# Personal Struggles and Political Issues

## AN INTERVIEW WITH OLIVER STONE

by Gary Crowdus

*Until 1986, Oliver Stone was known primarily as the screenwriter of films such as* Midnight Express *(which won him an Academy Award),* Conan the Barbarian, Scarface, Year of the Dragon, *and* Eight Million Ways to Die, *controversial films that were frequently criticized for excessive violence and racist attitudes. Despite having made his directorial debut in 1981 with* The Hand, *a poorly received horror film, it wasn't until 1986 that Stone received critical acclaim as a director with* Salvador, *a film based on the experiences of photojournalist Richard Boyle and critical of U.S. involvement in El Salvador, followed a few months later by* Platoon, *Stone's semi-autobiographical film which focuses on the actions of an infantry unit in combat in Vietnam. One of the most realistic, viscerally powerful portrayals of jungle warfare ever realized on the screen,* Platoon *became a national phenomenon in America's long-delayed coming to terms with the Vietnam War. Last year it won Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director. December 1987 saw the release of Stone's latest directorial effort,* Wall Street, *which further establishes his reputation as a filmmaker willing to deal with controversial social and political themes.* Cineaste *Editor Gary Crowdus spoke to Stone in Havana last December during the Festival of New Latin American Cinema (where* Salvador *won a Coral Award). The following interview—which focuses on* Salvador *and* Platoon *since we hadn't yet seen* Wall Street *— also incorporates responses to questions posed at a general press conference.*

**Cineaste:** *What were your political intentions in making* Salvador?

**Oliver Stone:** I didn't have any at the very beginning. I was interested in the character of Boyle as this sort of renegade journalist, a selfish rascal who, through his exposure to the country, becomes more unselfish, and who, through his love for the woman, starts to become something he wasn't in the beginning. It's a transformation, a liberation, call it what you want.

In following that intention, however, I got very involved in the background story of El Salvador. To be frank, when I first went down there I didn't know anything about the 1980-81 period. I had really been confused by the American press reports and the situation seemed to me very ambiguous. When Boyle introduced me to El Salvador, I was quite shocked to see how really black and white it was, because everybody always tells you the greys, and it was at that point that we really tried to tell more of the Salvadoran story than the Boyle story, and we tried to blend the two together. Obviously, you know where the film came down—it opposes the U.S. policy of taking sides with the military in El Salvador.

**Cineaste:** *In writing the script, did you basically rely on Boyle's experiences or did you do your own research?*

**Stone:** Boyle certainly had a very good point of view which I pretty much adhered to in the screenplay, but I did extensive research on my own. I remember at the time being very influenced by Raymond Bonner's book, *Weakness and Deceit.** Whatever Boyle told me was matched and documented by Bonner's book.

**Cineaste:** *It's a terrific book. Bonner really nails D'Aubuisson to the wall in terms of responsibility for Archbishop Romero's assassination. Recently even Duarte has publicly stated that ARENA was responsible for the assassination.*

**Stone:** I'm only amazed that it took six years for it to come out, because everybody knew, including Duarte, who waited until Ungo and Zamora went back to El Salvador before opening his mouth. The State Department knew, and U.S. Ambassador Robert White said so. I read actual eyewitness accounts of those who sat together with D'Aubuisson at a table where he passed this bullet around.

I tried to talk to Robert White but he would not talk to us. He claimed not to remember Boyle although Boyle claims he was in White's office asking for the *cedula* for Maria. We sent White an early draft of the script but his attitude seemed to be that it just didn't have the gravity of a State Department document. I don't think he understood the nature of trying to make something exciting in fiction. Of course, our script had that ambiguity in White's character because it raises the question of at what point he reinstated military aid to El Salvador. In the script he is quoted as saying that the FMLN was a bunch of pinkos who would do to El Salvador what the Khmer Rouge had done in Cambodia. That's why the character of the Ambassador is played by a sort of liberal muddlehead like Michael Murphy.

**Cineaste:** *Much of* Salvador *captures the intensity and reality of that situation, but it unfortunately also resorts to many clichés and stereotypes — the love scenes, for example, and the scene of the guerrillas attacking on horseback!*

**Stone:** Well, you have to remember that the story was told to me by Richard Boyle who had had an affair with Maria in El Salvador for many years. What I heard came only from him, because Maria was missing, she had disappeared. We knew the horseback scene wasn't accurate, but we went with it because essentially we were romantics and we just wanted to have a charge on horseback. Also, at that time, in 1981, the feeling was that the guerrillas had no chance against the greater weapons of the government, and, to some extent, that was symbolized by the scene of horses against tanks.

**Cineaste:** *A more problematic issue is raised by the scene in which the guerrillas kill their prisoners. What is your rationale for that?*

**Stone:** Boyle is the one who described the incident. He was at some bridge — to be honest, I don't remember where right now — and he saw several National Guards-

*Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

men killed after surrendering, and he just blew up at the rebels. Boyle wanted to keep that in the film so as not to whitewash completely the other side. Once the scene was in the film, the producer wanted to keep it in, and I must say that in America a lot of people on the Right thought that that scene to some degree balanced out the movie. But in no way would I equate the FMLN with the government. I don't think there's any comparison.

**Cineaste:** *In your own mind you may be very clear about the relative levels of violence on both sides, but the film gives a false impression because, as I'm sure you're aware, it is not FMLN policy to kill prisoners.*

**Stone:** Yeah, I know it wasn't policy, it was an aberration.

**Cineaste:** *In fact, the way it functions in the film is a kind of 'pox on both your houses' approach, which works dramatically, but it is politically misleading.*

**Stone:** Sure, because the scene stayed in, it creates a distortion in terms of degree. But it is my personal feeling that, with all the murders, with all the Death Squad killings, with what the National Guard has done in El Salvador—some 50,000 dead, murdered—if the FMLN came to power, I think they would be completely justified in executing the Salvadoran military command. And I think the FMLN *would*, because if they don't, they're going to have a *contra* situation exactly like what's going on in Nicaragua.

**Cineaste:** *Many people found the film's two main characters to be unlikable, even sleazy. Weren't you taking a risk in making both of them so thoroughly unlikable and almost deliberately undermining audience identification? I mean, why should anyone care what happens to them?*

**Stone:** Well, a lot of people didn't. They're certainly a turn-off, but, you know, Hunter Thompson doesn't hang out with Boy Scouts either. Reality dictates that two sleazoids would attract each other and the Rock-Boyle relationship was already in place. And believe me, Rock was even sleazier than Boyle. What was interesting, I don't know if it comes across, is that they didn't like each other. They go nuts just being in the same room together. Boyle is always trying to borrow money from Rock, and Rock is always trying to borrow money from Boyle. If one of them fucks a chick, the other one goes crazy. I mean, it's hopeless, it's really a Three Stooges situation, but that's what it was.

I don't calculate the result of a movie. I don't think, "Well, this is going to turn off the audience." I go with what seems to me honest and right. Of course, I also like to turn the tables. Boyle ends up trying to get the hell out of El Salvador and Rock ends up wanting to stay, which I thought was an interesting reversal.

**Cineaste:** *Salvador was financed by an English company, Hemdale, but what happened with the film's release in the U.S.?*

**Stone:** Nobody in the American distribution system wanted it on terms that made any economic sense for Hemdale. They had to retain home video rights in order to justify their investment, and nobody would take it without videocassette as a back-up, because otherwise a distributor really has no incentive for investing time and money in the film's theatrical release. As a result, *Salvador* was badly and unimaginatively distributed by Hemdale with a very small amount of money. It did very well in Los Angeles and in a few other cities, but it never had any kind of national release pattern. It was sporadic.

**Cineaste:** *If you had been able to make* Platoon *when you first completed the script, in 1976, do you think you would have made the same film? And do you think the public response might have been different?*

**Stone:** Yes, the script was more or less the same struc-

James Woods (center), Elpedia Carrillo and Jim Belushi take cover from military gunfire in *Salvador*

*Platoon*

ture. It deepened a bit for me in 1984 when I did a rewrite and put in the killing of Sergeant Barnes by the Charlie Sheen character. That was a heightening of the symbolism I was trying to achieve. In the original version of the script, Chris got out easy, he just walked. In the final rewrite, I decided that, be that as it may, he would go out of there a murderer.

I think the film would have been accepted in 1976. I also think it would have been accepted in 1984. It was probably most acceptable in 1986, but I think it's a shame that it took America twenty years to come to terms with Vietnam. I don't think the American people have even begun to come to terms with Central America.

**Cineaste:** *What kind of political role do you think a film such as* Platoon *can play?*

**Stone:** Movies are only, finally, an approximation of reality, and, as such, *Platoon* is an approximation of Vietnam. It's important to the degree that it reminds Americans, and people all over the world, what war *really* is—that war kills and maims and steals souls—because forgetting is easy—that's a cliché, but it's true—and it is important to remember.

**Cineaste:** Platoon *portrays the Vietnam conflict in individual, humanistic terms, which succeeds from the point of view of drama, but isn't there a political limitation to this approach? For instance, you were saying that war steals the souls of the aggressors, but we should also be conscious of those who were the victims of this aggression. The war obviously did not mean the same for the Vietnamese people. In* Platoon, *the Vietnamese troops appear as little more than shadows, almost as a punishment for something that had gone wrong with America.*

**Stone:** I think what you say is quite right. The film is, of course, two hours long, and to do what you're suggesting would have necessitated a completely different approach, a film like Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, where you cut from the French back to the Algerians. And there is another great story, I think, in doing this as an epic, in which you show American as the late Roman Empire, and you cut from Washington, which is sending out legions to Vietnam, to Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam. Then you show a North Vietnamese living in a tunnel for a year, and the only American soldiers you see would be from the viewpoint of the North Vietnamese in his tunnel. The first time you see an American, he'd be looking down a hole.

But I wanted to tell the story of a small microcosm of an infantry unit and the struggles of a young boy. That's what interested me, and I could only do it from his perspective. I took that approach in *Midnight Express*, too, where I followed the story of one person. Too many war films try to give you too much exposition, they all fall into a pattern, and I always found those films to be unlike war, because war is chaotic.

As for seeing the North Vietnamese troops as shadows moving in the jungle, that was the way we saw them. Sixty to seventy percent of our actions came at night, and they were very hard to see, very hard to catch. In fact, when I was there, we didn't really *see* the North Vietnamese very much. And the villagers were there as objects of our mixed anger and love.

**Cineaste:** *How do you account for the difference between your voluntary enlistment to serve in Vietnam and your present beliefs?*

**Stone:** I basically enlisted at the age of 20 because I believed in the message that we were fighting to stop communism in Asia. After experiencing the war, I thought about it for many years, read books, educated myself, and, I think, matured, and now I see the mistakes I made as a youth.

The war in Vietnam was lost before it was ever fought. It was lost, in my opinion, after World War II when Ho Chi Minh offered us a very acceptable solution, but we turned it down and fought on the side of the French colonialists. For me, the war had no moral integrity and that's why we lost.

**Cineaste:** *Do you think the Vietnam experience could reoccur today with a new generation of young Americans?*

**Stone:** Oh, definitely. It's a recurring danger. The media in America can whip up a mass hatred for just about anything. I talk to young men, and they're ready to go to Nicaragua to wipe out the 'commies' there, but they particularly hate Khomeini. I'm not talking about the entire younger generation—there are many young people who question the goals of war—but there's always that forty to sixty percent willing to go anywhere for a good fight.

**Cineaste:** *The story of your new film,* Wall Street, *is reportedly based on the experiences of a personal friend of yours named Owen Morrisey.*

**Stone:** I really can't comment on that. I knew several people on Wall Street who were very young, who made a lot of money, and several of my friends lost money.

**Cineaste:** *But isn't your film in some way the story of Morrisey, who was involved in a $20 million insider trading scandal in 1985?*

**Stone:** He's part of the composite. It's a piece of him, it's a piece of Dennis Levine, who was arrested, and Ivan Boesky, and—I don't want to give you the names—but there were a series of young men who were arrested for insider trading.

**Cineaste:** *A number of brokers and insider traders served as advisors on the film. What sort of contribution did they make?*

**Stone:** We gave the script to a lot of people and got a lot of criticism back, which led to a lot of changes which made things more realistic. Through talking to them I came to the conclusion that I wanted to include a corporate stockholders meeting, and the boardroom scene where they break up Blue Star Airlines, which weren't in the original script. Much of the dialog and the sense of what happens behind closed doors only came about through talking to people who were inside those closed rooms.

**Cineaste:** *Did you see any other films for research purposes? Did you see* Rollover, *for example, and stuff like that?*

**Stone:** Sure, but *Rollover* showed us what *not* to do. Our problem was to make a very complicated subject clear, and I think we made it not only clear but I also think we made it exciting. None of the reviews have said it's dull, that's for sure. If anything, they've been saying it's more of a potboiler, but that seems to me too shallow a description of it. As a matter of fact, you'll like it because it has an analysis of class structure that you don't see in main-

Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) threatens Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), right, in *Wall Street*

stream movies very much.

I knew that this film would not ever get the same attention that *Platoon* got because it's not about a universal subject like war. It's about greed, about people who are somewhat more selfish—super-rich people, really. I think that, at best, the film is in the *Network* genre, but that type of film doesn't do as well. I mean, no one in, say, Erie, Pennsylvania or Fort Walton, Florida goes to those movies, so I know there's a more limited audience for *Wall Street.*

**Cineaste:** *We understand that the film is to some extent considered a tribute to your late father, who was a stockbroker.*

**Stone:** It was dedicated to my father, but I don't think he would recognize present-day Wall Street. Wall Street had a more creative purpose for my father, and I think he would be offended by the excesses and the directions that a lot of the Wall Street money has gone to. Too much money has gone to speculation, speculation that doesn't really create or produce anything for society.

**Cineaste:** *The social conflicts in your films are generally portrayed through the activities of individual protagonists, and their crises of conscience and growing sense of justice never move to a collective level. What is your interpretation of the individual in history?*

**Stone:** I consider my films first and foremost to be dramas about individuals in personal struggles, and I consider myself to be a dramatist before I am a political filmmaker. I think what links all my films—from *Midnight Express,* to *Scarface, Salvador, Platoon* and *Wall Street*—is the story of an individual in struggle with his identity, his integrity, and his soul. In many of these movies, the character's soul is stolen from him, or lost, and in some cases he gets it back at the end. I do not believe in the collective version of history. I believe that the highest ethic is the Socratic one, from the dialogues of Socrates, which says, 'Know thyself.'

**Cineaste:** *Do you think the Academy Awards for* Platoon *reflect a progressive, more realistic trend within the American film community which perhaps can contribute to a greater political consciousness or social awareness on the part of the American people?*

**Stone:** Jesus, I hope you're right. The film community has generally been more left than the rest of the country. We're generally regarded as kooks, so it's hard for us to have much political influence. Only through the films themselves can some subtle change in awareness occur.

My personal hope is simply that, within the limits of our system, the Democrats can get in in 1988. I'm supporting Mike Dukakis from Massachusetts. I've spoken to him, and he knows what's going on in Central America. He's dead set against our present policies there, but he would have many problems to overcome if he were elected. He would have to deal with a very strong Cold War bureaucracy that's been in place since 1946, and this cuts across the Defense Department, the CIA, the National Security Council, and a general consensus in Congress. It won't be easy.

**Cineaste:** *Are you working on a new film project now?*

**Stone:** I have been working on another Central American script which *might* be the next picture. I don't really want to talk abot it, though, because I'm really paranoid about made-for-television movies. ■