ANOTHER MEDITATION ON DEATH
An Interview with Oliver Stone

WORLD TRADE CENTER (2006) IS BASED on the true story of two Port Authority patrolmen, John McLoughlin (Nicholas Cage) and Will Jimeno (Michael Peña) who, on a voluntary rescue mission into one of the flaming towers on 9/11, are suddenly buried in an avalanche of twisted steel and pulverized concrete when the building collapses. Until their deliverance late the following day, the film parallels the struggle of the two men to stay alive, with their anxious wives (Maria Bello and Maggie Gyllenhaal) at home as the world trembles with news of the terrorist attacks on the city of New York.

Gripping, tender, and extremely powerful, World Trade Center is Oliver Stone’s sixteenth film as director. It is also one of his most restrained, with straightforward editing and camerawork and far less dialogue or narration than his previous films. By incorporating live television footage and commentary, there is also a compelling sense of immediacy but few images of the burning towers or their destruction. More important is that the mythic proportion of the 2001 national trauma becomes humanized in the grueling, finally transfigurative ordeal of McLoughlin and Jimeno.

Though Stone eschews any overt reference to the profusion of well-documented counter-explanations to the official version of 9/11, no other director–writer has so influenced the American political debate or the country’s struggles with self-awareness. With such films as Salvador, Platoon (both 1986), Wall Street (1987), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), The Doors, JFK (both 1991), Heaven and Earth (1993), Natural Born Killers (1994), Nixon (1995), and Any Given Sunday (1999), the three-time Academy Award-winner combines technical brilliance, stylistic audacity, and moral conviction to confront and unsettle as much as entertain. Still, as he discusses here, World Trade Center may also indicate a new direction in Stone’s methods and preoccupations.

We met at the west Los Angeles editing facility last August where Stone was completing a three-hours-forty-minutes DVD edition of Alexander, the 2004 epic that faltered at the domestic box office but enjoyed huge popularity abroad. Robust and very fit, Stone more resembles a retired running back than a Hollywood aesthete. Prone to laugh heartily, especially at his own foibles, Stone is nonetheless an engaging, pensive speaker who does not mince words. This is, after all, the man who once said, “You should make a film as if it’s going to be your last breath on earth.”

RIC GENTRY: Where were you on that day, September 11, 2001?
OLIVER STONE: I was asleep in L.A. My wife woke me up and put the TV on. I saw what everyone else saw. I was upset and very angry. But I felt it most deeply on the following Sunday, five days later, the day you spend with your family. Here was a Sunday and the families of the victims would not have them there. They’d never be coming home. That’s when it struck me the hardest. That’s when I felt the emptiness. It was horrible.

Later on, another part of me was trying to keep the historical perspective. John F. Kennedy’s murder, Vietnam, Watergate, the Oklahoma City bombing. I’ve seen many acts of horror through these some sixty years. You try not to lose your balance when overwhelmingly tragic things happen.

It wasn’t long after 9/11 that you left the country to shoot Alexander. You were gone for three years. In the meantime, the U.S. had invaded Iraq. Were you prepared for the mood of the country when you returned to make World Trade Center?
You know, going back to 2001, I was working on a script at the time, a My Lai kind of story, that didn’t get made precisely because there was this change, this fear. Before that I was working on Beyond Borders [2003], about a relief worker in Africa that was produced but I didn’t stay involved with it.

But the point is, these kinds of subjects were immediately endangered after 9/11. These kinds of films were the first casualties of the attack. Suddenly there was a kind of taboo with certain themes and stories. This is what fear does. Fear plays a role in controlling the system—commercially, politically, in every way.

And I remember getting into trouble at New York’s Lincoln Center in a big forum called “On Making Movies Matter: The Role of Filmmaking in the National Debate.” It was scheduled for October (2001), in advance of 9/11.

I spoke for about an hour, suggesting Pontecorvo stuff, The Battle of Algiers, confronting current issues in a dramatic but gripping way so that people would pay attention. I said it was a good time for that kind of filmmaking. But in a one-minute aside, I also said some things that were later quoted as if that were the gist of what I had to say. You know, I was very upset that the media was not putting 9/11 within the context of the previous decades of history. Later I was criticized for what I said, but the fact that this so-called “aside” was what got the attention told me that there was already the start of a drum beat for war, born out of this specter of fear.

What’s ironic is that I left the country to shoot Alexander, who made the first successful invasion of the East, the first westerner who actually succeeded, while Bush was making his foray into Iraq.

What appealed to you about World Trade Center?

I thought it was an excellent yet simple movie [written by Andrea Berloff] after Alexander’s grandiloquence, so to speak. To come back to contemporary America, after the Iranian war of 330 B.C., some 2400 years later, to the seminal event of this war. 9/11 precipitates Iraq, which may kick off more wars. The bottom line is that 9/11 is the Sarajevo assassination of this century, the French Revolution in the previous century. You know what I’m saying. 9/11 is the monolith.

I thought, what better way to tell it but through two guys who were part of this dramatic event and who had strong family lives that gave them reasons to survive.

That was the issue I kept thinking about. What motivated them to endure? It was horrific what they experienced. I might’ve given up. There was something in John and Will that pulled them through.

The two men are buried and immobile in the Trade Center rubble for over quarter of the story. When you first read the screenplay, it must have seemed very difficult to make that work, dramatically or otherwise. I did see that as a challenge. Claustrophobia is a factor in a film like this. But World Trade Center is not so much a question of containment as it is about light. You know, when I see the movie, what I like best about it are the spiritual qualities. When you think about Nick and Mike, their heads barely visible in these strange angles, you follow their eyes because you want to believe in them, you want to believe they’re going to survive. You watch their eyes as the measure of life in them.

There’s something very poignant about Nic Cage as a head in a heap of rocks and twisted metal just muttering these very ordinary words which nonetheless have a certain meaning. [Imitating Cage in a stricken,
monotonous voice] “My wife’s name is Donna. My kid J.J. is the unexpected one. I could’ve been a lieutenant. I never smile.” You know? As if he’s reminding himself of who he is, clinging to these pieces of himself.

I understand that you looked at films by Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer. Yeah, in relation to the “hole” [the underground chasm beneath the collapsed building where the men are trapped]. I don’t want to compare our movie to theirs. Those films are classics, but what we took from them was the stillness, the sense of stillness in the use of the close-up. It should be something you feel as much as see, a quiet through and beyond the frame.

You work this out in a triangular relationship between the actor, the camera, and the director. One gets the impression that the actor dominates a scene but it’s these three elements. In scenes where all you have is the actor before you, as in the “hole,” you realize that these are the rudiments of what makes a dramatic moment on screen.

With the lighting, [cinematographer] Seamus [McGarvey] was really trying to give it this struggle between light and dark. We tried to rhyme it out so it wouldn’t be overly dark in the eyes. We had, like, nine scenes in thirty-five minutes, less than four minutes a scene in the “hole,” but we started with the longest scene first and worked back from there.

And each scene in the “hole” gets lighter. As the day gets darker and drearier with the women, the scenes in the “hole” warm up, with the fires, the flashlights of the rescuers, so you see more and more.

There’s this whole transference. If you remember, in the beginning of the movie, New York goes from the dark to the light. The next day, John rises from the “hole,” coming up into the light. So this light/dark thing is going on the whole movie. That was the only way we could stylistically give it what it needed, this rhythm in light.

I think a lot of the power of Bresson’s close-ups lies in the black and white. A lot of it lies, frankly, in the lenses of the time, the focal depth for those movies in France in the 1940s and 50s. It was the Éclair, I believe, a beautiful camera with good hard lenses, great primes. We were on the edge of black and white in the “hole,” but it was still color.

This study of faces, especially faces so immobile, with nothing else to portray emotion or life itself, struck me as the distillation of a soul to its most refined and expressive capacity.

Thank you. There were metaphysical elements. My therapist [laughs] called it another meditation on death. But, unlike Alexander, it was the common man and the transcendence of the common man.

If you look at the movie closely, we took both of them several times to death states. Nic more than once, especially what I call the “2001 sequence,” [where] the light’s pulsing over his face. I was reading to him from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, trying to take the actors to the edges, the edges of death, based on philosophy and the little that I know of having sometimes felt like I had died. I mean, what is death? Something to pass through but also something larger than we are.

Nic really wanted to push it. He enclosed himself in a [sensory deprivation tank] and stayed there. So did Michael. And they spoke with the men whose characters they played. What John went through is unbelievable, what he claims was going through the whole experience in excruciating pain for twenty-two hours without losing consciousness. It’s impossible for me to believe that because I could never endure what he did. But for a man to go through twenty-two hours of that without losing a moment of consciousness, that’s where I softened the movie. I didn’t think the audience would sense how vulnerable he was without this lapse.

Was there anything else you did to invoke this spiritual sense? We tried every technique. I would sit there and read to them but it was a whole thing going on, with the lighting, the mood, the feel, the pulsing. Of course the crew was not too big. We were in very dark and dank places.

The movie goes very much into death.

This is very interesting because not only is this part of the spirituality of the film and a later sense of resurrection for the characters but, in another sense, a rebirth of a kind for the viewer, the way we look at 9/11 through the experience of World Trade Center. There’s a regeneration out of the cataclysm.

I think that’s the most important message of the film. You can come back, survive these horrible things. It’s not always true but we’d like it to be true. It was true for John and Will.

Let me read you something you once said about heroes, which I thought applied to World Trade Center. This is from the book Oliver Stone’s USA. In an essay by [Purdue University historian] James R. Farr, he quotes you saying, “I think the meaning of heroism has a lot to do with evolving into a higher human being. Heroism is tied to the evolution of consciousness.”

Further down [Farr] again quotes you, that “Heroes are the test pilots for an entire culture” and “the hero transcends self and death in the belief of something more.”
That’s what I was hoping for, a kind of transcendence, a cultural surge with the movie. But I don’t feel that in the culture.

Why do you think that is?

[Sighs] Many things. You know how I feel about the [mass] media, for example. It’s been the subject or part of the subject of some of my films, how it entrances and pollutes and trivializes. There’s also the technical devices [for mass communication] that leave people with fragments of information that do not add up and [therefore] an incomplete, confusing and finally abstract picture of the world. The devices become ends of their own, forms of stimulus rather than sources of information.

You see people everywhere with cell phones. It always bothered me, like they’re walking down the street talking to themselves.

[Laughs] What does that tell us?

There’s a preoccupation in your films with parental figures, Alexander, for example, Platoon, Wall Street, [Born on the] Fourth of July. With World Trade Center, I began to sense that the peril of the characters, in a figurative way, was that they were members of a family whose parents had abandoned them. Where is the air power in response? The National Guard? The Commander-in-Chief? There’s no one there but these unprepared citizens amidst the disaster.

But that’s the way it’s always going to be. If you’re a civilian in war, which we are, you’re going to have to deal with it on your own, believe me. If you see two sides on the street, don’t run to either one.

But it’s a pretty frightening thought, that the federal government wasn’t there.

Of course not. When guys came back from Vietnam, we knew the fuckin’ score. The government can’t take care of shit. You want to go to a veteran’s hospital to die? When did a government program ever work? All they did was build some fucking highways. And of course create the military-industrial complex.

What do you think really happened on 9/11?

I couldn’t tell you. But the consequences of that day are far worse. We’re in a far worse position now. There’s more terror, debt for war, constitutional breakdown. I mean, where we are is much more serious. How do you fight this? Look at now.

I’m not a journalist. I’m not a documentarian. As you know, I’m a dramatist. It takes time for me. I have to step back from this. But what I see is not over. There’s more comin’. We’re in the middle of the sea on a fuckin’ World War III boat. There’s no point in writing a novel about the conflict. Let’s try to find out what the fuck is happening. This is very serious.

Every day 200 people die in Iraq, get blown up here, blown up there. We started the whole fucking thing and now we’re immune to it. If 200 people died every day in some American city, we wouldn’t feel that way.

This guy, this jerk—after 9/11, you don’t pour fuel on the fire. You don’t make things into a war when they’re a battle. You see what I’m trying to say? You don’t make police action into a war.

You don’t create the Department of Homeland Security for $50 billion. Look at Katrina after Homeland Security. Where the fuck was the help there? Where the fuck was it? We all know what American bureaucracy achieves.

Alexander was willing to change as he went East. As he went East, he became more Eastern. Whereas Bush is intractable, unable to evolve, to understand the Eastern mentality. Of course, he’s not a frontline leader as Alexander was.
World Trade Center was shot in spherical, [a] 1.85: 1 [screen ratio]. That must have been a very deliberate decision, unrelated to budget, because you have a city [New York] that [with high-rises and skyscrapers] is very vertical. You’ve usually worked with anamorphic [2.35: 1 ratio, or “widescreen”], often very daringly. I wondered what were the considerations in shooting 1.85:1 for this film.

I’ve regularly gone back to spherical. There’s something modest about it. There was something modest about the movie. We could have made it work with anamorphic. It might’ve been spectacular, but to stare up at a giant screen seems somehow not in keeping of what this movie was about. The emotions are deep and profound but should be presented humbly.

I think I’m getting simpler now as I get older. Those who like my films would say there’s an intensity and power in the work, at whatever period I was making movies. It may not have worked for some, but you felt it. Even Alexander, for those who didn’t understand or like it, there was a punch. World Trade Center has that punch, but it has more punch in 1.85 than it does in 2.35. You can also over-punch.

I sat with [supervising sound editor] Wylie State men at the very first final mix, about three or four weeks before release. When I looked at the movie with that mix, I was so disappointed. The movie was completely lost for me. Completely buried. So much fucking sound. So much detail. So much exaggeration of rocks and debris, moving and shifting. The movie was lost. The humanity was lost because the sound interfered with our touching these people.

So my job essentially after that was to really peel back that mix, much of it in the last two weeks, in the last week maybe, a hard week of long hours. We got the mix down to what I felt was a humbler scale, which is where the 1.85 comes in. It was the same principle. The sound has to fit the picture. It would have been wrong to make a 1.85 film with a 2.35 soundtrack.

Poor Wylie, I was really raggin’ him. You know, I’d say, “Take this out. Take that out.” And he put a lot of work into these effects. He’d just done Poseidon II [sic]. I said to him, “I didn’t want to have that kind of movie.” The sound effects were certainly adequate but they were disaster effects. Whereas this, I wanted to keep the sound as raw as possible.

And very frightening, as much of what happens is suggested in this movie. People fidget and react. What they’re reacting to, essentially, is not something you see but something you hear.

How did you plan your shots for this film?

In many ways the shot list is going on from the very beginning, when you’re writing the screenplay or in this case when you’re reading it. You’re making lists in your mind. It’s the way you see it when you read it. It’s crucial to your understanding of it. Kubrick mentioned that. So much of it is all there, the way you read it.

But then the director begins his conversations with the others—the writer, the actors, the cinematographer, the production designer, the editor, the costume designer. From there it’s all an alchemy. How you see it begins to change. The purity of your vision when you read it, or wrote it, is no longer quite the same because so many other factors come into play. There’s now a clutter to the image that you had.

For example, you have a big actor. You no longer have the faceless man of your imagination. Now it’s Nic Cage, Jack Nicholson, or Al Pacino. They have priorities. They may want to look a certain way. You want to accommodate that without favoring the actor in a way that isn’t credible or overly defers to him on screen as the star. You’re always working with that. I think it’s a struggle for every filmmaker. That kind of thing.

And I think part of it for me, you see it in the movies I’ve made, is that I try to [examine] the process of looking. You know, the way we’re looking at it.

By “looking,” you mean not just what we see but how we see it, the conduits for perception, in a sense.

That’s a good way to put it, yeah.

How did you work with [cinematographer] Seamus McGarvey?

One thing Seamus did was enable me to intercut the scenes in the “hole” and I ended up doing that. The script changed in the editing. So it was good not to have to be held in by too much restriction of light. He gave me fine latitude on the negative but he shot it on the edge of darkness, too.

Earlier, we didn’t talk about shots so much because we knew that ultimately much of it would be decided when we got there, to the scenes in the “hole.” I told him my point of view, which was essentially inside the characters, a very subjective viewpoint. But sometimes Seamus would put the camera somewhere and all I would say is, “No, I don’t feel it there.” That’s all. And he was very open. He let me guide the camera because often I can’t put the camera in a certain place. I just can’t shoot there.

To find the right angle, once you had the actor in the “hole,” was crucial. If you didn’t have the right angle on them, fuck. Believe me, we worked with this because every move in the “hole” was so expensive in terms of time, energy. You never got any momentum if you
didn’t get the angle. Those first few days in the “hole” we suffered. We would shoot and not be happy and you’re dealing with a story about pain and the actors are in pain, too. It’s very tough to shoot that.

In what ways did World Trade Center evolve in the editing?

There were fifteen, sixteen scenes in the “hole” in the original script but nine in the final version, the result of a tremendous amount of condensation. Stuff that was in scene five was moved to scene two. In the editing we wanted to keep the pace, the tension of what might happen. Tension, when you think about it, is a kind of claustrophobia, a claustrophobia in time. When you combine that with the confinement of the men, I think you start to get a compounded feeling for enclosure.

But in recutting we surprised ourselves. We had sudden explosions [that weren’t in the scene as shot]. Pieces of dialogue we never thought would be there. Editing is so important because it’s like a rewrite. What was originally fifty minutes in the “hole” became thirty-five. The first scene was the longest at ten minutes, as I was saying, with Don Pizello dying. The second scene was less, eight minutes, and so on.

At the same time, whenever we went back into the “hole” there was this anxiety of what the next shock would be. When there was the collapse at 5.30 p.m. of [World Trade Center] building seven in the story, you hear the collapse before you see it. When it happened for me in the editing room for the first time, I nearly jumped out of my seat.

But there were other things you didn’t expect. The fireballs. The gun going off. You’re never at ease. By the end of it you have this emotional exhaustion from identifying with the characters.

That’s it. That how I hoped you would feel. And I’m telling you, if we’d have cut the movie to the fifty minutes that we shot according to the script, it wouldn’t have worked.

Was there anything in the use of lenses that you felt were vital to those scenes [in the “hole”]?

Seamus is the most conservative D.P. I ever worked with. He loved to work the 40[mm] and 50[mm], maybe even the 30[mm]. He liked those back from the subject with good focus. He liked to play it in the middle. I never moved around less in looking at a scene. It’s all in the use of the lens for him and the depth of field.

And I never shot so conservatively, except for that Hylen lens that was suggested to Seamus by Panavision. He wanted to put certain things out of focus in the same focal field. You could be very close to Nic Cage’s face, for example, and everything will be in deep focus except the eyes or the mouth. We did it about eight, ten times in the movie. It’s an effect that gets under your skin. You don’t even notice it but it bothers you.

Was that one reason you chose Seamus McGarvey as your cinematographer, because of this conservatism?

No. It was because I loved his work on The Hours [2002]. But in the broadest sense, I would say he created three distinct moods for World Trade Center, which was crucial to what the film accomplished and lovely photography in all three. There were the scenes in the “hole” but also the lives of the families in their homes and the night. I felt we needed those as markers in the film and I wanted to be sure we got them.
Seamus is Irish but lived in Scotland. He also did *The War Zone* [1999], a very dark film. But there was something about him that I liked. You know, I wanted to go with someone who was basically younger than me for some reason. I think it’s the energy.

And I have to tell you, Seamus flew in from England and met us in New York for the first time when we were scouting. He didn’t have the job yet. We found each other in the lobby and he says he was very nervous and probably talking too much. I’d forgotten this but according to Seamus, who has a heavy accent, I listened to him speak with a quizzical look on my face. Finally I leaned into him and said, “Do you come with subtitles? Because I can’t understand a fucking word you say.” [Laughter]

Can you believe I said that to him? The first words out of my mouth. But because I just insulted him, and couldn’t understand him, I said, “Ah, come on. Let’s go look at the location,” which turned out to be a scout of “ground zero” at the World Trade Center. We walked the whole Center that day, Seamus says it was one of the most meaningful days in his life, even if we wouldn’t have hired him, but we kind of bonded there and I wanted to keep him with me.

After the ominous shadow of the plane over the city, the look of the film changes. It’s more over-cranked (slow motion) and the lenses are longer. There’s a sense of disorientation.

Yes, that’s right. Not too over-cranked but some. Seamus also drained some of the color.

The hospital scenes also have a very different feeling, what I want to call “etherized,” spacey in a way. I think what you mean is the fluorescent light but nothing really very special. On the contrary, I regretted those scenes. I wanted to make those scenes much more extreme, like *Born on the Fourth of July*, but we were more conventional. That’s where Seamus is conservative. But probably because the “hole” is disorienting, the hospital following those scenes seems “etherized” to you.

But I hate hospital shooting because I’ve done so much of it. And after *ER*, what the fuck can you do? I mean, you dread those things. And yet, the hospital scenes, by sticking to the story, by sticking to the emotion, they work beautifully for me.

How does *World Trade Center* reflect who you are now? I’ll probably make more films like this. I don’t believe in all this juiced-up stuff in overdrive. I did that when I was younger. And there was a reason. It developed out of the story. But I just feel like there’s so much imagery now. I see it everywhere. Commercials, TV. TV especially. They’re doing my style from fifteen years ago on TV. And they’re doing it better and they’re doing it well.

But so what? Now I want to go back, more to Bergman and Dreyer and Bresson. I’m not saying I have their talent but I like that direction. They’re older and looking for what to them the deeper meanings are.

Is that what you meant before, by the reference to metaphysics? That element of it was very important to me [with *World Trade Center*]. I don’t know if it’s—some people got it. Some people wrote very beautifully about it and some people didn’t get it at all.

Was the cross in the church [in *World Trade Center*] an allusion to the last shot of [Bresson’s] *Diary of a Country Priest*?

No. But what amazed me, and I don’t want to compare myself to him in any way because I didn’t follow his path as a director at all, is the stillness in his frames. I come back to that. With Bresson it’s finding the right close-up and the right lighting. It’s very clear that there’s peace at the center. And torture at the same time.

And I think if you do the same, apply the same principle of close-ups in the “hole,” by setting up the right angle with the right lighting, you will get the best from the actor, some kind of refinement, in the look itself. I don’t know what it is, something psychic or metaphysical that comes out. Bresson was an expert, as was Dreyer, of finding that in the face, the human face.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 158–59.

RIC GENTRY is a Los Angeles filmmaker whose writing has previously appeared in *Film Quarterly* and numerous other publications. He is also a member of the editorial board of *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*.

ABSTRACT Oliver Stone discusses his film *World Trade Center* with Ric Gentry, discussing the political context and emphasizing the influence of Robert Bresson on the film’s spiritual concerns and its depiction of heroism; he also the details of the cinematography, editing, and sound edit.

KEYWORDS 9/11, *World Trade Center*, Oliver Stone, heroism, cinematography