

NIXON [1995]

by

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The career of Richard Nixon (Anthony Hopkins) is traced from boyhood in Whittier to the resignation of his Presidency in 1974. Told in a series of non-linear flashbacks and in a variety of filmic styles, we see him as a powerful world statesman opening China to the West and establishing detente with the Soviet Union; we also see him as a paranoid alcoholic haunted by demons, political and personal. Some of the events the film covers are: the death from tuberculosis of his two brothers, his Quaker upbringing, his relationship with his mother, (omitted is his military service), his run for congress, his work on the House un-American Activities Committee, the Alger Hiss trial, (omitted is his vice-presidency), the so-called Checkers speech, his unsuccessful run for Governor of California, his unsuccessful run for President against John Kennedy, his support by Texas millionaires, (omitted is his Presidential campaign), his approach to "ending" the Vietnam War, the bombing of Cambodia, the Watergate break-in and the subsequent downfall of his administration, (omitted completely is Spiro Agnew), his resignation, (omitted is his role after his resignation). (Rated R)

The key to this film comes when, toward the end, Director Oliver Stone has Nixon, standing in front of a painting of Kennedy, on the verge of his resignation, say, "When they look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are." In many ways, this is what *Nixon* is all about – a quaternity of vision: The way the public sees its heroes, the way it sees its villains; the way heroes see themselves, and the way villains see themselves. And, in many ways, this quote also describes what has given rise to all the controversy flying about the film.

Throughout his career, director Oliver Stone has seemed a bit scattered in his choice of subject matter. *Salvador* [1986] is about a reporter drawn into a revolution, *Platoon* [1986] is about the psychic diseases of the Vietnam War, *JFK* [1991] is a hyperkinetic meditation on conspiracy theories; *Born on the 4th of July* [1989] is about a war veteran who makes a political and psychological about-face; *Natural Born Killers* [1994] is an assessment of the role of the media in the perpetuation of crime, *Wall Street* [1987] is about corrupt business practices and the downfall of a yuppie. There is seemingly little rhyme or reason in Stone's career aside from becoming one of Hollywood's most elegant visual stylists (his films combine different film stocks, black-and-white with color, and various forms of video). This, however, is an external view of the man's work. If we look deeper, into the psychic core of his films, we find not only a consistency, but a consistency that is almost frightening.

At the heart of every Oliver Stone film is a study of a man precariously situated on the cusp between his external life and his internal life, between the demands of a

society that he has committed to and the demands of an interior driving force beckoning him to an ultimate psychic goal. And very often the tragedy of Stone's films is that this central subject misinterprets one or both of the forces that come to bear upon his life. Furthermore, it is often an even greater tragedy that the reason for the misinterpretation lies in his having allowed one of the forces, external or internal, to unduly influence – rather than balance – the other. Oliver Stone's films are about a divided life out of balance. *Nixon*, too.

First, the internal forces driving the Richard Nixon of the film (we, of course, know little to nothing of the real man – more on this later). He is driven by a desire to please his mother and father, to rise above class. These are not the forces that drive heroes; these are petty and personal forces, not collective. He feels awkward in the presence of other people; he is an introvert trying to live an extroverted life. He keeps Pat, his wife, separate from his political life and never consults her – his is a Presidency without the feminine and thus becomes brutally masculine. Nixon feels unworthy and weak – and thus feels he falls short when he measures himself against the American ideal of leadership, an external force.

But, in a complexity that Stone loves, all is not failure. Occasionally, the forces balance and Nixon makes good. There are external forces, like the anti-Communist wave, on which he rode to the Presidency. It haunts him in his efforts to deal with Communist China, which he sees as his greatest accomplishment, yet he recognizes that were it not for his anti-Communist rhetoric earlier in his life, he could have never opened China. On the domestic front, there are people who want to manipulate him for personal gain, to whom he accedes . . . up to a point. Perhaps the strongest and most heroic Nixon we see is when he stands up to the Texas millionaires, led by “Jack Jones” (a delightful Larry Hagman outfitted with satanic eyebrows) and draws a line. Here is perhaps the most successful combination of the conflicting forces. Steely eyed, he says, “Presidents don't threaten; they don't have to.”

Yet most of the time, these two aspects are in destructive conflict. We see the brilliant statesman who did much to defuse the power of Russia and China in the Cold War. We see a man saving Democracy in a hostile world, while personally disintegrating. His indecision, perhaps a symptom of the conflict, made the war drag on; if he had concluded it in a year, he would have been a hero. Because he is the leader, he draws allegiance from those around him; but because he is a warrior, he abuses those who follow him. We see a Nixon who is the founding father of modern Republicanism – thus a relevant figure, even today – yet the only President ever to resign the office. Finally, we see a man doomed never to be loved by the public.

The problem can be stated rather simply in archetypal terms. The conflict is between two archetypes: the Warrior and the King/Leader. Nixon as Warrior alienates the public love the King/Leader needs to govern justly. On the other hand, Nixon as leader is plagued by the paranoia of the Warrior who must be constantly on guard against enemies, real or imagined. this conflict is symbolized over and over in the film. Have a fire in the fireplace while running the air conditioning full blast is typical.

Another important difference between these archetypes affects Nixon's Presidency. The Warrior looks inward for power, while the King/Leader integrates the power of those around him to rise even higher. In *Nixon*, we see this difference in Nixon's reaction and treatment of not only this staff, but the feminine element. It is Pat Nixon (Joan Allen) who plays a pivotal role: she emerges as a strong-willed and clear-eyed woman not snowed by the political avalanche. She is a Casandra-like truth-teller who sees through Nixon's masks and evasions; she is tired of being a politician's wife. She supplies the film's conscience. The other feminine, their daughter, has a very significant view of Nixon: she knows him only through television. That is, she is restricted, unlike Pat, to only the external myth, barred from inner and personal.

The Nixon of the film can never resolve the two archetypes that possess him: the Warrior and the King/Leader. And it is not that they cannot coexist. Other presidents have managed it – Teddy Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower are the most obvious examples. But Nixon never found this resolution and it destroyed both him and his Presidency. This resolution is no easy task considering the differences that must be bridged: the Warrior is totally self-reliant, suspicious, crafty, scheming and oriented toward the single, narrow goal of victory, while the Leader/King must balance and consider all those around him (or her), must be trusting, must depend on the voluntary support of others, and must strive toward a goal of good that transcends the individual. *Nixon* is a study of the inability to integrate these opposite poles, the inability to live in a tension between opposing forces, the inability to survive an irresolvable conflict that must be resolved.

The appearance of a film about Richard Nixon may be an indication that this archetypal conflict may be far more widespread than we might first assume. There have been a spate of recent films about heroic failures, or at least films that demonstrate the dark, private underbelly of public heroes. *Cobb* [1994] is a good example of tabloid film investigation into the large clay feet of a public hero. The failed *Apollo 13* [1994] space flight was chosen as the subject of a film rather than the spectacularly successful Apollo 11. If these “failed heroic” films become a subgenre of contemporary American film, what does this say about the current psychic state of our culture?

And now I wish to turn from the internal/external conflict the film portrays to the internal/external conflict that surrounds the film itself. In recent weeks, there has been a rash of television and radio programs (not to mention the seemingly endless newspaper articles and opinions) which have served as platforms for almost everyone who was present in the Nixon White House from the Secretary of Defense to the gardener, all of whom seem to agree that, “that's not the way it was.” And, in most cases, the program's host concludes that therefore the film is no good.

But Stone clearly signals that *Nixon* is not a documentary film. He does this in text, subtext, and by visual implication. The first thing we see on the screen is a lengthy, written disclaimer. The Nixon-part of the film itself begins with the camera slowly rising before an iron fence to reveal a mansion behind – a direct quote from the opening of

Citizen Kane. The information-compressing newsreel device used several times in *Nixon* is another homage to *Kane*. This reference must be taken at two levels. First, *Kane*, perhaps Hollywood's first existential film, proposes that any human being is so complex that he or she can never really be understood. Ditto *Nixon*. Second, we must consider the flap about *Kane* that caused the paranoid William Randolph Hearst to assume the film was about him, to go to great lengths to prevent its distribution. Ditto *Nixon*.

What this controversy shows is how film has crept into the American psyche as a source of external verification of our internal beliefs when, in fact, it is no such thing. Demanding historical authenticity from *Nixon* is about as silly as using theologians to discredit C. B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* [1956] on the basis that Charlton Heston as Moses didn't lisp (Exodus 5:10). Nor, to my knowledge, for casting Laurence Olivier as Zeus in *Clash of the Titans* [1981], has any filmmaker been struck by a thunderbolt (nor showered with manna). People who demand and expect such historical correctness in films are like those who would calculate the osmotic pressure needed for a plant to thrive at a height of over 500 feet in order to discredit *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Historicity is not an issue in *Nixon*. This is made perfectly clear by the casting of Anthony Hopkins – he looks not even remotely like the historical Nixon (just as none of the men cast as Jesus – all Caucasians, often with blonde hair – could possibly bear even a passing resemblance to the historical Jesus, surely of Semitic stock). Indeed, demanding historical authenticity from a film may be a defense mechanism that allows a viewer to avoid the film's deep psychological and archetypal implications.

Nixon will always be remembered as the President who resigned, and the natural question is to wonder *why* he resigned. What Oliver Stone offers is simultaneously an answer and a non-answer. *Nixon* shows us a man ridden by two conflicting archetypal forces, only the greatest of men and women could possibly survive this conflict, let alone lead successful lives. And the controversy surrounding the film, politics aside, shows us an American social collective trying desperately to endure the same conflict in the image of a man who has become a symbol.

Nixon. Directed by Oliver Stone. Written by Stephen J. Rivele, Christopher Wilkinson and Olivier Stone. Distributed by Disney. 1995.