Macedon lead immediately to Gaugamela, bypassing such episodes as the battles of Granicus and Issus, the visit to

Siwah, and the foundation of Alexandria. Stone uses the character of the older Ptolemy dictating to a scribe before a large map as a device for summarizing these events. In the film's final cut on DVD ("Alexander Revisited," released in February 2007), Stone takes his original intent a step further by beginning immediately with Gaugamela after the prologue and using all the Macedonian scenes as strategically placed flashbacks.

The entry into Babylon, following on the heels of the battle of Gaugamela, marks a major turning point in all three versions of Stone's film. Stone's decision to emphasize Babylon as a hotbed of luxury and exoticism is not surprising, given the city's cultural and cinematic associations; indeed, Stone's vision recalls the sensory-overload conception of the site in D. W. Griffiths' *Intolerance* (1916).[10] In *Alexander*'s Babylon the colors are saturated and bright, and peoples from across the Persian Empire cheer and bow in deference to the king. Caged, roaring lions demonstrate the exotic character of Alexander's new lands and hint at his own wild animal nature, barely restrained.

The sojourn in Babylon before resuming the pursuit of Darius features scenes highlighting the riches and territory gained by Alexander, while suggesting the need for him to maintain a level head and not succumb to greed and lust for power. Hephaestion, Alexander's voice of reason throughout the film, expresses his concerns during an intimate conversation on the king's balcony: "I'm so jealous of losing you to this world you want so badly."[11] Inside Alexander's bedchamber, two immense copies of the fourth-century Derveni krater, with its magnificent scenes of Dionysus and his entourage, stand discreetly in the shadows, and an image that appears to be based on Hellenistic archaizing herms of the god stands by the door. These visually link Alexander's bedchamber to Olympias's and suggest his own potential for Dionysian excess.[12]

As the army proceeds after Gaugamela into Babylon and beyond, the road of conquest becomes a form of *katabasis* narrative, with Alexander presumably searching for glory but ultimately exploring aspects of his own identity.[13] He sets out with a retinue of companions for the journey but loses many of them to betrayal and/or death before the story's end. Stone uses the diverse landscapes Alexander encounters as a "displaced underworld" (Holtsmark 2001, 34): deep gorges, high mountains, barren steppes, the mighty river Oxus, then claustrophobic jungles in India. The older Ptolemy's voiceovers repeatedly use the word "unknown" to describe these lands, and at one point when describing the trek through Sogdia he says, "We were totally lost." Exotic peoples, clothing, customs, animals, and even extreme weather set these worlds apart from the

Macedon known by Alexander and his men and periodically recalled in flashbacks.

The film's colors change with each new setting. Scenes set in Macedon incorporate a great deal of white and black, with sporadic splashes of red and yellow. The desert of Gaugamela introduces more golden tones evocative of victory, while the richness of Babylon brings jewel tones of red, gold, and blue. Strong reds appear in Sogdia, and finally in India, bright oranges, pinks, and greens emphasize the unfamiliarity of that world while belying the tragic events taking place there. Among other elements both thematic and visual, the progression of color schemes signifies Alexander's external and internal journey.[14] Alexander himself undergoes a mental, emotional, even physical transformation. Earlier in the film he is a beardless, golden-haired, Apollo-like figure, but later his appearance changes together with his behavior. The colder climates of Sogodia and the Hindu Kush provide an excuse for Stone to show Alexander in animal furs, which highlight his wild nature, while Alexander's long hair, occasional beard, and luxurious robes increasingly recall none other than the Dionysus statue on Ptolemy's Alexandrian balcony.

Out of India

As Alexander goes further east, Stone explores the struggle for inner balance more deeply. The crossing of the Hindu Kush marks another turning point in the film and the beginning of another expedition into the unknown. Before the descent into India, Alexander stands high on a mountain peak and reflects with Ptolemy about the future, his fur robe an emphatic crimson in the blue-white snowy landscape. The sun-drenched mountains that encircle the two characters become an opposite and yet a parallel to the mythical river Styx, for they mark the boundary between the worlds Alexander has conquered and the dangerous worlds to come. Ptolemy explains that Zeus chained Prometheus in those mountains, and a shot of a distant peak reveals the outline of a face, presumably that of Prometheus himself. The reference to Prometheus here as elsewhere brings to mind Alexander's desire to serve humankind but also his potential for hubris, an apropos reminder for the film's viewer before the action continues into India. Ptolemy agrees with Alexander's desire to find the eastern ocean but encourages a return to Macedon first, "so the men can see their homes." This brings a meditation from Alexander on the nature of home ("I have no such place") and ultimately the asser-

tion that "We must go on, Ptolemy, until we find an end." In the scene's most telling moment, Alexander looks up to the empty sky and asks, "Where has our eagle gone?" Zeus's eagle, first spotted at the taming of Bucephalas and omnipresent at the battle of Gaugamela, has not been seen for some time and will not be seen again until after Alexander's decision to leave India.

India is Dionysus's land, and Stone's Alexander faces external and internal challenges there that make his earlier victories seem effortless. The crossing of the Hindu Kush brings Alexander and his army into a harsh jungle landscape replete with driving rain, snakes, unknown animals (namely monkeys and elephants), unknown religions, and as the older Ptolemy explains in voiceover, putrid water that necessitates the drinking of strong wine instead. Three episodes epitomize the strain on Alexander and his men: a banquet scene during which Cleitus is killed, a mutiny scene, and a graphic battle scene against an unnamed local ruler (presumably Porus) and his elephant cavalry.

In historical terms, Stone takes the most liberties with the chronology and organization of events during the India sequences, in the name of literal and dramatic economy. Cleitus, for example, was not killed in India but earlier in Samarkhand. Likewise, Stone combines two mutinies and two battles into one of each. He also has the mutiny occur before the battle against the elephants, rather than after. By choosing to order events in this way, Stone attempts to present a more streamlined drama, punctuated with moments of reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnōrisis*).

Dionysus is invoked early in the Indian banquet scene, as Alexander leads a toast: "To my mother's god, Dionysus, who we are told by our Indian allies traveled here before Heracles, some six thousand years ago."[15] This line recalls Arrian's account of the inhabitants of Nysa (5.1–3), who told Alexander Dionysus had founded their city in order to receive merciful treatment. The toast "to a hero" likewise implies Alexander's one-upmanship of his father, given Philip's ancestral descent from Heracles. Alexander's allegiance to Dionysus is further expressed in dialogue included in the "Alexander Revisited" final cut but omitted from the film's previous two versions:

> **Ptolemy:** I remember a time when you hated how your father drank . . . Dionysus is hero but he is also mind-breaker. He destroys our self-control.
> **Alexander:** Self-control is a lover I've known too long, Ptolemy. The struggle worries me to the bone, and success I find to be as corrupt as failure. But Dionysus, bless his ancient soul, frees me from myself.

Disturbed by the goings-on, Cleitus initiates his own toast to Philip, "a real hero." Stone uses the resulting argument between Cleitus and Alexander as a way to deal with several issues simultaneously: the debate over *proskunēsis* and Alexander's divinity; the resentment of the older generation of generals at the privileging of Asians (including Alexander's marriage to Roxane); Alexander's desire to surpass his father and even the gods; and lingering questions about Philip's assassination. Cleitus's allusion to this last point incites Alexander to run him through with a spear. The death brings a moment of self-recognition. The next scene (deleted in the director's cut, restored and lengthened in the final cut) depicts the despairing Alexander bemoaning his own arrogance and blindness, an emotional tension emphasized all the more by the snake slithering unnoticed in his bed.

The Indian banquet scene has a Dionysian feel visually, with its shifting focus, tilted camera angles, and the dramatic inclusion of a vision; at one point Alexander sees his accusing father in place of Cleitus. Wine, the liberating but dangerous gift of Dionysus to humans, fuels the entire scene as it does the two other banquet scenes in the film—Philip's wedding banquet and the final symposium in Babylon.[16] In all three banquet scenes, the viewer sees how quickly an atmosphere of celebration can become one of violence. One cannot help but think of the mercurial and powerful Dionysus portrayed in Euripides' *The Bacchae*.

Alexander's internal and external struggles between reason and excess—excess of emotion, of thirst for glory—keep Dionysus in mind as the action moves to the mutiny and then to the Indian battle scene, although the god is not directly invoked by name or visual representation. As the battle rages, Alexander urges Bucephalas to a foolhardy charge against a mounted elephant with the exhortation, "It is only sun and shadow." This line echoes earlier dialogue in the scene of Bucephalas's taming and serves as a metaphorical restating of the film's dominant theme. Stone emphasizes the degree of Alexander's mad recklessness by a frontal charge toward the camera, the use of slow motion, and a brief slipping out of focus. The latter technique is used in other scenes where Alexander is drunk or ill, in all cases suggesting an altered state of consciousness.

In military terms, Alexander's charge toward the mounted elephant is absurd and contrary to historical reality. But in visual terms the slow-motion shot of rearing horse versus rearing elephant is irresistible, evoking the famous so-called elephant medallions minted by the historical Alexander.[17] The moment becomes the opportunity for *ekstasis*, epiphany,

and in Aristotelian terms a *peripeteia*, as Alexander's fortune and fate quickly change and his seeming invincibility is challenged. Again altering historical events, Bucephalas and Alexander are pierced by the same arrow, then fall, gravely wounded. At this point the film goes infrared, casting events in a wine-like fuchsia. In the DVD commentary, Stone says the infrared footage "suggests the heightened state, surreal state of being close to death." Indeed, the rest of the scene possesses an otherworldly aspect as Alexander is carried off the battlefield amidst graphic scenes of what the elder Ptolemy describes in voiceover as "pure butchery."

The scene that follows in Alexander's camp reveals a world transformed from the phantasmagoric fuchsia of the battle to a fresh whiteness reminiscent of the Macedonian scenes.[18] His men believed him dead, but Alexander is resurrected, reborn—"twice-born" like Dionysus—and he possesses a sense of clarity lacking in previous scenes. Draped in a gauzy white shroud, he limps to the entrance of his tent and informs the crowd, "Men of Macedon, we are going home." This announcement is accompanied by cheers, the tossing of flowers recalling the entry into Babylon, and Alexander's glimpse of his father's approving shade. Zeus's eagle returns again as well and it seems Alexander has been saved, both from the enemy and from himself. At the same time, the scene is gently ironic, for with the turn back and the renewed adulation of Alexander's army comes, as Stone phrases it in the DVD commentary, "the death of his dream."

The director's cut and final cut feature at this point a scene not included in the theatrical version: the setting up of altars and statues to the gods (and Bucephalas), with prayers to Zeus. Alexander proclaims, "May all those who come here after us know when they see this altar that Titans were once here." Stone's use of the Titans as a symbol builds on the Orphic myth found in the Derveni papyrus, in which the baby Dionysus (there called Zagreus) is killed and chopped into pieces by the Titans. Discovering their deed, Zeus incinerates the Titans with lightning and mixes their ashes with human matter to form humankind. In the director's cut and final cut, after the battle of Gaugamela a flashback to the cave scene between Philip and Alexander features Philip recounting this story to his son. Stone uses the Titans motif to communicate the potential for savagery and violence that exists within all humans and within Alexander himself.[19] In the altar scene, the towering wooden image of Zeus commands attention, but as the army rides away, the viewer notices a smaller, more discreet statue of Dionysus, reminding us that the struggle is not over.

Indeed, it is not. The return to Babylon—literal and metaphorical

symbol of power, luxury, and excess—brings the death of Hephaestion who, throughout the film, had been Alexander's strongest link to rationality and reason. "You saved me from myself," Alexander says mournfully, anticipating the effect Hephaestion's demise will have. This unexpected and devastating event precipitates another reversal in Alexander's behavior, namely his violent attack on Roxane, whom he accuses of poisoning his friend. It also brings another moment of self-recognition. Alexander, his hands at Roxane's throat, experiences a flashback to his father's brutality toward his mother and, catching sight of himself in a nearby mirror, cannot discern whether he sees Philip's face or his own.

The film's Dionysian themes find ultimate expression in the symposium scene that immediately follows. The first and last character we see in this scene is a jesting, painted reveler costumed as Dionysus.[20] Playing off Alexander's Heracles coinage and (negative) accounts preserved in Athenaeus (537ff.), Stone's Alexander wears a lion skin, demonstrating that his wild animal nature has nearly taken over. His companions are dressed as mythological figures too; having the "gods" surround Alexander at this fateful moment visually echoes the scene of Philip's assassination, as well as the gathering of statues on the older Ptolemy's balcony. Alexander cries, "One last toast before the dawn," and looks into his silver *kantharos* to find the warning Gorgon-face of Olympias.[21] The faces around him are tense and watching. Smiling at danger, Alexander drinks deeply, the lion's eyes leering over the cup's edge. Alexander stands and reaches to the elusive sun rising outside the window but collapses in pain. The camera cuts to the Dionysus-reveler, who plays a make-believe *aulos* at that moment. Dionysus, it seems, has won.

This suspicion of Dionysian victory is compounded as Alexander lies on his deathbed. Among others in a series of jump-cut flashbacks is a shot of the bronze Dionysus statuette from Olympias's bedroom, the god's wine cup held aloft in a toast. Together with the Dionysus statue on the older Ptolemy's balcony in Alexandria, which reappears in the epilogue, this statuette visually frames the film. After the shot of the statuette, Alexander looks down to the floor, where he sees a snake, and up to the cloth canopy/fan above, where he sees an eagle. Taking off the ring given him by Hephaestion, he makes a choice and reaches up to the eagle's image, which comes to life as a vision to swoop down upon him.[22] Has the eagle of Zeus come to carry his soul away in glory, or to punish him like Prometheus? The viewer is left with the impression that Stone's Alexander has spent his life searching for a balance between opposing forces—but in vain.

Oliver Stone's Dionysus

The archetype witnessed in *Alexander* of a man confronted with dueling facets of his own personality resonates throughout Stone's body of work, in films such as *Platoon* (1986), *Wall Street* (1987), *The Doors* (1991), *Nixon* (1995), and even *W*. (2008). *Platoon* takes the traditional *katabasis* narrative into Vietnam, where the young soldier Chris Taylor finds himself caught between opposing attitudes towards war, personified by Sergeants Barnes and Elias.[23] Sergeant Elias is the Dionysus-like character who is disillusioned by war, works for justice, cares for his men, and introduces Chris to music and marijuana, but who tragically dies, first wounded by the cold, dogmatic Barnes and then torn apart by enemy bullets. *Platoon*'s jungle environment finds echoes in *Alexander*'s Indian sequences; the moment when the wounded Alexander is lifted on the shield of Achilles and taken from the battlefield mirrors the wounded Chris being carried on a stretcher to a waiting helicopter at *Platoon*'s conclusion. Unlike Alexander, Chris leaves the East alive and experiences a form of redemption, although his final speech in voiceover suggests the internal struggle for balance will never end.

The Doors incorporates Dionysian themes most explicitly. Rock star Jim Morrison is directly equated with Dionysus as a shamanistic figure who indulges in excess and drives women to maenadic frenzy. He is haunted by death and metaphorically torn apart by the pressures of stardom and his hedonistic lifestyle. References to Dionysus, myth, and *The Bacchae* abound in the script. When Morrison and Ray Manzarek (Kyle MacLachlan) discuss the formation of their band, Morrison proclaims: "There'll be great orgies, man, like when Dionysus arrived in Greece, he made all the women mad, leaving their homes and dancing off into the mountains . . . there should be great golden copulations in the streets of L.A. . . . " The story of *The Bacchae* is referenced again in dialogue during a spaced-out sex scene between Morrison and journalist Patricia Kennealy. Stone described *The Doors* as "my chance to explore the Dionysian,"[24] and he did so not only thematically but visually, employing frenetic camera techniques, occasional staccato-paced editing, and a progression of color schemes to convey Jim Morrison's topsy-turvy hallucinogenic world.[25]

In *The Doors*, Jim Morrison is equated not just with Dionysus but also with Alexander. The face of the sensual, bare-chested Morrison is briefly overlaid with one of Alexander's sculpted portraits, a marble head from Pergamon, in a scene of a photo session. Stone explains in the special-edi-

tion DVD documentary, "The Road to Excess": "To live life intensely and well and die young and achieve great, everlasting fame and glory is the greatest . . . it's Achilles, it's Alexander, and it's Jim Morrison." Val Kilmer, who played Jim Morrison in *The Doors*, is King Philip in *Alexander*, a casting choice that inspires comparison between the two films. In *The Doors* as in *Alexander*, Stone explores the consequences of success and glory while incorporating motifs of wildness and excess. Similar visual techniques are used, particularly in terms of editing and the use of color. The Indian battle scene in *Alexander*, for example, is drenched in fuchsia the same way that concert scenes in *The Doors* are washed in red.[26]

Despite the violent demise of Alexander and Jim Morrison in the two films, Stone's message is not a wholesale condemnation of excess and the Dionysian sensibility. Stone (2000, 238–9) has observed about Morrison and *The Doors*: "Obviously, he was a creature of excess . . . But strangely so, by living a larger life, you inflate your life, you learn and see more of life, and you die a wiser man. As long as you don't hurt other people. That's when it becomes an issue. Excess is a fragile line . . . I think we each have to find the line for our own excess." The older Ptolemy appears to confirm this sentiment in *Alexander*'s epilogue when he looks up at the Dionysus statue and pronounces Alexander "the freest man I have ever known." Alexander himself states in the final-cut version of the Indian banquet scene that Dionysus "frees me from myself." The concept of Dionysus and the Dionysian conveyed in Stone's films shares much with the perception of the god in antiquity, as expressed in *The Bacchae* and elsewhere. Dionysus, wine, excess—when taken in moderation, these things can foster creativity, liberation, and *katharsis*, but taken past a certain point can bring destruction.

Oliver Stone's characterization of Alexander as a tormented, conflicted figure is not what American moviegoers expected. They expected a conventional film in the cinematic epic tradition and a conventional action hero in the mold of Kirk Douglas's Spartacus, Charlton Heston's Ben Hur, and more recently Russell Crowe's Maximus in *Gladiator*. And yet, while elements of *Alexander* fit squarely into the cinematic epic tradition—big battles, sumptuous costumes and sets, swelling music, grand gestures—Stone simultaneously subverted the genre, especially in the presentation of his hero. Harsher film critics described Stone's Alexander as a "mama's boy," a crybaby, and one critic described the film itself as "David Lean in hell." In the DVD commentary, discussing the ways in which he challenged the cinematic norm, Stone laughs: "What can I say? I'm sorry, this is not *Braveheart*."[27]

What Stone sought to create is a tragedy in the ancient Greek sense, in which the protagonist confronts forces both within his control and beyond it. In Alexander's case his *hamartia* include pride and anger, as he is well aware.[28] This sense of Alexander as his own potential nemesis is highlighted by the lack of a single, main antagonist in the film. For Stone's Alexander, the most dangerous enemy is not Darius III, the Persian army, his parents, or any of the conspirators or barbarian foes who cross his path, but rather his own self. Visual and thematic allusions to the god Dionysus in the film underscore this theme.[29]

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, I am working with the theatrical version of the film, released in November 2004. The director's cut was released on DVD (as was the theatrical version) in August 2005. In February 2007, Stone released a final cut on DVD ("Alexander Revisited"), which includes previously omitted footage and was re-edited to suit his original vision.

2. Email from Oliver Stone (received 19 September 2005), in response to a posted letter of 30 August 2005. The influence of *The Bacchae* on two of Stone's other films (*JFK* and *Nixon*) is posited in Auster 2000.

3. A painted version of the same statue appears among the Olympian pantheon during the scene of Philip's assassination. Given that the production and set designers were headquartered in London, I speculate that they took as their inspiration a statue of Dionysus, "Sardanapalus" type, which stands in the British Museum's Castellani Collection (*GR* 1878.11–6.1).

4. Ptolemy's speech was altered for both the director's cut and the final cut, mainly for length. However, this part of the speech remains consistent, showing the importance of these lines for Stone's purposes.

5. Parmenion in the generals' meeting before Gaugamela; Parmenion in the Sogdian council scene denouncing Alexander's plans to marry Roxane (Alexander's response: "Damn you, Parmenion, by the gods and your Apollo!") and the doctor in the scene of Hephaestion's death, swearing that he has done all he could (Alexander's response: to order the doctor executed).

6. See Whaley 1997, 119–21 for likely Nietzschean themes in *Platoon*.

7. The reference to Dionysus in this line was deleted in the director's cut DVD version. In the final cut DVD version ("Alexander Revisited"), the line was reversed ("the child of Zeus, others Dionysus") and moved to be a voiceover just before a shot of a Dionysus statuette in Olympias's bedroom. In the original theatrical version, the line was voiced over a shot of a wall painting of Zeus. Clearly Stone wished to emphasize the Dionysus angle in the final version of the film above that of Zeus.

8. Although Olympias asserts Alexander to be Zeus's child in the film, which is not entirely consistent with the pattern otherwise set up.

9. Dionysus was certainly associated with the East prior to Alexander, but not specifically with India; cf., e.g., Euripides, *Bacch*. 14–20 and numerous vase paintings that depict him in Eastern garb. It is debated whether the association with Dionysus

and India actually began with Alexander himself or grew after his death. On this point, see Bosworth 1996, with references to earlier scholarship. Bosworth believes Alexander crafted and promoted the connection between himself and Dionysus via India, in contrast, e.g., with Nock 1928, which argues that links between Alexander and Dionysus arose during the Hellenistic period.

10. For Babylon in earlier films, including *Intolerance*, see Solomon 2001, 225–41.

11. Alexander's self-questioning during this scene recalls Bud Fox's (Charlie Sheen) "Who am I?" on his apartment balcony in Stone's film *Wall Street*, as he gazes out over New York in the same way that Alexander looks out over Babylon, both men at the pinnacle of their success.

12. Cf. Lane Fox 2004, 92. The image by the door is joined by an image of a young, beardless man on the opposite side, which may represent Apollo (it is difficult to tell).

13. See Holtsmark 2001 for the *katabasis* theme elsewhere in film, including Stone's *Platoon*. As the anonymous reviewer for *Helios* notes, Stone's *World Trade Center* (2005) contains decided, and sometimes very literal, catabatic elements. In the prologue and epilogue of Alexander, a statue of Hermes, a god otherwise unimportant in the film, is repeatedly shown on the older Ptolemy's balcony. Might he be included here in his role as *psychopompos*?

14. Color schemes are used to similar effect in other Stone films, most notably *The Doors* (1991) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

15. Stone departs from the literary sources here for thematic reasons of his own. Arrian (4.8–9) says that Alexander failed to sacrifice to Dionysus on that day as prescribed, and that his soothsayers attributed Cleitus's death to the god's wrath. Plutarch (*Alex.* 13) also reports that Alexander believed Cleitus's death was instigated by the god's anger but for a different reason, his destruction of Thebes. In contrast, Stone chooses to have Alexander honor Dionysus.

16. Stone (2005 personal communication) does not agree with the conception of Alexander as alcoholic; contra O'Brien 1992.

17. Cf. Holt 2003.

18. In the director's cut and final cut, Stone inserted a scene of Alexander's last meeting with his mother as a flashback between the Indian battle scene and the scene in the camp, thereby suggesting his state of mind at the point nearest death. The motif of lightness/brightness as synonymous with life and resurrection occurs strongly in Stone's *World Trade Center*; for example, Will Jimeno's vision of Jesus, and the moment when John McLoughlin is lifted from the hole. I thank the *Helios* referee for this observation.

19. Stone in the director's cut DVD commentary explains this use of the motif, and also highlighted it in personal communication. Speaking in the DVD commentary about Alexander's specific line at the altar, Stone says: "He's acknowledging his own lust for power, he understands it, he acknowledges it. There's something freeing about that to me."

20. The Dionysus figure cannot be recognized as one of the Companions. Is it the god himself? He appears here as rotund, beardless, and silly, a contrast to the dignified Dionysian image from Ptolemy's balcony. More than an ancient image of the god, he resembles a modern cinematic image—Dionysus in the Pastoral Symphony sequence from Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940).

21. Is this a clever play on those Greek drinking cups of an earlier period which had

the Gorgon face in their tondos? The Olympias-Gorgon also visually resembles Caravaggio's Medusa (ca. 1598). The scenes on the *kantharos* portray the labors of Heracles with the fight against the Hydra clearly visible as Alexander lifts the cup. No doubt this is meant to be the cup of Heracles from Medius's party, mentioned in Plutarch (*Alex*. 75).

22. In the final DVD cut (unlike the two earlier versions), the ring shatters upon falling to the ground: a curious change, since in the epilogue the older Ptolemy gazes at a ring on his finger that is meant to be that very ring.

23. For the catabatic themes of *Platoon*, see Whaley 1997, 117–8 and Holtsmark 2001, 42–4.

24. "Splinters to the Brain," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 9.2 (spring 1992): 53; quoted in Farr 2000, 156.

25. Compare the quote by the director of photography, Robert Richardson, as cited in Farr 2000, 160 with respect to the color schemes used in *The Doors*. For Dionysus in *The Doors*, see also Farr 2000, 156–9.

26. In *Platoon*, the scene in which Chris first enters the underground bunker of the "heads" (referred to as "the underworld"), to be indoctrinated into their lifestyle of marijuana and music, is likewise washed in red.

27. On critical and popular reaction to the film, see now Engen 2007 and Borza 2007, the latter focusing in particular on reaction among the modern Greek audience.

28. Stone read and studied the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, as well as of Euripides, for inspiration as he was writing the *Alexander* script (Lane Fox 2004; Stone 2005 personal communication). Speaking not only of Alexander but Stone's work in general, Solomon (2005, 153) astutely notes: "Stone fills his films with atmospheric symbols to such an extent that at times the textures seem almost Aeschylean."

29. This article expands upon a paper delivered at the 2006 American Philological Association annual meeting in Montreal. I would like to thank Hanna Roisman and Martin Winkler, organizers of the "Alexander the Great on Film" KINHMA panel; fellow presenters and audience members for their helpful comments, especially Darel Engen; also the editor of *Helios* and the anonymous reviewer for their advice and assistance. Special thanks to Oliver Stone for answering questions via personal correspondence.

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