

## MOVIES

## O • l • i • v • e • r • ' • s



# TRAVELER

## Stone always has a point in loud, disturbing films

By David Kronke

WHEN THE USA Film Festival decided to honor Oliver Stone with its Great Director Award on Saturday, it chose a guy who was conveniently going to be in town during the proceedings anyway. And, it selected a seeming rarity: A contemporary filmmaker who is part social critic — adept at, and even reveling in, the art of baiting and confronting his audiences with the ugly realities of our times.

Regardless of how they have been received critically or commercially, Stone's movies have consistently been of intense interest to critics and film buffs.

His releases have become events, and while this can be attributed somewhat to his well-oiled publicity machine and his taking on "big" issues, it's also because his movies genuinely have something to say, and do so in fiercely committed, impassioned tones. Like a braying, compelling street corner preacher, Stone's movies are so loud they are impossible to ignore or dismiss.

Stone may not be quite a fearless director, as some suggest — his topics are usually commercial enough to guarantee decent box office — but he's certainly not a fearful one either. In Hollywood, where studios routinely manufacture pabulum guaranteed not to offend — or even register with — its audiences, that's creditable indeed.

Outside of his early work — the thrillers "Seizure" and "The Hand," and his screenplays for "Midnight Express" and "Conan The Barbarian" — Stone's movies address very similar concerns.

Generally, his films — both those he directs and those he has written for others — feature a protagonist who is not terribly likable; indeed, many of them are compellingly loathsome. They're redeemed — in



Director Oliver Stone, top left; Tom Cruise plays Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic in Oliver Stone's "Born on the Fourth of July," above.

Please see STONE, G-3

## STONE

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Stone's eyes, at least — by having a fixed gaze upon or by struggling to expose an important truth.

Photojournalist Richard Boyle in "Salvador." The sleazy cops in "Year of the Dragon" and "Eight Million Ways to Die." Eric Bogosian's inflammatory talk show host in "Talk Radio." Ron Kovic in "Born on the Fourth of July." Jim Morrison in "The Doors." All are men who connected with a real or perceived higher good, but ran roughshod over friends and loved ones to do so. One can imagine we'll be able to add Jim Garrison from Stone's upcoming "JFK," whose flawed but important theories helped fuel further conspiracy research.

Another conceit found in Stone's films is that of the innocent who becomes tainted by society — Charlie Sheen's wet-behind-the-ears characters in "Platoon" and "Wall Street" are quintessential, almost stereotypical, all-around good guys who are sorely challenged when exposed to the harder lessons in life. Kovic, especially as played by Tom Cruise, and even Jim Morrison, who opens "The Doors" as a blissed-out if somewhat morbid hippie, also fit this mold.

Stone also revels in Kurtzian villains straight out of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" — Al Pacino in "Scarface," Tom Berenger in "Platoon," Michael Douglas in "Wall Street." These are men who have realized that compromising a lot is the logical extension of compromising a little and have therefore found solace in their evil, knowing that if nothing

else, they're consistent, they're honest.

When Stone takes his excesses to even further extremes in films and screenplays — "Year of the Dragon," "Eight Million Ways to Die," "Talk Radio" and "The Doors" — they failed to catch fire at the box office. Stone, never a subtle filmmaker, is sometimes too visceral for his own good. He always wants to take his audiences over the edge — sometimes, though, audiences balk, leaving him alone in his dark abyss.

Stone's greatest failing, his insensitive and even cruel treatment of women, has long been documented. In "The Doors," Meg Ryan announces to a TV camera that she's an "ornament" — she's commenting uncannily on the role of all women in all Stone films. Stone knows this — when asked about it in a recent Rolling Stone interview, he sighed wearily. His later comments — such as his be-

lief that women "dispense grace" — indicate he's still not ready simply to accept them as equals.

It has been repeatedly noted that Stone is forever returning to the '60s — "Platoon," "Fourth of July," "The Doors," "JFK" — and by doing so, he's reliving an era that profoundly changed his life. But it likely goes beyond that — in graphically depicting the lives of these flawed but enthralling individuals, who grapple with large philosophical and political issues, whose titanic struggles are over their very souls, Stone may be forging a none-too-veiled autobiographical trail.

His characters lose at least as much as they gain. Often, they achieve their goals, but sacrifice their humanity. That's a grave price to pay, even in Hollywood.

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