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WEIRD AT HEART:
*Novelist Barry Gifford
on Louisiana's politics
noir (P.13)*

PLUS:
*Tim Redmond
on the Burton
machine (P.10)*



Oliver Stone has remade the Doors, the Vietnam War and now JFK in his own macho image — and will soon tackle Harvey Milk.

**IS THIS GUY
A JERK,
OR WHAT?
(P.19)**



Last words of last year:
Our critics review the music,
film, theater, and dance of 1991
(P.29)

Man-child in Movieland

The whole world is watching Oliver Stone, which makes a lot of sense, as far as he's concerned.

I like that, yeah ... to be called an adolescent at the age of 45 ... to be a man-child.

— Oliver Stone
in the January '92
Issue of GQ

By J.H. Tompkins

THERE ISN'T much about the '60s that really panned out, all things considered — we didn't stop war or racial injustice, love isn't free, and rock'n'roll turned out to be just music. So it figures that a not terribly '60s man (or man-child, as he seems to prefer) like Oliver Stone would come along, buy the decade up, and turn it into a bunch of movies about Oliver Stone — as if days of rage and notions of peace, love, and understanding were just some backstage pass allowing him the opportunity to get onstage and deliver a series of after-the-fact, big-screen air guitar solos.

Stone's taking on the role of keeper of the '60s flame is a little annoying. In the hippie days, you were either on the bus or off the bus — and Oliver Stone couldn't have found the bus if his life had depended on it. When space cowboys, psychedelic rangers, radicals, and easy riders were taking things beyond the limit, Stone was proving a thing or two about being a man (to himself, and to his father, he once remarked) by enlisting in the Army and fighting in Vietnam.

The war in Southeast Asia may be over, but Stone's personal war — his uphill battles to achieve red-blooded, American manhood — continues, and it surfaces in script after script, film after film. Unfortunately, "The Sixties" loom so large in the American sociocultural landscape that the mere mention of one of the decade's icons anoints conversation with the excitement of the era. Make an entire movie about one, and, well, a filmmaker can hardly miss.

The fact is, however, that focusing a film on a particular '60s icon — as Stone has done in *Midnight Express* (drugs), *Salvador* (leftist politics), *Platoon* (Vietnam War), *Born on the Fourth of July* (the Vietnam War and, in small measure, opposition to the Vietnam War), *The Doors* (sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll) and *JFK* (disillusionment and political conspiracy) — doesn't mean the film offers any particular insight into the times. Was *Gone With the Wind* a Civil War film? How much did we learn about the attack of Pearl Harbor by watching *From Here to Eternity*? Come See the Paradise was supposed

to expose the causes and fallout surrounding the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Did the director's intention mean he succeeded? Was the *Green Berets* about Vietnam or John Wayne?

Stone wants to make socially relevant art, but for the most part his films fail to provide a sense of what made the '60s tick. He reduces a complex web of social and political factors to the time- and male-honored struggle of one man facing off and eventually triumphing against overwhelming odds. His movies are updated versions of old Hollywood Westerns like *High Noon* and *Rio Bravo*, not path-breaking attempts to uncover the roots of social ferment.

There is nothing particularly "sixties" about Stone's ham-fisted Oscar-winner *Platoon*, nor anything particularly anti-war — at least not in the sense that we associate with anti-Vietnam War sentiments. Activists from that era debated any number of questions: America's imperial designs; anti-Asian racism; street politics vs. electoral politics; the racial makeup of American combat troops — to name just a few.

If *Platoon* had an "anti-war" message, it was only that "war is hell" — hardly a startling concept. True, *Platoon* drove that fact home with deafening, paralyzing force. But the conflict, the issue that Stone felt important to concentrate on, was the struggle of good versus evil in the soul of man.

Just to make sure the audience didn't miss the point, Stone — he's not a subtle man — didn't take any chances: As the war against the Vietnamese unfolded, Charlie Sheen, the soldier protagonist, also got a chance to witness the dark/light face-off in the forms of bad sergeant Tom Berenger and good sergeant Willem Defoe, two guys who really didn't get along. Sheen kept the audience posted on what was going down with a convenient series of voice-overs ("He was our Ahab," Sheen informed us, referring to Berenger, who was dolled up with soars and other physical deformities just like his sea-faring forefather).

And in the final scene — in case we were totally dim, or had retreated to the back row with our dates and missed the important parts — Sheen set us straight once again, by saying: "I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us." This would no doubt come as a surprise to the Vietnamese.

PLATOON'S TREATMENT of the Vietnamese, is also important to consider. They floated like ghosts across the screen — as if their presence in Vietnam was just an unhappy accident, since it necessitated risking injury to American troops (the lone exception was the scene during which villagers were brutalized by the Berenger/Ahab/evil-led soldiers — and in this case, they were present, but passive).

Stone's Yankee-centric point of view is ugly, though not particularly uncommon. But it's more disturbing when considered in light of the script for the movie *The Year of the Dragon*, which Stone co-wrote with Michael Cimino. (The Cimino association is one to consider — he wrote and directed *Deerhunter*, another Vietnam-related Oscar-winner. Told from the perspective of young white working-class men from a Pennsylvania steel town, it was marked by a virulent racism that included revising the infamous photo of a South Vietnamese general executing a kneeling NLF prisoner, to show it as a North Vietnamese officer with a pistol pointed at the temple of an American soldier.)

Dragon is the story of an emotionally unstable police captain, played by Mickey Rourke, who's assigned to take over New York's Chinatown precinct when a gang war breaks out. From the first frame through the last, it overflows with anti-Asian racism. Rourke spews out a non-stop torrent of *gook-* and *chink-*laced venom: that, arguably, could be considered in character for a racist, emotionally unstable, Vietnam vet cop. Still, Stone freely admits he identifies with his lead characters, and the statement Rourke makes in one scene — "Well, the mark of a great man is one who in manhood keeps the mark of a child" — echoes Stone's observation quoted at the beginning of this article.

And *Dragon's* treatment of the Chinese characters is telling and unforgivable. Rourke's love interest is an Asian American newscaster. They have quite a relationship: She considers him a "racist crackpot"; he puts her in a position in which she's raped (he screams at her when she tells him — the rapists insulted him, you see); he tells her, "People like you are destroying this country... So why do I want to fuck you so bad?" Despite all this, she loves him (you know those Asian women and how they go



for racist tough guys).

Wars come and Woodstocks go — and so does Oliver Stone, making one movie after another (he's about to tackle the story of San Francisco's murdered gay leader, Harvey Milk). It's not that there's no merit in any of his films: *JFK* is certainly provocative (although if, as Stone claims, there was a CIA coup in 1963 and we've been living under fascism since, we ought to rename whatever happened in Nazi Germany). And Ron Kovic's story told in *Born on the Fourth of July* is compelling and important.

But no matter whom or what Stone deals with, each movie pretty much feels the same. For Stone, the trials of manhood endure, and we endure those trials as we fight to find a political core in his films. Because, although Stone *might* have some heartfelt political sympathies, he *definitely* has some heartfelt feeling about how tough it is to be a man.

Some guys crumble, some guys hook up with Robert Bly's wild men, and some guys make movies. You've got to admire his approach: If you can't control, shape, and explain the world to your satisfaction in real life, you can certainly do it on film.

Films of Stone

MIDNIGHT EXPRESS (1978)

The plot: Stone's Oscar-winning script tells the story of Billy Hayes, played by Brad Davis) a young white man arrested for hashish-smuggling in Turkey. Things go wrong like you wouldn't believe: Corrupt officials refuse bribes; the food is terrible; and Turkey turns out to be full of noisy, mean, uncivilized Turks who can't even speak English.

The conflict: How can Hayes get out of jail and back to Babylon, N.Y.?

The solution: Hayes puts up with a lot of Turkish bullshit, but enough is finally enough. He kills the prison sadist and hits the road — goodbye Ankara, hello New York.

Key dialogue: Billy Hayes to Turkish court: "For a nation of pigs, it sure is funny you don't eat them."

Message: White American men have it tough in Turkey.

YEAR OF THE DRAGON (1985)

The plot: Stone co-wrote this script with Michael Cimino. Mickey Rourke plays a young police captain who takes over responsibility for Chinatown (where, it turns out, a lot of

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Stone

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people don't even speak English) at a time when gang violence, drug-smuggling, murder, and mayhem are at an all-time high. Fellow cops hate him because he won't look the other way and let the sneaky Chinese kill each other if they want to. The Chinese hate him because he's white, tough, and smart and won't let them kill each other if they want to. Rourke hates the Chinese because they remind him of the Vietnamese and he's a Vietnam vet and, well, you know how that goes. He leaves his wife for a beautiful Asian American newscaster who can't figure out why she loves such a racist jerk but just can't help submitting to his demands.

The conflict: Rourke has to stop the drug trade and make the Chinese ganglords understand that this is America, where people speak English and do whatever American cops tell them to do. He also has to work out his anger, which causes problems in his life.

The solution: Kill a lot of Chinese.

Key dialogue: Rourke: "Did you ever see a Chinese grand prix driver?"

More key dialogue: A jealous Rourke to girlfriend, referring to

another lover she has: "Do you want to have a little slant-eyed baby?" They exchange slaps. They make love.

Message: White men have it tough in Chinatown.

SALVADOR (1986)

The plot: Young, white, hip alco-

In Midnight Express, things go wrong like you wouldn't believe: Corrupt officials refuse bribes; the food is terrible; and Turkey turns out to be full of noisy, mean, uncivilized Turks who can't even speak English.

holic loose-cannon journalist played by James Wood is desperate for work and trouble, which he can't seem to stay out of. He recruits a drinking buddy and drives to El Salvador in an old Mustang to cover an uprising by left-wing guerrillas against the fascist, U.S.-backed Salvadoran military. He drinks a lot, witnesses the death-squad murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, fights with his beautiful

Latino girlfriend, pisses off fascists, and nearly gets killed about a thousand times.

The conflict: How to have a few cynical laughs, get an internationally important cover story and stay alive, all at the same time.

The solution: Be in the right place at the right time and then show the world what you're made of.

Key dialogue: James Woods to pal Jim Belushi: "Latin women, they're totally different. They're understanding. Look at Claudia. She's the greatest. She doesn't care what I do." Belushi to Woods: "The best thing about Latin women is that they don't speak English."

The message: Left-wing rebels owe a lot to wild, crazy white American guys like James Woods who risk their neck telling the world about fascism and repression when they could be home kicking back.

More message: When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

More message: War is hell.

PLATOON (1986)

The plot: Charlie Sheen joins the Army and winds up in Vietnam in the same platoon as Willem Defoe, who is good, and Tom Berenger, who is bad. Bullets fly, booby traps explode, soldiers are killed and wounded, and men do some serious

A Thousand Pieces of Stone

Behind every good Stone

"I think women are totally equal to men in every way, except maybe upper-body strength." (*GQ*, January '92)

"I'm subject to change, you know... I would like to make a movie about a woman protagonist... more tender, a little bit softer. I can see that when I'm older. While I have some energy as a young man... I think that energy changes through time, and it's going to soften." (*Spin*, January '92)

Jesus, Joe McCarthy, and Stone

"*JFK* is the most important thing I've ever done. No matter if the press drives me out of the country and I wind up making movies in England or France, it was damn worth it." (*GQ*, January '92)

"We use Garrison, in a sense, as a metaphoric protagonist. He stands in for about a dozen researchers, and in that sense we take liberties and make his work larger and make him a hero. I know I'm going to get nailed for that." (*GQ*, January '92)

"I think what is clear from [the media's] efforts to destroy my film's credibility is that history may be too important to leave to newsmen. And that artists have the right — and possibly the obligation — to step in and reinterpret the history of our times." (*SF Chronicle*, 12/27/91, reprinted from the *New York Times*)

Boy Stone

"Later, my father said he was deep in debt from my mother's spending and the divorce... I think I got a sense that everything had been stripped away. That there was a mask on everything and underneath there was a harder truth, a deeper and more negative truth." (*GQ*, January '92)

"As my dad always used to say, 'Don't tell the truth; it will get you in trouble.' ... That's the idealism in me. My God, you got to tell the truth. The little boy in me: You've got to tell the truth." (*GQ*, January '92)

Too old to die young

"Jim Morrison was a Romantic poet, in the sense of Rimbaud and Baudelaire and Apollinaire. They all died young... It's a tradition of Romantic poetry. You aren't supposed to live long.... He did his job, Jim. It wasn't like a long slide into death." (*Spin*, January '92)

Triumph of will

"My characters" go through misery and horror. But don't necessarily end in it. At the end of *Platoon* Charlie Sheen is reunited with his country, in a different sense. And in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic goes through horror but I think emerges in a heroic fashion." (*Spin*, January '92)

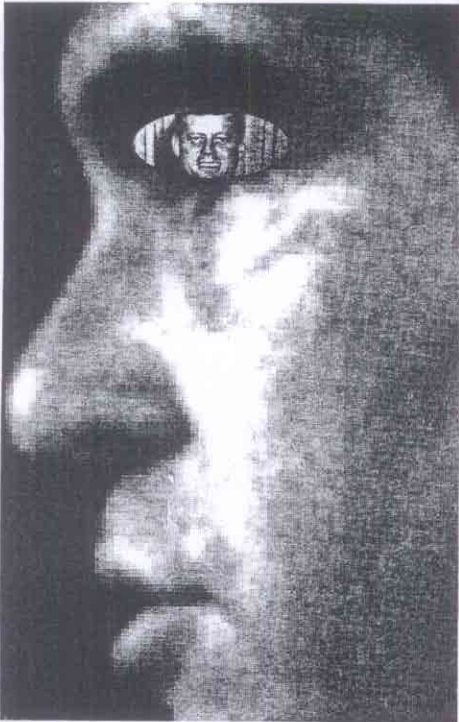
The bad seed

"I think you become a victim of yourself as much as you do of outside forces, too. You have personality traits that get you into a mess in Vietnam. You know, like I got into a mess in Vietnam. Or Billy Hayes got into a mess in *Midnight Express*. Or Garrison had some victimization in him that pushed him to the place where he was abandoned.... But I think of it more as living out your destiny." (*Spin*, January '92)

Stonespeak (if you were as smart as he is, you'd understand what he's talking about)

"We must start looking at the sixties not as history but as a seminal decade for the postwar generation coming into power in the '90s. Dan Quayle's thinking was shaped by the sixties as much as my own, and he may be our next president. We still have a choice. What is past is prologue. To forget the past is to be condemned to relive it." (*Premiere*, January '92)





bonding while the forces of darkness and the forces of light collide. The Vietnamese, who slip across the screen like shadows, can't seem to get the idea that if they'd just go away the American's wouldn't have to kill them all the time.

The conflict: How to stay alive.

The solution: Keep your head down.

Key dialogue: Charlie Sheen, in a letter: "I don't think I can keep this up for a year, Grandma, I think I made a big mistake."

More key dialogue: Charlie Sheen to himself: "I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves."

More key dialogue: Tom Berenger to the troops: "OK, saddle up!"

Message: War is hell.

BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY (1989)

The plot: This is Stone's version of war-crippled Vietnam vet/anti-war activist Ron Kovic's autobiography. Brainwashed by Cold War propaganda, Kovic enlists, fights in Vietnam, gets wounded, comes home, gets freaked out and fucked over before figuring things out and taking a stand.

The conflict: How do you cope with life as a paraplegic, especially after figuring out that you shouldn't have been in the Army in first place? How do you tell the parents of a dead GI that you shot him by accident? How do you spread the anti-war word? How do you get a photo of?

The solution: Just do it.

The message: Shit happens. **More message:** When shit happens, a guy can have a lot to deal with but he can handle it if he's tough enough and tries real hard.

More message: War is hell.

THE DOORS (1991)

The plot: No plot. **The conflict:** No on-screen conflict. Off-screen the problem is how to endure a movie about the '60s rock scene made by a man whose favorite '60s band was Zagar and Evans. Also: what to make of the semitransparent Indian who appears before Morrison at Andy Warhol's party and at other odd moments.

The solution: No solution.

Key dialogue: Jim: "I am the lizard king. I can do anything."

More key dialogue: Jim to girlfriend Pam: "Do you really know what I am, Pam? Do you know what poetry is? Where is what they promised us? Where is the new wine, dying on the vine?"

More key dialogue: Female journalist to Jim: "Are you going to fuck me? Are you going to fuck me?" Jim to female journalist: "Yeah, yeah."

Message: Squandering talent and drinking and drugging yourself to death at age 27 is romantic as long as it happens to someone else.

JFK (1991)

The plot: You know it. **The conflict:** Same conflict, on-screen and off: How to suffer the slings and arrows of government agents and media jerks while making the world understand the importance of your efforts to find out who shot John. How to cope with sublimated personal issues provoking compulsive behavior.

The solution: Make a movie.

Key dialogue: No key dialogue. **The message:** Oliver Stone would like to be JFK, except for the dying part.



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