**Stone Cold: Controversy, Conspiracy, and Cupidity**

 Politics, the media, and finance are arguably the three most important lifelines of a nation. For a single man to attack every one of them and polarize views on them within society is quite a gargantuan feat. The director Oliver Stone has managed to do this, challenging American society's conceptions on conspiracy theories, violence, and greed with the ensuing controversy dragging into courtrooms, congressional halls, and educational institutes. The three prime examples of his ability to polarize society can be seen in the social consequences of the movies *JFK, Natural Born Killers,* and *Wall Street* which separately spurred the American government into action, sparked debate on constitutional rights, and radicalized the modern financial world.

The movie *JFK* is a prime example of the profound effects of Stone’s films. What makes the film so significant is how it changed society’s view and incited the American government to take action on the topic of President Kennedy’s Assassination. The film advocates several conspiracy theories and generally regards the Warren Commissions findings (the Warren Commission was a panel set up by Chief Justice Earl Warren to investigate the assassination) as a deliberate sham. Oliver Stone himself noted that he believed that members of the Commission deliberately misconstrued their repots as part of a larger conspiracy (Conversations). The assassination was as follows: officially, Lee Harvey Oswald fired three shots in the direction of the President, one which missed, and two which hit the President and killed him while also wounding Texas Governor John Connolly in the front seat. If it could be proven that more than 3 shots were fired, and one of the shots came from a direction other than that of Oswald's’, this would mean that the Lone Gunman Theory (in that Oswald acted alone) was false and thus establish a conspiracy (Greene 5). More than 200 books have been written about the JFK assassination, most advocating some form of a conspiracy theory (Marks 4) and perhaps rightly so. An investigation launched by the House of Representatives in 1976, created to placate Warren Commission critics, concluded that Kennedy was “probably” a conspiracy victim (Marks 4) and that there is a 95 % probability that a fourth shot had been fired based on new evidence not available to the Warren Commission (Greene 6). Stone states that his movie is a "hypothesis… a combination of facts…. and speculation" and a fictional response to the fiction of the Warren Commission (Marks 2). The result according to Douglas Brinkley, a Kennedy Scholar at Hofstra University is a “vivid” movie that makes you firmly believe in a conspiracy due to how “it's all put together… it’s scary what the movie does" (2). The film itself is not about the President's assassination or the Warren Commission's report. It follows the story of Louisiana District Attorney Jim Garrison as he collects the facts of a perceived conspiracy to bring the co-conspirators of the assassination (the movie assumes that there was another gunman other than Oswald) to trial. According to TIME journalist Lance Morrow, the movie and the Warren report are “interestingly similar… in a strange way, the two reports balance each other out” (1). To the non-conspiracist the Warren Commission is truth; to the conspiracy theorist, *JFK* is something closer to the truth.

 The movie *JFK* has caused American society to rethink the conclusions of the Warren Commission and create new hypotheses about President Kennedy's assassination. Since the 1960’s the number of people who believe in a conspiracy involved in the killing has increased dramatically (Carlson 1). The number further increased after the release of *JFK*. According to a Gallup Poll after *JFK*'s release in 1992, support of the conspiracy theory grew to a fifteen year high, rising from 74% in 1981 to 77% of the American population supporting a conspiracy theory in the year of the movie’s relea*s*e and 75% a year after the movie's in 1993 – showing a direct influence of Stone’s interpretation of the events. Stone’s influence has seeped into the academic world too. According to journalist Mark Leier in the article "How Can We Know What Really Happened in the Past", students at Simon Fraser University, “hold on to the conspiracy theory. Often their reasoning is based on the scene in “JFK” where Kennedy’s head moves backwards after being hit by a bullet” from the back. This seemingly defies Newton’s third law of motion since “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” – meaning that Kennedy’s head should have jerked forward (7). The other major theory popularized by the film that lends credence to the conspiracy theorists (and fodder for students) is the "magic bullet" theory. Although some studies have come close to recreating the "magic bullet theory", the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassinations disagree on this aspect of the assassination (Greene 17, 18). The "magic bullet" theory, as illustrated in the visual on the next page ("The Magic Bullet"), hit President Kennedy in the back of the neck, exited through his neck, smashed into Governor Connolly's back, fifth rib, and wrist before entering his thigh (Greene 17). According to the 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner in History Professor Stanley Karnow these theories have allowed, “Stone [to] have the final word [on what actually happened]. Friends [of professor Karnow] who teach high school and college courses on Vietnam tell… [Karnow] that for most of their students, *JFK* is the truth” (Karnow 2). The movie that Stone stated was a “hypothesis” has become truth.

 But the effects of the movie did not only affect conspiracy theorists, students, and the general population; it also managed to influence the upper echelons of US government. The US Congress, “disturbed by conclusions of Oliver Stone’s *JFK*… passed the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 (JFK Act)” (United States 1). The insinuations of Stone’s “hypothesis” caused many in the US government to challenge the facts that were presented to them regarding the assassination. The film spurred many members of Congress to try to make public the remaining clandestine files of the 1979 House Select Committee on Assassinations. Rep. Henry Gonzales (D-Texas), who was in JFK’s motorcade on the day of the assassination, introduced the necessary legislation of the act. Yet, he is not the only high-profile figure to be directly involved in the assassination who urged for the mysterious files to be released. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), President Kennedy’s brother, Representative Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) who chaired the 1979 assassinations committee, and even Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) who devised the controversial “magic bullet” theory have all urged the release of the files (Marks 2). In the end, the JFK Act (1992) mandated “the gathering and opening of all records concerning the death of the President [Kennedy]” (United States 1). The act itself was unprecedented. It established the Assassination Record Review Board which acts as an independent agency free from any influence from other government departments or agencies. The Board consisted of 5 citizens, who were not government employees. They had unprecedented power in ordering government agencies to declassify government documents. Only the President himself could overrule the declassification of certain documents. In addition, the “JFK Act required all government agencies to search for records in their possession concerning the assassination and place them in the National Archives” (United States 1). To ensure complete cooperation from the various agencies across the government, “a signed declaration [ensuring compliance] was required from each agency, under penalty of perjury” (United States 3). The repercussion of Stone’s conclusions can be said to have touched every segment of society – from Senators to students.

 *JFK* was not Stone’s only film to fuel heavy controversy which permeated into factions of society. His 1995 film *Natural Born Killers* brought up many questions about violence in the media and freedom of speech. The film itself is about a psychologically unstable couple that goes on a drug and adrenaline fuelled killing rampage while focusing on the ensuing media coverage surrounding them. According to associate editor of *The Guardian*, Xan Brooks, segments of the film are “so over the top” in violence “that they emphasize his [Stone’s] satirical intent” (3). Famous film-critic Roger Ebert has noted that *Natural Born Killers* is not so much about the killers, however, as about the “violence they inspire” (Ebert 1). Brooks notes, “No film in recent decades has stoked as much controversy as *NBK*. No filmmaker, if critics are to be believed, has so much blood on his hands as its director, Oliver Stone” (Brooks 1). Perhaps what has caused all this frenzy is that Stone “will do anything to get his effect… He understands that celebrity killers have achieved such a bizarre status in America that it's almost impossible to satirize the situation” (Ebert 1). Despite this, Stone gives it his best try which makes the movie all the more interesting and controversial (Ebert 1). The result is “Stone’s picture has been confidently linked to at least eight murders” in the eight years after its release ranging from Mississippi in the United States to Paris, France (Brooks 1).

 Thus, with the murders, serious questions over freedom of speech and violence in films arose as a lawsuit was brought against Oliver Stone and Time Warner. A teenage couple shot Patsy Byers, a cashier in Louisiana, in 1995 paralyzing her from the neck down. Soon after, Byers launched a lawsuit against Oliver Stone and Time Warner. The couple had gone on a multi-state killing spree, and “had prepared for the trip by dropping acid and screening *Natural Born Killers* on a continuous loop throughout the night” (Brooks 1-2). Best-selling author John Grisham, whose close friend, Bill Savage, had been murdered on the same killing spree, gave direct support to the lawsuit (Brooks 2). Grisham noted that “the artist should be required to share responsibility along with the nut case who pulled the trigger,” sparking questions over First Amendment rights. Stone’s reply to that assertion was, “Once you start judging movies as a product, you are truly in a living hell. What are the implications for freedom of speech? … [No] film of stature would ever be made again.” Yet Stone “won’t dispute that a film can influence its viewer” (Brooks 2). Even though the movie was threatened with the “dreaded” NC-17 rating (no child under 17 would be allowed to view the movie in a cinema) for strong violence, Ebert claims he can point to dozens of other films that have more violence that received an R (restricted) rating (meaning that children under the age of eighteen must be accompanied by an adult). Ebert believes that “Stone has touched a nerve here, because his film isn’t about violence, its about how we respond to violence” (Ebert 2). From what the film insinuates, our response is frenzied, bloodthirsty, and down-right disgusting.

Supporters of the lawsuit can point to *NBK*’s “natural ancestor” *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). *A Clockwork Orange* is about a violent youth who is arrested by the state authorities and is controversially rehabilitated (A Clockwork Orange). When directly linked to violence, the film was pulled out of viewing by its director Stanley Kubrick. Stone believes that Kubrick’s actions were wrong, as it was an “admission of guilt… [or] embarrassment”. “He should have stood up and defended his work,” Stone asserts (Brooks 2). The judge presiding over the case sided with Stone and Time Warner, and the case was thrown out of court in 2001. The Louisiana Court of Appeals also sided with Stone and Time Warner in 2002 (Brooks 2), effectively ensuring that Stone and *Natural Born Killers* were not responsible for the murders. It can be stated that court ruled correctly. If they had ruled in Byer’s favor, it would have sent ripples throughout America as, arguably, it would have been an infringement of First Amendment rights.

Yet, another of Stone’s film that has strongly helped reshape society’s perceptions, and in some cases, values, is *Wall Street*, which tackled the topics of greed and the pursuit of material wealth*.* The film’s plot is simple: a young stock-broker, Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), is hoping to get rich quickly and is taken under the tutelage of corporate raider Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) who occasionally uses illegal acts to maximize his profits. The themes, however, are more profound, exploring the greed and consumer culture in the US during the 1980’s. *Wall Street* was a product of the time, with the main character, Gordon Gekko, influenced by egos of corporate raiders (such as Ronald Perelman, who took over thirty department stores and Robert Campean who took over Revlon) and rival battles between different corporate raiders (Gabriel 1, 6).

*Wall Street*, according to Economics and Finance Professor, Satya Gabriel, of Mount Holyoke, was meant to be an example of good vs. evil, but it “was quickly turned into a parable of how to get rich the Gekko way while reducing the probability of getting caught by the SEC [Security and Exchange Committee]” (Gabriel 4). The film was meant to be a film that illustrated the "negative consequences of the naked pursuit of material wealth" (Gabriel 4). It was a reflection of the hostile takeovers by various corporate raiders and corporations of other corporations taking place at the time. Some notable examples include Sony taking control over CBS and Columbia, corporate raider Robert Campean taking over Bloomington and an additional thirty-three department stores, and Ronald Perelman nearly taking over Salomon Brothers and successfully taking over the Revlon Corporation (Gabriel 6). However the film was interpreted in an opposite manner by many. Despite Stone's intentions, the movie's main antagonist, Gordon Gekko, described as "an oleaginous villain meant to embody the worst excesses of his era [eventually] became a folk hero and highly persuasive career counselor" (Winter 3). As Professor Gabriel notes, "once a film is created, it becomes the malleable object of the culture(s) into which it is thrust and the culture of Wall Street… reversed the polarity of the morality of the tale" (4). "For the hip-hop Wall Streeters Gordon Gekko was the hero of the film and Bud Fox was his Judas, the ungrateful disciple" (4).

 This reverse interpretation was a reaction to culture of greed in America at the time (Ross) as well as the audience's ability to directly relate to Gekko. The 1980's were "a decade all about money… Money was a favorite obsession in the '80's and it came through on film" (Tuttle). This caused *Wall Street* developed a cult status among its followers, as the "wanna-be-Gekkos… could see themselves in his [Gekko's] shoes, as Gekko the Great" (Gabriel 4). Indeed, "Gekko… [was] a self-made man, lacking the WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] pedigree and the Ivy League credentials" (Winter 1). These characteristics made him a "more attractive villain" and a figure that most people could relate to. Ironically, the cinematic value of Michael Douglas and Gordon Gekko did the opposite and appealed too much to some who viewed the movie. Evidence of the film's popularity and Gekko/Douglas' charisma represented another film about finance, Boiler Room (2000), "where the young wanna-be-Gekkos even memorize the lines of their hero" (Gabriel 4). Most support for Gekko stems from the fact that the 1980's were "an era of uncapped greed" (Ross 2), and many CEOs and board members took hold of companies without owning much, if any of the stock of the company (Gabriel 6). This would mean that the negative or positive consequences of their decisions within the company would not impact them financially as they have no stocks in which they can lose or gain value. Gekko was seen as a figure that would challenge all of this bureaucracy (Gabriel 6). The process of corporate takeovers resulted in massive layoffs and the firing of inefficient managers, will garnering more profit for these corporations which will "ultimately make US capitalism… function more efficiently, i.e. generate economic growth." (Gabriel 8). This "greed is good" mentality is meant to create "a leaner, meaner, more shareholder friendly American capitalism. If in the process long-term employees lose their jobs and factories… disappear, generating negative effects on the communities… then so be it." It is these negative consequences that Michael Moore explores in his film *Roger & Me* with an example being when General Motors shut down its factory in Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan (Gabriel 7). Despite this, Gekko's "greed is good" mentality/argument "has many adherents within the corporate finance establishment" highlighting the influence the single character of this movie has (Gabriel 7). *Wall Street* was released as a "cautionary tale, but oddly enough, it endures as a possibly timeless model for success" (Winter 3).

These three films with nine Oscar nominations and three Academy Awards between them are ideal examples of the discussion, controversy, and ideas stoked by the director Oliver Stone. Each movie has raised serious questions about certain aspects of our society and has polarized views on issues. From political conspiracy theories to violence in the media to greed in the financial world, these three topics have been independently tackled by Stone and changed the way people view these issues. Yet these movies are only three examples of Stone's works. When taking into context Stones' other movie, such as *Midnight Express*, his Vietnam trilogy (*Born on the Fourth of July, Platoon,* and *Heaven and Earth*), as well as his presidential biopics of Richard Nixon and George W. Bush, one realizes the true breadth and depth of topics which Stone tackles topics and the questions that arise from them, as well as the perceptions within American society, that are changed because of them.

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