

# 4

## Love

### Introduction

I liked *Heaven and Earth* and *Alexander* for their tenderness. I dedicated both to my mother for that reason.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of *U Turn*, all of my films have an aura of optimism about them. In *World Trade Center* it is feelings of family that help pull the people out of the hole. In *W.* Laura Bush is a binding force. In *Wall Street* love is also important. *U Turn* demonstrates the problem of isolation.<sup>2</sup>

In the opening scenes of *Salvador* (1986), Richard Boyle (James Woods) is arrested for multiple traffic offences and then bailed by his friend Doctor Rock (James Belushi), whereupon Rock asks Boyle to drive him to the dog pound to release the his pooch, Bagel. During the drive, the pair get into a discussion about women:

ROCK: Oh man, everything's turned to shit. Miriam's thrown me out, man. You know she says I'm too old to be a rock 'n' roll disc jockey any more. She wants me to sell computers in Silicon Valley – can you believe that?

BOYLE: You know, you know I can't take these yuppie women. You know, with the Walkmans and the running shoes and the, the ... they'd rather go to the aerobics jazz class than fuck. Forget about it!

ROCK: Yeah, yeah, they got those pussy exercises too.

BOYLE: You see Latin women? Now, they're totally different. They're kind, they're understanding. Take Claudia – she's the greatest, man. I mean, she doesn't give a shit what I do.

ROCK: The best thing about Latin women is they don't speak English.

The scene closes with a riff from Jackson Browne's 'Running on Empty', a signification not only of a cultural deficit in relation to the protagonists' views of women, but a wider national malaise concerning the government's malfeasance in Central America, where much of the rest of the film resides. Although the tone of the film and the characters' attitudes towards women changes after the pair find their way to El Salvador, this initial exchange is emblematic of critical perceptions towards gender and sex that Stone epitomised for some, particularly in his emergent phase as a writer and filmmaker. *Salvador* offers more evidence too. Boyle's girlfriend Maria (Elpidia Carrillo) is a central motivation for his character to evolve, and she is in considerable danger as the narrative progresses. Yet the screenplay gives her little to say of significance, and Stone's off-screen reputation around Hollywood for indulging in drugs and women at this time probably did as much – if not more – to feed the negative assessments of his narrative.<sup>3</sup> While the historical image of Stone as a womaniser presented in, for example, Jane Hamsher's *Killer Instinct* (1987) and Eric Hamburg's *JFK, Nixon, Oliver Stone and Me* (2002), may have dissipated over the years, his escape from this straitjacketed personality trait has been harder to achieve. An interview in the *Observer* in 2010, for example, continued to contemplate an 'almost hyper-masculinity to Stone's oeuvre'.<sup>4</sup>

One consequence of this reportage has been to cloud Stone's views on gender and the representation of women more generally in his films. It also has clouded our assessment of the centrality of love as a theme in many of Stone's pictures. In the case of *Salvador*, Boyle goes to extraordinary efforts later in the film to obtain the *cedula de identidad* (identity card) for his girlfriend Maria that will allow her safe exit from El Salvador. The ultimate reversal and failure of that scheme at the very end of the film, with Maria removed from a bus, allowed Stone to use the pathos experienced by the lovers to speak to

the audience of the personal as well as national tragedy that the US government was party to in that strife-ridden country.

The particular focus of this chapter is on the dramatic constructions that Stone has used to explore themes of love in his more recent films, taking their cue from earlier explorations such as those above in *Salvador*. Pathos and parental love became important components in films such as *Wall Street* (1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and, perhaps most particularly, *Heaven and Earth* (1993). In these films the parent-child relationship is a nurturing one. In *U Turn* (1997), *Alexander* (2004 and various cuts of the film thereafter) and *W.* (2008), the parent-child relationship becomes disruptive. In both *U Turn* and *Alexander*, parental love is infused with the more troubling prospect of incest. In *W.* the suggestion of emotional distance between father and son is played out alongside warm and close emotional bonds between George W. Bush and his wife Laura. Indeed, the prominence and conventionality of the portrayal of Laura (Elizabeth Banks) poses its own challenges to established caricatures of Bush that are used elsewhere in the film. At the same time, all three films adopt a distinctly melodramatic tinge, both in the performances and in some of the cinematic flourishes and realisation of scenes. A more nurturing parent-child dynamic is once again in evidence in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) and *Savages* (2012), providing insights into Stone's changing personal perspective on the subject through the 2000s.

This chapter will explore these interwoven developments – familial as well as personal love – in Stone's filmmaking, highlighting the importance of a transition that began in the mid-to-late 1990s with *U Turn*: a film generally regarded as one of Stone's darkest and most problematic. The argument here posits that this film in particular represents a marker in Stone's career, not because of the loss of aesthetic vitality that had been integral to earlier films, as some critics observed, but precisely because the film marks the emergence of a distinctive melodramatic shift in Stone's work, and a shift towards the darker aspects of parental love in particular. The contention here is that in the rush to classify *U Turn* as a noir thriller, critics and observers of Stone not only pre-emptively closed the door on any recognition of the film's overt melodrama, but also in later reappraisals continued to miss a bigger opportunity to find

a key interpretive clue to Stone's personal as well as cinematic development. Then, the significance of a melodramatic filter for viewing Stone's later films is used to assess *Alexander* and *W.*, before investigating the way in which relationships and emotional love are worked into both these films and then *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages*.

Stone's later cinematic output has been faulted on several occasions by a range of critics for a loss of dramatic urgency and controversy that he displayed so explicitly in earlier years. What supposedly did change? One key shift was in a revived representation of women. From the rather minor role afforded to Maria in *Salvador*, Stone shaped a series of increasingly important roles for his female protagonists as the years passed. Starting with Hiep Thi Le as Le Ly Hayslip in 1993, and Joan Allen's portrayal of Pat Nixon in 1995, strong female roles became integral to the plot and gender discourse. Beyond that, there was a noticeable shift towards a different aesthetic – one less wedded to the realist and hyperrealist style that Stone made his own in the late 1980s – that was more interested in situation-driven moral dilemmas.

Integrating love and melodrama into his pictures more deliberately, Stone shifted registers. Less urgent perhaps, but engaging gender in a different way allowed him to foreground questions of love that, if they were present in earlier films, nevertheless were confined and conditioned by other concerns. The shift was aesthetic, but inevitably it was also personal. Stone's settled marriage as well as his embrace of Buddhism redirected his more visceral creative energies into the task of marshalling a broader critique of sex, relationships and love. However, even this task was still infused with a love of country – politics, capitalism and community – as an expression of the American myth belatedly grounded in family and partnerships. For example, as Chapters 2 and 3 of this book on politics and money amplify, Stone's exploration of love is grounded ultimately in personal passion that stretches beyond the confines of human relationships. Within his screenplays, Stone always has had one eye on a broader set of questions about what love means in the context of American culture: questions that are couched not as some intellectualised consideration of culture, but as a very personal expression of love for a particular vision of what it means to be an American. The expression of that love enabled

the melodramatic counterpoints of personal love considered here to flourish, as Stone's career progressed.

### Love and melodrama

Love, pathos and visceral emotion were important elements in Stone's early work. In particular, familial love emerges more than once. Stone's Oscar-winning screenplay for Alan Parker's *Midnight Express* (1978) privileges love and forgiveness expressed for Billy Hayes (Brad Davis) by his father (Mike Kellin) in the early moving prison scenes. In fact, the film displays two archetypes of familiar love in these moments. In comparison to Hayes, the somewhat racially prejudicial relationship between the prison warden Hamidou (Paul L. Smith) and his two cowed sons bears witness to their father's sadistic tendencies. The racism is undoubtedly gratuitous, but it offsets the essential message about deep commitment and loyalty between Hayes and his father that Stone was trying to get at. More controversial still was the film's brief allusion to homoeroticism, in a dream-like sequence involving Hayes and another inmate exercising and bathing. The author Billy Hayes later commented that while his book, on which Parker's film was based, largely refuted the sanitised scene, its filming gave an almost romantic gesture to these moments that somewhat affected Hayes. 'I'm happy that someone from the Midwest who is freaked out by the idea of homosexuality can look at the scene and feel the delicacy of it. The line from my book expresses it best – "It's only love"'.<sup>5</sup> Stone also engaged in another cinematic prop that helped propel emotion and feelings through the narrative; the protagonist's voiceover. Here, as later in *Platoon* (1986), hopes and fears are rhetorically unveiled, conveying deep affect and love together with the hope for an alternative future.

In *Scarface* (1983), Stone's script for Brian De Palma used love to dilute the violence by bestowing a complex set of emotions on the protagonist Tony Montana (Al Pacino). Montana's struggles with the sexual independence of his sister Gina (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), and his evident frustrations at the lack of love in his own life and marriage, certainly suggest a macho conservative conventionality. However, a scene where Montana decides to abort a car bomb assassination, prompted by some inner moral

reserve because of the presence of the diplomat's family in the car, suggests something more in Montana's psyche than simple paternalism. His search for the American Dream succeeds in material terms, but the absence of any love that might nourish his better moral instincts leads inexorably to a slow hollowing out of his entire being, resulting in a death surrounded by materiality but little value.

More optimistically, in *Wall Street*, Stone returned to the father-son dynamic, and a crucial hospital scene where the bond between father and son Carl and Bud Fox (played by father and son, Martin and Charlie Sheen) provides the impetus to help Bud seek a higher moral course of action. Parental love is perhaps even more apparent in *Born on the Fourth of July*, where the combination of conservative restraint and pathos felt by Ron Kovic's father (Raymond J. Barry) for his wounded veteran son (Tom Cruise) becomes the device that allows the audience to grasp the personal tragedy of returning veterans.

In one of Stone's most contentious and criticised films, *Natural Born Killers* (1994), the central unifying thread is that Mickey and Mallory, for all their misguided rage, are in love. Mickey (Woody Harrelson) even acknowledges that love is 'the only thing that kills the demon.' Indeed, Stone's own assessment was that the film connected so well with young audiences precisely because of its love story; a coda to earlier relationships played out in similarly violent circumstances, not least the bond established by the protagonists in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).<sup>6</sup>

However, perhaps love is explicated most carefully in *Heaven and Earth* (1993), Stone's final chapter in his Vietnam trilogy. Based on the personal experiences of Le Ly Hayslip growing up in the 1950s, the film charts a succession of disasters that befall Le Ly and her village of Ky La. Destroyed by the French in 1953, the village is ravaged by a succession of interlopers, from the Viet Cong, to the South Vietnamese army and US military, as Vietnam collapses into war and the turmoil of the 1960s. Le Ly's father (Haing S. Ngor) later explains to his daughter how the Vietnamese had previously fought against the Chinese and Japanese, and emphasises to her that: 'Freedom is never a gift ... it must be won and won again.' Le Ly endures torture by the South Vietnamese army, is suspected by the Viet Cong who

capture and rape her, and all the while the bond with her village is broken. This symbolic withdrawal of love precipitates an asymmetry where Le Ly struggles to find an enduring and shared love. Moving to Saigon, she becomes a source of sexual gratification for the businessman she works for, and later is induced into prostitution by and for US army personnel. Le Ly manages to return to her village to see her dying father and, in reconciliation, he tells her that she must return to the son and other life she now has, rather than stay. In leaving her home for the last time, the absorption of strength and forgiveness from her father is something she later draws on, when her subsequent relationship with another US serviceman Steve Butler (Tommy Lee Jones) eventually ends in tragedy. Given this overview, it was surprising for Stone to claim in a 1994 interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that the film was not in any sense feminist in outlook. Even if true, retrospectively it is far easier to see how Le Ly's story became more foundational for Stone's appreciation of female roles in his films, and, following this, the performances from Joan Allen, Jennifer Lopez and Cameron Diaz in later pictures confirmed the understanding.<sup>7</sup>

From *Midnight Express* to *Heaven and Earth*, Stone's use of deep pathos was a thread winding its way through his canon. After the mid-1990s, changes ensued. A new mode of filmmaking emerged that was less hyperrealist – blending messages about history with kaleidoscopic flourishes of colour and composition – to one that was stripped back to a concentrated examination of personal and moral choices. *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages* were less concerned with their historical and cultural contexts than with foregrounding the moral choices facing their protagonists. Alongside these moral choices emerged melodramatic tendencies in new guises, visible in different forms in *U Turn* and *Alexander*, and later in *World Trade Center* (2006) and *W*. In other words, love and melodrama were distinct elements that were less staging posts for institutional and historical assessment, than driving forces for more self-conscious storytelling. Melodramatic devices in turn contributed to a shift in the way that female roles contributed to the narratives, resulting in a much richer examination of gender than in the early films.

In *Any Given Sunday* (1999), Christina Pagniaci (Cameron Diaz) assumes a strong role that is not in any way propped up

by her sexuality. She is playfully undaunted by the sight of naked football players in the changing rooms, while asserting her own corporate power throughout. Acknowledged as business-savvy and tough, there is a grudging recognition of her abilities as owner of the team in an overbearing patriarchal environment. In *World Trade Center*, the familial love expressed by Donna McLoughlin (Maria Bello) and Allison Jimeno (Maggie Gyllenhaal) anchor the film, and provide a counterpoint to the ordeal of the Port Authority officers buried in the rubble of the towers. Stone seeks to portray and understand the small-scale, human aspects of the story rather than be consumed by the geopolitical dimensions – a deliberate ploy that drew criticism from some observers, but which rewarded viewers with an emotional depth rarely seen in Stone’s movies previously. The cumulative result from *U Turn* onwards was a remix of character approaches that flew in the face of accepted wisdom about Stone, his ‘hyper-masculinity’ and his (perceived previous) failure to position important female characters within his stories.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, familial relations, a degree of pathos and female empowerment added up to a more expressive use of melodramatic markers for Stone that circled themselves around concepts and concerns about love. However, critics such as Barry Langford have not been slow to note the pejorative associations of ‘melodrama’.<sup>9</sup> The historicisation of melodrama through genre, suggests Langford, impedes our ability to acknowledge these markers – not as a failure of cinema’s realist instincts, but as a distinct, deliberate and coexistent form of cinema. One-dimensional characterisations and obvious narrative contrivances may not necessarily point to a failure of psychological expression as a way to impart meaning for the viewer. Instead, different means of expression locates meaning, to use Langford’s terms, ‘not as a process but as a *situation*, fixed and externalised in a binary oppositional structure (good/bad, desire/frustration, happiness/misery, and so on)’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Langford and others have suggested, melodramatic markers can be present in all of the predominant genre categories of film used by critics and scholars alike.

This complication is crucial here to our reading of *U Turn* and its significance as a signal of change in Stone’s filmmaking. The film was read by many critics, including Janet Maslin at the *New York Times*, as simply classic noir reheated. Others, such as Roger Ebert,



went further and thought it was actually derivative noir.<sup>11</sup> These elements – the femme fatale, the hint of the dark city and the seeming presence of transgressive sexual desire – all ascribe to the noir label, as homage or pastiche.<sup>12</sup> *U Turn* has a lead female, Grace, who is engaged in sexual exploitation and has some femme fatale qualities. However, it is the film's tension between sexual ascendancy and emotional pathos that gives us pause for thought, and which re-emerges in a similar binary between sexual predator and victim in the framing of Olympias, (Angelina Jolie) Alexander's mother in *Alexander*. In both instances sexual dynamics are strong, but sexuality does not drive each character. Rather, passion is displaced as pathos anchors their motivations. In the rush to pigeonhole *U Turn* as some kind of overacted, noir-esque holiday from serious filmmaking for Stone, and in the later film to lambast Jolie for her accent and overacting, crucial new trends were eschewed. Stone was doing something different, to be sure; but it was not by making a poor job of a new genre or losing control of his actors. Rather, it was by foregrounding devices which represented a distinct alternative to his previously realist, hyper-driven cinema.

### *U Turn*

#### *Isolation and incest*

In *U Turn*, Stone employed a melodramatic overlay to explore two essentially counter-hegemonic aspects of love: isolation and incest. If the first theme was a magnification of something that perhaps could be inferred from the text on which the film drew – John Ridley's *Stray Dogs* (1997)<sup>13</sup> – the second was pure Stone: a development that emerged during his preparation of the screenplay.

Stone's personal assessment of Ridley's book was that there was a good basic plot, but that the story did not go far enough in exploring its characters' psyches. Nonetheless, the film does follow the basic outline of the book in telling the story of a small-time gambler, Bobby Cooper (Sean Penn), who is waylaid on a trip to Las Vegas to pay off a gambling debt. The failure of the radiator hose on Billy's 64½ Mustang diverts him to the small Arizona town of Superior, where he soon encounters Darrell (Billy Bob Thornton), a mechanic at Harlin's garage. Despite his reservations, Bobby leaves his treasured automobile in Darrell's care and heads towards town

in search of a bar to await the completion of the repair. During a brief casual conversation with a blind Native American beggar (Jon Voight), Bobby's attention – and, as it turns out, the direction of his life – is diverted when he sees a young woman in a red dress further down the street. He introduces himself to Grace McKenna (Jennifer Lopez) and helps her carry some shopping. Grace flirts with Bobby, and he quickly finds himself invited to her home. However Bobby's tête-à-tête with Grace is interrupted by the return home of her jealous husband, Jake (Nick Nolte): a development that quickly leads to Bobby's unceremonious expulsion from the McKenna home.

Despite the brief fracas at the McKenna residence, Bobby and Jake have a conversation soon afterwards during which Jake confesses the depth of his jealousy arising from the behaviour of his younger wife, and indicates to Bobby that he would be willing to pay to have Grace killed. Bobby declines, and instead prepares to wait for the repair to his car. However, following the loss of his gambling stash in a grocery store robbery, he relents. He needs the money, not least to pay for the repair of his car, and he accepts the deal. Having entered into this contract with Jake, Bobby conspires to take Grace to a local beauty spot and overlook where he plans to push her to her death. However, when the moment comes he draws back, driven in part by lust for Grace, but also some residual sense of morality. Despite not consummating their love, the couple enter into a new pact. Bobby and Grace formulate a plan to kill Jake, and steal the money that Jake has kept hidden at the couple's house.

By the film's midpoint, fairly conventional noir elements do arise. Playing on something of a revival during the 1990s in the genre which had seen critical and commercial success for films such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *Red Rock West* (John Dahl, 1993), *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994) and *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), a number of aspects of Stone's story still disrupt its categorisation as any shade of noir.<sup>14</sup> The film's western elements provide a useful starting point for investigating a reworking of Ridley's novel and, by extension, the starting point for rereading *U Turn* as a modern neo-noir. The integration of extensive scenic and emotional topography, stock characters and moral dilemmas with a hegemonic maleness are important elements of the western that underpin the narrative in *U Turn*. While Ridley's

book devotes a chapter to the noir world of Las Vegas spiced with misogyny and gambling, Stone gave this aspect of the story little more than a passing reference, involving a brief flashback to help explain how Bobby parted company with two fingers of his left hand.

By contrast, Stone gives full vent to the western elements – the gambler, a land baron and his Native American wife – in a narrative where the construction of maleness is more dystopic than misogynistic. The desert landscape was the base material for this configuration, and Stone went to considerable lengths to find the appropriate location for the shoot in the desert of the south-western United States. In the introduction to the published script for *U Turn*, Stone opined that ‘it speaks to me of America far more than any other single region of the nation, and reflects my own innermost cultural totems about this country’.<sup>15</sup> The location of Superior, Arizona exemplified for him the physical exhaustion and emotional attenuation that much of the West had endured as waves of settlers arrived, displacing the native population and consuming the resources only to depart elsewhere (usually California), leaving a hollowed-out spirituality whose scar tissue was the physical disfigurement of the landscape caused by the spoils from now-abandoned mines.

While *U Turn*’s literary inheritance may have promised a low key noir–western hybrid, the film’s on-screen reworking by Stone foregrounded the physical threat of the desert heat and its deleterious impact on the psychology of a remote community. The result, to appropriate Langford once more, was a film that represented a situation rather than a process, exploring two particular aspects of life and love in this fragmented American outback.

For one, the theme of isolation permeates all of the characters. People are stark and overblown in their delivery: a melodramatic affectation that confers a one-dimensionality accentuating their disengagement from each other, if not life. Darrell fills the hours between car repairs with pornography. Jenny (Claire Danes) and Toby Tucker (Joaquin Phoenix) are shut away from the excitements of a different life at which their bickering vaguely hints. Bobby’s inability to engage fully with Darrell and Grace says as much about his own social dysfunctionality and isolation, as it does about the town of Superior and its people. The brief flashbacks to his life

playing professional tennis highlight that the loss of control in his life began before he arrived in Superior. Bobby's isolation, as manifested in his dealings with Darrell and Grace, invites us to see the town not just as the passive recipient of his disdain, but as a victim in its own right that requires more careful analysis. Stone's use of brief *cinéma vérité*-style shots of local inhabitants unconnected with the rest of the story suggests a direction for this analysis, underlining the distance and lack of mutual understanding between urban and rural communities in their historical as well as contemporary sense, as well as highlighting the decay and interiority of rural America.

The visual possibilities offered by the remote south-western town clearly help develop the theme of isolation, although Stone is not building a simple duality between socially and economically impoverished hinterland and the metropolitan antithesis. Instead he allows Bobby's arrogance to project a more nuanced perspective on the mutual lack of empathy and respect offered by either world to the other. Bobby's initial dealings with Darrell reflect his contempt for the man and the place he lives in, but Bobby's hostility and prejudice speaks to a lack of self-worth too. When Darrell slams the hood of his car shut, Bobby objects:

DARRELL: It's just a car.

BOBBY: No, it's not just a car. It's a 64½ Mustang Convertible. That's the difference between you and me. That's why you're living here, and I'm just passing through.

The deadpan comedy inherent in Darrell's initial interactions with Bobby suggests that he understands rather more about his own situation than Bobby is prepared to give him credit for. More importantly, his response to Darrell convinces the audience of the nature of Bobby's arrogance: it is both personal and metropolitan in its failure of perspective.

Bobby's pursuit of Grace reflects a similar high-handed attitude, seeing her as no more than a sexual diversion that he can indulge in without consequence. However, Grace highlights his arrogance during their initial encounter at her home. When Grace rebuffs Bobby's overtures, he accuses her of playing games, to which she replies: 'And what game you want to play? You carry my boxes for me and then I fall into bed with you?' Grace's initial encounters

with Bobby also suggest a boredom that flows from the isolation of the town, but her unfolding story embodies not just isolation but the other key theme in the film: incest. It is the nature of the presentation of Grace's story that provides the film's depth. Her listless flirtation with Bobby is not the key to the narrative trajectory of the film; rather it is the key to her own persecution. While Bobby's encounters with Darrell, Grace, Jake, the Native American beggar and Toby and Jenny all contain a sense of a simple narrative manipulation, and while Jake's nascent plot to dispose of his wife has a similar feel – albeit with some growing sense of moral disturbance on his part – our sense of Grace is completely different. Even in her encounter with Bobby at her home, we start to see not just a bored, flirtatious young woman, but a woman who immediately recognises when she is being used.

The depiction of sexuality in the screenplay differs significantly from Ridley's book, with the crucial element of incest missing from the latter; but it is also missing from early drafts of the shooting script. Grace's backstory is also largely absent in the book, apart from a brief indication that she had grown up on a reservation, and later sought out an older man with money as a way of improving her circumstances. Stone's initial rewrite still did not introduce the controversy, although elements of sexual abuse were apparent. A 30 October 1996 rehearsal note cited Grace's father as having been killed in a mine, after which she and her mother were taken in by Jake.<sup>16</sup> However, Grace was being raped by him: a situation that drove her mother first to alcoholism, and then death in an apparent suicide. Despite this, Grace's account to Bobby indicated that she took some pleasure from the situation with Jake: 'I liked it ... I liked being controlled by Jake. It was a relief. The truth was as far out and crazy as he got. I wanted more.' In the same scene, Grace goes on to explain how it was the sight of her dead mother that made her vow revenge.

Stone's subsequent reworking of the script to include incest had two key effects on the story. First, the eroticisation of abuse which is apparent in the 30 October rehearsal was deftly turned on its head, resulting in a dark and disturbing bedroom scene involving Grace and her husband. Second, Grace's character is given more strength. Her motivation for seeking Jake's death is redirected and made clearer, as is the reason for her ultimate failure to trust in Bobby.

Stone's decision to add the additional layer of incest, and to recast Grace as Jake's actual, rather than adopted, daughter, arose out of his incessant use of readings, rehearsals and discussions with actors and the circumstances of the shoot to refine and develop his scripts. Indeed, Stone and his friend, chief scout and co-producer Richard Rutowski, continued to tinker with the screenplay after shooting had started. Incest is revealed only slowly, as though they were unsure of its presence here and what it meant. An early scene has Jake discussing his jealousy with Bobby, although the Nolte's delivery ensures that the film's early lighter mood is not completely disrupted. The juxtaposition of comedic and dark elements almost places the audience in an uncomfortable emotional space, as Jake's persona becomes clearer. He explains almost in exasperation:

I hate loving her. I hate having to tolerate the little games she plays, like fucking half this town behind my back and laughing at me. The bitch! You know, she wants me to hit her, and then when I hit her she likes it. She just likes to fuckin' torture me, goddam it. But ... she's my family, she's my little girl, my baby.

The devastating and jumbled emotional turmoil of the rant underscores Grace's situation. She is trapped and in search of any way out. Abused by her husband/father and used by Sheriff Potter (Powers Boothe), she falters even as she tries to believe in Bobby. He is flaky and self-centred, and there is no evidence that she sees him as anything more than her ride out of town – but she is unable to sustain the trust that would be required for him to make good, even on this limited commitment. Through the construction of Grace's story and her response to the men around her, Stone sets her apart from their one-dimensional motives and characterisations. Ultimately, her story is one of love betrayed. That she is unable to trust in Bobby is tragic in one sense, but it also preserves her integrity. She is neither 'action babe' nor helpless female waiting to be rescued. That she does not get away in the end is not Hollywood conventionality putting an end to her aspirations for freedom. Two of the three men in her life who have wronged her have had their fates sealed by her. Jake is lying dead beside her in the ravine, and the sheriff is lying dead on the highway. Bobby gets the better of her momentarily, but she is still alive and close enough to hear the intervention of fate as Darrell's repair to the Mustang's radiator

hose expires. With it, Bobby will expire too. Grace may be dying, but she knows how the story ends.

From early in his career, Stone established a recurring reputation for shooting on a tight timetable and looking for extremely high levels of commitment and engagement from those around him. These factors no doubt contributed to some on-set tensions during *U Turn*. However, of more significance was the discomfort that arose as a consequence of how Stone had chosen to depict love and relations through sex: in particular, the scenes involving Jake and Grace on the evening of his murder. These scenes were, Stone recalls, an issue for his long-term cinematographer, Robert Richardson. While critics would show up Richardson's ability to reference and utilise classic cinematographic technique – Chris Salewicz likened his camerawork here to Godard on *À Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960) – *U Turn* would prove to be his last film for Stone.<sup>17</sup> The relationship reputedly ended because Richardson felt these concluding confrontations between Jake and Grace were unnecessarily extreme, even perverse, in their nature. Stone argued that the editing brought attention to Grace's unacceptable abuse and Jake's underlying moral corruption. Richardson walked away anyway.

Stone's parting from his cinematographer was a personal loss as much as a diminution of his cinema's aesthetic bravura. In interview, he stated that relations with Richardson had been uneasy dating back to *Natural Born Killers*, but confessed to missing him and his presence on the next few films, *Any Given Sunday* and *Alexander*.<sup>18</sup> That said, Stone had only good things to say of cinematographer Salvatore Totino's dynamic realisation of gridiron in *Any Given Sunday*, and he concluded that the difficulties in *Alexander* were not with Rodrigo Prieto's cinematography, but with the editing process deployed for the film.<sup>19</sup> In subsequent pictures, Stone worked with first-rate cinematographers; no doubt the loss of Richardson was not just about ability, but cumulative vision built up over years which had produced a singular approach inherent in so many other classic Hollywood partnerships.

*U Turn* was to be premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1997. However, at a press conference in Paris on 22 April 1997, the Festival chair, Gilles Jacob, indicated that his committee had seen the film: far from intimating that it had many things to say

about relationships, loyalty and sacrifice, Jacob said it was just too violent.<sup>20</sup> Rebuffed, the film eventually made a festival appearance at Telluride at the end of August, and opened in the USA on Friday 3 October 1997, although not before some changes had been made to the version prepared in the spring. In an internal memo from Phoenix Pictures to Stone dated 12 June 1997, enthusiasm for the film was tempered with some concern about the final half-hour. The memo commented that 'we seem to lose all the engaging energy surprises and good will of the story and find ourselves in a deeply disturbing place – almost another movie'.<sup>21</sup> A total of eleven tweaks were then proposed, all of which were directed at toning down the sexual content of the film. Interestingly, considering all that had gone on with the script that would precipitate Richardson's exodus, Stone adopted all the proposals.

On release, critical response was divided. In *Variety*, Todd McCarthy described Stone as 'displaying ... stylistic urgency and restlessness, without the slightest speck of Hollywood complacency in evidence'.<sup>22</sup> Janet Maslin's *New York Times* review understood the film to be 'a showcase for the filmmaker's terrific arsenal of visual mannerisms and free-association imagery'.<sup>23</sup> However, Roger Ebert's assessment turned out to be closer to the majority audience reaction. He accused the film of being 'a repetitive, pointless exercise in genre filmmaking – the kind of movie where you distract yourself by making a list of the sources'.<sup>24</sup> *U Turn* had a disappointing opening weekend at the box office, taking only \$2.7 million from more than 1,200 screens; Columbia TriStar immediately scaled back the release and the film quickly disappeared from cinemas. Its domestic gross was only \$6.6 million. Eric Bryant Rhodes later argued that the film had not received its just recognition because it aroused hostility in those who find Stone's portrayal of the USA as increasingly anti-American, and that it disappointed fans looking for a clearer political statement from the director.<sup>25</sup> Unwittingly this time, the film's concerns were part of a growing national debate.

The issue of abuse and incest had been prominent in the American media during the mid-1990s – not least as a result of the abduction, rape and murder in 1994 of seven-year-old Megan Kanka in Hamilton Township, New Jersey by Jesse Timmendequas. The trial that brought her assailant to justice concluded in June 1997,



in the wake of extended press coverage not just about the murder, but about the family history of the murderer.<sup>26</sup> The progressive introduction of community notification laws since 1994 ensured that the issue remained prominent in public debate. These taboo subjects also had further cultural interest. In April 1996, media mogul Ted Turner was reported to have intervened to have a production of *Bastard Out of Carolina* – Anjelica Huston's directorial debut – dropped by Turner Network Television (TNT).<sup>27</sup> At issue were scenes of molestation and child abuse, including a particularly vivid rape scene involving a twelve-year-old girl. In the following year, and just a week before *U Turn* was released, a remake of *Lolita* directed by Adrian Lyne struggled to find a US distributor, prompting Anthony Lane to comment in *The New Yorker* that a febrile national climate was informing the debate about the film.<sup>28</sup> *Lolita* eventually aired on Showtime.<sup>29</sup>

With some justification, then, Stone concluded that *U Turn's* focus on incest was a topic that American audiences did not want to hear about. Producer Mike Medavoy had warned that the film might be too brutal, and cinemagoers clearly agreed.<sup>30</sup> Yet here was evidence of Stone moving in a new direction subject-wise and cinematically. The early sequences of the film with their stock characterisation, overlays of comedy and situational contrivances signalled something *entirely* new in Stone's oeuvre. Within this aesthetic wrapping, he set about the corruption of familial love and the loss of hope, invoking a deep pathos and a dark message of despair. It was a denouement like no other Stone had constructed to this point.

From his own account of the circumstances leading up to the making of *U Turn*, it is clear that Stone was suffering from a sense of professional and personal isolation. In the two years before shooting he had faced widespread media criticism following the release of *Natural Born Killers*. Further shocked by the disappointing critical and public response to *Nixon* (1995), he also had ended up in divorce proceedings. As recompense, Stone returned to finish his semi-autobiographical book, *A Child's Night Dream* (1997). Completion of the manuscript brought back a complex mix of emotions and memories about his childhood, his relationship with his father and mother, his experiences in Vietnam, and later in the Merchant Marine Corps. Although some of the original

manuscript was missing – Stone had thrown half of it in the East River in New York in 1967 – he was able, with the help of editor Robert Weil, to reconstruct a shorter version of the book which was published in October 1997, at the same time as *U Turn*, mostly to favourable reviews.<sup>31</sup>

*U Turn* was designed as a low-key, low-budget exercise without the burden of political messages. ‘It was good for me to make [something] that was fun,’ Stone was reported as saying – although he also acknowledged the depth of the piece and perhaps, inevitably, that it did have something to say.<sup>32</sup>

Some observers saw *U Turn* as a kind of misfit production, but it nevertheless carried important clues to an evolving mentality in Stone’s handling of ‘love’, his portrayal of women, and his application of a melodramatic signature related to these developments. In *Alexander*, Stone returned to some of the film’s key elements, such as an exploration of disruptive love within a melodramatic narrative enclosure. Love and pathos remained key to the historical figure of Olympias in the later film and, far from being insular and closed off, *Alexander*’s grand patina attempted to bring love and emotion into a giant epic about power, history and antiquity.

### *Alexander*

*Alexander* (2004) offered Stone the kind of challenge he always relished. A life story that was incomplete both in its execution and in the contemporary record, Stone’s aim was to recreate some of the grandeur of the legend of this larger-than-life figure. To do that, he wanted large scale battles of the old Hollywood school, including the pivotal clash with the Persian King Darius III at Gaugamela in 331 BCE. However, Stone also wanted to convey something of Alexander’s relationships with his father King Philip (Val Kilmer) and his mother Olympias (Angelina Jolie), as well offer some insight into Greek cultural and sexual mores. Therefore, issues of structure, time and sexuality would all prove to be central elements in the film’s production, editing and reception.

Stone’s own production archives indicate an interest in making a film about Alexander the Great as far back as 1989. Seven years of negotiation followed, but after a deal collapsed involving German producer Thomas Schühly and Cinergi Pictures in 1996,

the project lay in abeyance until 2001 when Moritz Borman and Stone agreed to a production commitment.<sup>33</sup>

The journey to the finished screenplay was long, as was the filming that followed. The final shooting schedule was set at 103 days, with locations in Morocco, Thailand and at Pinewood Studio and Shepperton Studio in England. It was the longest of Stone's career (Figure 9). Preceding this timetable, in August 2003, was horse training for the principal actors and a boot camp for weapons training. Dale Dye, who had first worked for Stone on actor training for *Platoon*, supervised these activities as part of his role as second unit director. Dye's contributions were complemented by the meticulous planning of the battle scenes. Preparations for the recreation of the battle of Gaugamela ran to 73 pages of storyboards. However, even here the intuitive side of Stone's filmmaking played a part. Confronted with a sandstorm in the midst of shooting the battle, Stone opted to incorporate the ensuing chaos rather than abandon filming and the time and money that it would cost. While time pressures remained an issue in post-production, it was the treatment of love, familial relations and sexuality that were defining issues for the film's release and reception, rather than its epic military confrontations.

The multiplicity of difficulties presented by attempting to impose some kind of narrative structure on an open-ended piece of history, coupled with an overlay of explicit sexuality, had been apparent before production began. Joanna Paul records in her essay, published in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander*, how pre-production press speculation about how the film might deal with suggestions of Alexander's bisexuality drew predictable criticisms from more socially conservative commentators in the south of the USA, as well as a less expected intervention by the Greek culture minister, Evangelos Venizelos, who described the proposed film as a slur on Greece.<sup>34</sup>

In differing ways, these responses highlighted the presence of a highly combustible mix in the making of *Alexander*. There was the presence of an icon from antiquity, whose cultural capital had stock in the contemporary world, plus a director whose stock-in-trade was the questioning and validity of such capital. For many Americans, the heart of the 'War on Terror' moment in 2004, complicated by Stone's portrayal of an allegedly homosexual general,



**Figure 9** Colin Farrell and Oliver Stone on the set of *Alexander* (2004)

provoked a predictable backlash. Indifferent reviews were met with low US box office receipts for the initial theatrical release of the film. Conservative political commentator and film critic Michael Medved summed up the prevailing attitude:

There's a certain audience out there that just loves war movies, battle movies – 'Braveheart,' 'Saving Private Ryan,' 'We Were Soldiers'. There are probably a bunch of people who will go to see 'Alexander' looking for a he-man, a superwarrior. When they find out he's playing for the other team, that will probably create a certain indignation in some of the audience.<sup>35</sup>

Distributing and marketing the film, Warner Bros. executives were alert to Medved's prediction. Moritz Borman received a seven-page memo from the studio in September 2004 detailing a series of proposed changes and cuts to the version of the film they had seen two days earlier. The changes were intended to reduce the running time, as well as deal with 'difficulties' surrounding the representation of violence and homosexuality. The screenplay referenced Alexander's love for his friend Hephaestion, as well as his attachment to a young male eunuch, Bagoas. Several suggestions for saving additional time also coincidentally reduced the emphasis on the homoerotic aspects of the dialogue.

Behind the concerns about running time lay a further timing constraint. Shooting had finished in early February 2004, with release scheduled for November of the same year. In response to a proposal by Warner Bros. that editing be concluded in August, Stone had answered combatively that 'you must really be on drugs, if you're not crazy'.<sup>36</sup> He was worried, though. The film needed a considerable post-production effort, and the space was not there. Later reflecting on the time constraint, he commented: 'I wish to God I'd had the courage to tell Warner Brothers that I needed more time, but it would have been a scandal.'<sup>37</sup>

The structural problems and range of criticism directed at the film gnawed away at Stone. The criticism and poor box office for *Nixon* had riled too, but Stone had been content that he had delivered the film as intended. However, in having to accept the timetable for the original *Alexander* release, and in acquiescing to studio requests to tone down some of the homoerotic aspects of the film, Stone felt compromised. In the event, he took it upon himself to commence what was a labour of love: an arduous effort to undo and overcome some of the blemishes he felt responsible for in the original film. In the end, *Alexander* was cut into four versions over the space of a decade. Following the original theatrical version released in the USA in November 2004, a second version of the film arrived in August 2005. It was an effort to improve on the overall structure, but in the process some more controversial material was removed. While the first film had accumulated plaudits from gay and lesbian advocacy groups, the director's cut was criticised by the same community for seemingly bowing to convention and removing a key scene between Alexander and Hephaestion.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the alterations made to the first two versions of the film, structural problems remained relating to, for example, the portrayal of Alexander's youth and the build-up to the Battle of Gaugamela. Therefore, to then have the opportunity to cut a third version of the film was unusual. 'The next reworking was for me, and thank God I had one ally with Warners Home Entertainment who gave me a shot; they gave the chance to put out my version on Blu-ray,' Stone said.<sup>39</sup> The eventual appearance of *Alexander Revisited* (2007), with a running time of 214 minutes, was not only a remarkable statement of persistence but, in an important way, an act of contrition. Stone commented again in 2011 that:

The [original] script actually resembled the third version [*Alexander Revisited*, 2007] more than the first two. Warners were upset with me. I promised them a sanitised film. I saw a list of their cuts and we went back and forth. There was no way I was going to make all of those cuts. They wanted all the homosexuality out. They hated Bagoas. There was also huge problems with blood.<sup>40</sup>

Despite his assessment that *Revisited* was his best effort, Stone nevertheless went on to undertake a fourth cut of the film. This highly unusual development came as a result of an invitation from Warner Bros., who had been pleased with the commercial response to the 2007 version. Stone had watched this version three or four times at festivals, and had become convinced that he could improve on the editing. *Ultimate Cut* is eight minutes shorter than the *Revisited* version, and takes a slightly quicker route still to the Battle of Gaugamela. *The Ultimate Cut* premiered the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2013, and released on Blu-ray and DVD in June 2014. With as much certainty as he could muster in the circumstances, Stone declared in interview in August 2013: 'I am now signed off on it! I'm finished! I can't do more.'<sup>41</sup>

Inevitably, Stone's efforts to address the difficulties that he perceived within the early versions of the film were limited by the available footage. In the third version he was able to reintroduce some of the homoerotic aspects of the story that had been previously cut or toned down. There was also some scope to work with the structure, both in the third and fourth versions; however, there were issues that reached beyond the constraint arising from available footage. Joanna Paul notes a complication related to the dramatic imbalance injected by (truthfully) ending the main action in the film with Alexander's premature death, rather than, for example, ending the cinematic action more conventionally with the climactic battle in India, thereby gifting the film a more conventional hero/quest narrative and ending. Paul's proposed solution, drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics*, was the suggestion that the ideal epic narrative should be constructed around a single action – in this case, the murder of Philip – rather than a single hero.<sup>42</sup> Langford's observation about melodrama is crucial here. In drawing the distinction between a process and a situation, Langford was making the point that whereas realism might rely on the use of an individual character to guide the audience through a complex narrative,

melodrama relies on the moral embodiment of a situation.<sup>43</sup> Stone responded 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.<sup>44</sup>

Following Paul's line of reasoning, the film contained at its heart a not-fully realised melodramatic component. There were two possible resolutions: either the minimisation of this aspect – for example, by using a different and more conventional hero/quest ending; or its full embrace by a structural foregrounding of the murder of Philip as the centrepiece of the film. With neither option fully realised, the consequence appeared to be the presence of a subtle but significant incongruity in the structure. In the same article, Stone speculated in hindsight that his unwillingness to foreground Philip's murder may well have been driven by a desire to avoid any commercial damage to the film, as a result of his conspiracy theorist reputation being reheated by an unsympathetic press.

This concern to minimise any commercial backlash certainly figured in discussions about the film's sexual content. Stone acknowledged that an early scene involving Bagoas at the harem was cut from the original film because of the 'tremendous amount of hostility the eunuch received at the early screenings we held for Warner Bros. personnel'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, a contradiction at the heart of the US reception to *Alexander* was that while media coverage about the film's bisexual content did appear to damage its US box office takings, the presentation of sex was remarkably conventional. The most explicit sex scene is a heterosexual one involving Alexander (Colin Farrell) and his wife Roxane (Rosario Dawson). References to Alexander's relationships with Hephaestion (Jared Leto) and Bagoas (Francisco Bosch) are essentially confined to knowing looks and supporting dialogue.

Complicating all these speculations on structure – the absence of a conventional hero/quest story, the not-fully realised component of Philip's death, and the presentation of sexuality – is the fact

that the relatively low box office was not replicated in non-US markets. While the film took some \$30 million in America (a small but not-insignificant sum), the takings for the rest of the world actually added a further \$130 million and made the movie something of an international success. The lack of conventional narrative used in the likes of *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and the homoerotic dimension may have put off US-based audiences, but that was not the effect everywhere.

Conservative ideology at home also shaped national consciousness at this time. Just two weeks before the US release of *Alexander*, voters in Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Utah had all approved anti-same-sex marriage amendments by double-digit margins.<sup>46</sup> In July 2004, President George W. Bush indicated that he supported Congressional moves to amend the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage.<sup>47</sup> That initiative failed, but the position of the eleven states made political, cultural and social projections about homosexuality a bedrock of conservative reactionary thought in the 2000s. Stone's film no doubt felt some of the effects of that reaction, as its publicity took a hold.

*Alexander* also reflected on the invasion of Iraq. WMDs had failed to materialise, and insurgency followed initial military successes as the more difficult 'rebuilding' of Iraq commenced and quickly stalled. By May 2004 the *New York Times* was questioning its earlier supportive coverage of the administration and belief in assertions about the presence of WMDs, although the paper remained cautious about returning to these stories and putting the record straight.<sup>48</sup> Amid a polarised media discourse, the parable of military overreach and the limits of empire offered by *Alexander* gave the film a measure of contemporary perspective, ensuring that it remained aloof from the 'patriotic war experience' category of movies described by Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, which might have produced a different commercial result for the picture.<sup>49</sup> By July 2005, during preparations for the recut DVD release of *Alexander*, Stone acknowledged publically some of the difficulties in the *New York Post*:

You cannot associate homosexuality with the military in this country. Audiences want their war films straight. From the day we opened, we did not do business in the South.<sup>50</sup>



The structure and commercial sensitivities were questioned further in the light of something Stone had rarely confronted in his career. Whatever the merits of his films, even his harshest critics were loath to criticise the performance of his players. However, Colin Farrell, Rosario Dawson and most notably Angelina Jolie were perceived as every bit the film's problem, not its saving grace. In *USA Today*, critic Mike Clark saw the performances of all three actors as camp, while Nathan Lee in the *New York Sun* saw Jolie as poised somewhere between camp and conviction.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, concerns were voiced about Farrell's hairstyle and the accents used by some actors, as well as a more general sense that the performances were all somehow overblown. Nonetheless, most of this distain was reserved for Jolie, and that word 'camp', as well as 'overacting', kept re-emerging.

In an early scene, Olympias warns her then 18-year-old son about the dangers inherent in Philip installing Eurydice (Marie Meyer) as his new wife and having a new heir. There is a distinct sense of sexual tension between mother and son throughout the scene. She suggests that 'a mother loves too much', and then pulls her son's head into her lap. The closeness in age between the two actors, and indeed Jolie's media persona garnered through her appearances as *Lara Croft* highlighted, from an audience perspective, the countercultural innuendo of incestuous love in the relationship between mother and son, even as the dialogue drew attention to the relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion. The scene is infused with Olympias' hatred of her husband, and her fear that her son will lose everything if he leaves for Asia without an heir in place. Jolie mixes these passions with the delivery of a temptress in a way that ensures that hatred, fear and love are all set out of balance and against type. In this imbalance we may begin to sense the significance of the use of 'camp' as a descriptor of her performance.

In her 'Notes on "Camp"' originally published in 1964, Susan Sontag wrote that camp was a mode of aestheticism that emphasised style at the expense of content. In addition, Sontag suggested that a camp sensibility could be found in the androgyne – 'going against the grain of one's sex' – and in a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.<sup>52</sup> In the context of *Alexander*, two connected points seem to follow from this line of reasoning. First, in view of the particular sexual subject

matter that Stone was working with – Olympias' love for her son and Alexander's love for Hephaestion – a camp aesthetic seemed consistent with such an 'against the grain' representation of sexuality. Second, the accompanying presence of exaggeration and externalised emotionality were quintessentially melodramatic elements that sat uneasily within a conventional biopic narrative structure. This mismatch troubled both critics and audiences, leading many to misread the tone of the performances as simple excess, when the explanation had much more to do with a mix of aesthetic and narrative choices.

*Alexander* was undoubtedly an obsession of sorts for Stone; an effort to tell a very complex story without recourse to familiar, audience-friendly tropes of heroic narrative which, for example, had carried *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) to US box office earnings of \$133 million earlier the same year. Instead, Stone sought to stay closer to the historical record, with its vagaries and essential inconclusiveness about Alexander's life. The film's construction comprised four layers: a not-fully realised melodramatic core tied to Philip's murder; a more realist biopic structure; a camp performance aesthetic; and a post-production effort to conventionalise the presentation of sexuality and, to some extent, the narrative structure – the last, Stone acknowledged, somewhat working *against* the first three elements.

At several levels the film aggravated the preoccupations of American critics and audiences in a way that depressed its value. From a realist perspective, there were just too many aesthetic clashes which, when mixed with the discomfort evoked about homosexuality, masculinity and the 'War on Terror', limited the film's audience significantly. While some observers *did* read *Alexander* as a commentary on President Bush, Stone was less interested in the allegory, although he accepted the confluence with events taking place in Iraq.<sup>33</sup> *Alexander* was a truly enormous undertaking, and in its various guises bears witness to Stone's evolving aesthetic, as well as a studied patience in reaching a conclusive on-screen rendering of the story with which he was finally satisfied.

The melodramatic flourishes visible in *U Turn* had been revealed not as a one-off piece of cinematic distraction, but as a distinct aesthetic trend. Stone's interest in this style of representation, and the ways in which it might amplify aspects of the subject of love, was

evidenced not only in the persistence with *Alexander*, but in varying degrees in the films that followed. *World Trade Center*, *W.*, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages* all had things to say about love and relationships. In addition, the presence of strong female roles first established in *Heaven and Earth* was worked with in varying ways within these narratives.

However, it is with *W.* that Stone brought the aesthetic innovations first seen in *U Turn* back to his core subjects of politics, history and power. Reducing the scale of the melodrama, but re-engaging with the state of the nation, the dynamics of love played out in the Bush family dynasty found further inflections in this, Stone's third presidential biopic, essentially confirming his predilections and interest in the human and familial – the universal in us all.

## W.

In important ways, *W.* followed a similar narrative trajectory to *Alexander*. Here was another story with crucial off-screen action impinging on the narrative, and with contextual history influencing people and decisions in ways that logic and rationality cannot always comprehend. The unseen forces that precipitated Philip's murder in *Alexander* are marshalled by Alexander, as he uses the murder to galvanise support for the war against Persia. In *W.* the first Gulf War, the failure to topple Saddam Hussein in 1991, and the defeat of his father, George Bush Sr, in the 1992 presidential election, are all seen as staging posts in the politicisation of George W. Bush and shapers in his prosecution of the 'War on Terror'.

Picking up the story, co-written with Stanley Weiser, of Bush (Josh Brolin) in 2002, Stone used a conventional biographical structure employing a series of flashbacks to move between the Bush administration's preparations for the Iraq War, and his more formative years at Yale University, his aborted careers and later his conversion to aspiring politician and evangelical Christian. These flashbacks allow the audience to piece together the critical influences on Bush's life and the ways in which they affected his approach to the presidency. In particular, Weiser and Stone kept coming back to this theme of a task left undone: a quest left hanging by the father for the son. Less conventional was the way in

which the flashbacks and Oval Office scenes were used to intuit a personality, rather than build a detailed history either of Bush's formative years or his time in the White House. The conceptualisation of Bush lent itself to an externalised emotionality – one that Josh Brolin's performance made manifest – in that its trademark buffoonery and awkwardness, the use of figurative scenes, lent the film a distinctly melodramatic hue at times. A figure almost half-realised, half-created, almost built and filled in by media and populace alike. A figure, like Alexander, almost so mythical as to be not quite real, we might suspect.

Two parallel narratives depict Bush's progress. One is his struggle to establish himself and win approval from his father (James Cromwell), and the second is his romance and marriage to Laura Bush (Elizabeth Banks), depicted with almost no gratuitous sentiment. Once again parental love is problematised, as Stone explored the way in which a seemingly distant love expressed by the father for his son had a crucial effect on the psychology of the future president. Bush's struggle in *W.* is about recognition as much as it is about achievement. Through the portrayals of wife Laura and George's mother, Barbara Bush (Ellen Burstyn), the audience is given a window into the psyches of both father and son. Laura's unconditional love is the counterweight to her husband's search for his father's approval. Here, as elsewhere in the film, Stone's refusal to engage in a straightforward vilification of Bush Jr leaves space for a more measured pathos. Several scenes focus on the relationship between George W. and Laura, including the family barbeque where they met, the Texas congressional election debate with Kent Hance, and the preparations for the governor's speech.

In these scenes Stone fused together two very different perspectives which attempted to unlock some prevailing stereotypes of Bush. The White House incumbent is a caricature of malapropisms and instinctive, untutored thinking. In notable exchanges with vice-president Dick Cheney (Richard Dreyfuss) during lunch, and in the cabinet discussion about going to war, Stone parodies Bush's visceral mode of decision-making. Yet Laura, this attractive, intelligent and sincere woman, loves him. Why does she do that? In forcing us to recalibrate our sense of Bush, we are gradually taken away from the simple desire to laugh or ridicule towards a more uncomfortable place, captured in the atmosphere of the final press

conference scene. Stone is perhaps evoking pity, but the portrayal points to the wider implication that we still need to understand, and perhaps even forgive, our fellow human beings – whether they are leaders and powerful figures or not. The film's narrative is indeed anchored in the notion of redemption and Bush's rebirth as a born-again Christian. Therefore, the deeper message carries a universal note about love: an acceptance of imperfection in someone who has made mistakes on a truly global scale.

Brolin's performance in this regard is very well judged and was well received by critics, some of whom were not otherwise as enthusiastic about the film. From Bush's punctilious eating habits and his need to remind Cheney that he is 'the decider', to his near-tantrum as the search for WMDs draws a blank, the back-and-forth emotional vent in Brolin allows Stone to reinforce his central point: that this man does not quite belong here. The mystical and mythical flourishes in the film try to pin him down too: the son not quite fitted to the role, the history not quite read and understood as it should be. In a scene towards the close, father and son circle an Oval Office stripped back to its bare walls, as Bush's deepest personal fears transpire about Iraq, and his presidency begins to shift on the axis of approval and history. He is still a disappointment to his father, and history is conspiring to make him a failure. His incomprehension at all this is manifest in the closing scene as Bush looks skywards, waiting in the outfield for a baseball which never returns to earth. The final moments frame his quizzical expression and ready susceptibility to all that has failed.

Stone filmed and rejected other similarly figurative scenes. He also discussed with producer Eric Kopeloff a possible scene depicting Bush in an orange jumpsuit, conflating his persona and decisions with the symbolic imagery inherent in the meaning of Guantanamo Bay. Eventually, the scene was rejected for appearing overly judgemental in the circumstances, given that Stone was trying to present the evidence and ask the audience to make up their own minds.<sup>54</sup> Taking a very different approach compared to previous political and historical outings, Stone commented:

We did talk about a possible end-scene with Bush in an orange jumpsuit at the Hague – that's funny! – but I don't think it was in the script. Everyone was attacking Bush and I felt we shouldn't

hammer him ... It's a lighter movie but it's made about a man who is a lighter man. He is a two-dimensional man. He's Peter Sellers in *Being There* – he just doesn't belong.<sup>55</sup>

If Stone thought the neutrality of the film's position was brave, some critics were less sure of what he was attempting to do. Helen O'Hara in *Empire* magazine felt that too much of importance had been overlooked: the power grab in 2000, 9/11 itself, the partnership with Laura, and the working relationship with political advisor, Karl Rove.<sup>56</sup> O'Hara suspected that the real problem with the film was that Stone was sitting on the fence. Manohla Dargis concurred in the *New York Times*, concluding that the film was neither send-up nor takedown.<sup>57</sup> Inevitably, there were also scholarly complaints about the mix of history and drama. Kingsley Marshall, for example, concluded that Stone had missed several opportunities in the film to mount a serious and sustained critique of the decision-making process that took the US military into Iraq.<sup>58</sup> Marshall thought the decision to psychologise Bush produced a film that was neither history nor drama. These points were not without merit. Concluding in late 2004, but with Bush all too aware of the strategy collapsing around him, the plot exonerated the president in some areas both past and yet to come that really were an indictment of his 'little boy lost' mentality in the White House. The job was too big for him for sure, but he had made critical decisions too that needed to be accounted for – and for some critics, the film did not do that nearly enough.

Nonetheless, this was not a documentary for Stone, not even docudrama, let alone a conventional biopic. It was instead a melodrama, pure and simple: an examination of, if not expression of empathy for, a man who was loved and loathed in his own way like so many of us, but who also happened to be out of his depth in ways that had grievous consequences.

In both *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages* Stone had continued to explore aspects of love in the screenplays, but without the melodramatic flourishes of these earlier films. Indeed, the lush photography and construction of *Savages* in particular seemed to suggest a return to the imagery more often associated with films such as *The Doors* (1991) and *Natural Born Killers*. In *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, Stone persisted with the theme of

familial love. He had provided a figurative father figure in the form of Lou Mannheim (Hal Holbrook) in the original film. In this second outing, the benign patriarch is configured through the character of Louis Zabel (Frank Langella) who, we learn, has provided a loving and guiding hand to a young protégé, Jake Moore (Shia LaBeouf). Indeed, it is Zabel's suicide that provides one of the principal narrative drivers, as Jake sets out to avenge Zabel's death.

Stone also uses 'love' as a redemptive device at the close of the film. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, the behaviour of the resurgent Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) throughout suggests that little has changed after his spell in prison. He is even prepared to engage in duplicity to access the trust fund set up for his daughter, Winnie (Carey Mulligan). However, Winnie's pregnancy finally causes Gekko to relent (even to repent), and instead put his family before his business ambitions. The 'happy ending' did not please all who reviewed the film, but it was a very deliberate statement from Stone about the importance of love and the possibilities for positive change.

In *Savages*, the theme of love is a motivational tool woven into the screenplay at various junctures. Most straightforwardly, love seals the fate of Elena (Salma Hayek) as she is drawn across the Mexican–USA border to be with her daughter; a move that eventually leads to her capture by the DEA. Love also informs the conventional narrative decisions taken by Ben (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) and Chon (Taylor Kitsch) as they strive to free O (Blake Lively) from the drug cartel. However, the film then works with several further manifestations of love, including Dennis's (John Travolta) devotion to his wife, and Elena's *in loco parentis* relationship with the captured O. The choice taken by Lado (Benicio Del Toro) to be north of the border is, we learn, at least partly motivated by his desire to give a better life to his children. The effect of these manifestations of love develops character and reasoning as an emotional concoction. Dennis's testament of his love to his wife and his confession to her about the immorality inherent in his work is deeply affecting. O's playfulness in the presence of Elena makes manifest her need to be mothered: an antidote to a hedonistic lifestyle that has not worked out the way she thought it might.

Stone confessed that his more positive outlook on love and life prompted him to rewrite the ending in the film, taking away Don

Winslow's denouement where the protagonists were all killed, to be replaced with one where hope and a second chance were on offer. It was a flourish that reflected Stone's mood and his unwillingness to ape what he saw as an emerging cultural propensity towards cynicism in an age that, he felt, needed hope more than ever. A similar optimism infused the *Untold History* documentary series of the same period. This was optimism not borne out of some whimsical recollection of the nation's past, but a firm belief that, despite missed opportunities, the possibilities for change were always there, waiting to be grasped. In *Savages*, Stone reinforced that view, a message that nevertheless had its roots nearly twenty years before, in *Natural Born Killers*.

## Conclusion

Pathos and love have been components of Stone's filmmaking from the outset. Parental love has been a perennial theme, and in *Heaven and Earth* Stone signalled a willingness in the 1990s to depart from Hollywood trends and tell a story of grief, endurance and love from a woman's perspective. It was a choice that did him no favours critically or commercially, as the film disappointed critics and isolated audiences who were perhaps unwilling to empathise with a Vietnamese point of view. *U Turn*, and several productions that followed, applied a different aesthetic to their storytelling and imagery. Stone's increasing use of melodrama left the films vulnerable to charges of whimsy and overacting. However, the shift in style allowed for a more pronounced portrayal of moral dilemmas, notable throughout *U Turn*, *Alexander* and *W*. Moreover, the personal and optimistic infuses so much that was at the heart of *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages*, although these changes came with a cost. In the latter two projects, Stone stuck to his instincts in a way that perhaps he had failed to with the original release of *Alexander*, and he spent a decade wrestling with the challenge of bringing that film back towards his own vision. This effort was its own labour of love, and in it lay a persistence and single-mindedness that was moving Stone away from the self-examination alluded to in James Riordan's earlier biography of the director, towards a concerted world gaze more embracing and other-directed.<sup>59</sup>



While Stone has been criticised by several observers for the limited and limiting female roles as well as stereotypical machismo in scenes and dialogue, the accumulated evidence points to a more subtle rendering of gender, love and sexuality than has been often appreciated. Hiep Thi Le's portrayal of Le Ly in *Heaven and Earth* was steeped in pathos, Juliette Lewis's explosive performance in *Natural Born Killers* was lauded by critics, and Joan Allen's portrayal of the president's wife in *Nixon* was a strongly captivating performance on screen, evidenced by Allen's nomination for Best Supporting Actress both at the Oscars and BAFTA awards of 1996. What was in evidence in these earlier films, and again in *U Turn*, became progressively more constant as the 2000s went along. Female roles acquired increased diegetic agency, while Stone's longstanding preoccupation with parental love rather than relationships just based on sexuality and/or power were a key ingredient. Familial relationships became recurrent plot components, while the presentation of sexualised female roles was sparser. In fact, sexualised roles were never an abiding preoccupation for Stone, and more often than not, the presence of sex on screen has signified tension rather than passion. In *Salvador*, *The Doors*, *U Turn* and *Alexander* the sex scenes are never straightforward, providing instead subtexts that push at the boundaries of convention.

In her 1995 assessment of Stone's first-half career, Susan Mackey-Kallis noted how *Heaven and Earth* was as significant for what it said about the director's ability to tell a story from a woman's perspective, as it was as a piece of counter-hegemonic storytelling about Vietnam.<sup>60</sup> As the concluding part of the trilogy, *Heaven and Earth* extended Stone's philosophy first constructed in *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* about what the effects of war are for those living through it. While *Heaven and Earth* was constructed within the same realist aesthetic as its earlier companion pieces, the focus on familial love was becoming a trend already in Stone's writing. The female protagonist marks it as a precursor to the raft of later films that would continue with the theme of parental love framed within melodramatic moral choices, and making use of a more expressive melodramatic aesthetic and a greater range of female personification.

None of Stone's later films gave a female protagonist as much prominence as *Heaven and Earth* did, but they are distinguished

by a number of leading and supporting roles where the contributions are not incidental but central to the narrative, philosophy and motivations. Stone was becoming progressively more interested in the intricacies of love, and the ways in which it moves our lives. It became an unexpected legacy of his art from a man whose outlook and past found so many of these themes hard to reconcile in his life. In *Natural Born Killers*, love 'is the only thing that kills the demon' is the mantra, and Stone's second-half career played on that register time and again – and not just in the dramas. As he moved into documentary work, Stone was mapping out an understanding of the analogy that linked the personal and the political. The individual condition was tied immutably to the condition of the country. As Stone discovered, the quest for happiness and the universal themes of love that were traced in the melodramas were mirrored in his abiding preoccupations about the condition of the USA. In Stone's eyes, love and happiness – conventionally understood as being rooted in the very personal – were wrapped up increasingly in the reified corporate establishment that now drove every aspect of American life, as the final chapter explains.

## Notes

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- 10 Langford, *Film Genre*, p. 38; emphasis in original.
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- 14 Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 97–133.
- 15 John Ridley, *U Turn: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1997), p. xiii.
- 16 *U Turn*, Rehearsal Papers, Box E-4, Ixtlan Production Files (hereafter I-PF), Los Angeles, CA.
- 17 Chris Salewicz, *Oliver Stone: The Making of his Movies* (London: Orion, 1997) p. 117.
- 18 Interview with Oliver Stone, Santa Monica, CA, 7 December 2011. Stone and Richardson almost did reunite in 2007 as plans were well advanced for the shooting of *Pinkville*. However, casting and finance problems put paid to this, and Richardson subsequently worked with Stone's mentor, Martin Scorsese, as well as Quentin Tarantino, winning Oscars for *The Aviator* (2004) and *Hugo* (2011).
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- 21 *U Turn* Post Production folder, Early Project (*Nixon/U Turn*) Box 80, I-PF.
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- 38 Paul, 'Oliver Stone's *Alexander*', p. 18.
- 39 Interview with Stone, 7 December 2011.
- 40 *Ibid.*
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- 44 Oliver Stone, 'Afterword' in Cartledge and Rose-Greenland (eds) *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander*, p. 348.
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