

"I'm not a political filmmaker goddamit!"

Web Exclusive! Oliver Stone in conversation with *Sight & Sound's* Ali Jaafar. This candid interview, conducted in September of this year, came a little too late to make it into our 9/11 special. Enjoy the complete transcript exclusively here.

Given that it is based on a specific real event and the script already existed before you came onboard, to what extent do you feel *World Trade Center* is an Oliver Stone film?

The story was there in script form and it was smart, but we did a lot of work on it during the production process, pre-production and even editing. There's no such thing as a perfect script but it was a good beginning. I've always said that films are collaborations between groups of people, actors, DoPs, writers, directors, producers. It really is a group effort. It's not a one-man band but there has to be a leader. I've always been the leader of the film. I am what they call a final-cut director. When I came onboard this, even though I didn't originate the script, I worked on it as hard as any script. Whether I get credit or not is frankly not an issue for me. I worked with the actors, we changed a lot of things. It was the same thing with *U Turn* (1977), which I didn't get credit for. I worked very hard on that script. I didn't seek credit on this because it's good that this young woman, Andrea Berloff, gets it. It helps her career. I consider myself involved in all the aspects of production. I know that there's been an issue that this is not an Oliver Stone movie, and this idea that I'm on probation or something, that after *Alexander* (2004) I did this to be the good boy. It's a nice narrative, it might play well and I don't mind if people say that, but it's not quite the truth. *Alexander*, financially, was one of my better successes. It made \$170 million abroad, although it

did miserably in the States, Britain and Australia – basically the English-speaking countries. It was number one in many countries. My true disasters financially were *Nixon* (1995), which did nothing in the States or anywhere else; *Heaven & Earth* (1993) was a disaster in the States; *Talk Radio* (1988) was a disaster in the States; *Salvador* (1986) was a disaster in the States; *U-Turn* was a disaster. I've had my share of disasters, but in terms of business *Alexander* actually recouped.

You mention *Alexander's* failure in the US, Britain and Australia, all members of the coalition in the Iraq war. Do you think that was a coincidence?

I don't see the connection. I know you're with *Sight & Sound*, which I read back in film school, and we're supposed to be talking movies here but I want to add one thing. I don't give up. I love *Alexander's* subject matter. I've done a three-hour-and-40-minute version of *Alexander*, which is coming out internationally next year. The extra time allows the film to play. I think the script always needed that. Trying to truncate it down to three hours or less for theatrical release was always a problem for me. I didn't admit to it because I was fighting to get it right. With the second version I made some structural changes for the director's cut. This third version is more relaxed. It's done as a three-act play with two intermissions, which goes back to my youth. Even then the road show was only one intermission, but I think this requires two intermissions. It allows you to get into that world, to make the connections with mythology. For example, with the much-ridiculed Anthony Hopkins performance I went the other way. I let him go all out. By making it more, it becomes actually hypnotic and allows it to weave the tale much better. And, of course, at the end he turns out to be a conspirator. Things play themselves out better. I'm happiest with this version. Three cuts of one movie in three years. There's nothing more to be had. That's it.

There's no other cut, and now I can walk away. I feel cleansed. *World Trade Center* did not come from that. I didn't have this feeling of taking a safe bet. It was not safe at all. It was filled with potential disaster. Politically, it was a nightmare to make because of all the sensitivities. It could have backfired at any given point. In New York we had many enemies. We had a lot of prejudgement on it. A lot of attacks. It was crucial that it be responsible and accurate to the story. It was limited, but it had to be right on. We were threading the needle. If we'd gotten too sentimental it would have been ridiculed as Disney. At the same time, if it had been too ugly and gritty we wouldn't have been able to achieve the box office we've achieved in the States.

Did you feel constrained or liberated by staying faithful to the story of the two officers and not necessarily tackling the bigger picture of 9/11?

I wasn't trying to be Terry Gilliam in this picture. These guys were there, and I wanted them there. This was a procedural. I wanted to do it no-nonsense style. In America, 9/11 is a very sensitive, raw wound in the country. You have to handle the wound very delicately. You go in, clean it, you bandage it and you walk away. You don't try to make it bigger than it is. You just deal with the subject delicately because it's a small one but also a big one... Already we're on the border of dramatisation – as you know when you go into the interior minds of these men you're taking liberties, but no one seems to have objected to that.

How did you decide what to show and what not to show? We never see the planes hit the towers, but we do see someone jumping from the World Trade Center.

That was determined by the subjective points of view of the four characters, the two women and the two men. [Police officer] Will Jimeno felt the shadow of the plane; he looked and thinks he saw it on 42nd

Street. [His colleague] John McLoughlin never saw anything. They stumbled into the building thinking it was a single plane disaster. That was one small accident that was leading to stepping up the tension, ratcheting it up into a bigger and bigger thing. The wives allowed us to jump out after about 35 minutes and go outside of the hole. We go out to the wives and there we see the objective disaster on the television and archival footage of the towers collapsing. I did that very consciously. I didn't want to overdo it. You have to remember that some kids don't know what happened. These guys are inside the building and they think it's a truck bomb. The wives structurally gave us that objective point of view. As for the jumper, he was seen by Will. There, again I cut back on the gore. I did a series of Eisenstein portraits of the men looking up, and you hold what they see until you see one jumper fall. That was computer-created, by the way; what if it had been a real person and they'd been spotted in ten years from now and a relative had wanted to sue us. That one fall worked for the audience because we built enough tension in the faces. That was the kind of thing I was very conscious of. Too much or too little in so far as I played to that piper. It was a good discipline for me. It was a very humble movie after *Alexander*. It was limiting me by the facts.

On the one hand the film is the story of these two guys, but it also seems to convey the arc of America on that day from a state of blissful innocence to vengeance.

I think that's astute, but remember that the film ends specifically on the barbecue two years later, and it ends on the note – because John and Will are the main characters – that a lot of people saw evil that day but they saw good. They saw people helping each other and connecting. That is John and Will. They are that way. They're very grateful to their rescuers. They're not consumed with desire for revenge at all. Karnes is an

interesting side character here. Not only is he the chief rescuer, but he's also probably the most heroic man in the movie. The hero to some degree does warp society. The rescuers are ordinary people doing their job. I wouldn't say the rescuers are heroic because they're doing what they're supposed to do. Whereas Karnes is the only one who steps out of his job as an accountant. He's a bit like the Heracles figure, but he's a little warped. People say I exaggerated him, but he's a United States marine. He's a fundamentalist. That's the way marines are. They're tough men. Once they go they don't think about it, they go. They'll walk through a wall. That was the way they were in Vietnam, too.

At the same time, I do think he represents the American people. That part of the American people wanted revenge and they were angry. I was. I think the British would be. There was a definite foe. There was a definite criminal here and it was al-Qaeda. We did go to Afghanistan, and the world was with us when we did. We almost finished the job, but we didn't. Then something else happened and there was a warp. Karnes ended up in Iraq just as the American people felt vengeance and they ended up in Iraq. These are facts. For me to have cut Karnes to conform to political correctness would have been wrong. But it's been much misunderstood in Europe.

You mention that some critics in Europe have seen the film as your embracing of the pro-war lobby whereas you've traditionally been seen as a liberal, left-wing film-maker?

That's a fact. It's not even a comment. There's no need for me to comment. I feel very strongly in my opposition to the Iraq war. I'm on the record. I took a lot of heat in Hollywood for it. I don't think it's necessary for me to repeat it. It was a fact. I had to put in that end coda because we screened it for people in Seattle and Minneapolis and they thought we'd added the Karnes character. They didn't know. They

thought we'd added him as a Hollywood creation in order to have a happy ending. We had to tell people this guy was real, but I'm sorry that it's distracted from the story in the same way that the homosexuality and the wig did in *Alexander*. It always happens in one of my movies. It becomes controversial. It's unbelievable that I should make a movie so uncontroversial as *World Trade Center* and it still became controversial. You should have seen Germany and Spain. It's insane. It's all politics. But the critics lose sight of the heart. The movie's about heart. It's about people helping each other. It's about lighting a candle in an insane world. This fundamental goodness that we have as people. These men helped each other to survive. They would not have been able to survive without the metaphysical side.

You mention Karnes. To what extent do you see Karnes and Platoon's Barnes as mirror images. Twenty years ago, Barnes was seen as a villain, while here Karnes is the hero of the piece. Does that signify a shift in America post-9/11?

I would say to you, unfortunately, that if it were so it would be clearer. In 1986, when *Platoon* came out, I remember many people loved Barnes. In the same way, in 1987, when I did *Wall Street*, many people loved Gekko. There is a quality in the American soul that is aggressive, that loves that kind of temperament. The guy who, fuck right or wrong, gets what he wants and gets the job done. I suppose there's a vigilante aspect to it. Look at *Dirty Harry* or *Taxi Driver*. It seems to be a quality in the American psyche that wants to go outside the law and disrespect the law. Fuck the United Nations. That kind of thing. Fuck the Europeans: they're a bunch of wimps who just sit around and talk and they don't do shit. There's that attitude in America. Frankly, in Bosnia you guys didn't do shit. *Platoon* was praised from all sides but sometimes for the wrong reasons.

Back to World Trade Center. It reminds audiences of a time when the world was united in grief with America. You show a scene with Arabs looking mournfully at television footage of the events, whereas in the days after 9/11 there were scenes shown on television of Palestinians apparently celebrating, which were later shown to be false. Was that deliberate?

You're joking. I didn't know that. I imagined there were some Palestinians who were pretty happy, but I didn't know those images were erroneous. I wouldn't have shown those images anyway because I think most of the Arab world was with us and they were moderates. I'm not disputing bin Laden and al-Qaeda's reasons, because they're legitimate to them. It's the methods which are disgusting. To say it's in the name of God is a distortion of the Bible *and* Islam. It's a distortion of the basic human goodness. Any culture that is spiritual will tell you that. You don't kill innocent people in the name of your cause. That's the issue for me. I think most Arab people know it in their hearts, and they condemn it. But I think that Bush, by overreacting to 9/11, has only added fuel to the fire and made more Arab people immoderate, which is a shame. We are coming closer to a state of war.

How different have reactions to the film been in America and Europe?

In America I've had the best reviews since *Platoon*. England has been good. Maybe this time the English-speaking countries understand it, whereas with *Alexander* it was the opposite. I think it will be mixed in all the [non-English-speaking] European countries, but I have a feeling that audiences will respond in the same way American audiences are responding. It's doing very well as a drama. It will be one of the highest-grossing dramas of the year. We're hopeful it's going to go worldwide. I don't believe the intellectuals of Europe are really in touch with people. They are so politicised by 9/11. It's not their fault. It's anti-Bush, pro-

Bush, anti-Iraq. They've lost sight of something. It's that state of mind that leads to war in a way. All our individual behaviours are responsible. If we're angry, if we're politicised, we are creating the very thing that we condemn. That's why I hate the left when it becomes rigid as much as the right. It becomes a church. The left is radical. They're the people who gave us Mao and Pol Pot. Let's be honest. It doesn't work because they've lost connection with the human soul. They politicise everything. Every movie has to be seen through political glasses. They're insane.

I'm not a political film-maker Goddamnit! I'm a dramatist and I always have been. I've done some political subjects, but I've always done them through people, whether it's Jim Garrison as a lonely DA in New Orleans going up against a huge monstrosity of a system – it's always been based on people.

I'm disappointed by the German and Spanish critics and some of the French for misunderstanding my body of work. I don't think there's a solution in the way they think. Put it this way: your kid or grandkid in 30 years time can see this movie and, no matter what, can say that he has a feeling of what that day was like. That's important. It is a form of memorial. *Platoon* came after *Apocalypse Now* and *Deer Hunter*, big, big overarching films, beautifully done. But the beauty of *Platoon* was its simplicity to say, "You are there. This is what it was like to be a soldier without politics." *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) was a follow-up to that, and the beauty of that was it did the same thing but also showed you before the war and after the war. Possibly I could open [9/11] up now, feeling I've done right by that day, and go to another place and judge the after-effects.

So you would you revisit 9/11 on film?

In a second if I could get the right story.

How important for you is the film's reception in the Middle East?

If they misunderstand it for Karnes, they're fucked. What can I say? If the Middle East can see the film and they cry, that's a good sign for humanity. If man would care about man, that's the important thing. If we lose sight of our humanity we're going to be back in World War I. The greatest fear I have is that we become inured to cruelty. We're accepting these larger body counts. Sixty-eight dead in Baghdad every day. We become immune. For some reason I was thinking about World War I and a flash came to me about *Paths of Glory*, which I love. A hundred thousand men get wiped out in one day, and you get used to the idea. It's all relativistic. That's how we get into these things, and before you know it we'll wipe out people with nuclear explosions and we'll shrug. That's when you get used to war. That's why it lasts so long. It takes a while before you come down and stop. Then it's so late in the game you start over.

I guess that's the way life is. I went to Vietnam and did three pictures about it. What the fuck good did that do? The idiots marched off to another war. My friends in Iraq, some of the Vietnam veterans who are there, the older guys doing contracts making a fortune, they love it. They say they never made more money in their lives. It's fun. It's our second Vietnam. The chicks are great. The place is a whorehouse. It's Vietnam all over again. Iraq is not so bad for them. They say the kids, the American soldiers in Iraq, are all born-again. Not all, but most of them. I couldn't believe it because when we went to Vietnam we were draftees. We were a different style. These kids are better trained, better prepared, and dedicated.

Would you do a film about Iraq?

I don't think so. That belongs to a younger film-maker who's been there. I did my wartime. But I think I could do a political version of the

aftermath. Iraq's already out there in a way. The internet's a whole different world in terms of movies and the way things are reported. Front-line stuff's out there.

To paraphrase Nixon, to what extent did 9/11 stop Americans seeing themselves the way they want to be?

Ironically, I'm not so sure it did. I think there's a defiance about it. We're geographically so isolated. It's something like 5 per cent of Americans have passports. They don't know where Iraq is. They don't know the difference between Iraq and Afghanistan. Our media education is very shallow. The news and most of the TV stations that I see in the heartland, it's fodder between the commercials basically. It's like infotainment. It's one perception, American perception. There was very poor coverage of the Iraq war, of 9/11. It's all sanitised. The defiance sets in. If they hate us, then fuck them. One encouraging thing is the mass seems to have picked up on Iraq because the polls now indicate that, finally, more than 50 per cent are against the war five years later. But they still may vote for Bush because he's conned them into thinking he can provide them security. In some strange way it's not in al-Qaeda's interest to have a terror attack before the election. They'd love to see him continue in some way. If I was al-Qaeda, George Bush is my best friend. What a crazy world.