

Oliver Stone's World Trade Center: a crude and dishonest work

By David Walsh
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World Trade Center, directed by Oliver Stone, screenplay by Andrea Berloff

Five years after the fact, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, remain largely uninvestigated. The most critical questions surrounding events that supposedly “changed everything” continue to go unanswered and even unaddressed.

Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*, following in the wake of *United 93* (directed by Paul Greenglass), does not deign to approach any of the troubling issues surrounding September 11. On the contrary, Stone's work is artistically crude and politically dishonest.

The film follows two Port Authority policemen, John McLoughlin (played by Nicolas Cage) and Will Jimeno (Michael Peña), who are ordered on the morning of September 11 to help with the evacuation of the first World Trade Center tower to be struck and end up buried in rubble themselves. For the greater portion of the film we see McLoughlin and Jimeno, in pain and speaking to one another, stuck in the tons of wreckage of the massive skyscrapers.

At one point in Stone's film, President George W. Bush shows up on a television screen. “The resolve of our great nation is being tested, but make no mistake,” he asserts, “we will show the world we will pass the test.” New York City's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani makes a brief appearance. Horrified television viewers around the world watch the event.

Much of the film cuts between the two trapped men and their distraught wives and families in suburban New York and New Jersey. Donna McLoughlin (Maria Bello), the wife of the 21-year veteran of the police force, has four children, one of whom accuses her of indifference because the family sits at home and waits for news. Eventually, Donna heads into Manhattan to find out her husband's fate.

Jimeno's wife, the younger Allison (Maggie Gyllenhaal), is five months pregnant. With her family and in-laws, she waits anxiously across the river in New Jersey. Given false information that her husband has been rescued, Allison and other family members rush to lower Manhattan, only to be told that Jimeno remains trapped in the ruins.

An ex-marine from Connecticut, Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon), changes into his old uniform and unofficially reports for duty at Ground Zero. Patrolling the site at night, he makes contact with Jimeno and McLoughlin, who are eventually brought to the surface by emergency workers risking their own lives in the process.

The real McLoughlin and Jimeno survived the ordeal, and the screenplay, by Andrea Berloff, is based on their accounts of the experience.

Stone has never been a serious artist. His “good” films (*Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*) were not very good, unsubtle and bombastic, and his bad films (*The Doors*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Any Given Sunday*, *Alexander*) have simply been awful.

About *Any Given Sunday*, six years ago, I wrote: “In any event, the final result is at once clichéd, impersonal and hysterical. Nearly everyone acts

detestably ~~throughout~~ ^{throughout}.” in 2005: About ~~Alexander~~ little about its central figure or the sort of society he emerged from or envisioned. Its goings-on are rather silly. It's not at all clear what Stone is getting at, other than suggesting that conquering the world is exhausting and psychologically damaging work. He wants us to admire youth and heroism, but a sensibility that finds it difficult to distinguish between the exploits of Jim Morrison of *The Doors* and Alexander of Macedon may be lacking some fundamental ingredient.”

Berloff's screenplay for *World Trade Center*, although based on facts, is cliché-ridden and contrived, and the direction follows suit. Even the opening banter among the Port Authority cops feels false. Certain moments are objectively moving, and the performers do their best, but the film is emotionally manipulative and maudlin. “Is Daddy coming home?” asks Allison's daughter at one point. “They did what they had to do,” we are sternly told at another. Although no expense or theatrics have been spared, the condition of McLoughlin and Jimeno is never genuinely communicated—because the film, at its core, is deeply evasive and untruthful and this finds expression at every dramatic turning point.

Stone and his colleagues assert that *World Trade Center* is “not a political film.” In a variety of interviews, the director has sounded this theme. “The beauty of my original premise was to take you inside the lives of these two men,” Stone told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. “I wanted to narrow it down to two men and feel their fear, their strength and their courage. I thought this was a fresh way to purge our systems of this tragedy.”

In comments to the *New York Times*, the filmmaker went farther: “It's not about the World Trade Center, really. It's about any man or woman faced with the end of their lives, and how they survive.”

The notion that this is merely a tribute to the courage and strength of individuals on a tragic day is absurd, and it's doubtful that Stone believes it. If the work is simply about individual heroics, or how men and women face the end of their lives, why spend \$63 million in recreating the rubble of the World Trade Center?

The filmmaker's own view, which comes out from time to time, seems to be that September 11 was an extraordinary opportunity for national unity, which was hijacked by a crowd of neo-conservatives in the Bush administration: “All I can say is that we had the sympathy of the world on that day. The rest of the world was with us. We had a right to pursue those murderers. We should have closed the circle. We didn't need more and more terror, Constitutional breakdowns and more pain.” Iraq, he argues, like numerous leading Democrats, is the “wrong war.”

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Stone had a more “left” take on the events. On October 6, 2001, at a New York Film Festival forum, he denounced the “new world order” and asserted that “the revolt of September 11th was about ‘Fuck you! Fuck your order—’” He suggested that those in the Arab world who celebrated the downing of the World Trade Center were reacting like those who had responded joyfully to the French and Russian revolutions. Stone also apparently

drew a link between the attacks and the hijacking of the 2000 elections by the Bush camp, which he described as a confirmation of the demise of democracy.

To ascribe any degree of political legitimacy to the heinous attacks of September 11, in which 2,700 innocent human beings horribly lost their lives, was wrong and disoriented. Stone's transformation into a manufacturer of patriotic myths is not an improvement. He asserts, "Don't pigeon-hole me; I change." We feel that a lack of principles and any sense of political responsibility, however, are constants.

In any event, Stone, with whatever degree of consciousness, has made a highly political film. Granted, this takes a peculiar form. In *World Trade Center*, no effort has been made to provide the slightest historical or political context for the 9/11 attacks; on the contrary, Stone's film is devoted to the principle of explaining nothing. The viewer, it is made clear, will know only what McLoughlin and Jimeno knew that day. Why is that an advantage? What is the point of art in that case? This was the premise of *United 93*, and it failed in that instance, too.

If sticking to the bare empirical facts, or claiming to do so, is a poor guideline for a historian or a journalist, it is nearly always fatal for an artist. Art exists to illuminate, to expand, to magnify. It lives or dies by the degree to which its imaginative and recreative powers are exercised, even in non-fiction or documentary—in those cases, the conscious intervention of the artist to arrange his or her material is perhaps all the more essential.

It is impossible to understand the smallest incidents of September 11 apart from their broader context. The film, of course, does not take this up, but the very unpreparedness of the city for such an attack led to the high death toll among firefighters in particular. The latter were unable to communicate with each other or the police. Firefighters in the World Trade Center's north tower, for example, 121 of whom died, were never able to hear the order to evacuate because of faulty equipment—at a time when all the civilians who could possibly have been reached were already out of the building.

Meanwhile, Rudolph Giuliani treated September 11 as one extended photo opportunity. As the WSWS has noted, the mayor "did little other than appear repeatedly before the television cameras." At the national commission hearings in May 2004, Giuliani was heckled by a number of relatives of those killed in the attack. (In a new book, as noted by the *New York Times* August 6, commission heads Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton admit that they failed to "ask tough questions" of Giuliani out of fear of "public anger"—i.e., the right-wing media.)

The general social and socio-psychological situation is a fundamental fact for cinema; it has to saturate a given work. Stone's film, however, portrays an American society without sharp contradictions. The better Hollywood films about World War II never painted such a false picture. Even the titles of some of the works, *They Were Expendable*, the ironic *The Best Years of Our Lives*, acknowledged difficulties and social discontent. In *World Trade Center* the myth of a nationally unified, harmonious America filters into the images and falsifies critical moments, including intimate ones.

Explicitly political elements are not missing either in this "non-political" film. A Sheboygan, Wisconsin, policeman, focused upon for some reason, calls the terrorists "bastards." The images of the ex-marine, Karnes, in his uniform, determinedly searching the smoking ruins are particularly loaded. Having come upon the trapped men, in the company of another marine, he shouts down to them, "We are marines. We're not leaving you. You are our mission." Later in the film, Karnes looks straight ahead and menacingly avers, "They're gonna need some good men out there to avenge this."

Stone's work is thoroughly conformist and encourages various forms of backwardness. One shot stands out in particular: one of Allison's in-laws on her knees, tearfully praying. The camera lingers on the woman, in

Stone's inimitable style, which consists of hitting the spectator over the head until he or she cries "Uncle!" We are also treated twice to a vision of Jesus Christ, which apparently came to Jimeno in his obviously desperate circumstances.

Patriotism, militarism, religion, Bush and Giuliani: this is nothing for Stone to be proud of. The extreme right, however, thinks highly of *World Trade Center*. Reactionary columnist Cal Thomas termed the work "one of the greatest pro-American, pro-family, pro-faith, pro-male, flag-waving, God Bless America films you will ever see." L. Brent Bozell III, president of the right-wing Media Research Center and founder of the Parents Television Council, described *World Trade Center* as "a masterpiece." These comments strike one as a clutching at straws. It's dubious, in fact, whether such an insincere film will have a significant impact on those who see it.

Parenthetically, the effort by Paramount on behalf of *World Trade Center* is a further repugnant instance of the Hollywood studios' knuckling under to the ultra-right. The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the studio hired a media firm [Creative Response Concepts] that played a prominent role in various conservative causes, notably the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth group that attacked Sen. John F. Kerry's Vietnam record during the 2004 presidential campaign, to do outreach in the conservative community. Paramount also tried to avert a backlash in Washington by having screenings of the film and its trailer for members of Congress."

Why has Stone made this film? As he says, he "changes," and it may very well be that his own confused, disoriented views are drifting generally to the right. The atmosphere of intimidation that followed the September 11 attacks and which has never dissipated has clearly had an impact on an entire social layer, in Hollywood in particular. How many leading film figures have denounced the Bush administration for its criminal activities?

There is another issue, however, perhaps an even more troubling one, and not only associated with Stone's evolution (although he may be particularly susceptible): the obsession with celebrity in the US, the desire to be in the limelight, the fear of isolation and disapproval. As we noted seven years ago, at the time of informer Elia Kazan's honoring by the Academy Awards—"In America, after all, if you are not an immense success, a star, you are nothing, a human zero."

Stone has been wandering in the wilderness for a dozen years or more. Recent films, *Alexander* in particular, have not been successful in the US. Directing *World Trade Center* did not fall into his lap. As he admits, he campaigned for the job. Clearly, he felt, here was a chance to get back in the industry's good graces, to return to the fold. And, by all appearances, the strategy has worked.

The filmmaker made a revealing comment in an interview with the *New York Times*, whose reporter noted that Paul Haggis (*Crash*) is directing an adaptation of former intelligence analyst Richard Clarke's book, *Against All Enemies*, which took the Bush administration to task for its failings. "Asked if that weren't the kind of film he might once have tried to tackle, Stone first scoffs: 'I couldn't do it. I'd be burned alive.' Then he adds: 'This [*World Trade Center*] is not a political film. That's the mantra they handed me.'"

How can anything worthwhile emerge from this type of cowardice and cynicism?

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