

## THE UNITED STATES PRESIDENTS IN OLIVER STONE'S POLITICAL CINEMA

Painting, literature, music and arts in general have always been interested in power in order to seek refuge or source of financing. However, as centuries go by, they strived for studying, understanding and even criticizing this power. In every time, men have used art and its several forms in order to describe the physical, natural, social and political context, creating an important way of expression, communication and self-consciousness. Moreover, art has always been tightly bound to religious, political or social power. Therefore, this power used art to justify and celebrate its values by playing the role of a buyer, a protector or a user. Nevertheless, art was able to deliver alternative ideas and values by interpreting political and socio-cultural changes and bypassing every rule and model. Cinema, as a form of art, is not an exception. Thanks to its communicative ability, cinema is nowadays the most popular and powerful expressive form.

Cinema analyses power and its effects on men and it describes this relationship power-man through various ways, such as satire, science fiction or “simple” biographic and literary transpositions<sup>1</sup>. Many films underline this fact: *The Great Dictator* (1940) by Charlie Chaplin, *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Welles, *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005) by George Clooney, *The Truman Show* (1998) by Peter Weir. Furthermore, cinema gives the change of telling a story. As a matter of fact, several films deal with the same topic through different angles; for example, many films tell the story of the same character and in particular of American Presidents.

The figure of the President of United States of America has always attracted Hollywood film productions, first as an historical character in costume films,

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. G. Rondolino e D. Tomasi, *Manuale di storia del cinema*, UTET Università Torino 2010

then as a character experiencing risks, attacks and intrigued storylines. In American films, the President is a reference figure even in the most disparate situations.

In order to analyze the figure of Presidents of United States, we would like to concentrate on Oliver Stone's trilogy: *JFK* (1991), *Nixon* (1995) and *W.* (2008).

Oliver Stone has often been described as "the director of the 1960s par excellence" thanks to his aptitude for dealing with socially and politically difficult topics like the Vietnam War, Wall Street, the Kennedy case, Nixon. He is a creature of that period and culture, that's why he analyses this particular decade that he considers the most exciting.

Stone entered Hollywood world during Reaganism in 1980s, in a conservative and unwilling to risks atmosphere. His films are daring and he managed to create a reputation as an unconventional director, even working in Hollywood context. He is one of the few directors that irritated and provoked, but also enchanted critics and public. Stone's films got lots of criticisms and they sparked off the debate about the values of American system. Oliver Stone is not only a political director, but also an author covering a wide range of topics. He is one of the most "discussed" directors in the story of cinema, because he agreed to be interviewed by critics and journalists and because every single event of his life (the military service in Vietnam, his political ideas, the use of alcohol and drugs, the relationship with his father) has been analyzed in order to understand this alternative Hollywood figure.

Oliver Stone was born in 15<sup>th</sup> Septembre 1946 in New York. His father was Louis Stone, a Hebrew Wall Street stockbroker, and his mother, Jacqueline Goddet, was a Catholic French housewife. His parents, despite their different religious and cultural points of view, conveyed the typical American middle-class values. His father had always enhanced discipline and countered any sort

of vices. He taught young Oliver that life is hard and the most important thing to do is to make a living. Moreover, the father's conservative right-wing ideas influenced Oliver's adolescence making him eager to leave for Vietnam as volunteer when he was only 21. His mother introduced him to the cinema, taking him to cinema to watch the same film twice or three times. His father was a movie-goer, too.

He suddenly left Yale University in 1965, after just a year. He started to live like a vagrant, and adventurer and he went to South-East Asia when he was only 18. Once back to United States, after six more months at Yale, Stone entered the army as a volunteer in 1967 during the Vietnam War. He served the army for 15 months in the 25<sup>th</sup> infantry division. Stone was disillusioned by the Vietnam he discovered as a soldier that was completely different from the Vietnam he discovered in 1965 when the population was welcoming. Once back home, he wandered around the West Coast until he was put in prison for detention of marijuana at the Mexico border.

Afterwards, following one of his friends' advice, he applied for cinema class at New York University. The charisma of Martin Scorsese, his first teacher, inspired some Stone's short films. Subsequently, Stone became keen on the creative freedom in European films and directors, like Truffaut, Godard and Fellini.

In 1973, Stone managed to sell his screenplay *Seizure*, based on one of his nightmares, to a Canadian company. This film released in US in 1974, but it didn't run for long time. *Seizure* is an imaginative psychological thriller and apparently not intended to be political. It succeeded to convey the mental distress of an artist who is drove to an uncertain end by out of control circumstances. And this is a clear metaphor of Stone's life.

In 1977, Stone left New York. Then he met the director Alan Parker for whom he wrote the script of the dramatic film *Midnight Express* (1978). This film achieved resounding success and it won Stone an Oscar for the best adapted writing in 1979 making the director known in Hollywood. Between 1978 and 1986, Stone had been writing screenplays for medium/high budget films.

One day, one of his friends, Richard Boyle, showed him some drafts about his travels to El Salvador. Stone drew inspiration from it, making a film about El Salvador. Hollywood conservatism didn't accept the screenplay as it was characterized by political topics and an anti-hero. Therefore, Stone committed himself to English producers, making a "radical and anarchical" motion picture concerning the controversial role of US in El Salvador. Critics are surprised by the left-wing ideas carried by Stone in his film *Salvador* (1986).

In 1986, Stone directed *Platoon*, the first film about Vietnam written and directed by an old soldier. This fact made the film attractive to public and critics, too. It is the most autobiographic of his films. Stone did not deal with the political aspect of war, but he focused on people's suffering, transforming it in the archetypal experience of a soldier in Vietnam. This film is a hit and it earned eight Oscar nominations in 1987 and four Oscar Awards among which the best direction prize.

The next film, *Wall Street* (1987), owed much to *Platoon* for what concerns the structure and the narrative conflicts. The film drew on the same Oedipus theme in which "two fathers", one good and one bad, contended for the young man's soul, even if, in this case, it concerns business and not killing. Therefore, *Wall Street* can be considered as a civilian *Platoon*.

After having shot *Talk Radio* (1988) describing an alternative America and dealing with power abuse, Stone went back to Vietnam War topic and he shot *Born On the Fourth of July* (1989) that is the ideal sequel of *Platoon*. In this

film there are several references to personal illusions and real people. Both critics and public loved this film.

Another important film about 1960s is *The Doors* (1991). Jim Morrison was extremely important for Stone because he personified the 1960s myth, the rebellion, the boundless feeling, and the uncontrolled passions.

*Heaven & Earth* (1993) is the last film of the trilogy about Vietnam. The leading character is now a Vietnamese, not an American, and, for the first time, it is a woman. This movie reconciled Stone with his illusions about Vietnam and made him discover Buddhism, according to whom catharsis is not necessary in one life, but it can be reached in future lives as well. Afterwards, Stone shot *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *U Turn* (1997) and *Any Given Sunday* (1999).

Later, he decided to concentrate on documentaries. So he shot *Comandante* (2003) and the sequel *Looking for Fidel* (2004), both concerning the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, then *Persona non grata* (2003) about the conflict between Israel and Palestine and *South of the Border* (2009) dealing with Chavez phenomenon, in South America.

Recently, Stone directed *Alexander* (2004), a biography about Alexander the Great, *World Trade Center* (2006) dealing with the terroristic attacks on 11<sup>th</sup> September, *W.* (2008) the last film of the trilogy about Presidents of United States, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) sequel of *Wall Street* and finally *Savages* (2012).

Oliver Stone has strongly believed in political cinema renewal. The Presidents of United States he concentrated on were John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Richard Milhous Nixon e George Walker Bush. The three films are ideologically linked: Kennedy was the most beloved (defeating Nixon at the election), Nixon was the most hated until Bush's arrival. The controversial *W.* concentrated on the detested Bush Jr., perhaps too much underestimated by critics, analyzed, from a

tragic point of view, the figure of the President just overcome. Despite the limits of an instant movie, the father/son contrast links this film with *Nixon* for what concerns the esthetic choice of a perfect mimesis between actors and real characters and for what concerns the idea of a characters suffering from his inadequacy. Nixon, in particular, is seen as a clever but envious person. In the movie *Nixon*, Stone is able to transform a political scandal into a human Shakespearian drama. The exuberant style of Stone's political cinema blends real documents with philological reconstruction, it increases the numerous points of view, eliminating the traditional chronology in order to combine story, alternative point of view and tragic dramaturgy. In this sense, the masterpiece of Stone's political cinema is certainly *JFK* that made Stone the most involving historiographer of US recent history.

While reading Jim Garrison's book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*<sup>2</sup>, Stone picked out the core of a powerful, decisive and certainly controversial film. In his book, Garrison deals with his vain efforts to sentence a businessman, Clay Shaw, for conspiracy in Dallas killing when he was district attorney in New Orleans between 1967 and 1969. Garrison/Stone saw Kennedy as a good "father" killed, for whom his sons have to mourn and to redeem the country in his name. The film wants to be an alternative truth, a real "myth" opposed to the one created by the Warren Commission.

Kennedy and Nixon are two of the most recalled figures in recent American cinema. The first one is the symbol of civic responsibility and of the dark side of democracy (both he and his brother Robert were killed and Robert Kennedy's murder was told in *Bobby* (2006) by Emilio Estevez<sup>3</sup>). On the other hand, Nixon is their nemesis, but he is redeemed in the superb film *Frost/Nixon* (2008) by Ron Howard.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Garrison, *On the Trial of the Assassins: My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President Kennedy*, Sheridan Square press, New York 1988, trad. it. *JFK, Sulle tracce degli assassini*, Sperling Paperback, Milano 2003

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. N. Aspesi, *Bobby Kennedy, il sogno spezzato*, «La Repubblica», 18 gennaio 2007, p. 53

The idea of making a film about Nixon dated back to some years but it was impossible to carry out until the President was alive. His death in 1994 broke the deadlock. In the film, Nixon turns into a tragic character: megalomaniac, egocentric, unable to communicate, terrified by not matching up, paranoid, unsatisfied, always pushed to lie to himself and to the others.<sup>4</sup> A sort of union between Macbeth and Richard III, a character from Elizabethan drama: he had modest origins, he reached the top before falling down. Paradoxically, Nixon saved himself only when he definitively fell. The film is not an historical inquiry, but rather a return back to himself after having drunk a few too many. It is a subjective view of the story, composed of flashbacks, particular angle shots, and chronological disorder. Richard Nixon looks like a typical character from Stone's films because of his complexity, his ambiguity and his togetherness of greatness and misery.

After Kennedy and Nixon, Stone deals with Bush Junior, even if this time cinematic pretension does not match up with political ambition. It is probably because, for the two previous films, he could proceed from two highly dramatic moments, such as doubts concerning JFK's death and Watergate for *Nixon*. According to the director, Bush's presidency is unimpressive and the film undertakes to stress every single moment: vis-à-vis his colleagues, journalists, his family and the whole world. Stone describes George W. Bush from his well-know youth insobriety: alcohol, cars, women until Iraq War. This film is an actual biopic about George W. Bush and, at the same time, it is a pitiless humorous portrait of a politician and a man. The theme of the father is present in this film, as well. As a matter of fact, according to Oliver Stone, father's ghost is the key to the reading of Bush Jr. that does not feel equal to his parent. In this film, Bush is an apathetic person, characterized by his disproportionately high ego and by his inability to acknowledge his more evident mistakes. That is why

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. R. Rombi, Stone: "Il Presidente? Arrogante e fragile come mio padre", «La Repubblica» 21 febbraio 1996, p. 38

he is totally different from the usual Stone's characters: he has no hopes, he does not redeem himself once he hit rock bottom because, differently from Nixon, he is unable to know himself. Therefore, he is a comic but not tragic character. In the film *W.*, George W. Bush becomes a man of the past.