

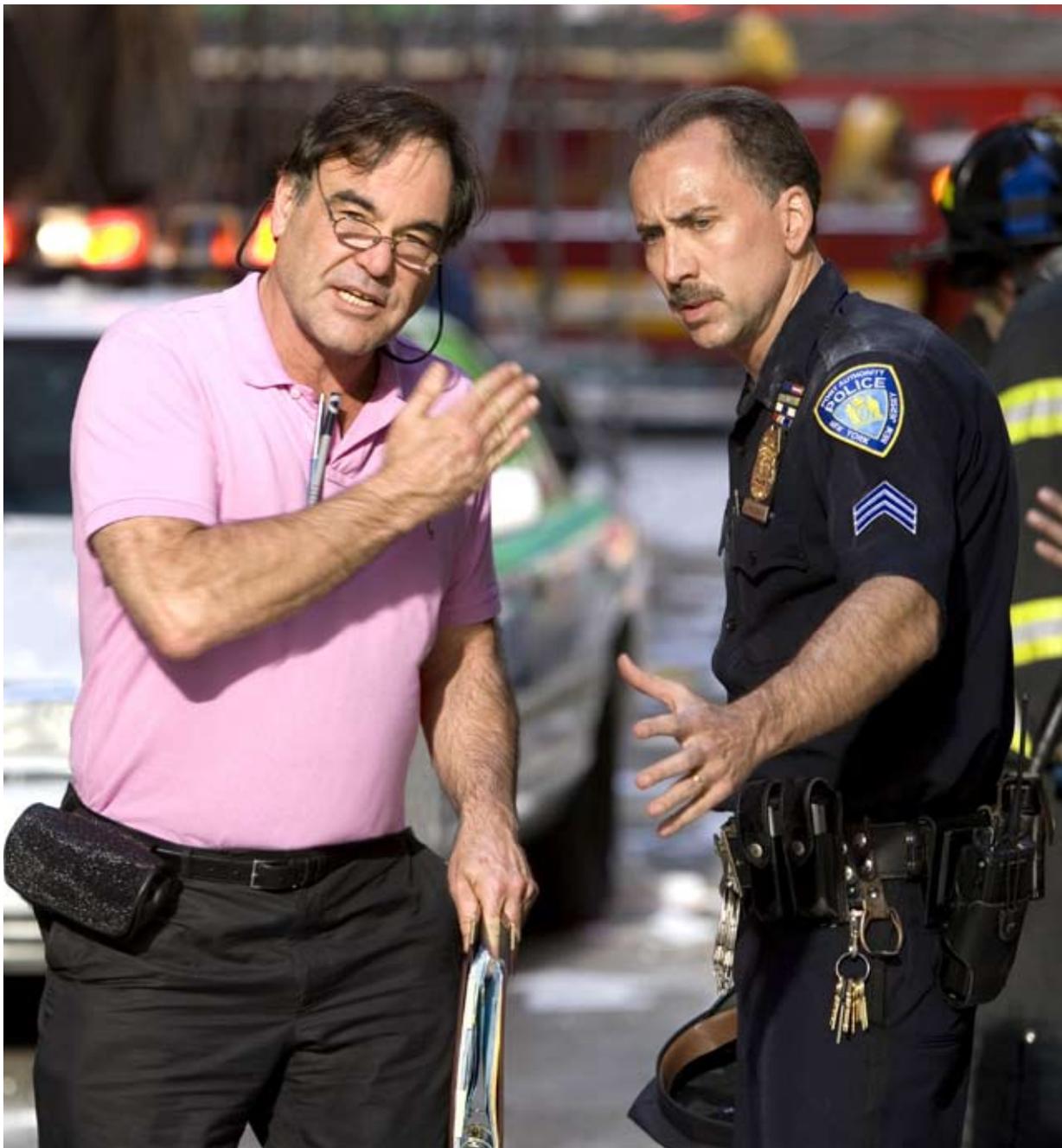


British Academy of Film and Television Arts
The 2006 David Lean Lecture given by Oliver Stone

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Above: On location, directing Nicolas Cage in *World Trade Center* (2006) Credit: Rex Features

Cover: Discussing a scene with Kevin Costner in the BAFTA-nominated *JFK* (1991) Credit: Rex Features

Overview

Oliver Stone's preoccupations are reflected across his many films, through which he asks difficult questions about society and the individual. A multi-talented screenwriter, producer and director, he successfully combines rich cinematic narrative with thought-provoking subjects. He remains one of the most articulate voices in Hollywood, prepared to train his camera on uncomfortable areas of life without fear or favour.

If a tour of duty in Vietnam was perhaps the making of Oliver Stone, then the film career that followed might be described as a prolonged period of self-analysis and, by extension, analysis of the country he served with distinction.

His understanding of the extremes of human emotion was forged in this arena, and reflected in the films *Platoon*, *Born On The Fourth Of July* and *Heaven & Earth*, each of which deals with the grim reality of war by a filmmaker with first hand knowledge. Twice wounded in action, he was decorated with both the Bronze Star Medal and the Purple Heart.

Stone's reputation is for dealing with tough subject matter, writing raw screenplays such as *Midnight Express* and directing provocative films such as *Natural Born Killers*. The latter – vilified upon its release for glamorising violence – is now better recognised as a technical tour de force and as a satire of today's media spectacle, depicting the ills of a 'civilised' society in which the banal and the brutal co-exist and pass themselves off as entertainment. "Part of what the movie does is create the idea that we are watching something that is so horrific and yet we are entertained by it," he said at the time.

This is a recurrent Stone theme. His detractors might froth at the uncompromising nature of his characters in macho movies, yet these are

consistently stories of people seeking answers – whether on the battlefields of southeast Asia or the boardrooms of corporate America.

Stone is no proselytiser, as he is often accused. He is a man intent on seeking alternative viewpoints. War movies reflect just one aspect of his experience, whereas *Wall Street* evokes the world of his stockbroker father whilst underlining a sense of social responsibility. He is a child of the 1960s, of a counterculture he depicted in a highly spiritual piece of rock and roll history, *The Doors*. With *JFK*, he made a riveting account of the Kennedy assassination; he also crafted a wonderfully-nuanced, impressively even-handed biopic of Richard Nixon.

Throughout his career, Stone has earned as much controversy as he has accolades – including a BAFTA and three Oscars. Similar recognition may come, in time, to his latest film, *World Trade Center*. This is a film that his critics, and those most personally affected by the tragic events of 9/11, were reportedly wary of him handling. But in telling the tale of two survivors pulled from the debris of the Twin Towers, Stone has achieved a rare feat: remaining true to his own ideals while winning grudging praise from his detractors. And that, surely, is the mark of a master filmmaker.

Anwar Brett

On his role as a dramatist:

I've always done a film because there was something in the foreground that really sparked me and that took me ideally into the background. So it would be able to combine, like [Sir David] Lean and the other great filmmakers did, the concept of a foreground and a background. An intimate epic, so to speak. On *Born On The Fourth Of July* I was fascinated by Ron Kovic's changes. But through him, I was able to live through 30 years of American history. Richard Nixon is a fascinating foreground figure and through him you can see much of the American consciousness for 50 years. So I always worked on those premises. Go back to *Midnight Express* and *Scarface*. It starts with one person. That's been my way of working. It's very inductive.¹

On *Born On The Fourth Of July* (1989):

I think the militaristic John Wayne stereotype influenced many young men to enlist in the military and support the [Vietnam] war. Ron Kovic was certainly one such person. I was more influenced by Tarzan, Errol Flynn and Clark Gable, and definitely Hemingway. And I tremendously enjoyed the James Bond stories by Ian Fleming. I loved the rectitude of male heroes that, in that era, was a dominating impulse. It certainly coloured my decision to join up and go to Vietnam. But that kind of idealism and romance quickly burned away when I actually went into combat and saw how ugly war really was. I tried to show that side of it – idealism meeting reality – but without losing sight of the Eliases [the protagonist in *Platoon*], who I thought of as the good guys, the heroes of my youth. Anyone who knows better and makes of war a stirring, moving experience has made a fraudulent movie.⁴

On screenwriting:

I'd always wanted to be a director, ever since I went to film school. Scorsese was my professor in 1969. I studied with him for two years. He was what we wanted to become, a "filmmaker"... Directing is a natural extension of writing. I like to write because there's honesty in that activity. It's more difficult. You're alone in a room and you have to sort things out yourself. A director can always pull through with noise everywhere and his colleagues around. I don't think a good director can make a good film with a bad screenplay, but a bad director can deliver an acceptable film if he has a good screenplay. Even Ingmar Bergman or Woody Allen can't create a masterpiece with a bad screenplay. So, for me, that's the number one priority. And that's why I plan to go on writing my own scripts.²

On *Heaven & Earth* (1993):

I did not make this film in response to critics' complaints that my films neglected or denigrated the role of women. I wanted to make it because it was the completion of a cycle of stories that would at least give credit to the other side, which nobody had yet done in Hollywood... Here was a chance to do something different. I found a story to love when I read Le Ly Hayslip's book...

One of the qualities of spirituality is, as F. Scott Fitzgerald suggested, a fine mind's capability to hold two contradictory thoughts at the same time, its capacity to contain multitudes of feeling.

The reviews were dreadful, dismissive. But to this day, it is still one of my favourites, because it is tender and beautiful and still makes me cry in certain scenes, like the one in which on screen Le Ly comforts the despairing, suicidal Tommy Lee Jones character ("different skin, same suffering").⁴

On the individual:

I consider my films first and foremost to be dramas about individuals in personal struggles, and I consider myself to be a dramatist before I am a political filmmaker. I think what links all my films – from *Midnight Express* to *Scarface*, *Salvador*, *Platoon* and *Wall Street* – is the story of an individual in struggle with his identity, his integrity, his soul. In many of these movies, the character's soul is stolen from him, or lost, and in some cases he gets it back in the end. I do not believe in the collective version of history. I believe that the highest ethic is a Socratic one, from the dialogues of Socrates, which says, "Know thyself."³

On *Natural Born Killers* (1994):

Having just returned from making *Heaven & Earth* in rural Thailand, where Buddhism is practiced and non-violence revered, I found myself back in America, as if a painter throwing up on a canvas that which I saw and powerfully felt – more tabloid news, more commercialism, more aggression, more media, more of everything that's rotten. I felt sick...

Yes, I wanted to have fun – in the way a painter might play with and interpret chaos into surrealism. Fun not at the expense of a human being, but fun in the act of escaping a landscape of madness and culture wars, and of creating inside the mind. It was [also] cut extremely fast; it was the most intricately cut film I've ever worked on... It took ten months to edit. It was edited and concocted as a poem would be, with its own rules of thought and song. For me, and for several directors whose opinion I respect, it was a groundbreaking technical film. It had its own rules.⁴

On *Platoon* (1986):

I didn't design *Platoon* as an anti-war movie. I simply didn't think in those abstract terms, because they categorise and kill off the ambiguities of this life experience. I was only thinking about making it true and gritty, from the inside out. As such, I worked as a dramatist, not as a historian...

I had seen too many World War II movies where people didn't look worried enough or tired enough or even young enough, for that matter. Screen soldiers, in general, were too old, and comfort had compromised that "thousand-yard stare." In the infantry, I remember that the dirt was embedded in my skin and became part of my body during the 15 months I slept like a feather, on my nerves.⁴

On *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995):

You can't run from politics, it's awful to do so... It's better to do something with less popularity but make it true, at least to your own conscience and what you believe in. You have to be willing to take the loss at the box office. That's not to say you can't be entertaining doing it.

I think *JFK* was an extremely uncompromised picture and it did historic, incredible business everywhere. I didn't expect it to. I thought it was too dense, the dialogue too much. Three hours, dark subject, complicated, and it did business everywhere in the world. Unbelievable, it truly is. So I used that marker, in a sense, to do *Nixon*. Which didn't do well commercially. Very few directors have been able to make two politically uncompromised movies in their lifetime. It's not about politics, it's about people who are in politics, remember that...¹



Above: With Anthony Hopkins, filming *Nixon* (1995) Credit: Illusion/Cinergi/The Kobal Collection

Filmography & Awards

- 2006 World Trade Center director, producer
- 2004 Alexander director, producer, writer
- 2004 Looking for Fidel (TV) director, writer
- 2003 Persona Non Grata director
- 2003 Comandante (TV) director, producer, writer
- 1999 Any Given Sunday director, writer
- 1998 Savior producer
- 1997 U Turn director
- 1996 The People vs. Larry Flynt producer
- 1996 Evita writer
- 1996 Freeway writer
- 1995 Nixon director, producer, writer
- 1994 Natural Born Killers director, writer
- 1994 The New Age producer
- 1993 Heaven & Earth director, producer, writer
- 1992 South Central producer
- 1991 JFK director, producer, writer
- 1991 The Doors director, writer
- 1990 Reversal Of Fortune producer
- 1990 Blue Steel producer
- 1989 Born On The Fourth Of July director, producer, writer
- 1988 Talk Radio director, writer
- 1987 Wall Street director, writer
- 1986 Platoon director, writer
- 1986 Salvador director, producer, writer
- 1986 8 Million Ways To Die writer
- 1985 Year Of The Dragon writer
- 1983 Scarface writer
- 1982 Conan The Barbarian writer
- 1981 The Hand director, writer
- 1978 Midnight Express writer
- 1979 Mad Man Of Martinique (short) director
- 1974 Seizure director, writer
- 1971 Last Year In Vietnam (short) director, writer

BAFTA Award summary

Evita – nominated for Adapted Screenplay
 JFK – nominated for Adapted Screenplay
 Born On The Fourth Of July – nominated for Adapted Screenplay
 Platoon – won for Achievement in Direction

Academy Award® summary

Nixon – nominated for Original Screenplay
 JFK – nominated for Best Picture, Director, Adapted Screenplay
 Born On The Fourth Of July – won for Director, nominated for Best Picture and Adapted Screenplay
 Platoon – won for Director, nominated for Original Screenplay
 Salvador – nominated for Original Screenplay
 Midnight Express – won for Adapted Screenplay

This Filmography lists Writer, Producer and Director credits only. Oliver Stone also has Executive Producer, Acting, Cinematography and Editing credits.

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The Foundation's continuing financial support has been integral to the production of our high-profile film lecture series featuring internationally-renowned and award-winning directors. These lectures are designed to educate, inform and inspire practitioners by providing insight into the experiences of some of the world's best and most compelling filmmakers and to provide a forum for further discussion of their outstanding creative achievements.

The lecture series also serves to carry-on the legacy of the great director David Lean, one of the founders of the British Film Academy (as it was then known) in 1947 and a continuing inspiration to many through his exceptional body of work.

Previous David Lean Lectures have been given by:

- 2001 Sydney Pollack
- 2002 Robert Altman
- 2003 Ken Loach
- 2004 John Boorman
- 2005 Woody Allen

Bibliography

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