

Conclusion

Although we are clearly overreaching, it's too easy to talk about the USA losing its grip because we happen to be rooting for another approach. It's not going to go away that easily. This empire is Star Wars in the 'evil empire' sense of the words ... We are virtually becoming a tyranny against the rest of the world. It's not evident to people at home, because they don't see the consensus in the media and they don't see the harm the USA does abroad. We are not in decline. We are decayed and corrupt and immoral, but not in decline. The USA exerts its will in Europe, Asia, much of the Middle East, and still much of Latin America. The recent revelations that the NSA's and the UK's surveillance programmes are linked is big news.¹

Oliver Stone has been a fixture in the Hollywood landscape since his Oscar-winning script for *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978). That high-profile foothold gave him the opportunity to build slowly towards his ambition of capturing on film what he had lived through in Vietnam during 1967 and 1968. The young Yale man who had entered the army was a cerebral romantic in search of adventure; but his experience, not just of combat but also of his return to a country that was already openly divided about the war, altered his perspective and the direction of his life. Enrolment at film school under the GI Bill seemed to offer a way of expressing his anger and disillusionment, and the same determination that had kept him alive in South-East Asia now drove him on to try and tell something of that experience on film. Even as he took his place in the Hollywood firmament, the subject did not need to be

Vietnam to get the fire burning in him. *Midnight Express* started the catharsis, and after this his career garnered praise, admiration and plenty of criticism for the visceral, uncompromising writing in *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983) and *Year of the Dragon* (Michael Cimino, 1985). With the release of *Platoon* in 1986, his ambition to show something of the real terror and confusion of combat was finally realised in a film whose popular reception made Stone Hollywood's hottest property.

In important ways, Stone's auteur brand was constantly evolving during this period. The new wunderkind who penned tales of violent excess in *Midnight Express* and *Scarface*, and who found fame and fortune in the reconfiguring of Hollywood's perspective on Vietnam, also acquired something of a 'Midas touch' when it came to eliciting establishment outrage. By the 1990s, an on-screen homage to Jim Morrison played nicely to off-screen tales of drug-fuelled excesses, although the mixture of professional and personal coverage was eclipsed by the allegation at the heart of *JFK* in 1991 of a state-sponsored *coup d'état*. By this time, Stone's brand identity had traversed the space between wunderkind, *bête noire* and anti-establishment firebrand within little more than a decade, and the story was only just heating up.

In *Natural Born Killers*, Stone pushed the boundaries of mainstream acceptability towards on-screen violence while articulating a caustic critique of the entertainment–media complex. The dispute over the rating for the film highlighted a complex web of incompatible needs that touched on the limits of artistic freedom, the preservation of self-interested studio business, and the effectiveness and extent of industry self-regulation. In the midst of all of this, there were questions of censorship and personal integrity. Stone found himself in the difficult position of trying to explain how a film that seemed to push the boundaries of explicitly violent content also could be a legitimate form of critique of the wider cultural and economic forces that were driving that very same trend in violence. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the fallout from the film brought allegations of copycat killings and a court case that threatened to ascribe a product liability to any film: a move that also threatened the very *raison d'être* of the self-regulatory regime established by the Motion Picture Association of America in 1968. When *Nixon* failed at the box office a year or so later, the harbingers of doom predicted a

career decline. Understanding what happened thereafter has been at the forefront of many of the preceding pages.

Studio projects did not vanish in the wake of the cumulative controversies surrounding *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Nixon*. Like his mentor Martin Scorsese, Stone succeeded in maintaining both a personal vision and a working relationship with the studios. The supposed meltdown and critical decline after *Nixon* – at least in the eyes of some critics – did not materialise. If *U Turn* signposted a rapid descent in earnings potential, Stone's next film, *Any Given Sunday*, actually took \$75 million at the US box office for Warner Bros., and the period after *U Turn* accounts for more than 40 per cent of total career earnings. If Stone the iconoclast filmmaker no longer seemed to be at the centre of auteurist discourses that came subsequently, for example, to embrace the works of Paul Thomas Anderson, Darren Aronofsky, Christopher Nolan and the Coen brothers, he still extended his artistic reach, consolidating himself both as a filmmaker that producers and production crews alike are keen to work with, and as a totem for a range of Left-leaning causes and critiques marshalled against the government and media. Indeed, while the veneration of the Hollywood establishment reduced, Stone's auteur brand – strengthened ironically enough by his political credentials – actually increased in some overseas territories.

Nevertheless, the commercial environment within Hollywood did have an impact on Stone in the 2000s. In *World Trade Center* and *W.*, the perspectives on 9/11 and the Bush administration were remarked on for their lack of polemical bite. More visceral and acerbic critiques including *War on Terror* and *Jawbreaker* were developed, but ultimately faltered for want of available funding. This was certainly evidence of what Stone and many other observers saw as the prevailing neo-conservative cultural narrative about the necessity and justification of the 'War on Terror'. However, the mothballed scripts also provided an echo of the kind of studio resistance that Stone had encountered during preparations for *Platoon* at the early juncture of his career, as well as confirmation of an enduring conservatism within the major studios, despite the liberal pretensions of some of the industry's leading spokespeople.

Locating Stone's auteurism within a critical framework always presents challenges for critics, scholars and audiences. These

off-kilter projects from the turn of the millennium have made that pursuit no easier. The classic theory of auteurs derived out of the French New Wave, carried through in America by critic Andrew Sarris, and followed on by Peter Wollen and Roland Barthes, offered a range of analytical tools designed to extract meaning from the film text.² Sarris argued that an auteur was composed of three components: technical ability; a distinctive signature visible across several films; and some intangible third element; the 'soul' of the director.³ His model – long since discredited in a number of scholarly circles, although a renaissance of sorts has taken place in recent years – does capture some aspects of Stone's presence as an auteur, but it provides an incomplete picture.

Stone's writing and his editorial eye do provide a 'signature' that has remained relatively stable across all of his dramatic oeuvre. Yet as we have described, other aspects of that signature changed from the mid-1990s, as evidenced by a less realist and more distinct melodramatic aesthetic and, by many accounts, reduced polemical force. Melodrama comes to the fore in *U Turn*, *Alexander and W.*, with all three films foregrounding questions of personal morality. *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages* also asked moral questions, but locating their respective targets – the failure to grasp any legal oversight facility with regards to financial institutions, and the disorientated, apolitical lifestyle of certain sections of American society – appeared trickier. The absence of real polemic in these films is something that Stone himself has admitted to, and it was one of the reasons he threw himself more steadfastly into documentary work during the 2000s.

The move into documentary reflected a further authorial change. The distinctive editing techniques showcased in *JFK* and *Natural Born Killers* among others were eschewed for a more pared-down palate, visible in the *cinéma vérité* style of the Castro documentaries and the pedagogic techniques of presentation used in *Untold History*. It added up to an auteurist instinct that was almost covering its artistic tracks.

Indeed, post-Sarris, post-structuralism and variants thereof, more recent assessments of auteurism have given added emphasis to the *commercial* aspects of a director's brand. Undoubtedly, this has been a strong dimension in Stone's story too. By the time that *Savages* had completed its tour of cinemas in 2012, the cumulative earnings from

films directed by Oliver Stone had topped \$1.5 billion, split more or less evenly between US and foreign earnings – a state of financial affairs comparatively rare for a director of his ilk. The details are revealing, not least for what they say about the ways in which media images of Stone as an industry *bête noire* belie a more subtle relationship between the director and the film colony in Los Angeles, of which he is very much a part. Stone's position within Hollywood and his reputation there and beyond as an auteur has remained remarkably stable. His output repeatedly has employed standard industry protocols for auteur commodification – director's cuts, box sets, re-releases – embellished with self-assessments of his work, as well as commentaries on Hollywood and the condition of America. To listen to a director's commentary on one of Stone's films is to be initiated into a series of themes, theories and ideas that are at once challenging, provocative and illuminating. In fact, this added material extra to film embedded in the contemporary technology is almost a lecture series in its own right, detailing everything that Stone set out to be as a director when he returned from Asia in the late 1960s. Yet his auteurism does not quite reside within the 'commercial strategy' described by, for example, Tim Corrigan, any more than it might be said to reside within any particular artistic vision of the kind described in earlier variants of theory.⁴

Stone's interests in social critique and politics have carried him some way ahead of art and commerce into territory that can be best summed up as activism. Each of his films has been a piece of crafted drama with a range of distinctive attributes related to narrative and photography, acting as a baseline for Stone's auteur brand. However, what is striking in the second period of his career is the way in which those core elements of the auteur brand did not merely become retroactive career artefacts for a media narrative that views his auteur heyday as belonging to the past. Instead, Stone's auteurism acted as a platform for a political discourse that retained as much urgency and purpose as films such as *Salvador* and *JFK* had.

The full range of Stone's work does not sit comfortably within the rubric of auteurism any more than it does a commercial entertainment aesthetic. Both elements have populated Stone's career – sometimes at one and the same time – but something more remains. In his journey towards documentary work, Stone mapped out a space for his own brand of political activism

expressed in an increasingly strident assault on the political and commercial establishment in the USA. That move was accompanied by both a change in the dramatic work and a shift in personal outlook. In the closing pages of James Riordan's 1995 biography, the author argues that Stone had found in his films a place to both neutralise the pressures of his private life and express the pain he was concealing. Out of this, Riordan suggested that Stone was finding a degree of peace in the realisation that he was not alone; his efforts to find self-enlightenment were shared by many others who were on similar quests.⁵ In the book, the portrayal of Stone confirmed a need to redraw the boundaries between himself and the world, reflecting on his previous lack of compassion and a wish to expose himself to more love and understanding. Stone did move on in a way that did not erase his irascible old self, but certainly changed it. The acerbic, combative, guerrilla fighter remained – ready to engage and challenge – but the mix of passion and anger that drove him at the time of Riordan's book became centrally directed at a panoply of establishment malfeasance and mendacity.

An important complement to Stone's broader media presence was his increasing use of social media. Through his Facebook page, established in March 2012, he created a brand that projects himself, his directorial work and his treatise on surveillance, foreign policy, empire, terrorism and drugs.⁶ The entries in 2012 were dominated by information on the progress of *Savages* and *Untold History*. However, in-between these updates, Stone referenced a range of his concerns, some longstanding, some new. A plug for the republication of Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, and a posting of an op-ed piece about *JFK* written by Stone and first published in the *New York Times* in December 1991, were interspersed with entries about Julian Assange and endorsement of Robert Greenwald's 2012 documentary, *Koch Brothers Exposed*. In 2014, Stone continued to use the site to talk about his own work, including the difficulties he had experienced trying to bring a rendering of Martin Luther King's life to the screen. However, he also sought to draw attention to what he saw as failed media coverage of a range of issues, including US complicity in the killings in Indonesia in the 1960s – a topic aired in Joshua Oppenheimer's

documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2012) – as well as the political crisis gripping Venezuela in 2014.

Through his developing online presence, Stone's 'brand' has been consolidated in a form quite unlike any other Hollywood filmmaker. Few other directors in Hollywood have attempted to work with both drama and documentary in the way that Stone has, and none have really fashioned a political edge to their work in the manner that he has. Alongside lauded dramatic work such as *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Departed* (2006) and *Hugo* (2011), Scorsese has assembled documentary work about entertainment industry icons including Bob Dylan (*No Direction Home*, 2005), The Rolling Stones (*Shine a Light*, 2008) and Elia Kazan (*A Letter to Elia*, 2010). However, despite work on a documentary about the Clintons, Scorsese's auteur identity is firmly rooted within Hollywood. With documentaries about Howard Hawks (*Howard Hawks: American Artist*, 1997) and Bob Marley (*Marley*, 2012), UK-born director Kevin Macdonald has assembled a not-dissimilar range of subjects with occasional dramatic forays into politics, most notably with *State of Play* (2009). George Clooney seems to offer a closer mapping in terms of political work. As producer on *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Grant Heslov, 2009) and *Argo* (Ben Affleck, 2012), and as director on *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) and *The Ides of March* (2011) as well as appearances in a raft of other productions, including the ambitious *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2007) and *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009), Clooney has established a close association with a range of liberal concerns including media bias, political malfeasance, foreign policy deceit and corporate corruption. Away from the screen, Clooney's political work has combined a critique of US foreign policy and an extensive humanitarian profile. Yet it is Clooney's fame that is foregrounded more often, not least in the celebrity pages and gossip columns, where his Hollywood star still shines brightly. By contrast, what is striking about Stone is that his involvements seem to have no lighter alter-ego side: no musical documentaries, no celebrity partygoing, no whimsy.

Stone's increasing online presence shifted the narrative of his work away from an ordered recital of past projects towards a set of agendas and causes receiving regular updates in the 2010s. Not

only did this provide a sense of continuity, but also one of interconnectedness of causes and themes. One prominent example concerned US media coverage of the political protests in Venezuela in spring 2014. In April 2014 the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece by Nicolás Maduro, the President of Venezuela. Stone did not claim credit, but his eliciting of more openness and transparency at the paper bore fruit with the Maduro piece that indicated a greater willingness within the press not to simply tout the official line of the US Department of State – an accusation that Stone had advocated since *South of the Border* first appeared in 2010. It was a small step in advocacy, but clearly one that Stone relished.⁷

The content posted on Stone's social media does not exhibit any personal political pretensions; however, in its commentary it does seem to reflect a desire on Stone's part that the USA find its way back to the kind of republicanism that Benjamin Franklin and the Founding Fathers had sought. On the closing page of Stone and Kuznick's *Untold History* book, the authors conclude that any real hope for the USA 'to regain its democratic, evolutionary and revolutionary soul' lies with the citizens themselves, rather than with President Obama. The book closes with a quote from Benjamin Franklin who, in response to a question about what kind of government had been agreed at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, was reported to have replied: 'A republic, Madam, if you can keep it.'⁸ Stone's restorative wish was for an American democracy anchored in political advocacy, and a more personal sense of what it means to be an American. In the wake of Henry Luce's vision of the 'American Century', patriotism and love of country seemed to become the almost exclusive rhetorical preserve of the political Right. As outlined previously, dissenters such as Stone were readily dismissed as 'America-hating'. Thus part of Stone's enduring appeal to some liberals has been in the battle to 'keep' Franklin's republic, and to reclaim a sense of patriotism and love of one's country for all – not just the Right (Figure 10).

In media interviews, Stone continued to use his films to illustrate wider points about the shortcomings of both US foreign policy and the mainstream media coverage of such policy. In some instances, as with HBO's cancellation of its planned transmission



Figure 10 Protest against US military installation, Jeju Island, South Korea, March 2013

of *Comandante*, the critique acquired an extra texture but the message remained consistent. To be an adherent of Stone, one is not merely musing about the evolution of fast editing or acknowledging his position within the industry as a maverick capable of retaining relationships within the studio system; rather, one is embracing a personal worldview: a rebuttal of neo-conservative hegemony, a challenge to government authority, a calling to account of the ‘news-for-profit’ media, a wider rallying point for Left-leaning disaffection, and the articulation of a variant of the American Dream that is offered as a counter to the myth of global hegemony.

As James Welsh and Donald Whaley have noted, the movement from the supposed macho right-winger who wrote *Conan the Barbarian*, to leftist crusader with *Salvador*, to establishment chronicler in *World Trade Center* has not revolved around some moderate centre-ground with Stone.⁹ His politics throughout have been rooted in the foundational myths about America. He is a supporter of still the greatest capitalist nation on earth, but not an unbridled advocate of *capitalism*, much less the continued expansion of corporate power that the particular brand of American capitalism has wrought. (As mentioned previously, there is something

distinctly Jeffersonian in this outlook.) He displays an opposition to privilege, corruption and elitism. His production company Ixtlan is relatively modest by Hollywood standards, yet it works unabashedly within the 'system' as well as within its own independent confines. In Stone's lifetime the USA moved from the vision of Henry Luce to the cautionary observations of, in recent times, George Packer and Edward Luce.¹⁰ Stone's leanings as a political advocate have followed a not-dissimilar pattern. His is a view that still sees the possibilities for intervention on the global stage, but which decries unsubstantiated military adventure – and more than anything else, calls for the dismantling of overarching government power.

Such a stance is not without its own difficulties and moral dilemmas, but the direction of travel has been almost as important to Stone as achievement of the aims. If there is one idea that Stone has settled on in his efforts to give airtime to the debate about the failings and missteps of the US administration, it is the tyranny of empire that he sees as knocking at America's door almost constantly now. His choice to pick up on the era's most highly politicised subject – the NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden – was an obvious decision for someone who had been raising the issue of unwarranted state surveillance since soon after 9/11.

As this new outlook has evolved, Stone has succeeded in neutralising some of the negative aspects of his earlier *bête noire* reputation, replacing it with an establishment figure and talk-show alter ego that has at least as much interest in 'the marketplace of ideas' as it has in referencing and marketing his films. At times, that alter ego has shown signs of impatience, and on occasion has made unguarded comments which then had to be rowed back from, but it continues to command a hearing. Stone the filmmaker, documentarian, political firebrand and American, aided by a news-scape that finally came round to questioning the ideological tenets of the post-9/11 age – through Iraq, Afghanistan, extraordinary rendition, Assange and Snowden – have fused together in a locus of opposition towards Big Government and corporations alike. Stone the Left-leaning libertarian, we might say, his career and his astonishing array of output have been central to that awareness-raising.



Figure 11 Oliver Stone, Sun-jung Jung and their daughter Tara, Berlin, February 2000

We are in moral decay. The people who broke the law from Bush onwards are in power. The people who decried the breaking of the law are fugitives. Everything is upside down. Most people don't see it. It's a sad world that we are leaving to our children. But we must fight against it – in this [*Untold History*] series, at the end, we say, 'History has shown us that the curve of the ball can break differently.' It's happened several times: with Gorbachev, Khrushchev, Roosevelt, and Kennedy. Hope is still there. Hope is a foundation for action against this empire.¹¹

Notes

- 1 Interview with Oliver Stone, Santa Monica, CA, 8 December 2011. Nick Hopkins, 'UK gathering secret intelligence via covert NSA operation', *Guardian* (7 June 2013). Available at www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/jun/07/uk-gathering-secret-intelligence-nsa-prism (accessed 1 March 2016).
- 2 Helen Stoddart, 'Auteurism and Film Authorship Theory' in Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 37–57.
- 3 Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962' in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (eds) *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th edn, 1992), pp. 585–8.

- 4 Timothy Corrigan, 'Auteurs and the New Hollywood' in Jon Lewis (ed), *The New American Cinema* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 42.
- 5 James Riordan, *Stone: The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (London: Aurum, 1995), pp. 521–3.
- 6 Available at www.facebook.com/TheOliverStone (accessed 1 March 2016).
- 7 Nicolás Maduro, 'Venezuela: A Call for Peace', *New York Times* (1 April 2014). Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/02/opinion/venezuela-a-call-for-peace.html> (accessed 7 December 2015).
- 8 Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States* (New York: Ebury, 2012) p. 615.
- 9 James M. Welsh and Donald M. Whaley, *The Encyclopedia of Oliver Stone* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), p. 234.
- 10 George Packer, *The Unwinding* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013); Edward Luce, *Time to Start Thinking: America and the Spectre of Decline* (London: Little, Brown, 2013).
- 11 Interview with Oliver Stone, Santa Monica, CA, 8 December 2011.