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## OLIVER STONE'S POLITICAL CINEMA

### Abstract

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*Where there is the combination 'Politics and film', there is likewise the inevitable protagonist of political cinema – the American filmmaker, Oliver Stone. This paper explores the most important celluloid achievements of the great movie director, analyzes his film projects, summarizes them and draws conclusions. The focus of Oliver Stone's research is always the same: social power, political dominance, 'court' intrigues, political schemes and organized conspiracies, and coups. All of these are seasoned with very interesting analysis of the social milieu of the protagonists. In Stone's films, some of the following questions arise: What political motives drive his (anti)heroes? What are the main drivers of political activity? What is the societal, social and geopolitical concept of his heroes? The paper comprises a short biography of Oliver Stone, his most significant feature films and those of documentary-political nature, as well as some closing remarks on the significance and reach of his films.*

**Keywords:** *political cinema, Oliver Stone, social power, conspiracy, United States, anti-globalism.*

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## OLIVER STONE – A BIOGRAPHY

The American filmmaker William Oliver Stone was born in 1946 in New York. The director-to-be was the son of Jacqueline Godet, a Catholic woman of French ancestry, and Jewish stockbroker Louis Stone (real name: Louis Silverstein). Oliver Stone's religious views were pretty neutral and came somewhere in the middle of those of his parents. He opted for Protestantism and joined the Episcopal Church of the USA. Years later he would show a propensity for Buddhism. His parents' divorce came as a bitter blow to him, and since that point in his life he would go on to spend much more time with his father, which was to leave a visible mark in the films he was to make. He entered Yale University, but did not graduate from it, enlisting into the army instead, whence he was conscripted into the Vietnam War. This fact would affect Stone's worldview and his future celluloid interests.

He graduated from New York University in 1971, with a degree in film studies, where he was deeply influenced by director Martin Scorsese. His first major feature film, *Midnight Express*, which brought conditions in Turkish prisons to the silver screen, earned him and British director Alan Parker an Academy Award in 1979. He wrote a crime story for Brian de Palma, which grew into a movie script for *Scarface* in 1983. He carried off his first major solo award, an Academy Award for Best director in 1987 for *Platoon*, his powerful anti-war story about the Vietnam war. It was not difficult for Stone to write the screenplay and direct the piece, which was autobiographical to a large extent; the movie would go on to make the 2007 "100 best American films" list compiled by critics; the list includes movies made during the first hundred years of American cinema. He took on the same topic with the film *Born on the Fourth of July*, for which he would also go on to win an Academy Award for Best Director.

More feature films were to follow from there, perhaps even better-quality ones than those he had previously made, and by all means certainly more memorable than the mentioned two films that earned him the Academy Awards for Best Director. Nevertheless, because of their strong criticism, especially of the US establishment, these films were largely ignored, so only *JFK* was awarded an Oscar, and only for Best Adapted Screenplay, in 1992. From the 1990s onwards, Stone would go on to make *The Doors* (a 1991 tribute to Jim Morrison), *Nixon* (from 1995), *Alexander* (a huge commercial success about Alexander the Great

from 2004), *World Trade Center* (about the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, from 2006), *W.* (from 2008), *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (from 2010), *Snowden* (from 2016), as well as a TV show about prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Alongside all these feature films, the documentaries *Comandante* (from 2003), *Looking for Fidel* (2004) and *Castro in Winter* (2012) carry special political weight. They all deal with the leader of the socialist revolution in Cuba, Fidel Castro. Then there were also the movies *South of the Border* (about the rise of left-wing governments south of the Rio Grande, from 2009) and *Mi amigo Hugo* (about the Venezuelan political leader Hugo Chávez, from 2014).

## OLIVER STONE'S POLITICAL FILMS

### ***JFK* (1992)**

Oliver Stone's first piece of real political cinema premiered in 1991. Its abbreviated title, *JFK*, refers to John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Oliver Stone won an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for his adaptation of the story centered around the assassination of the 35th president of the USA. The film itself seems to vacillate between the intention to depict from a documentary angle the unfortunate Dallas, Texas event from November 22, 1963, and a broadly-constructed plot that revolves around the efforts of Jim Garrison, a Louisiana district attorney, to begin an investigation aimed at shedding more light on the background of the assassination and the perpetrators of the crime. And just as in every good feature film the plot begins suddenly, when something happens to the protagonist by chance, in this film the prosecutor Garrison learns by accident that the only person accused of the murder of President Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, stayed in his very city – New Orleans, Louisiana – only a few months before the assassination in the summer of 1963. The plot of the film sticks to the documentary narrative closely.

Stone first construes the events in detail, the inherited problems President Kennedy encountered after he had taken office: the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, as well as racial segregation in the country. At the very beginning of the movie, he presents some possible points of resistance to the efforts to reform and de-oligarchize the country. He then moves on to the "Garrison case", and redirects the story to the efforts of the district attorney from Louisiana to expose the conspirators gathered around Lee Harvey Oswald via inductive reasoning and a case study;

above all Jack Ruby (the killer of Lee Harvey Oswald), David Ferrie, and Clay Shaw. The plot of the film includes a lot of flashbacks which the director uses to return to certain earlier events intended to clarify events and circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Garrison's initial conviction that by using induction he could find a chain of direct conspirators expands throughout the film, not only to union leader Jimmy Hoffa and mob leaders Sam Giancana, John Roselli, and Trafficante, but also to people at the top of the military, intelligence agencies and the White House itself. Conspiracy required a system. "Everyone was doing their part there," states an unnamed intelligence officer from the Department of Defense who secretly met with Garrison. "A tacit agreement was made that the president must be removed." He was much too in the way. It was the job of the people from the security sector not to be overzealous in protecting the president after he had landed at the Dallas airport.

The "go-stop" policy, Kennedy's pacifism and the effort to initiate a policy of détente in times of bloc vehemence cost him his life. "He was in many people's ways," the film states. Stone hints at profiteers from the military-industrial complex, deposed generals and demoted heads of intelligence agencies, such as Allen Dulles and J. Edgar Hoover. They all bore a grudge against John Fitzgerald, and they all felt the need to take revenge on him. The conspiracy had been prepared for a long time, through the grapevine. Jesus was killed by the Pharisees, because he got on the wrong side of them, by pointing out to the hypocrisy of the Old Testament customs that he wanted to change. It was the same with Kennedy, too. He tried to rattle the 'Deep State', to drain the 'Great Swamp'. He was betrayed by people from his own ranks: dissatisfied, wounded, spiteful; they were keen on getting revenge. Gaius Julius Caesar was killed by Cassius and Brutus, also people from his milieu. "This was also the case here," opines Oliver Stone. At one point, DA Garrison, a family man with five children, asks his wife: "How could Lee Harvey Oswald go to the Soviet Union, stay there, marry and bring a Russian woman back to the US if he hadn't worked for the service?" Exploring the world of intelligence agencies, Stone opens a new hidden world of parallel games in which jerseys and roles are changed as needs be.

The final scenes of the film abound in the expected fiasco of the indictment against Clay Shaw for conspiracy, due to insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, like Stone, Garrison devised a strategy from the beginning on at least two levels: one where he strove to prove a conspiracy (in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Corliss (1991), "Oliver Stone: Who Killed J.F.K.?", *Time*. December 23.

which he failed), and the other: to put on unstable ground the conspiracy of silence about the existence of a conspiracy regarding the assassination of President Kennedy to which common sense points.<sup>2</sup> Garrison won the second battle. Regardless of the fact that the archives pertinent to the "Kennedy case" have not been opened to this day, very few people indeed believe today that Lee Harvey Oswald was the (only) murderer of President John F. Kennedy.

## **NIXON (1995)**

One of the best feature films by Oliver Stone, which, although it did not win a single Academy Award, is the very pinnacle of Stone's political filmmaking in terms of its quality, dramatic plot and brilliant acting. The film is an integral system – both a feature film and a documentary, a kind of biographical tribute to one of the most controversial presidents of the USA of the 20th century – Richard Nixon. Even at the very beginning of the film we can't help but be under the impression that a great deal of effort went into rendering the composition and structure of a feature film as documentary-like as possible. Here, using frequent flashbacks in the narrative, the author seeks to return the plot to the past only to move it to a future which is in fact merely the recent past.<sup>3</sup> Stone thus biographizes the movie plot and, as if he were the author of a scientific paper, dissects the footnotes portraying the protagonist of the film.

The first part of the film is more dynamic and interesting. Stone focuses on portraying Richard Nixon in it: his nature, character, psychosocial traits, (un)spontaneity, sexuality, work ethic and family relationships.<sup>4</sup> What emerges in the first part of the movie are the character traits of a man who was actively involved in politics for a little longer than a third of his life: as a federal-government Washington official, as a 'witch hunter' in McCarthy's anti-communist era, as US vice president in Dwight Eisenhower's era, as the losing contender in the 1960 presidential election against John F. Kennedy, and, finally, as the 37th president of the USA, who would irrevocably resign from that highest political post in 1974, during his second term. In this part of the movie, Stone remains committed to the *JFK* idea about the conspiracy of the

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Lambert (2000), *The Real Story of Jim Garrison's Investigation and Oliver Stone's Film JFK*, M. Evans Incorporated.

<sup>3</sup> Mick LaSalle (1996), "Oliver Stone's Absurd Take on Nixon", *SfGate*. Hearst Communications, Inc. July 12.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Ebert (1995), "Nixon", December 20.

most powerful political, military, intelligence and economic US elites in realpolitical events.

The idea of a political conspiracy of the establishment is a logical extension of *JFK*, only now everything is viewed from a Nixonesque perspective: Nixon and (the) Kennedy(s) intertwine, collide and touch directly or through intermediaries who seem to hover above the protagonists, playing with their roles and destinies. The social milieu from which Nixon came is especially memorable. It is a poor Quaker family of atomized ranchers, their only options being to survive or disappear on one of the hundreds of orange plantations in California. Social darwinism at work wreaked havoc on the Nixon family, but it allowed Richard to study law at the local university and become the first man of the United States. To the moving cry of a young Richard Nixon, who, in a state of despair and disturbance over the loss of his loved ones, asks his mother why life is so cruel and when happiness will come, the Spartan mother, who received a Puritan and Quaker upbringing, replies: "Strength in this life, happiness in the next." Richard, too, was looking for power in this life: for social and political power, sacrificing everything, even morality. Nixon is fascinated by meetings with the most powerful people: these are two emperors, one Shah, dozens of presidents of republics, and prime ministers.

When Kennedy very narrowly wins the 1960 presidential election, Nixon regrets that he is no longer in the company of the greats: de Gaulle, Adenauer and Macmillan. Moreover, at the 1968 Republican convention held after he had secured victory in the elections, in front of thousands of members who greet him exaltedly, he triumphantly utters the sentence "Say you didn't want this!" to his wife Pat. And in order to get all of that, he had to make compromises with what we colloquially call today the 'Deep State' or the 'Great Swamp'. As a leading anti-communist, he agreed to be the leader of the establishment. And when the deposed head of intelligence, J. Edgar Hoover, warns him that "sometimes the irresponsible make the system snap", and that "the system survived one radical reformer in the White House, but it wouldn't survive another" (Bobby Kennedy), Richard Nixon returns again to the anti-hero side: he treads the safe, well-beaten tracks of the 'beasts of the deep state'.

Trying to satisfy the inert forces of the establishment, and to control the processes in times of revolt, public-morality erosion, and the rise of transparency, Nixon becomes a victim of his own technique of governance. The "Watergate" affair – spying on political opponents during

the election campaign – would lead Nixon to the no-win situation of saving himself from impeachment by irrevocably resigning. And thus we reach the narrative arcs of the second part of the feature film, which go into the complex processes of the dramatic unraveling of the “Watergate” affair. Stone’s exhaustive use of the material renders this part of the film static and even torpid, difficult to watch at times. It overwhelms the viewer with the smallest details of the “Watergate” affair, abuses of political power and state secrets; court intrigues and schemes. The impression remains that Stone had already told everything in the first part of the film.

### “*BUSH (THE JUNIOR)*” OR *W.* (2008)

If a film deserves to get acknowledgement and win the Academy Award for Best Director, it is undoubtedly the 2008 film *George W. Bush* or just *W.* Made as a full-length feature biopic, it draws on the best things from Stone’s previous biopics on American presidents. In a little more than two hours, we get a round-up of one life and one biography.<sup>5</sup> The feature has a well-shaped, homogeneous structure. The character of the protagonist and his companions in the film derive from their actions, they can be read with the power of intuition. In this film, Stone does not suggest, but unobtrusively leaves it to the viewers to intuit the clues themselves, to draw conclusions independently, without any imposition. The flashbacks are associative, they are not intended to clarify, as in *JFK* and *Nixon*. After these two earlier films, in which Stone seems to want to say too much by cramming all the facts and events into a movie script, the feature *Bush Jr.* is a masterfully polished piece. The chronicle of George W. Bush Junior’s life is in fact an unobtrusive comedy in which Oliver Stone portrays the downfall of the American political scene. Again, it’s a story about nepotism, plutocracy, corruption and “the iron law of oligarchy”.<sup>6</sup> The dynamic of the narrative is greatly contributed to by the brilliant acting of Josh Brolin, who interprets the character and work of George Bush Jr. in his role. Unlike *JFK*, which is overcrowded with documentary bits and clarifications, and *Nixon*, which is divided into a biographical part that shows the rise of

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Galloway, Matthew Belloni (2008), “Bush biographers mixed on script for Oliver Stone’s *W.*”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11.

<sup>6</sup> Agencies (2008), “Oliver Stone making a comedy? Maybe, with Bush film”, *China Daily*, Beijing, May 9.



the titular character, as well as a documentary part which heralds the end of a career, in the movie *Bush Jr.*, the occupation of Iraq is merely the final act of the downfall not so much of a president as of the world power he ruled. The whole film is actually a biography of a downfall.

To depict the genesis of the downfall, Stone returns to the early youth of the elder son of Texas magnate George Bush Sr. As a trusted man and an exponent of the deepest state, Bush Jr.'s father, Bush Sr., entered high politics crawling, first as a member of the infamous Warren Commission (connection with JFK), then as director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), going on to serve as Ronald Reagan's vice president in both of his terms (diligently building his empire on oil and politics), managing to get the presidential chair itself in the end. His elder son, George Bush Jr., lived the life of a bon vivant: he was prone to 'painting the town red': drunk parties and skirmishes with the law. Stone ascribes such a character to the genes of Jr.'s temperamental mother Barbara. As the movie progresses, the great director would build the story on the complex of 'the Great Father' whom the son would never either surpass or outdo. The script builds a narrative around the efforts of George Bush Jr. (or: W.) to step out of his great father's shadow. And when W. boasts that he is "the fittest and fastest president", after his deputy vice president Dick Cheney's remark that "Dad was faster after all", W. does admit: "Yes, Dad is faster". Bush Jr. has obviously had to prove himself all his life to win his father's favor and would never win the love reserved for his younger brother Jeb, who is much closer in temperament to Bush Sr.

Throughout the movie this would be the basic motivational impulse of Bush Jr.: only through victories could Bush Jr. prove himself to 'Big Daddy'.<sup>7</sup> Oliver Stone himself admits in an unusual way: no matter how limited in his intellectual abilities he was, no matter how little he worked on himself, W. is devilishly talented at summoning the daring cowboy-oilman (anti)hero whose archetype is embedded in the collective unconscious of the average American who has watched the saga of the Ewing family and its long-running soap opera *Dallas* at least once in their life. In several places in the movie, Stone depicts the idea that W. knows his way around people. The introverted father, Bush Sr., would never admit it. Unsuccessful as an oilman, sporting goods dealer, sports manager and baseball team owner, 'W.'s son' redirected his driving force – his extroversion – into politics: his father's domain, and he succeeded

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<sup>7</sup> John Robert Greene (2021), *The Presidency of George W. Bush*, University Press of Kansas, 91.



there. The successful politician is unsuccessful in everything else. Oh, how familiar that sounds! Against the expectations of his father, and mother Barbara, he first becomes the governor of Texas, and then the president of the USA. And no one can come to their senses after learning that W. is more than successful, least of all his father and mother.

The rise of W. has its explanation: it is the period of the climax of US power in the world. The nation is delirious – no one is as strong as the US, the only remaining superpower in the world. Stone captures that moment brilliantly. America and the Americans needed a cowboy at that moment who knows how to brandish a revolver throughout the world and take what belongs to him. And what belongs to him are the Iraqi oil reserves, which, according to data from the movie, are as much as a quarter of all world reserves.<sup>8</sup> It was prey that could not be relinquished. And it was relinquished by the hesitant Bush Sr. “Dad, you are indecisive!” cried the son to his father. Bush Sr., still suffering from the complex of having withdrawn from Vietnam, stopped halfway<sup>9</sup>: he expelled Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and occupied the oil fields in the south of Iraq, in Basra. However, he soon withdrew. This, according to his son’s interpretation, cost him his second term.

Bush Jr. waited for his moment, and when Clinton left the White House, he moved into it, bringing with him the affair of the recount – of only about a thousand votes more in the state of Florida. By his father’s admission, he would never have become president if his father’s friend James Baker hadn’t helped. Bush Jr., at the height of US power, goes all the way in the Iraqi adventure and emerges from it victorious. To criticism that he is embarking on an insane adventure that even his father does not support, he replies: “This is my war, not dad’s!”. Nonetheless, that victory has the overtones of a Pyrrhic victory. Stone hints at the beginning of the end of a rise. And while the beginning of the end of a rise in *JFK* was the violent termination of one life and one hope for change, and in *Nixon* a resignation as an escape route out of impeachment, here it is the moral demise of a (geo)politics that does not have a single moral value, but exclusively war booty. That’s why the message of George Bush Sr., the ‘Big Daddy’ who appears to his son in a dream, sounds so sobering: “You succeeded, but actually destroyed everything, ruined 200 years of reputation of our Bush family.”

<sup>8</sup> John S. Duffield (2012), “Oil and the Decision to Invade Iraq”, *Political Science Faculty Publications*, 27, Georgia State University.

<sup>9</sup> John Robert Greene (2015), *The Presidency of George H. W. Bush*, University Press of Kansas, 259.

The movie *Bush Jr. or W.* is a great piece of cinema by Oliver Stone. It stands as a testimony to the ups and downs – to the failure of a rise at the moment when the ordinary observer least expects it.

### ***SNOWDEN* (2016)**

*Snowden* is Oliver Stone's first real political, non-presidential, feature film. Judging by its content, it is a natural continuation of *JFK*, *Nixon*, and *Bush Jr.* This celluloid piece also deals with the abuses of the political higher-ups. It is, in fact, a documentary adaptation into a feature film with a political topic and non-presidential content. In the middle of 2013, the 'Snowden' affair shook up not only the USA, but also the world, especially allied countries such as Japan, Italy, and Germany, which were under special digital surveillance by American security structures. The plot of the adapted screenplay and film revolves around the activities of young IT expert Edward Snowden, who unauthorizedly collected data from the digital database in the computer center in Hawaii where he worked, and handed them over for publication to the independent journalistic team of the London *Guardian*. Snowden was accused of the most serious crimes belonging to the category of unauthorized disclosure of secret information, so he was forced to flee the USA for Hong Kong (China), and thence to the Russian Federation, hoping he would be able to reach Cuba and Ecuador, which offered him asylum.<sup>10</sup>

The plot of the film unfolds in the training camps of the American army somewhere in the USA. A young Snowden soon becomes aware that he is unable to fulfill the tasks in military training, gets injured and it is 'game over' for him. However, he is back to the field again when he applies for a surveillance job in the world of digital technology within one of the command intelligence centers. He passes the test top of his class and enters the US National Security Agency (NSA) with great success. He is entrusted with important jobs: Geneva, Tokyo, Hawaii. We can see the rise of young Snowden, who finds an attractive girl (at least in the movie), Lindsey. There is a fancy house, a good car and upper middle class status. However, this way of living has its price. His bosses are increasingly demanding, and the initial monitoring of data and identification of opponents acquires more brutal proportions over time: physical elimination and the tracking of people for which there are no court orders issued, espionage of entire social groups that do not pose

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<sup>10</sup> T.d.L. (2017), "Tout comprendre à l'affaire Snowden", *Le Parisien*, Paris, November 8.

any danger and especially a threat to the national system of the US. The increasingly brutal jobs he participates in prompt Snowden to reconsider his role in that machinery of evil. He realizes that people's human rights are being violated, and he demands answers from his superiors.

The young operative is stupefied by the answers. At one point, his superior tells him: "Between the freedom of privacy and security – people choose security." Snowden asks: "But how do you know that? These people have never been asked whether they want to be under constant digital surveillance?" The answer is astounding: "There hasn't been a world war for more than 50 years. That's because we monitor and keep things under surveillance." And when Snowden realizes that he himself is being monitored and kept under surveillance, that his correspondence is being tracked via email, that his significant other's photos are being downloaded and his intimate moments are being recorded via a web camera, he becomes fully aware of the madness which he lives in. He makes a very risky and even dangerous decision to go public with data about the massive abuse to which the NSA is subjecting tens of millions of people around the world, who are by some hand of fate connected to the initial investigation in the fight against terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Snowden leaves the USA and in a Hong Kong hotel room he gives information to independent journalists of the *Guardian*, discloses the truth about the mass digital monitoring of not only suspicious and ordinary people, but also hundreds of political decision-makers in Europe and the world. The USA issues an arrest warrant for Snowden, and after a month's quarantine, he is granted asylum in the Russian Federation.

The movie *Snowden* is just a continuation of the story about the strengthening of the political power of the oligarchy that eliminated the Kennedys, led the war in Vietnam and clinched lucrative deals within the military-industrial complex, and then connected with the world's oil oligarchs and attacked Iraq, only to launch a punitive expedition into Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, and passed a whole set of laws aimed at protecting the national security. The culmination of those procedures was the so-called 'surveillance state' – digital tracking and surveillance without any legal basis. Congress and the presidential administration have also been involved in the digital security conspiracy, while no one asked the citizens whether they wanted their human and civil rights to

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<sup>11</sup> Rhonda Richford (2016) "Oliver Stone Reveals Details About His *Snowden* Biopic", *The Hollywood Reporter*, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, June 22.

be violated for the sake of such goals. The state of emergency declared after September 11, 2001 served to set this precedent.

## OLIVER STONE'S DOCUMENTARIES

Oliver Stone's politically-themed documentaries occupy a significant place in the oeuvre of the famous director. Here we shall mention only some of these movies.

The 2003 documentary *Comandante* and its 2004 sequel *Looking for Fidel* are interviews, a kind of political confessionals, which Oliver Stone conducted with the legendary Cuban leader Fidel Castro.<sup>12</sup> This is a story about the resistance of tiny Cuba in the face of a much more powerful stronghold of capitalist imperialism from the immediate Cuban surroundings. In the film, Stone often poses direct and even provocative questions, to which he gets witty and interesting answers from the leader of the Cuban revolution. The overthrow of the Batista regime, the Cuban missile crisis, the Non-Aligned Movement, relations with the Soviets, the attitude towards Cuban ex-pats in the USA, the position of dissidents and the state of human rights in Cuba are just a few of the questions that intrigued the world-renowned creator Oliver Stone in this film. The film was met with indignation in the US, and critics panned it, accusing the great director of engaging in "cheap left-wing propaganda".

The political film *Mi amigo Hugo* is Oliver Stone's documentary panegyric on the charismatic leader of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez. Using his friendly ties with the late president of Venezuela, Oliver Stone portrays another strong anti-globalist figure of South America.<sup>13</sup> Chávez is a leader who tried to use all the resources of oil-rich Venezuela to improve the social image of the people of this poor South American country. The plot of the film follows the anti-colonial policy of Venezuela, and the efforts of its politicians to free the country of its dependence on multinational corporations, especially the US ones. The film also features other Latin American leaders, such as Fidel Castro, Nicolás Maduro, and José Vicente Rangel. This movie too was heavily criticized by national security opinion makers in the USA.

The 2016 documentary film *Ukraine on Fire* is a documentary piece that construes political, ethnic, historical and economic-social

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<sup>12</sup> Kathy McDonald (2003), "Oliver Stone Meets Fidel Castro", *Documentary*, IDA, April 21.

<sup>13</sup> Cory Franklin (2017), "The deafening silence of Hollywood's Chavistas", *Washington Examiner*, May 01.

relations in contemporary Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> The piece was judged as “subversive, pro-Russian and nonobjective”, so Stone was boycotted by Western distributors.<sup>15</sup> The film hints at the gloomy events in that country, which would escalate in 2022 with a major war between the Kremlin and the government in Kyiv. The script follows the ethnogenesis of the liberation movements in today's Ukraine: from the modern-era withdrawal of Poles from those areas and the liberation struggles of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, through Ivan Mazepa's joining the side of the Swedish king against Russia, to the short-lived formation of the Ukrainian state in 1918. A lively national consciousness grows to the point of extremism during the Second World War: a special emphasis is placed on the infamous Nazi SS division called the Galicia Division which clashed not only with Russian and Jewish civilians, but also with the Polish population.

The attempt of Stepan Bandera, Mykola Lebed, Roman Shukhevych and other leaders to finally form an independent Ukrainian state failed. Bandera was taken to a German concentration camp, and after the expulsion of the Germans, Ukrainian nationalists waged a guerilla war against the Soviet authorities as late as the beginning of the 1950s. Oliver Stone documents how many Ukrainian Nazis were spirited away and provided with refuge in the USA and Western European countries after the war. The director then deals with Khrushchev's “Crimean gift to mother Ukraine”, and then moves on to perestroika and the 1991 declaration of Ukrainian independence. Radical elements enter the Ukrainian assembly, the “Verkhovna Rada”, and the struggle between pro-Russian and anti-Russian forces reaches its climax during the “Orange Revolution” of 2004, when the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko eventually beats the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych for presidency after the annulled presidential elections. Economic and social problems further worsened during Yushchenko's rule, so Yanukovych convincingly wins the new presidential election with the promise that Ukraine would pursue a balanced policy between Russia and the European Union. The stalemate in negotiations with the EU, which demanded unbearable economic and social cuts from Ukraine, was the reason for pro-Western supporters to launch a rebellion so that Yanukovych's government would not hand over the country completely to Russia. The peaceful uprising in Kyiv's main square Maidan was additionally radicalized over time

<sup>14</sup> Othmara Glass (2022), “For the Kremlin?”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frankfurt am Main, August 19.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Kuhlenbeck (2017), “Ukraine on Fire exposes fascism”, *Workers World*, July 17.

through the actions of armed Ukrainian nationalists. The commotion lead to an armed rebellion with numerous casualties. Yanukovych leaves the country and takes refuge in Russia, and the new, radically pro-Western government is trying to defuse pro-Russian tensions: in Crimea, the Donbas and Odesa. War is on the horizon.

## CONCLUSION

Today, Oliver Stone has become synonymous with political cinema. The so-called 'presidential film' occupies a special place in his cinematography. Presidential films about the Kennedys, Nixon, and George Bush cover political power, social power, influences, interests, blackmail and complexes, plots and tragic denouements. Stone unmasks the "iron law of oligarchy".<sup>16</sup> Although he deals with powerful people, human destinies absorb him, in fact. Stone portrays his heroes, tries to establish their subconscious and conscious motives. He constantly asks: What drives them and how far are they willing to go? He is trying to tell us that "even the rich (read "the powerful") cry". At the same time, Oliver Stone also deals with the great anti-globalist leaders of South America throughout his documentaries. In these movies, he tries to interpret the heroes he portrays, to present to the audience their motives and strivings, and to convey the message of the enslaved world of Latin America, which is looking for a life worthy of a man in the 21st century.<sup>17</sup>

And if someone, at the very end, asked the question: "What is Oliver Stone's political cinema like?", the answer could be short, succinct and almost pithy: intellectually provocative, dynamic, documentary-like, and, above all, warm – with a strong human message which seems to be missing in contemporary auteur cinema.

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<sup>16</sup> Владан Станковић (2003), „Теорија елите и фашизам“, *Политичка ревија*, № 2/2003, Институт за политичке студије, Београд, 159-173.

<sup>17</sup> Владан Станковић (2019), „Марксизам и католицизам – католичко виђење марксизма“, *Национални интерес*, Vol. 36, № 3/2019, Институт за политичке студије, Београд, 245-270.

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