

Interviews

Stone on Stone

Between 2010 and 2014 we interviewed Oliver Stone on a number of occasions, either personally or in correspondence by email. He was always ready to engage with us, quite literally. Stone thrives on the cut-and-thrust of debate about his films, about himself and perceptions of him that have adorned media outlets around the world throughout his career – and, of course, about the state of America. What follows are transcripts from some of those interviews, without redaction. Stone is always at his most fascinating when a question leads him down a line of theory or thinking that can expound on almost any topic to do with his films, or with the issues in the world at large. Here, that line of thinking appears on the page as he spoke, and gives credence to the notion of a filmmaker who, whether loved or loathed, admired or admonished, is always ready to fight his corner and battle for what he believes is a worthwhile, even noble, cause. Oliver Stone's career has been defined by battle and the will to overcome criticism and or adversity. The following reflections demonstrate why he remains the most talked about, and combative, filmmaker of his generation.

Interview with Oliver Stone, 19 January 2010

In relation to the Classification and Ratings Administration

Interviewer: How do you see the issue of cinematic censorship?

Oliver Stone: The ratings thing is very much a limited game. If you talk to Joan Graves, you'll get the facts. The rules are the rules.

They change with societal norms. You can now have a kiss between homosexuals. In *Alexander* you can even have someone go to bed with the man. The only guideline that now exists as far as I know would be the word 'fuck' and various obscenities. It is a limitation. I was told most recently that you can have three or four of them – obviously, context is important – and retain a PG-13, which is an issue on *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. There are occasional curse words in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, so you need to use each 'fuck' well. Currently, there is a big issue about smoking in films – not sure what the rules are, but they [the Classification and Ratings Administration, CARA] have been very tough. As with any board, they respond to pressure. The movie business is now officially way behind the cable business in terms of freedom of expression. Many filmmakers are now reaching for cable for the freedom to do shows where they can do what they want, including references to penises and any kind of lovemaking. This is a strange development, given that there had historically been such censorship in network television: it was the most hidebound outlet for many years. When my films were released back then, the cuts mandated by the television networks would run to three, four, five pages long. We used to do a television version of scenes while we were shooting. That's to say, we would cover up some of the words where possible to save time and money later in the process. Probably wouldn't do this now.

In relation to cable television

Stone: The television sales market has changed. I'm not up-to-date on it, but cable is now in any case the main purchaser of shows. Network television is much less subversive in terms of sex and language than cable. However, there are still pressures even with cable that can be applied to material. In the case of *Comandante*, HBO came under pressure, I suspect, from various sources, including right-wing Cuban American communities and the White House. I heard about it after the fact – it was really badly done. Promos were already running. HBO is part of a corporate complex at Warner Brothers, and there were a ton of emails coming to that studio, as well as perhaps, I believe, pressure from the White House, so it was cancelled at the executive level only. You never really know what goes on behind the scenes in corporations, but it was

an abrupt cancellation with two, three weeks to go. The decision was made in hours, when I was out of the country. There was no consultation with me; I was simply informed it was cancelled, and it was dead in the water. They sat on this film for another year-and-a-half because it was licensed to them, and they didn't do anything with it. Then they returned it to us. It has since gone back to its copyright owner in Spain, who's been very difficult to deal with in releasing the film. We're still working on it, and hopefully it will get out eventually. It is available in England, Canada, and on YouTube for free. Some of the other cable channels will however take more chances to get attention, which means that there is a relatively open market, even though the viewing numbers at these stations can be small. Cable is the best place to work, if you want to get beyond the boundaries of present behaviour.

In relation to personal experiences with CARA

Stone: If you are interested in filmmaking and narrative-making as I am, I have never sought to shock as much as to ask the viewer to consider an alternative – as with the JFK assassination. I have included sex in all of the movies to some degree. I think there was some issues with *The Doors* because of sexuality, but I can't remember – we may have cleaned it up. In *Heaven and Earth* there was a vivid rape scene and CARA made suggestions. We went to see CARA, and tried to maintain a friendly relationship. Heffner was very good at this. CARA would seek to help by making 'under the table' suggestions so as to avoid giving an official rating R, or whatever, which would then get in the newspapers and become an issue. I remember doing this several times, where the issues would be dealt with quietly. Heffner and Graves were both very reasonable. The one occasion where I had no understanding of what I was up against was with *Natural Born Killers*: it was a case unto itself. This was the most negative experience with the ratings board.

As it affected JFK

Stone: *JFK* was only ever considered as an R, probably due to the obscenity and scenes of homosexuality. The film included images of behaviour that I imagine the board did not want young people to see. The censorship that astounded me at the time was in the

official media in the country. I think I was relatively naïve; I felt that by 1991 the country was ready to look again at the Kennedy killing, and it seemed like the right thing to do. I felt like someone opening up a cellar. I talked to as many people who had been in Dealey Plaza as I could. The censorship was inflicted early on. When we were shooting, George Lardner was there from the *Washington Post* – he got hold of a first draft of a script. That was eviscerated in the *Washington Post* Sunday Calendar section, in a story about how I was completely perverting the real facts. It was a pretty ugly story. I was furious about this. We engaged Washington publicist Frank Mankiewicz, who had worked with Robert Kennedy, and we demanded fair time on the *Post*; we didn't get it. I did get an article printed eventually.

Newsweek blasted us. The cover story was titled 'Why Oliver Stone's new movie can't be trusted'.¹ It was also much criticised in the *New York Times* – there were more than a dozen articles of different sizes from the editorial board, Tom Wicker, political and cultural critics condemning the film. I would only remind you that the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have been extremely rigidly pro-Warren Commission since the beginning. The *New York Times* came out supporting the Warren Commission just as the report was issued, which was several thousand pages long – so they didn't take very long to double think it.² For the record, they have never given a good review or much coverage to any book that condemned the Warren Report. They've always given excellent coverage to books pro-Warren Commission; from Gerald Posner 'til way back. There's been a significantly rigid policy in both papers. In fact, probably the *Washington Post* gave me the most coverage as a dissident when they attacked me in that Sunday piece by George Lardner.³ Bush and Nixon attacked the film. Robert Dole attacked *Natural Born Killers*, so I have been attacked by every presidential candidate except for Clinton!

Jack Valenti [president of the Motion Picture Association of America] lobbied against the film, which was a complete surprise and came out of the blue; the MPAA chairman had never taken a public position on a film previously. Given the level of controversy at the time I was not overly shocked, but I felt it was not Valenti's job. Valenti had said he could not live with this lie – the suggestion that the film had implicated LBJ [US President Lyndon B. Johnson]

in the assassination. I do not believe that the film suggests that. I do not believe that LBJ was directly involved, but I do think that LBJ was thoroughly involved in the subsequent cover-up. What people didn't know at that time was that there were significant changes in policy directly after the assassination. Warners [chair Bob Daly] then got pissed off with Valenti. I stayed out of the debate as best as possible, but there is no doubt that Valenti's intervention hurt the film with respect to the Oscars. I met Valenti some years later and made up with him. He was a likeable man, however his position was that when it comes to Johnson, you don't tread there. I think that Valenti's opinion was to some extent shared by some of the other studio heads, who anonymously expressed the view that Warners had acted irresponsibly.⁴ Warners took a lot of heat over *JFK*. The combination of that pressure, with the limited success of *Heaven and Earth*, meant that Warners did not back *Natural Born Killers* as well as they might have. They were scared of the film. Warners at that time was becoming more of a stockholding company, with a conservative focus on making movies that pleased stockholders.

On *JFK* I would ideally have put an intermission after the [Donald] Sutherland [X] scene. Tarantino told me that he had seen the film in Holland and the Dutch distributor had put an intermission in at this point, and that it really worked for him because it gave a pause to think about the events of the first half. A lot of information had been given at that point of the film. I recall that when I was making *JFK* I was young and strong-headed, and was on a roll. I had read the books and got to know Garrison, and went for it. I fought with Warners to get the film out in December. The film was shot fast and came to three hours eight minutes. When Warners wanted to preview it in Pasadena, I refused, knowing that such a step would generate calls for changes, and hence delays. Senior execs at Warners really believed in me and [the] film caught the fire and did well, despite the official criticism. It came close to an Oscar win for the [best] film that year. I get letters regularly from researchers who benefited from the availability of material following the set-up of the Assassination Records Review Board [ARRB].⁵ There was no acknowledgement in the press of my efforts even after the ARRB was set up.

My experience with *JFK* was part of a wake-up call: I had wandered from being a relative American hero with the Vietnam movies that were respected for telling the American soldier's part of the story. I found later with *Heaven and Earth* that there was no interest in hearing the Vietnamese side of the story. *Born on the Fourth of July* was not universally appreciated. It received several Oscar nominations [eight] and almost won Best Picture, but was beaten narrowly by *Driving Miss Daisy*. I won the Oscar for director, but it became a controversial picture, as Pat Buchanan and the right-wing kicked in with severe criticism of the movie, and of Ron Kovic. Kovic had fainted and run for a House [of Representatives] seat in Orange County against a famous right-winger, Bob Dornan – and when that happened, the Right came down on Kovic and the movie. So we got quite a bit of controversy, and that certainly hurt us. I think we were the early favourite in January to win the Oscar, but *Driving Miss Daisy* did better box office and overtook us. We did very well: it was one of the most profitable I've ever made. It was not as successful financially as *Platoon*, because of the issues of the severe wound and the nature of Kovic's criticism of the United States when he returned. People did not immediately enjoy it, but did come around to liking it. It was not an easy movie for some Americans to watch because of the castration issue, which bothered many young males who walked out of the movie. It didn't connect at all levels. Many veterans could not watch it, and many thought Ron Kovic was belly-aching.

The Doors came out the same year, which made 1991 a massive year for work. I don't recall enormous problems with the board. The band was a shock to the American public because Morrison was that kind of person. He was wearing snakeskin pants, screwing anything in sight and yelling obscenities like 'fuck my mother and kill my father' – I can't remember if that made it into the final movie or not – but it was pretty wild, even for 1991.

As a commercial phenomenon

Stone: *JFK* was the worst case for political censorship, but *Natural Born Killers* was my worst experience with the film board. We hit a wall there. I was supposed to deliver by contract to Warner's an R rating. This pressure for R had arisen in [the] 1970s. The 'X' was a

beautiful 1960s concept, but after the *Midnight Cowboy* era, porno films began to displace mainstream films on Broadway. I remember vividly that during my film school years at New York University, main houses other than 42nd Street were playing softcore porno, for example *Devil in Miss Jones*, *Deep Throat*. Kung Fu films were also very popular. As a result the X rating lost its respectability, and newspapers and TV stopped taking advertising for X movies. Since the 1990s, the 'R' rating has come under pressure from Christian groups, and the current situation is that similar pressure to that experienced by the X is coming on to the R rating. An R rating can only be shown at certain times on television. For the last five to seven years everyone has been under pressure to make PG-13 rather than R. *World Trade Center* was a PG-13, which was a very violent movie about a grim subject. It was however a family-oriented movie with good perceived values. The violence was modified so that the viewer does not see overly crushed limbs. There were heroic true stories, and so the film got a PG-13 despite the violence. This move to PG-13 is driven by commercial pressures. Studios will not make the movie if it has certain threatening elements in it – political and sexual. Also, commercial pressure is driven by rules on advertising: for example, having to use slots on TV after 9pm. Papers and media outlets in smaller cities and towns won't take advertising. There are also big pressures from retailers like Walmart: for example in the 1990s, if a studio was getting 40–50 per cent of its video sales from a retailer who doesn't want to put R on its shelves, particularly in cities in the south of the country. At a certain point it went to 50 per cent or 60 per cent of the business, maybe even more. Now it could be even higher. I think the numbers are really insane. Walmart dominates the market. There is a lot of hypocrisy, because often in cities in the South and the West, and the South-West, despite the presence of Christian groups, there will be demand for more adult materials. At one time you would often find that small towns had an alternate video store with all of the juicy materials. Walmart had a 'Christian' aura of sanctity and a clean image, and this affected what the studios did. A provocative movie just can't make as much money because you can't get the broad base for financial success, including the kids and the 'right thinkers'. You can only get the 'free thinkers' – and they are in limited numbers in any society.

In the old days the audience base didn't have to be so big. A movie could gross \$5 million to \$20 million to \$30 million and be a success, with merchandising costs being relatively low. Therefore, you could successfully appeal to the smaller audiences off the dime, and take chances: for example, with people like [Roman] Polanski or with *Midnight Cowboy* [John Schlesinger, 1969]. However, people did start to get greedy. Actor costs have gone up, driven by agents. The costs of production have not gone up dramatically since I first started in 1980s. Crews are still very hardworking, and costs have never been excessive. The real growth has been in the costs of 'above-the-line' people – the actors and the advertising. The television business drove the advertising change, where for example a \$30 million movie might cost \$20 million to advertise. That is a disconnect. This brought with it a move for conglomerates to own film studios with an anchor in television stations. The dynamic between these two businesses has been fascinating, because now the film studios seem to have reasserted their profitability, whereas in the 1990s it was looking like television was going to dominate strongly; but then television ran into strong competition from cable, and lost its easy profitability. The movie business seemed to have gotten away, lost its soul when the television advertising took over. Adverts had to work in prime time, be provocative but not go too far abroad. In Ang Lee's R-rated *Brokeback Mountain* [2006] the positive critical comments and the fact that it was Oscar-nominated allowed it to be advertised on television, despite the homosexual theme.

There is a whole level of hypocrisy in the Oscar aspect. Films can be uncommercial, but the Oscar label allows it to be advertised extensively. This still may mean that Americans will not go to see films like *Brokeback Mountain* or *Milk* [Gus Van Sant, 2009]. There were several producers who did change the business radically and pervert the meaning of the Oscar by chasing after it. Independent producers who use a large amount of money and illicit contact to campaign for Oscar success for their films – that changed the nature of the game. By time I attended the Oscar event for the *JFK* nominations, campaigning for awards had become very hostile.

The ratings board doesn't play a role now. Everyone is making a centrifugal movie to meet criteria of social responsibility and acceptance. If you do a *Doors* movie, you go against that grain.

This reflects great conservatism in the industry and in the country. The presentation of news to the American public is in similar vein. It's OK to give aid to Haiti, but not OK to criticise efforts in Iraq or Afghanistan, where we are destroying countries. This is an issue of political correctness. Movies critical of Iraq have not done well. In *Platoon*, I had a mix of dead stone killers and heroes which allowed me to attempt a reassessment of Vietnam. The film did show Vietnamese being killed and it did become a subject of discussion, yes. I was called a 'baby killer' and so forth, and people said that I should be tried for 'baby killing' and for 'war crimes'. It was mentioned, but it was not the prominent mention. It was overlooked in general, because the film was seen as an homage to the American tragedy in Vietnam at that time. America was ready for it in the mid-1980s, and was tired of the cliché of *Rambo*. Similar issues reflected in *South of the Border*. I talked to seven South American presidents about Chávez. They all said positive things about Chávez, but none of this is known in the USA, where he is regarded as a clown and a demon – as is Castro. That is true censorship: in a way, it's an unofficial censorship of the mind arising from the way that our news is presented to us. I believe that we live in the most controlled society with the exception of the Soviet Union, which went under, and I suspect that the USA is paralleling their history to a similar conclusion. The news is ethnocentric: America first. Generally speaking, America is never to blame: 'Terrorists v US'. There is no concept that we partly created Osama [bin Laden] or [Saddam] Hussein, or that many US businesses and individuals supported the Hitler regime. We have started so much shit in the world. We are constantly labelling others as the enemy. The education system contributes to this: high schools are very conformist, and books reflect a pro-American interest. Colleges are more open but also more fragmented. We are not really in a people's democracy where the majority control policy. Obama was elected by the people, yet he still has finished up doing what the joint chiefs and the military complex want. Kennedy was the last president to really challenge the system, and say this is insanity – and he was killed. We are really in a gridlock like the Soviet Union was, and we can't get out of it. The only possible end was indicated in the 2008 financial crisis: that we would go broke, and could not afford to continue with the rigid control of the world that we are seeking.

As it affected Natural Born Killers

Stone: In 1994 *Natural Born Killers* was an essay about these issues of unofficial censorship, about the replacement of values with media and its love of violence. At that time the O. J. Simpson trial was the staple of American news, and might well have made close to \$10 billion for the networks. News used to be a non-profit activity, but that changed in 1980s with Larry Tisch buying CBS and declaring the news division for-profit. Whereas up until that point, to the best of my knowledge, all the licensing on television was done on the basis that news was supposed to be non-profit. That changed the game at CBS. This is to the best of my knowledge. For me, *Natural Born Killers* was a satire, but others saw it as violent, gory garbage. The Board informed me that the film would get an NC-17, which was a no-go that meant that it could not play at certain theatres and advertising would be limited. It would have been treated similarly to a porno film. Bob Daly at Warners told me that they needed an R, that Bob would help, but that Warners wouldn't release the film in that form. The film is finally available now in its original uncut form, re-released on DVD last year, although it received little attention. In 1994 I had to fight and went back to the Board with my editors six to seven times to work things out, without it becoming a scandal. I made a lot of cuts – about 150 – and the film was released as an R. I didn't lose anything essential except the rhythm and the savagery and brutality that I wanted. At one stage it was difficult to understand what the Board wanted to have cut because even they weren't sure; it was just the air of general chaos that they didn't like. The film did moderately well and made money; however, it was seen by some as not satire, but garbage with a flimsy excuse of satire. That was the end of my relationship at that time with Warners, although I did subsequently make two movies over the next ten years with them, *Any Given Sunday* [1999], and 50 per cent partnership with them on *Alexander* [2004], but essentially the relationship was fractured.

Natural Born Killers was not an easy movie for this town to accept. I had been in a similar position with *Scarface*, although I was only the writer. In 1983, *Scarface* likewise was abhorred and got very bad reviews, although it went on to become a cult classic. At that time it hurt our careers – Pacino, De Palma and my own. *Natural*

Born Killers had a harder time. The independent producer Arnon Milchan was looking to make money, and was not interested in fully promoting the film.

As it affected Nixon

Stone: Nixon was rated 'R' for language, but there were no particular rating issues. However, on the day the film came out it was attacked by Diane Disney [Miller], who said words to the effect, 'How can my father's studio make this film?' – clearly calculated to damage the film. However Michael Eisner, then head of Disney, told me that he felt it was the best movie they had made that year. From my perspective it was a defeat, losing \$35 to \$40 million. I think any portrayal of Nixon was probably not destined to make a lot of money. Even *Frost/Nixon* [Ron Howard, 2009], with enormous advertising only took around \$19 million box office. Nixon was a man of great talent, but his own worst enemy. Nixon did make some progress with the Soviet Union and China, and in that respect he may, like Kennedy, have crossed a line – and it has even been suggested that Watergate might have been a response from the establishment to that development.

As a continuing phenomenon

Stone: U Turn was a story about incest and was released as an R; but by 1997 things had started to loosen up a little. However, by the time of *Alexander* I discovered that the gay relationship with Hephaestion was still a shock – certainly for the studio. As a result I did not at that time use the relationship with Bagoas – a eunuch. In the 2007 DVD version, this relationship is restored. *Alexander* was an explorer and went beyond all boundaries. The intermission which is only in the 2007 version was valuable to allow people to breathe. After *JFK*, I continued to get negative press for *Heaven and Earth*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Nixon* and *U Turn* which was deemed to be too violent. *Any Given Sunday* was also lightly regarded because it was about football.

I worked with Warners as a partner on *Alexander*. There was a change of administration at Warners. We had made a lot of money with Warners DVD division on *Any Given Sunday*, and they were

willing to take *Alexander* and quietly release it again in 2007 [*Alexander Revisited*]. In the USA, the representation of homosexuality was a big issue; no one came to even sample it in the south of the country. Newspapers played with the title: 'Alexander the Gay', 'Alexander the Not So Great'.⁶ The idea of a gay military commander was just unacceptable to Americans. If *Brokeback Mountain* had been a story of soldiers rather than cowboys, it would not have succeeded! The strength of reaction to *Alexander* may suggest an insecurity in the American psyche, linked to our aggressiveness and love of war. We have fought seven wars since World War Two, and none of them were necessary. War ramps up spending and provides a means of control, but it doesn't have to be so.

Comandante drew criticism, although the television programme, *Persona Non Grata* about Palestine, was balanced and not easy to criticise. It was released by HBO that year, but without much fanfare. It was 67 minutes long, and does exist in the Oliver Stone DVD Collection. I also returned to Cuba after *Comandante* to do a second documentary for HBO, which was released, called *Looking for Fidel*. It was my second interview with Castro, and this is a hard-hitting Q&A, but does not have the broad, portrait-like feel of *Comandante*. The documentaries on Castro came up as a result of me being approached by Spanish and Argentine producers with good contacts in Cuba. I had done *Salvador* and had a liberal's desire to help, but I never really had a thing for Castro until going there. I have also now done a third documentary on Fidel. We finished shooting in August, and are now slowly editing it. It's a farewell to Castro. *South of the Border* is also due out this year. I am currently working on *Secret History of the United States*. This has taken two years up to now off and on, and will probably take a third year to complete. It's proving to be very exhausting work. The recent press announcement again drew criticisms related to my comment about Hitler – it doesn't seem to let up. The *Guardian* report was probably the most accurate.

W. was a well-respected movie; however, by the time the movie came out Bush had lost his bite. If the movie had come out two months earlier, while the debate was still about national security, the film would have done a lot better. By the time of release in October 2009, the debate had moved on to the economy. There

was no participation or input from any of Bush's close associates who were – and are – very secretive. There is still a lot that is still unknown about Bush and that era.

Wall Street finished shooting in New York last month and the studio is looking for an April release, but this is still to be agreed. *World Trade Center* did good business around the world. Ixtlan is often approached with interesting stories, but from a movie perspective they are lost causes. I cannot follow the news, films take too long to make. In any case, I want to focus on the things that really interest me, given the time it takes to make a movie. I don't get any approaches from the studios, they are not interested in making those kinds of movie. The official line is that 'dramas are dead': the project either needs to be a comedy, or a big-pull teenager film. *W.* was an effort to fill that gap. It was financed with independent money, with 55 per cent from Hong Kong, plus Australian, French and German finance and a small amount of US equity. It was essentially a foreign production. There is a strong economic aspect to censorship, with the rule being 'don't rock the boat too much'.

As evidenced in media coverage

Stone: It's exhausting to go through all of these debates when you make a movie, because the debate is not about the movie, but about whether you are telling the truth or not, what a fraud you are, or what a liar you are. It becomes personal, and those attacks do wear you down – they beat the shit out of you, frankly.

I don't think anything could have prepared me for what I was going to get into in my life. My father always used to say to me when I was a kid: 'Kiddo, don't ever tell the truth – keep it to yourself.' I always tried to be a truth-teller because I was a bit of a rebel. Unfortunately I didn't realise the implications of that. I say that because it's very much a part of my life and I find that it goes on to this day; I am often criticised. As an only child, I do have a problem with criticism, but there is something beyond my own ego, and that is the truth. Some of the great people I admire probably had to learn the same lesson: for example, Martin Luther King. I believe that in an Anglo-American culture – it's the same situation in England as in the USA – what happens is that if you defend yourself in the press, you get attacked harder. Should one take a *noblesse*

oblige approach and let most things pass? Generally I have taken this approach, but as a result a lot of scandal and false rumours pass unchallenged.

Interviewer: Love appears in many of your films, but is little remarked upon?

Stone: 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.

I think *Natural Born Killers* connected with young people because it is essentially a love story. The theme is: love beats the demon. The theme is used on t-shirts and is used on projections: for example, in the scene with the 'Indian'. Mickey and Mallory are monsters in a sense, but they reflect better because they are surrounded by greater monsters – people who completely corrupt the system, and kill and murder in their own way – people such as the policemen represented by Tom Sizemore, the warden represented by Tommy Lee Jones, and the media represented by Robert Downey Jr. I shot two versions of the ending: in one, Mickey and Mallory get away, in the other, they are killed by someone who is in fact worse than them. I didn't like the latter ending, but it was shot in case there was a censorship pressure not to have Mickey and Mallory be seen to have gotten away. Certainly there was some bluenose reaction to the ending that was used. Some people were fearful that young people would model themselves on Mickey and Mallory. The movie was done in the spirit of asking how crazy has our culture become. Janet Maslin wrote in the *New York Times* about the edits in the film – some 4,000 – but not about some of the other cultural aspects.

Interview with Oliver Stone, 18 June 2010

Interviewer: How did *U Turn* develop as a project?

Stone: I did a lot of rewriting on *U Turn*. Also at that time Richard Rutowski [was] also involved in the rewriting. I didn't claim writing credit for *U Turn*, as I judged it below 50 per cent of the total, which is the WGA [Writers Guild of America] threshold. I think that a 25 per cent threshold would be more appropriate. The whole

thing is screwed up. The WGA rules tend to favour the first writer, who is often the most incompetent. I adopted a hands-off approach over writing credits on *U Turn* perhaps because of the reaction of Quentin Tarantino over the *Natural Born Killers* script. I had bought the screenplay wholly and legally and paid him very well, but he later got very upset with my rewriting it. The screenplay had been lying around for some years and he admitted that he did not have any intention of directing it. My view when I saw it was that it was a primitive but interesting idea. I talked to associate producer Janet Yang and I saw it on her desk, and said that's a great title. I had seen *Reservoir Dogs* [1992] and I was very impressed with his work. I loved *Reservoir Dogs*. I thought the original screenplay for *Natural Born Killers* would have also made a great first movie, but as it stood, it was shallow. I then bought the screenplay from Jane Hamsher and Don Murphy. What I didn't know was that there was bad blood between these two producers and Quentin, a long-simmering feud – they said they'd discovered him, blah blah blah. So I plunged in. Quentin then came to see me about the rewriting of the screenplay. I tried to explain to him that I had been there before too, in films like *Scarface* and *Year of the Dragon*, where I had written the screenplay and then changed it towards the director's vision. He was very bruised by it. He believes that the writer has to have the integrity of the material; I said I don't think we can do that. Writer integrity is important, but movie-making is a collaborative one, and singly-written screenplays don't always make for the best movies. My view on reflection is that the rewrite made a more interesting movie in that it went into the sociological issues and created real characters.

However, at the time Quentin was very pissed off. Quentin made his version of the screenplay more than available to everyone he could – available to various fan magazines – so it's possible to look at the final version and see how it was developed. The point was, Quentin was very upset. I had never seen such a campaign of vilification. *Natural Born Killers* opened, coincidentally, at around the same time as *Pulp Fiction* [1994]. In fact *Pulp Fiction* had been screened at Cannes and from my perspective, the timing of *Natural Born Killers* just after *Pulp Fiction* was unlucky. We were in his shadow. Both the timing and the controversy hurt *Natural Born Killers* during its opening. It has subsequently found its way

to success as a cult film. I had said at the time that Quentin was suable for his comments. When you take money from the producer you agree certain conditions. We have since made up, but it was a very painful period. I don't think to this day he had admitted to seeing it. I admire him as an artist and have enjoyed his later films. It's a tough business. I came from a tradition where as a screenwriter if you didn't like what the director did, you shut up or you waited until he died at least – which is what I did with Hal Ashby.

In *U Turn* the original book was a great set-up, good dialogue; however, it didn't go far enough – it wasn't crazy enough. Sometimes, great thrillers need to be made more crazy for movies. I was working on the script even during the shoot. It was a real down to the wall job. Richard Rutowski had been scouting in Arizona, looking for somewhere that would work as the location for the film – a hole-in-the-wall kind of place. As we looked for a suitable location in out-of-the-way places, the idea of incest came up. It is a chilling concept, but there are many products of incest in rural America. I hate to tell you, but it's true. Richard told me about an experience he had had during scouting on the back roads. During one of these visits he came across an ideal out-of-the-way place and pulled up to a shack – a big shack – with a guy sat on the porch with a shotgun. He said 'What do you want?' Richard bullshitted him a bit that he was a scout. Out of the shack walked a nymphet with shorts, cut-offs and all that. She looked, according to Richard, exactly like him, but the guy was not behaving towards her as if she was his daughter. This reminded me of a previous scouting experience in Mississippi near Parchment, where there appeared to be evidence of incest among some of the people that I came across. I suspect that Mississippi was famous for it. I think probably there's a lot more goes on than is admitted, possibly more so in the USA than in England. In the USA, rural communities are very physically isolated and insular, and people get away with it. They don't cooperate with the census. These people are off the map. They don't want to fuckin' know. In any event, these personal observations prompted me to weave incest into the narrative of *U Turn*. It is my darkest film, the idea was to go as black as possible. *Natural Born Killers* is a love story, but there is no possibility of love in this universe in *U Turn*: they are like scorpions in a bucket – nobody could get out alive.

It was one of the darkest spaces personally that I had ever been in. I had just finished *Nixon* and my book. I was turning 51 years old, and for some reason it was a dark period. Fifty is a very dangerous age – a mid-life crisis. I wanted to make a film that was deliberately low-key. I had been attacked so much for making big films. This was an attempt to return to my roots and make something low-budget, quick and dirty – really dirty. I feel I got killed for it. It went too far. Even Mike Medavoy, the Chairman of Phoenix Pictures, said that I hadn't given him the film that I wrote. Mike also said that I had made it too brutal. From recollection, I think Janet Maslin said something similar which probably put off some more respectable viewers. Mike and I have no luck together! We worked together on *The Hand* [1981] and also on *The People vs Larry Flynt* [Miloš Forman, 1996]. A lot of my weirder friends really love the movie. I think *U Turn* has some surface similarities with *Red Rock West* [John Dahl, 1993], but it's not the same kind of film. I found that kind of accusation demeaning – that I would make a copy of another film. All film noir films today are cheats – people live at the end. *U Turn* is a true film noir – the key people all die. Only the two weirdest people – the blind 'Indian' and Darrell – survive. I think Billy Bob Thornton is great in the movie. He was scared of flying, and every time we needed to get him on set they had to take a van from Arkansas.

Bill Paxton dropped out of the shoot with just two weeks to go to shooting. He called me when the crew were in Arizona at a production meeting, to say that he just couldn't perform that role. After I took the call from Paxton, I returned to the production meeting and pretended for the next two hours that all was well. Sean Penn had passed the initial offer to be involved, but after Paxton's departure Penn was available and took the role. There was some tension in the relationship between us, which Penn later expressed in a David Letterman interview; there had been an incident related to Penn's loss of temper on set. Certainly the work schedule for the shoot was tough, and this may have contributed to Penn's attitude. Despite the pressure of the shoot, I did stop production for two days so that Penn could return to Santa Monica to open his nightclub. There were some bad feelings that persisted after the film was completed, but these have healed over the years.

In addition to the personnel change there was also a change of title. We attempted to agree with Akira Kurosawa to use the *Stray Dogs* title, but Kurosawa was extremely litigious. Kurosawa wanted to avoid confusion with his own *Stray Dog* [1949]. As a result, a replacement title was needed. I did run a competition during the shoot for a new title, but eventually I settled on an idea I had had on a trip to Morocco.

In *U Turn*, I was able to take the story and give it a deeper meaning. I had a similar experience in *Alexander*, where I had been able to focus on questions that historians had previously overlooked. I asked the question why *Alexander* never got back to see his mother. The movie also raises questions about Roxane. I recently met Paul Cartledge, who did a book on the movie, on a trip to the Cambridge Union. He said that the film had given him cause to re-examine the role of Roxane in the story of Alexander, and the connections with Olympias. Angelina Jolie has had some issues in her personal life, and she was up for the challenges of Olympias. I'm not sure if Jennifer Lopez fully understood what was going on within the screenplay in *U Turn*. I think Lopez was a little disturbed by some of the nudity. Bob Richardson [cinematographer on *U Turn*] was also disturbed by the sexuality. Sean Penn was also not happy with the direction the movie took. I saw this role as similarly hopeless to that of Dix, played by Humphrey Bogart in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* [1950]. There is no love in the world. The woman he thinks he loves doesn't know what love is. The theme of emptiness is reinforced at the end of the film, both by the blowing of the radiator hose and in the lifting helicopter shot. I recall that the production did not get any positive coverage from the local paper in Phoenix.

As to why *U Turn* didn't find its audience, I think that certainly one reason was to do with not getting to Cannes. That really hurt us. The film had a terrible opening weekend. It opened against *Kiss the Girls* [Gary Fleder, 1997], which was an entertaining murder story. I also have the sense that Mike Medavoy, who didn't like the portrayal of incest, didn't fight with TriStar to keep the film in theatres after the first weekend. TriStar didn't put any further effort into promoting the film. I also suspect that incest, and indeed homosexuality, are both issues that Americans don't really want to hear about.

Interviewer: Was television censorship an issue?

Stone: On the general question of censorship, it becomes very difficult to monitor and keep control of what happens to a film after its theatrical release. The offering of films for television transmission does provide a means by which the studios can recover their money, but it does involve edits to the film. *U Turn* was probably one of the worst examples of a film getting chopped up. In the case of Turner [Network Television], their need to work with advertisers necessitated the cuts. I hope that at least if people see the film in some form, they may return and seek out a version that is accurate – for example, on DVD – but it is a far from ideal situation.

On the question of news priorities in the USA and the limited reporting of the war in Afghanistan, I think that the USA is a funny place. When you are in the madhouse, it's hard to judge. England has pretensions to civility but is one of the most aggressive countries in the world, and are partners in crime with the USA. I think that the BBC has played an important role in the UK's 'cold warrior' stance, particularly against the Soviet Union. The sanctions in Iran are yet another march to war, with many of the same perpetrators still involved.

Interviewer: How is *Wall Street* progressing?

Stone: As regards *Wall Street*, I was pleased with the overall reception of the film at Cannes. It was offered as a non-competitive entry. Several Wall Street traders made the journey to Cannes to see the premiere. There has been some discussion of the issues raised by the film at Cannes but the film is intended primarily as entertainment – in contrast say, to *South of the Border*. *Wall Street* was viewed by Fox earlier today and they were happy. Some minor tweaks are still required – not by the studio – but by me.

Interview with Oliver Stone, 7 December 2011

Interviewer: What impact did Robert Richardson's departure have on you?

Stone: Bob departed after *U Turn*. His departure had a tremendous impact on me. I sort of think he had a younger brother–older brother sort of issue. I can't drill into his psyche, but I think he felt I was too strong and too much of a dominant factor in his life, and

it was time to move on. It certainly hurt, the whole thing. I miss him. I don't think we'll get together again.

Interviewer: How did you get into making *Any Given Sunday*?

Stone: I would agree that while *Any Given Sunday* did not do badly at the US box office, it would it be fair to say that its failure to attract a wider audience was in no small part due to its failure to adhere to some of Hollywood's conventions of narrative simplicity.

It took a lot to make this movie, including buying these freighted scripts that were no good. There were a lot of junk scripts. I wanted to make the movie. The vision I had was a combination of what I saw in the doctor's [Robert Huizenga's] book, what I got from my own observations, and what I was getting from [screenwriter] John Logan, so I took it upon myself in this period [late 1998] to try and unify the scripts and get everybody on board with the same script. We were prepping in Miami, and the actors didn't know what script we were doing, and the studio head [Terry Semel] didn't know. That was the problem. They [Warner Bros.] had hesitation because we were spending money to get ready. I succeeded in getting the script finalised two-and-a-half weeks before the shoot. Al [Pacino] and Terry saw the script at the same time. Without the script, that would have been worse than any disaster; would have been what poor Francis [Ford] Coppola went through with *The Cotton Club*, I guess. I didn't have a green light on any script until two-and-a-half weeks before the shoot. That's pretty wild!

The 11 November 1998 memo from Neil Austrian at the NFL to the production, which suggested the NFL would have final script approval, was a kind of a fake, in that Clayton [Townsend] was the whole time trying to keep the NFL in the mix. I said on our first meeting that this will never happen with these guys. They are assholes – just another culture, another world, billions of dollars, Disneyland. They said we couldn't have the language in the screenplay, or talk about playing to the death or about the corruption. Clayton's attitude was, let's play them along because we've got an issue with the stadiums. He put up with meetings and meetings. They did eventually send memos out to tell the coaches not to cooperate. I would never have given final script approval. On reflection, perhaps Clayton's approach was right. We did ultimately get the Miami and Texas stadiums because the guys were rebels.

I had extensive talks with George Clooney because he was coming up, and I knew he would be great as a quarterback and he loved football. We talked and he thought that I was going to make certain changes in the picture that would make him bigger in the movie. I thought they [the changes] were good, but they were not up to what he thought, so he pulled out.

Tensions were very high throughout the shoot. There was a dust-up between LL Cool J and Jamie Foxx, kind of semi-comic. Al got in the middle of the fight and almost got his head taken off. It was a macho film with a lot of real footballers involved, including the entire second unit. [Production designer] Victor Kempster resigned three-quarters of the way through, and we finished [the film] with his art director, Derek Hill. He did a great job. I don't know that Victor was right for the movie because he didn't like football and made that evident to me on several occasions. His attitude was, 'Why the fuck are you making this kind of movie? You should be making something more important.' I resented that. I thought it was important. It wasn't just about football but changes in the culture and of the corporations involved. It is clear that the corporations were changing in the late 1990s and becoming more and more what they are now – risk-free and liability-averse. A lot of the fun has gone. Making the movie was a bit like learning the truth. It is an ugly game in some ways. Sports movies tend to be nostalgic and don't go to the underlying corruption. I didn't seek out the corruption as a theme. It came to me gradually as I read the books.

There was very little attention from the sports media when the film came out, almost as if they had got a memo from the NFL reminding them of how much money comes from the NFL!

Interviewer: Why are there three versions of *Alexander*?

Stone: Thomas Schühly is a lover of classical film. He proposed *Alexander*, but he didn't know how he wanted to do it. I hired other writers (it's a dirty story relating to the WGA, not worth repeating). An Italian company then claimed that Schühly had sold the rights to them; it was very confusing and I just didn't feel that Schühly was the right guy to be in business with. I later spoke to Moritz Borman. He had a big company called Intermedia, and he asked me what I would like to do, and I said *Alexander*. He said, oh shit! However Intermedia raised the money, mainly through independent sources via Cannes. Various markets were sold and then

the USA. We then reinstated Schühly as exec. producer. He was around, but not a significant factor.

I wish to God I'd had the courage to tell Warner Bros. that I needed more time, but it would have been a scandal. It was sold to them on the basis that it was the son of *Troy*. However, the little that we know indicates that *Troy* distorts history. We know that the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is not just man-to-man.

That was the most rushed film we ever did. We finished shooting in January [2004] and were out in November. It was just too tough. They wanted a less than three-hour film. The film was number one in many countries, but the reception of the film in the USA and the UK was devastatingly bad. I can only blame myself. 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.

Looking back, Rodrigo Prieto did a good job as DP [director of photography] on *Alexander* – as good a job as he could have done under the circumstances, on three continents and a very tight schedule. The flaws in the film have more to do, if anything, with my editing process at that time. The second version was done immediately as a DVD, as I was still chomping at the bit. This was the director's cut. It was shorter but didn't deal with the essence of the problems, and that gnawed at me for two-and-a-half years.

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. *Alexander Revisited* did well as a catalogue sale – about one million copies – but I couldn't get the critics to look at it again. It was the best I could do, and I think it does explain a lot about that world. There is also a lot about my feelings about life in there. *Alexander* had a point. It wasn't clear in the first two, but it was clear in the third. I would like to see this version shown on TV, but I think the chances are thin. I would be in your eternal debt if you guys could get the two-part with intermission, 3 hour 48 minute version *Alexander Revisited* on TV. I could go to my grave feeling good. I grew up with long movies – they work.

Interviewer: What happened with the proposal for *Pinkville*?

Stone: [Bruce] Willis pulled out because of script issues. Mikko Alanne had been an intern in my office and wrote the script. There were problems, but nothing that couldn't be fixed. There was a New Year's break coming up, and I had the intention to fix it before we were due to start in January, as I had done on *Any Given Sunday*. We had a great cast lined up, including Woody Harrelson and Channing Tatum.

We had the village built, we had the whole thing set up. Unfortunately Bruce got cold feet and he pulled out. I was surprised when he pulled out. *Lions for Lambs* [Robert Redford, 2007] had opened, and [producer] Paula Wagner received a lot of criticism for doing the movie. She used the Willis excuse to pull support for the film. We got Nick Cage to replace Willis a month later, but Paula was grateful to be off the hook. The issue was that Willis felt he didn't have enough to do. We could have solved it because I was aware of the issue in rehearsals, but he didn't have much patience. It's a great story. [Robert] Richardson came back for that, he wanted to work on it, but it didn't go through.

Interviewer: What cinematic options did you consider in relation to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'?

Stone: Prior to 2006 I did work on *War on Terror* and *Jawbreaker*. *War on Terror* was going to be about the mistake we were making at a domestic level. It is about a dentist who gets lifted and just doesn't get back home. The script needed work but I just didn't have the time. *War on Terror* was not financeable at that time. In those days, to open your mouth to criticise the USA drew a lot of criticism. I was criticised in the press when I spoke out against Christopher Hitchens at a *New Yorker* event at the Lincoln Centre in 2001, where he was talking about bombing Muslim countries.

Jawbreaker I bought. It was written by Gary Berntsen, who had been on the ground in Afghanistan. He was at Tora Bora and was a real hardcore, right-wing operative. It showed the facts as he saw them. At Tora Bora the Pentagon let the CIA down. They refused to commit the necessary troops; the focus was already on Iraq. It was a classic government fuck-up. I would have made a hero out of this guy B., and perhaps I would have been faulted for it. In hindsight, I think if the USA had cooperated with Iran and Pakistan, it would have been possible to bring pressure on the Taliban to get

rid of Osama [bin Laden]. We didn't need to fight that war, but we bombed right away and then let him go.

Jawbreaker was a doable deal with Paramount. Cyrus Nowrasteh wrote a script, but it didn't work yet. Nowrasteh also wrote and directed *The Day Reagan was Shot* [2001] and wrote the ABC mini-series *The Path to 9/11* [2006].

Michael Shamberg and Stacey Sher brought me *World Trade Center*. It was a chance to work with the studio. It was a script that Michael and Stacey had developed and had been worked on by Andrea [Berloff] for a year, and I tried to respect that. However, the more I got into preparations for shooting the script, the more it became clear to me that we really couldn't shoot that script, and it needed restructuring. I worked on it before, during and after, trying to solve the structural problems and also trying to add some spirituality to the dialogue – it was their spirit that kept them alive. I didn't go for co-credit: it was Andrea's first script. It was a difficult script to shoot. We had to alternate light and dark to prevent the viewer having to look at too much content in darkness. It was also hard technically shooting in the holes because of breathing problems, and it was personally difficult standing on the side of a rubble heap for many hours.

John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno were happy with what we were doing. We also had fifty of the rescuers come from New York to Los Angeles to help us on the film because they liked what we were doing. It wasn't any kind of false patriotism on their part. They were just doing their jobs, and wanted to help us show that in the film. The marine was a patriotic right-winger who went back to Iraq. He did say those things. Some people assumed that I was saying we have to go and bomb Iraq, which was the farthest thing from my mind. I wanted to look at a micro-level; I didn't want to bullshit anybody about what happened down there. I felt that by honestly dealing with fear and hysteria you can come to grips with what happened that day, rather than running around saying we can't let any of the Guantanamo people come to the USA, and spending \$50 billion protecting ourselves from ghosts.

Interviewer: W. pulled its punches in the eyes of some critics. How do you see it?

Stone: In 2006 there was very little information about Bush. It's living history, and it's hard to piece it out as we go. This was

Bush in 2008: he was the least popular president. In some ways the movie was too late, people were saying: 'Who gives a shit about George Bush?' That made financing difficult. I think we had a story. We took the tack of national security. [Senator John] McCain pulled even in the polls in August 2008, and then the economy became the main issue in September. This became the one issue in the election, and at that point our movie became irrelevant to the debate that ensued between Obama and McCain.

So the economic woes hit me in two ways. On *Pinkville*, the hedge fund that was funding Paula Wagner pulled out on her, and then a year later it did me in on *W*. I am a victim of that fucking economic crash! We all were.

One scene that didn't make it into the movie was the ghost of Saddam talking to George Bush. I didn't think it was interesting enough. It seemed like an oddball tone, and it was on the edge of silliness. The Oval Office finale, a showdown between Bush *père et fils*, was shot with a swing lens, and the office was completely stripped to signal that this was not intended to be taken literally.

The film picks up the administration's story in 2002 after 9/11, and before its entry into Iraq. It might have been possible to start earlier with Bush's first year and the response in the immediate period after 9/11 – but that would have meant going into the Patriot Act as well, and we already had a long movie.

On Dreyfuss let's just say he was impossible to work with. It was one of the worst experiences of my life. Let's just let it go at that.

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 did not need to hammer him. It's a little bit of a whimsical movie. He grows delicately. He arrives at this very tender moment with his wife, and asks 'What have I done wrong?' When he goes upstairs after the news conference and slams the door, he knows he has fucked up. He just doesn't know what to do about it. But that's the first sign of a consciousness: that's how delicate the movie's representation of him is. It ends with the hopeful note that someone might learn from his mistakes, and then of course he's in the outfield, but the ball never comes down. 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.

Interviewer: You passed on *Wall Street 2*?

Stone: I did pass the first time on directing *Wall Street 2*, but after the crash it was too important to ignore. The banks had become the Gekkos.

Interviewer: How was working with Fox?

Stone: We live in a world where we need patrons. We are all artists. I may work with Fox another day.

On media coverage

Stone: Frank Rich wrote last week in praise of Stephen King's new book *11/22/63*, about how right he was about [John F. Kennedy].⁷ King claims that he is 99 per cent sure that Oswald did it alone, based on the fact that he [Oswald] took a shot at Edwin Walker.⁸ Just shows you that he has done a lot of research. Aside from that, Rich goes out of his way to call me that 1 per cent crusader-type. That's a cheap shot, he's a smart guy. Problem with my generation, all the smart ones, they didn't get it – they missed it. People like [the journalist] Bill Keller.

The world is run by madmen. They are completely deluded – and it remains for us, the 'V for Vendettas', to tell the truth. We had the WMD story in Iraq, now we have it in Iran. Some crazy stories about Iranian plans to kill the Saudi ambassador. The same cast is back – who did the WMD story – and the newspapers are providing the same drumbeat. We kill their scientists and we blow up their installations, and we are the good guys.

What annoyed me was how little coverage the HBO–*Comandante* dispute got in the US media. That's another aspect of the media game: they hype what they want. The idea of the artist being censored by the studio is a great story – it always plays well – but they didn't play it. The same thing was true in the *Natural Born Killers* case in the fight with Grisham. There was no sense of challenge to Grisham's claim that artists should be sued for their statements – that they could be sued as if they were products.

On writing and work

Stone: Finding a good writer is like finding a wife or a husband. It's a very hard thing to do. You can sit here and you can babble

all you want, and you can produce hours of transcripts and the guy or the girl goes out and writes, and it has nothing to do with what you fucking talked about. I mean, you have wasted hours and then you say, 'Why didn't I write it myself?' But I can't do everything. I depend on partners, on the kindness of strangers. A lot of Hollywood deals don't go bad for any one reason. Sometimes it's just that the chemistry isn't there between the writers, or between the writer and director. That's why I cut back. I was expending energy on a lot of projects that were not getting done.

Heaven and Earth, *Nixon* and *U Turn* were my three greatest failures in terms of money. However, it's not a business only of money, it's a business of impression. As far as keeping within budget goes, I have never been in trouble on that point. When people ask me which of my movies I like better, I say it doesn't matter. It's a year of my life.

Interview with Oliver Stone, 8 December 2011

Interviewer: Media coverage of you and your work and career is seldom tepid in tone. What kind of perspective do you have on the often hostile appraisals of you and the work?

Stone: Well, the piece written by Camilla Long in *The Sunday Times*⁹ is a case in point. There is no goodness in this and articles like it, it's all negative. It doesn't matter how tough you are, it does wear you down. It makes filmmaking so impossibly difficult. You reach the point where, as David Lean so eloquently said: 'What's the point?' The curse of my career, but it was also a blessing – it works both ways – was that I won Academy Awards young and unknown. It was a great surprise to me. Richard Brooks said to me backstage at the Academy Awards for *Born on the Fourth of July*: 'It will be a long time before you get another one.' With few exceptions there is a point where a man's life reaches a zenith and he doesn't know it, and no matter what he does after that, he can never approach that again. That's not to say I don't try and do my best work, but the way other people see your life is determined by these Greek drama perspectives.

So if you wrote the life of me, Oliver, you might see it that way, but as you have suggested, I think I have matured. I'm still doing the work. It's not like all of a sudden I couldn't say the same things,

it's just that I said them differently. The Bush movie [W.] and *World Trade Center* were cases in point. On each occasion I tried to respect the story. The climate changed after 2001, but for me it changed after 1995. *Nixon* was one of my best films, but it was received in a very niggardly manner, partly due to my earlier success, and partly due to the scandal associated with *JFK* and with *Natural Born Killers*. By then people were exhausted with scandal. Lars von Trier got away with it twice and he ended up talking too much and making a fool of himself, but that doesn't make him any less of a filmmaker.¹⁰ Anybody put under the spotlight is bound to have flaws in the public eye. I reached that place in 1995. I think it was one of my best films, but when *Nixon* came out there was a giant thud of silence. There was a lot of quibbling about the film. Hopkins didn't look like Nixon, but anyone who understands drama knows that this can work. There were Oscar nominations for Anthony [Hopkins], Joan [Allen], John Williams for the music and one for the script, but not for directing. The message I got from that was there was quite a bit of antagonism around town, because if anything, it was very much a director's film. The film only took \$13 million at the US box office, and not that much abroad. It wasn't as if I collapsed, but I gave in a little – got demoralised – and concluded that people no longer wanted me or these kinds of films. After that I did a low-budget film [*U Turn*] just to escape the wrath. It was different, low-budget film noir that would be fun for me. It was compared to other film noirs, and dismissed and also compared unfavourably to *Natural Born Killers* by the constituency who liked that movie. The poor performance of *U Turn* was also a demoraliser. I then wrote a book to get away from it all. It came out and sold 20,000 copies in hardback. These messages come along. I then made a supreme effort on *Any Given Sunday*. It was dismissed as a football movie. On 31 December 1999 we were the number one film in America, but there were no Oscar nominations. Then I moved to documentaries which didn't get attention, and then to *Alexander*, which also received poor reviews – for example, in the *New York Times*. So I could say that I was working as hard, but the critics were not in a mood to receive. There was a different story for journalists to tell, about someone who had received this early praise, and was now on the fucking bonfire. It's a hard place to come back from. I'm still the same person and the work endures, and I hope that people will

eventually notice it. The truth endures. It's on film, thank God. If I had done theatre, it would be impossible now to function.

Interviewer: How have your media profile and political interests affected your relationship with the studios?

Stone: People have kept employing me from different places – for example, *W.* was funded out of Hong Kong. I have also worked inside the system on *World Trade Center*, *Wall Street* and *Savages*, and I have managed to maintain my freedom within that centre. *Pinkville* was a horrible setback. As for loyalty to the system and the studios, I tried to be loyal but gave up with *Nixon* at the point at which Warners dumped me. I bought the rights back from Arnon Milchan, and made the film with Anthony Hopkins and the independent Cinergi [Pictures], distributing through Disney.

Warners did get re-involved with *Any Given Sunday* and with *Alexander*, where they became involved reluctantly. That was then the end of my relationship with Warners. With *World Trade Center*, Paramount were very happy. *World Trade Center* was their ideal movie: serious, Oscar-worthy and made money. However, there was no recognition from the Academy. After that, Paramount would not make *Pinkville* – and that's when they supposedly liked me. So you have to be a gypsy, you have to take your banjo and try to move on and get another patron. I was offered *Wall Street* because Michael Douglas thought I should have first refusal; however, the studio would have happily moved on to another option. I realise that I am an older director and memories are not so long. I bought the material for *Savages*, and then Universal came on board in March of this year, but who knows where Universal will be in a year. They have been bought by a company called Comcast, who are relatively conservative. So I think we all work on the basis that any relationship is a one-picture thing. If a picture takes \$100 million at the domestic box office, that will make a difference to the kind of relationship you have with the studio – but otherwise, no.

Interviewer: How successfully do you think other leading directors are at working with the studios?

Stone: I admire Spielberg. He has the technical ability. He solved the issue by becoming the billionaire moviemaker; his approach is, however, different than mine. [George] Lucas, [Peter] Jackson, [James] Cameron, [Ridley] Scott are all really good at what they do.

I think for some, I am perceived as crude or excessive. There is also still a stigma about my association with Vietnam, that I am in some way lecturing them because they didn't go to Vietnam. I still don't think the younger moviemakers really see the bullshit in our foreign policy. They are ready to celebrate World War Two, but they are not ready to look at the root causes of why we are such a militaristic country. Writers like Stephen Ambrose have been happy to celebrate the 'Greatest Generation', but a lot of those people were not so great. They moved on to become our commanders in Vietnam, but they didn't see clearly. Eisenhower was a grandfather figure, yet he built up our nuclear capability to the hilt and he intervened in foreign countries repeatedly. At the time of making *JFK* I admired Eisenhower for the speech he made about the military industrial complex, but it later shocked me that he was more responsible than anyone else for building it. He gave us Cuba and Guatemala. In a way, *Saving Private Ryan* [Steven Spielberg, 1998] is a celebration of the same kind of thing, a glamorisation of that generation. There is no doubt that D-Day was a big deal, but the timing of *Ryan* in the late 1990s coincided with US remilitarisation. The sentiments that saw *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* become hits had all gone out of the window by '98 when *Ryan* came out. Ridley's film [*Black Hawk Down*, 2001] did the same thing. Here we have a depiction of slaughter with American technology. Jerry Bruckheimer received an award nomination for the film [AFI Movie of the Year].

Interviewer: What is your assessment of the national political direction taken in recent years by Bush and Obama?

Stone: It was a terrible time in 2003, it was a strange time. There was a false patriotism. We need to react to terror like the Europeans had done – Spain, Britain. They respond with covert work, intelligence gathering, police work. The Americans have insisted on militarising the response. We are now a militarised state. We have people in America who are talking more and more about the military undertaking police work, while the police look more and more like military. It's out of control. Michael Moore's movie [*Fahrenheit 9/11*] helped a bit in 2004 because it brought out some truth, but Bush got re-elected. The media response to Moore was focused on him rather than his film. Anyone who questions too much from the Left gets the same kind of treatment. Ralph Nader received a similar hearing.

The problem in America is that we don't apologise, and we don't learn. The protests against the Iraq War worldwide were enormous. I don't think Americans got a sense of the protest or the damage in Iraq at all. The protests were not that big a story in the USA. The American press report on every story from an American viewpoint: it is what comes naturally to them. It's not done out of malice, they don't know any better – they find it hard to become more international. A British journalist, perhaps because he comes from a smaller country, goes out and sees the world. I don't believe the American journalist does that – certainly the ones that belong to the mainstream. Even the *New York Times*, which is supposed to be the most liberal, is pro-empire. American interests come first. In the handling of stories like Iran and even Cuba, you never get the full historical background. We never go back to look at what Castro was fighting against, to the earlier period of American control of Cuba from 1898 onwards. The three documentaries provide some counter to that. He's a tough guy, but I don't see him as a monster. The American media's perspective is always ethnocentric; it sees the world from the perspective of American interests. This is noticeable now in the reporting of China, where the focus is on whether the US is slipping behind China. As to why Obama has not managed to reach out more and change this balance, I think that in the two to three months between election and taking charge, the security state frightened him with stories about threats. The guy was probably brainwashed with these stories. Kennedy, by contrast, had served in World War Two in combat. Obama, like Clinton, had never been in the military. Both were probably in awe of the military people around them. The quality of our intelligence has also suffered from attacks from within. The fiasco involving our counterintelligence chief, James Angleton, and the disastrous paranoia from his reign, resulted in the wiping out of any kind of an informed Soviet bureau, with the result that we went to war with the Russians in Afghanistan. That in turn led us to encourage the zealots there. What happened to the peace dividend after the end of the Cold War? When Obama gave that acceptance speech [12 October 2009] for the Nobel Peace Prize about America's service to the world for the last fifty years, I felt like vomiting. It's like he has bought into a doctrine of endless war. It is a crazy time. It's almost an end time. Holy shit, what a way to go out! I hope there is some better news on the way.

Interviewer: Has your shift to documentary work been in part at least a response to the changing political climate?

Stone: My film business travails, although they have been painful personally, are not as significant as the travails of the world. So if I can do something as a filmmaker – as a documentarian – maybe to bring some benefit, then that is a good thing. I believe there is a core of resistance, of good people. I like *V for Vendetta* [James McTeigue, 2006]. There are intelligent people around who know what's going on; I applaud people like Julian Assange. The move to documentary work is an effort to put pressure where I can best put it, even if it's a reduced impact. The *Untold History of the United States* documentary work has taken up a lot of time and energy, almost four years now. It may not have immediate impact, but perhaps students will see it in due course, say on YouTube. *Comandante*, for example, is available on You Tube but is not available commercially in the USA.¹¹

As to whether the move towards documentary work says something about a reduced appetite on the part of the studios for more controversial dramatic content, there are always exceptions. *Savages*, which is backed by Universal, is not a conservative movie. It has a lot of violence and sex. It is, however, not a political movie, although it does criticise the drugs war to a degree. I am putting more of my political passion into the documentary work at this time. The studios have been reduced into a position of fear, where the corporations are more dominant and the profile of the individual filmmaker is reduced. The old concept of turning out money-making films from a factory is back, but they are making too many and hurting themselves.

Interviewer: What scope is there for political expression and creativity within the current studio structures in Hollywood?

Stone: Some filmmakers can come and go to some extent within the studio structure. George Clooney, for example with *Syriana*, received studio support for a film that did critique the oil companies and the administration. [James] Cameron, however, was more reticent about any kind of explicit political commentary in *Avatar*, but it seems pretty clear what we were looking at. Who were those guys? The fucking American army – but no one could say it. Ironically, the film that won the Oscar [*The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow, 2009] exonerated the American troops, saying it doesn't

matter what the political situation is, you guys are courageous for doing this. I do admire Clooney for what he is doing. He's not saying exactly what I am saying, but he is using the platform he has, to say what he has to say; at the same time he has got to survive. I enjoyed *The Descendants* [Alexander Payne, 2012], and *Michael Clayton* [Tony Gilroy, 2007] was a very good movie. George is a serious, committed man, like Warren Beatty. I do admire creativity, and there are people in the system doing that – but I'm not interested in making movies for myself. I find too many independent movies bore the shit out of me. They are depressing, with a closed view of the world. I want an expansion. My father used to say to me, 'A lot of people don't give a shit about your problems.' He was exaggerating, but I do think there is too much self-indulgence. You have to find a way to take your own observations of self and put it together in a way that is entertaining and exciting for others. People like [Federico] Fellini managed this with *8½* [1963], [François] Truffaut with *The 400 Blows* [1960]; [Jean-Luc] Godard and [Luis] Buñuel likewise have managed this transformation. My favourite of Terry Malick's movies is *The Thin Red Line* [1998] – not everyone agrees, but I think it captured something very accurate about war, and it is also a poetic movie. To take five or six years to make a movie, well at one level there is nothing wrong with that, but you have to be careful about becoming lost in your own thought processes; like Theseus but without a thread – and the Minotaur gets you. [Stanley] Kubrick did a wonderful job on his movies but he agonised a lot, and you wonder sometimes if he hurt himself. *Eyes Wide Shut* [1999] is a movie I don't understand. However, Kubrick did a wonderful job on *Full Metal Jacket* [1987] and captured something about Vietnam, even though it was shot in England.

Charlie Wilson's War [Mike Nichols, 2008] did not work so well. I think it was a lie on many levels. It sets up Wilson as a hero for taking on the Soviet Union, but the CIA were already involved. The film doesn't deal with the results of that intervention. In many ways Charlie Wilson is what's wrong with this country, and not what's right. I don't think Mike Nichols examined the values of the man. He represents the vigilante, the bully. Interestingly Hanks' most famous film is *Forrest Gump* – a guy who doesn't know any history.

Interviewer: What persuaded you to do the cameo in Ivan Reitman's film, *Dave* [1993]?

Stone: Well, I was right in the piece, wasn't I?! I don't think I would have done it if I'd been wrong! No ... I did it because it allowed me to make a little fun of myself at a time when I was getting a lot of flak. It was one day's work with Larry King, and was fun. It was a well written piece by Gary Ross.

Aaron Sorkin's writing is also good, although I do think he is something of a pessimist. I think that feeling is in the air at the moment, it has become something of an art form at the moment. I feel a little more optimistic than that. If you end on a potentially happy note, say with Gekko wanting to enjoy becoming a grandfather, you become suspect. It's like everybody must be cynical about everything. It's not how I was raised. Cynicism is a virtue now in this society, we're Orwellised. It's fucked up – I mean, the culture is fucked up. People must find their way in a very complicated world where there is no hope for government, or no mercy from government or the media. People must lie to survive.

Interviewer: Did you always have a sure and steady sense of what makes good drama?

Stone: No, not at all. Every screenplay is its own struggle. Every screenplay has been difficult. I'm wrestling with *Savages* in the editing room at the moment. I did a lot of rewriting and I just changed something in the structure yesterday, and it's much better now. How come I didn't see that in the fucking screenplay? I worked and slaved over that. I don't know the answers. As a dramatist I have no confidence: I feel like every movie is a truly humbling sport. You learn over every time. I used to have a little more confidence, but my screenplays were never noted. It's true that I did win the Oscar for *Midnight Express*, but in the critics' minds it was regarded as a crude film.

A lot of my characters are martyrs, but I don't want to be a martyr. I'd love to have the business acumen of Spielberg, to put together my own studio and do exactly what I want – but it takes acumen and you have to make deals, and where do you make your deals? You try to soften the edges because you are not looking to fight, but you don't want to run from a fight. I once took money to write a P. D. James novel, *Innocent Blood*, years ago – I spent a month and couldn't fucking get there. I took the money and then returned it to the producer.

Interviewer: As an artist, do you have a vision from the outset, or do you see new possibilities as you make the movie?

Stone: Kubrick and [David] Lean spent a lot of time in the editing suite: that is part of the excitement of movies. You see it one way as a writer, then you shoot it and it morphs into something else, and then you edit the movie and it changes again. It's like a chemical experiment where by the very act of measuring it, you change it. Kubrick said something that I love: I can't quote it exactly but I think he said, 'When I am editing I am not a director.' I feel the same way – I am only looking at whether it works. No love of a scene – no matter how difficult or how painful, or how much fun it was to shoot – makes any difference. The director wants to expand the vision and be generous to the actors – expand, expand! The editor's job is the opposite – restrict, restrict! In every movie I have done, a lot has changed structurally during the course of making the movie. I can't believe that [Alfred] Hitchcock was so arrogant as to say that after the first day of shooting, it was over. I remember Billy Wilder once told me – I don't know if he was bullshitting me or not – but he told me he had *Double Indemnity* [1944] in a Pasadena theatre for a preview three weeks after he finished it! I mean, I know they wrote them tight in those days – but still ... I love structure. Logically, something belongs before something else, but when you make the movie – no! It should have happened before you figure it out. I like three-act structures, but there are a few four-act plays that work.

Interviewer: How far will *Savages* look beyond the issues of the drug war to the wider critique of southern California offered at the end of Don Winslow's book?

Stone: I'm still not sure how much we will go into that. I don't believe the southern Californian culture is as bad as Don makes out. There is a lot of great things that have happened here. I'll find my way to my own expression. I don't want to make a value judgement about the journey of the three youngsters until I have lived longer with the film. The girl in the book is a tough chick. The girl we used – Blake Lively – is different again. So right there, we are into a slightly different world. She is a woman with two men. Why is she with two men, and what does it mean to her? So we have to come to a new understanding. The character in Don's book is perhaps closer to how Jennifer Lawrence, the original choice, might have played the role. My choice of Blake changes the whole nature; the choice of star absolutely changes

the nuances of the story. I looked at a lot of gamine actors for the role, including Emily Browning; however, there is something special about Blake that I wanted. Benicio [del Toro] also changes the nature of Lado – he makes a moment out of nothing. So as a dramatist you then have to wrestle with how the choices of actors bring new meanings to the story. Movies work differently than novels.

Interview with Oliver Stone, 19 August 2013

Interviewer: What prompted you to describe President Obama as a ‘snake’?

Stone: My reason for calling Obama a ‘snake’ is because I am very upset, as are many people, by the latest revelations from Ed Snowden, and I’ve been upset for a while about Bradley Manning and about Obama’s attitude to whistle-blowers and to Wikileaks. You also have to reference what I remember of him in 2008 as a reform candidate: a candidate for transparency in government. So when I say he’s a ‘snake’, it’s a fully considered comment – it’s not off-the-cuff. I don’t mean to belittle reptiles, but I do mean it negatively about Obama: he has not only made legitimate the illegalities of the Bush administration, but has made a point of attacking the people who have tried to expose the war crimes and horrors that this government has visited on other countries. It’s one thing to say that all countries seek control of the diplomatic world, but we are the dominant country, we are the Roman Empire – and we are totally obsessive about it. Obsessive – and we’re bugging allies as well as enemies – and when I say ‘snake’, it references the Garden of Eden. We always thought we had a chance to get democracy back after the 2000 debacle. The 2008 election was that chance. It was – if you can remember that slogan – a very important one, it was: ‘Change we can believe in.’ Change we can believe in! It’s been the opposite of that. He delivered no change. He’s kept it the same – status quo, ‘War on Terror’. So what he has done is actually beyond me. His actions have undermined the faith of young people who voted for him, and the root organisations that went out there for him, and he has basically laughed in their faces and said there is no change, and democracy doesn’t work. That’s what’s really fucking depressing. Everyone I know who is a progressive

person – and even average guys with no particular politics – are depressed at where this country is at, and feel powerless to do anything about it.

Interviewer: What prompted the editorial choices in *Untold History*?

Stone: The intention was to make history dramatic. I realise it's a lot of material, and we cut and recut so many times to make that 58-minute limit per segment. That produced an enormous amount of reworking of the documentary texts. It had to be done like a movie: how do the pictures and the script work together? For me it was very hard work. [Film editor] Alex Marquez and I in the last year really twisted our brains to get it finished, and we went down to the wire in January of this year. We finished on 9 January, and the last episode aired on 12 January. The style is certainly 'headlong'. I don't know of any documentary that has ever delivered this much information, this fast – we had to do it that way. I knew nobody could quite keep up all the time, but I went with the idea that someone who was really engaged would go back and look at it again. What is amazing is that we had equally good ratings from Showtime for week ten as we did for week one. Some people on my social media sites did say that they had to tune out because it was just too much information, but I think they will come back to it. There are some opportunities to pause, but not for long. There are music breaks, we used as much music as we could: [composer] Craig Armstrong really opened the series very well. I worked with him on *World Trade Center* – beautiful score. However, after five hours of the series we were beginning to over-use those pieces. I don't know what it is. I guess it's a five-year movie, and it required two composers. So I needed Adam Peters, who also worked on *Savages*, to come in and provide some fresh music. They both contributed about the same amount of work. We used Górecki and also Beethoven and Brahms. In addition we used movie clips to offer breaks in the monologue. It was very important to put those in, although we were rushed for time. [Visual effects artists] Christina and Paul Graff did a great job, especially on the maps, which helped nail a few issues.

We tried to hone the events down to their essence, the pattern, the big picture. The aim was to avoid boring people. I tried to do that, although I'm sure there are a couple of sections I could redo.

There are only ten hours to cover World War Two to the present, and two additional hours [released as part of the series DVD set] to reach back to the turn of the century. The book had much more material and grew out of the series. After about two years in we decided to validate the detail with a book to deal with the questioners, the haters, cynics, etc. Peter [Kuznick] and his research students – some ten people – really did the hard work on the book. My problem was getting each episode down to 58:30 without going too fast. It's a balance. The target audience was really a seventeen-year-old studying American history who had already studied some history, and who would be open to an alternative view.

The only talking head I did for the series was an interview with Tariq Ali for a thirteenth hour to be included in the October DVD release: we used new archive footage for this. Otherwise, no talking heads were used: it would never have worked; we would never have made the 58:30, it would have slowed the pace down totally. With a talking head you are affirming points more slowly than can be made in a narrative flow.

Overall, we were trying to make the case that after the Second World War, the United States became a national security state of over-burdensome proportions, and after 1991 and the fall of the Soviet Union, continued on to become a global security state – and now Obama has activated the Asia pivot. We are helping create this fear of China to promote our own interests. There is no going back on empire. We are a bad force in the universe, we heighten tensions in every part of the world. It's not good for anybody – it's going to backfire on us eventually. We are not interested in pacifying, except under our own conditions: it has to be done our way.

The launch has taken about three-quarters of my time. Peter and I went everywhere we could. We were accepted readily by the progressive press. We had a mainly indifferent mainstream press. None of the network shows like *60 Minutes* dealt with it; I don't think we appeared on one public broadcast show. We were saying to the American people: look, we didn't have to drop the atomic bombs. If we can't get even that message out on PBS, I think we're fucked. I think Showtime were pleasantly surprised with the 1.1 million viewers per week without any major advertising. There was no Emmy campaign. The British were much kinder to us: we got more media attention in Britain than we did in the USA. There

was also enormous attention in all the newspapers to the launch in Japan: even the right-wing press was fair in its coverage; they were, however, less open on the issue of Japanese barbarism in World War Two, that's a sensitive issue still. Their leaders still worship at a shrine where there are thirteen or fourteen class-A war criminals. The Japanese have never understood these crimes because they have no official history of it. I went to a small privately funded museum in Nagasaki which is the only one that really covers this issue. It's not in the school books. We hear about the 'comfort women' now! These stories only started appearing fifty years after the war ended. The Japanese had sex stations in Burma, Indonesia, Saigon – it wasn't just Korean women. The crimes in China were huge. We made the point that after the war, Germany made a conscious effort to deal with the legacy of Nazism. The Japanese never dealt with their past.

So the message in Japan was complicated: to talk about the atomic bombs and the barbarism and to plead with them to rethink their United States strategy. The US has controlled Japanese politics for sixty-eight years – it still does. When the prime minister of Japan, Yukio Hatoyama, three or four years ago, tried to do something about the US bases in Okinawa and change things, Obama ate his lunch. He lost the confidence of the electorate and was ousted. And now we have a right winger in Shinzō Abe, who I'm sure Obama likes. He takes the US line on China.

The twelve-hour DVD will be aired in San Sebastian in September. The DVD launch in October will be big here. It will be the last effort – I'm really putting everything I can into that.

Interviewer: Given the depth of the critique of the American administration in *Untold History*, is that critique now part of your ongoing agenda?

Stone: This critique of the establishment is part of who I am. When I was younger I would have shied away from it, but now that I'm 66, going on 67. The *Untold History* work has broadened my horizons, and in some ways has returned me to that *JFK* thing – reminding people what I stand for. There is hope. When things look depressing that's when the curve of the ball can break differently.

Hey, it was a dream project, but I paid a price for it. It took me out of the film business because I wasn't developing projects. I wasn't thinking about film – every spare moment was here. Yet

I did manage to make three films during that period and two documentaries – *South of the Border* and *Castro in Winter*.

This critique may affect my film career, I don't know. I don't want to make a silly movie. I don't want to make it for the wrong reasons. I have a storytelling sense and a sense of drama, and I want to continue.

Each film I've done has been a growth, and the *Untold History* pushed things to a new level. For the time being, I've done all I want to in documentary work and said all I want to say. Financially I can't really do it. It's punishing, it's been five years. We still haven't broken even on *Untold History*. I guess its *pro bono* work. If I thought about purely commercial work I guess I'd be further ahead.

Interviewer: What is your assessment of other documentary filmmakers who have sought to explore aspects of US statecraft?

Stone: I think Michael Moore set the standard with *Fahrenheit 9/11*. I don't like Gibney's new film on Wikileaks [*We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks*, 2013]. It seems to be motivated more by personal animosity about not being able to get an interview. [Eugene] Jarecki's *Why We Fight* [2006] was a classic. [Errol] Morris' *Fog of War* [2003] was well done and it got a lot of play in this country, but I think it has a fundamental flaw in that the discussion about Cuba does not really give the Cuban point of view. As a result you form the impression that the United States was being aggressed upon by Cuba, which is one of the commonest flaws in our history of the dispute with Cuba. The focus was on what they did, as opposed to what we did to them.

Interviewer: What drew you back to make another cut [*The Ultimate Cut*] of *Alexander* at this point?

What draws me back to it is my dramatist's idea of what a film should be. I did sign off on the new long cut in 2007 [214 minutes], but then later when I saw it screened three or four times at festivals, I realised that I could make it shorter without sacrificing the essence of the film. In *Alexander* there is a tension between the inner and outer world. As Alexander goes to the outer world, he must keep returning to the inner world. The parents' story is the key to the inner world. I wanted to find that rhythm between inner and outer all the way through the movie. Also, I saw that one of the key parallel scenes with the mother was too late in the movie. It belonged earlier – after the assassination of Philip – we went to

the original French negative to get some footage that we wanted. I think it sets up the ending better.

Ptolemy says that Alexander should have died in India: that's true for dramatic reasons, but I like the ending we have because it touches on the nature of history. Ptolemy changes his story. He first admits to the assassination of Alexander, and then goes into why – because dreamers cannot exist, dreamers exhaust us all. He then removes this version for another more sanitised version of history. Later, of course, Ptolemy's writings are lost. I appreciate the way that history plays games on us. There is a line at the end of *Savages*: 'The truth has a mind of its own.' I think that pertains to all things, including my life and yours.

What kept Alexander going is the same as what keeps me going – the tension of trying to find out who you are. I came back to Alexander because I'm an explorer. I didn't have to go back, but Warner Bros. was pleased with the 2007 results of *Alexander*, and out of the blue offered me the opportunity to do another version. I am now signed off on it! I'm finished! I can't do more. I do still see flaws, for example with Colin [Farrell], which are partly my fault, but I believe the film truly works, and that it's a kind of miracle to have rediscovered this ancient time and place.

Interviewer: In the light of Spielberg and Lucas' recent commentary on the impending economic disaster awaiting studios who continue to depend on \$300 million franchise movies, do you see any evidence of studios being interested in shifting their emphasis to supporting more \$30 to \$50 million projects?

Stone: No – on the contrary. They continue with this neo-economics. It is senseless. People have always responded to ideas in films, no matter what the cost – so if the ideas are good, it will work. There is a kind of 'neo-think' in operation, an assumption that everyone thinks alike. The position does make it harder to make controversial films.

Interviewer: In both *Nixon* and *W.* there is a definite sensitivity in your portrayal of inner conflict and the search for recognition. Does the ability to empathise with these men draw on some degree of recognition of a similar struggle within yourself?

Stone: I always worked at drama from the inside out. For example with *Nixon*, it doesn't matter if I don't like the man: you have to learn to eat the soup; you wear a hair shirt to some degree. Spend

a whole year of my life on a movie about Nixon? Come on! There's no sex, no action, all talk – but that's moviemaking, you have to plunge into it and see the world as they did. Although I despised Bush, I tried to put myself in his shoes. His father was a giant to him. He had a younger brother who was getting all the attention. You have to use your feelings to get at these things. Bush's father was, in my opinion, an awful president,¹² and in the movie James Cromwell and I discussed making Bush senior an uglier figure, but I felt in the end we needed a foil for Bush Jr. With Bush [G. W.] the issue was that he was around power his whole life. When that happens you smell it, you want it. For Bush, the only way to be strong was to be stronger than his dad. In that sense, Bush's best moment is when he decides to invade Iraq – show his dad that he can finish the job! That's the way he saw it.

Interviewer: How did the deal for *Savages* get set up?

Stone: I liked the book right away, and purchased it myself from Don Winslow. He attached conditions that he would write the screenplay with his partner Shane Salerno. It was a very difficult writing process, and I eventually did a lot of work on the screenplay. It took almost a year. I had other things on my plate, including *Untold History*, and it took longer than it really should have.

We finally went out to several studios in March 2011. All passed except Universal. We never know what goes on, we live like mushrooms on our side of the equation. In any case, Universal liked the screenplay, and made the deal for \$48 million – and we turned it in for about a million dollars less and returned the money. They were very impressed by that: they told me most people lie about budgets. Universal wasn't scared of the violence or the drugs – the others didn't like it – anyway, Universal was happy. They didn't want to hamper me, they wanted me to unleash myself, but it was a tough schedule with penalties if we ran late. We couldn't shoot down in Laguna until after Labor Day. There were all the usual problems of actor schedules. Blake Lively had a TV series, it was painfully difficult to work her into the schedule.

Looking back at the last two films, Universal felt a freer working experience. Fox was more controlling on *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. That was Tom Rothman's approach at Fox, but it is just their way of working under Rupert Murdoch.

Interviewer: Is there a wider critique of government running through *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Savages*?

Stone: Yes – I would tie both of those films together. *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* was a complex film to make. We were very professional and open with Fox. There was a script by Allan Loeb and a previous one by Stephen Schiff, plus I did a lot of rewriting. One of the constraints was that Gekko was no longer the Gekko of 1987. You can't go back to that kind of movie, but Michael Douglas was where the money was. The studio was less interested in the Shia LaBeouf character, and we had a new villain played by Josh Brolin, and of course the Frank Langella character at the beginning, who was very important within the story. So from a story perspective, there were a lot of different balls in the air, including the intimate relationship of father, daughter and her new boyfriend. Perhaps I tried to do too much with the story, but I still like it. I know there has been some degree of criticism of *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, about it not being as vituperative or visceral as the first one, but to me it's not about that. It's about a man getting older and actually finding some degree of humanity.

It didn't catch the pop wave, but a lot of Wall Street professionals saw an accurate portrayal of their world. In *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, the banks have taken over Gekko's job. I was shocked when I went back to this in 2010. In *Wall Street*, Gekko had been the outsider, the inside trader guy, the thief, the blackmailer – and that's what the banks do now. In the old days the banks would never have done that – it was considered immoral – but by 2010 the whole thing had shifted because of deregulation. I think perhaps some of the critics' response missed the irony of that change.

Savages, to me, is about the art of negotiation. The drug cartels are enterprises which, like banks, have slipped free of all effective regulation. It is also about our 'War on Drugs'. The drug thing is so ugly because it creates such a false bureaucracy. We have a 'War on Drugs', a 'War on Poverty', a war on this, a war on that, a 'War on Terror'. Now we have so many wars we can't keep track any more. Now we have a border war on immigrants. So we have drugs, immigrants and terror, and we have now built into our system a huge budget for ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. ICE submitted a \$5.3 billion budget request for 2013 to the [US] House Committee on Appropriations. ICE was

overlapping responsibilities with other functions in homeland security, and with the FBI and with the DEA. So you have so many departments. It's like the same problem we had with the US army in Vietnam: we stepped on our own dicks so often. We have the same issue with our intelligence agencies, we couldn't even get the story on the Bin Laden 9/11 attack straight. The real problem with the 'War on Drugs' is that wars generally don't work. We need to get back to common sense.

Interviewer: The double ending in *Savages* is not in the book. What prompted you to introduce it?

Stone: The ending in the book was a different kind of ending – with the double suicide. I never bought that, and certainly when I rehearsed it with the actors and saw the relationships, I just couldn't buy that those two young people would kill themselves because their third partner had been killed. Certainly they would grieve, but I don't think they would kill themselves. It was romantic, we had that touch of *Butch Cassidy [and the Sundance Kid]*, but in *Butch Cassidy* Katharine Ross disappears at the end and it doesn't quite work dramatically. All the way through the rewrites I was always thinking about another ending.

As you get into it and really think it through, it's clear that the [John] Travolta character is much brighter than the guy in the book: there are too many opportunities for him. As good as Don is, and as good as his previous book on the drug wars was, I look at this book as a rather whimsical view of California. It's not likely that the big cartels would get involved in Los Angeles; they make far more money by shipping huge vats of marijuana and other stuff north to big terminus points. Why would you fuck with the legal system in California? A boutique business is not really the kind of thing they are going to go into – they make too much money the other way. It's possible that a small cartel which was under pressure might do this, but it is an unlikely fantasy. Don has written a very hardcore previous book called *The Power of the Dog* which really deals with the whole issue more realistically. So I looked at the book more as a poem.

Jennifer Lawrence was going to be O. When she left to do *The Hunger Games*, yeah, it hurt. She was looking after herself – and she was right, I guess – although I didn't care for the picture at all. It made her life. At that point it didn't matter to Universal, they

didn't mind who was in the role. They liked Aaron [Taylor-Johnson] because they had worked with him on *Kick-Ass*. They liked Taylor [Kitsch] because of *Battleship*. They liked Salma [Hayek] and Benicio [del Toro] and John Travolta but they were veteran actors – supporting cast from their point of view, they weren't the money behind the picture. It's funny because those three got the best reviews, as you know. I liked what A. O. Scott wrote in the *New York Times*, he was accurate about the film. It's a bit like *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* in that there are a lot of balls in the air – a lot of actors.

The DEA agent has got to be smarter than in the book, so that makes Travolta very interesting. He has a double role: he is a spy from the beginning. He gives everybody up, including himself. When you play out the negotiation it seems to me that the DEA agent is going to win. Once he figures out that Elena is in country, he has got his fly trap. If you follow the logic, the whole thing is set up when Elena goes north.

The DEA, as you know, always come out OK in the news, no matter what. It's still fucked up, and the drug war goes on and on. It's a racket. On both sides of the fence, and in prison. It makes the prison industry bigger.

That's the realistic ending; the other one was the romantic ending. So the idea was to have the romantic ending and then top it and turn it around. It's been done before, not often. Fritz Lang did it twice: *The Woman in the Window* [1945] was extraordinary. I liked the idea of the double ending. Yes, preview cards revealed some people didn't like this foreign concept. 'What's real?', they wonder. Most were happier with the second ending, and those people hated the first ending [the suicides]. It was far too nihilistic. I liked the idea of the kids going off to a desert island and getting a second chance – not that they would stay together. O says something about her two men, but that won't work over a period of time – a few weeks or a year maybe. I don't think O was ever realistic in the movie or the book; I think she was a dreamer, and she would have grown up and the boys would have grown up or changed. The idea at the end of the voiceover was that life goes on, and that each of them will go their own way. I went to all of the pre-release screenings, apart from England. I knew that there was resistance. Universal was very helpful: they asked me to reconsider. I went back to [Universal Pictures executive] Donna

Langley with my recuts, after a Woodland Hills [California] screening that took us to a place where the cards were good enough to go with.

When it finally came out in theatres, the scores were lower. Adam Fogelson, the head of Universal at the time, liked the movie so much he moved it up to July – it was originally slotted for the fall, which I preferred – but they rushed it, and I think we took a hit there because we had *The Amazing Spider-Man* [Marc Webb, 2012] one week ahead of us, with *The Dark Knight Rises* [Christopher Nolan, 2012] opening one week behind us. There was also an unforeseen hit for Universal – *Ted* [Seth MacFarlane, 2012], as well as Channing Tatum's huge hit – *Magic Mike* [Steven Soderbergh, 2012] one week ahead of us. So we had three fucking hits in front of us, and one right behind us. That was really bad timing. The 4 July weekend is a frivolous weekend: you wouldn't release this kind of relatively complex film on a 4 July weekend. So we didn't do as well as we had hoped, and the picture panned out at \$48 million in the USA. I think if it had come later in the summer or in the fall, it would have been higher.

The voiceover about 'in the end we worshipped only ourselves' is Don's version, and yeah, it's in the earlier screenplays. It's the romantic version, it's like he is blaming all of them for being so selfish. I just didn't want to end on that kind of note.

Interviewer: Aside from *Savages*, *Wall Street* and *Natural Born Killers*, where else have you shot two endings?

Stone: There were two endings shot for *Wall Street*. The romantic one had Daryl Hannah on the steps waiting for Charlie Sheen at the end, and I went for the one now in the film. In *Natural Born Killers* I liked the ending where they meet their fate at the hands of another serial killer – a just retribution, I suppose. But this time I went with the romantic ending because I wanted to see them live! Which, by the way, really pissed off a lot of people who condemned the movie for its violence.

In *Platoon* we shot a version where Chris [Taylor] does not shoot Barnes, possibly to soften the verdict at the end – that he was a killer – but we didn't use it. Also, on *Any Given Sunday* where Jamie [Foxy] and Al [Pacino] walk off the field after the game: that was the ending. Then there was a news conference during the titles where there was a further twist, where Al leaves the team, having signed

up Jamie Foxx. It wasn't quite two endings, but I guess we added on an extra bit – the twist. That's it for second endings.

Endings are always difficult. Even in *JFK* – where do I end it? Do I end it in the courtroom, or do I have them walk out afterwards? In *Salvador*, there was the same question in my mind. Should I go all the way and show Maria being arrested by US immigration authorities at the end? I did.

Interviewer: Are you expecting to become more involved in the JFK assassination debate as the 50th anniversary approaches?

Stone: No, I don't think so. I think the Assassination Records Review Board did a fairly good job – exhuming millions of pages of data, some significant reaffirmations that much more was going on than meets the eye – but the government cut the money for the time needed to pursue. That Act also led to accidents. Things came out you wouldn't have expected – for example, the Pentagon's Operation Northwoods, which involved secret proposals for the CIA to carry out terrorist acts in the USA and blame them on Cuba, in order to foment public anger and the invasion of Cuba.

Numerous people ask me to attend events. I did some significant TV, but expect to be edited in ways appropriate to their conventional message. I may attend a couple of conferences if I feel up to it, but I don't want to be used as some kind of symbol. I am more interested now in talking about the material in Chapter 6 of the *Untold History* – how I see the presidency of JFK overall, rather than focusing on the assassination. There is a lot of evidence of changes in his thinking during his presidency, and it's clear his re-election would have been a threat: it would have made a difference. Based on his three-year record and his standing order to withdraw, I don't believe for one moment Kennedy would have gotten involved in the kind of debacle in Vietnam that Johnson did.

Interviewer: What is your prognosis for the American empire?

Stone: 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 do have an incredible shield – full spectrum dominance. The game is now not about nuclear bombs. Obama can look like a

good guy, cutting infantry strength and so forth, but we still have 'lily-pad' island bases all over the world. We have 700–1,000 foreign bases, and are ringing Russia with NATO. As to China, with a new assortment of allies, treaties and bases, we have declared a new 'Asia pivot,' which brings us right back to World War Two days, Korea, Vietnam – we're still there, never gave up an inch. We are developing a new generation of drones, all kinds of intelligence and cyberwarfare capabilities. We have used these against Iran. We act like the underdog, as if China is overwhelming us in cyberspace, yet we have been working on these capabilities for years and have developed the most advanced techniques. The question is: how quickly will we have space fully weaponised?

So this is a serious issue. Although we may be hurting economically, we definitely have become a corporate oligarchy. It is still getting crazier. 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.¹³

Hillary Clinton talked in 2011 about America's 'Pacific Century' and how the USA would be at the centre of things, echoing Henry Luce's comments in 1941 about the 'American Century'. All of the countries affected reacted to that news supportively: Philippines, Australia, Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan. It elevates the tension. China is being portrayed as a threat to this world, yet they do not have 700 to 1,000 bases abroad like we do. They have one foreign base! They build an aircraft carrier, and all of a sudden they are the enemy of mankind? The perception of China, as it was of the Soviet Union, is magnified way out of proportion to justify continuing US empire.

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 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.

Notes

- ¹ 'Twisted History', *Newsweek* (23 December 1991). Available at <http://newsweek.com/twisted-history-201132> (accessed 7 December 2015).
- ² The *New York Times* reported on 25 September 1964 that the Warren Report had been delivered to President Johnson the previous day. On 28 September the paper published its assessment, which began: 'The Warren Commission's report is a comprehensive and convincing account of the circumstances of President Kennedy's assassination. The facts – exhaustively gathered, independently checked and cogently set forth – destroy the basis for the conspiracy theories that have grown weedlike in this country and abroad'. *New York Times*, 'The Warren Commission Report', 28 September, 1964. Available at http://nytimes.com/1964/09/28/the-warren-commission-report.html?_r=0 (accessed 1 March 2016).
- ³ George Lardner Jr, 'On the Set: Dallas in Wonderland; How Oliver Stone's Version of the Kennedy Assassination Exploits the Edge of Paranoia', *Washington Post* (19 May 1991). Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1991/05/19/on-the-set-dallas-in-wonderland/oc958035-3fc2-48a7-a108-dao855c92a94/> (accessed 7 December 2014).
- ⁴ Warner Bros. President Bob Daly confirmed in interview that he (Daly) had intervened and asked Valenti to stop criticising the film prior to its release. Daly shared Stone's concern that continued sniping would affect the film's chances at the Oscars that year. Interview with Bob Daly, Santa Monica, CA, 18 October 2010.
- ⁵ For example, James Douglass; Douglas Horne on autopsy and the Zapruder film, and James Bamford, who wrote the book *The Puzzle Palace*, about the National Security Agency.
- ⁶ Wesley Morris, 'Stone's 'Alexander' turns out not so great', *Boston Globe* (24 November 2004). Available at www.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2004/11/24/stones_alexander_turns_out_not_so_great/ (accessed 1 March 2016). Olga Craig, 'I have let Alexander down', *Telegraph* (3 January 2005). Available at: <http://telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3634344/I-have-let-Alexander-down.html> (accessed 1 March 2016).
- ⁷ Frank Rich, 'What Killed JFK?' *New York Magazine* (20 November 2011). Available at <http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/jfk-2011-11/> (accessed 1 March 2016).

- 8 Part of the Warren Commission case against Oswald relied on an FBI firearms expert who testified that when shooting the rifle found at Dealey Plaza (Mannlicher-Carcano) at less than 100 yards with a telescopic sight, 'you should not have any difficulty in hitting your target'. (Ch. 4, p. 190). Despite this, the Commission concluded that Oswald had used the same rifle in a failed attempt to assassinate Maj. Gen. Edwin Walker on 10 April 1963. (Ch. 4, p. 187). According to the Dallas Police report of the incident, Oswald had rested his rifle on the fence at the back of Walker's house and missed Walker, who was sitting at his desk by the window. The police report estimated the firing distance was 35–40 yards, with a clear view and no window shutters (Commission Exhibit CE 2001, p. 6). National Archives, *Report of the Presidents Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, Ch. 4. Available at www.archives.gov/research/jfk/warren-commission-report/chapter-4.html#walker (accessed 1 March 2016). Commission Exhibit CE2001 available at www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/wc/wcvols/wh24/pdf/WH24_CE_2001.pdf (accessed 1 March 2016).
- 9 Camilla Long, 'Oliver Stone: Lobbing grenades in all directions' *Sunday Times* (25 July 2010). Available at <http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/newsreview/features/article352668.ece> (accessed 1 March 2016).
- 10 See *Melancholia* (2011).
- 11 Although it is available in the UK.
- 12 See Chapter 9 of *The Untold History*.
- 13 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).