

# OLIVER STONED!

Award-winning film director and Hollywood maverick **Oliver Stone** continues to intrigue critics and fans with his latest film. Ron Gluckman reports

**M**inutes after sitting down with famed film director Oliver Stone, shirt sleeves are rolled up, acerbic criticisms are flying wildly, and all pretense of preparation has been set aside, along with a long list of questions covering what is, by any measure,

a remarkably distinguished and diverse career.

Not that Stone is a cagey or reluctant interview. Quite the contrary, he calmly, quickly, covers everything from presidents Obama (whom he likes, but thinks failed to deliver the Change promised), Bush (his Yale classmate, and subject of his bio-pic *W*; Stone calls Bush “the most dangerous president of all time”) and Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez (featured in Stone’s new film, *South of the Border*, as a misunderstood man of the people) to his more than four decade-long relationship with South-east Asia, service in and films about the Vietnam War, rampant greed on Wall Street, and possible film subjects ranging from China’s Chairman Mao to Cambodian strongman Hun Sen (whom he will soon meet).

Along the way, Stone instantly seizes the conversational high ground. Articulate and thoughtful, he offers intricate detail about a wide range of professional and personal topics. A longtime Buddhist, he reflects on failures like *Alexander*, about the Greek leader, but filmed in Thailand, and *Pinkville*, a project



that would have returned him to his fertile film-making grounds of Vietnam. Set to star Bruce Willis, it was abruptly shut down a few years ago, after he built an entire mock village in the North of Thailand to portray My Lai, the Vietnam War massacre that would have been the subject of the film.

He's equally forthcoming about his controversial views on coups, corruption and the CIA. The only thing that doesn't interest Stone is wasting time.

Hence, even the hour-long interview in an airport lounge in Bangkok — our first meeting on Stone's recent speaking tour in Thailand and Cambodia — is peppered with probing questions

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duty in the Vietnam War. “A tragedy,” he sighs.

Stone grows misty-eyed recalling his first visit to Cambodia. He snuck in as a bearded teen on a break from teaching in then-Saigon. “The Americans had all been kicked out. This was 1965. The Viet Kong had roadblocks set up and were

searching cars for Americans,” says Stone, who posed as a French backpacker; his mother is French and he spent long periods with his grandparents in France.

“Phnom Penh was beautiful,” he recalls, eyes closed, as he travels back in his mind to relish the images. “There were outdoor cafés and huge boulevards. Everyone was smiling and friendly. It really was the Paris of the East.”

Such moments of rapture are rare, and Stone quickly returns to current affairs, ever eager to elicit the viewpoints of others. Soon, he's steering the conversation into dark corners that only seasoned journalists — or conspiracy theorists — usually visit. Like a sponge, he gleefully sucks up insights and asides. That's when it hits me: The secret to Stone's storytelling skill is his amazing appetite for facts, figures, rumours and innuendo. You don't really interview Oliver Stone — he drains you.

Stone has a reputation as a rebrand and a workaholic, and, at 64, he shows no sign of slowing down. He has no less than four projects out in 2010, including one of the year's most anticipated releases, the sequel to his smash, *Wall Street*. Once again starring Michael Douglas, whose portrayal of Gordon Gecko epitomised the callous greed of the overleveraged US financial system in the '80s, the timing couldn't be more ideal. *Money Never Sleeps* screens in late September as the world still reels from a global economic crisis caused by those same busted banks and Wall Street gamblers. “The difference,” he jibes, “is millions have become billions, and trillions.”

Stone insists he's no enemy of capitalism. He just feels the financial system has become rotten and needs urgent reform. “Wall Street is supposed to be the engine of growth for America. But banks have



Oliver Stone honoured

and amazing insights. However, Stone does much of the questioning. Stone is in the midst of a series of talks for the International Peace Foundation, which brings world leaders, Noble laureates and celebrities to different countries in South-east Asia each year. Singapore, Burma and Malaysia are all on the future map. It's familiar territory for Stone, who first visited the region in 1965, when he volunteered to teach English in Vietnam. He later enlisted, and — unlike a certain Yale classmate — insisted on front-line

become divorced from meaning and trust. They don't exist for the benefit of society, but themselves."

He worries that, even as recovery is underway, little has been altered. "This is a dangerous time, like a heart attack for capitalism," he says. "We're out of the hospital after quadruple bypass surgery — but downing martinis and choking on cholesterol all over again." He adds: "I worry that we are headed for another bubble. It's like a roller-coaster ride."

Already garnering favourable advance reviews, a return to Wall Street, where his father spent his career as a stockbroker, should guarantee Stone space in all the movie magazines. However, Hollywood's longtime terror has already grabbed headlines for his controversial love-fest with leftist dictators like Chavez and Cuba's Fidel Castro (subject of yet another Stone documentary appearing this year).

Still, an even bigger *brouhaha* is already brewing over the release later this year of his biggest project: *The Secret History of the World*.

A whopping 10-part series for Showtime that essentially covers the entire 20th century, Stone calls it a legacy to his three children. The series started out in typical Stone fashion, as a simple attempt to detail what he calls "America's national security state" and blames for pushing his country into a long series of wars and invasions, and maintaining the Cold War. "We started out trying to explain history from World War II, but then, of course, you have to explain the origins, and go back before the Depression, to World War I."

Among other things, the ambitious series counters portrayals of Stalin as a tyrant, and seeks to explain Adolph Hitler and how he rose to power. Not

Oliver Stone with Carey Mulligan, Michael Douglas and Shia Labeouf of *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

## ON OBAMA

*“President Obama doesn’t need advice from anyone. He’s a great president. But he’s going through a hard time right now, with all the problems he’s inherited — the economy and these wars. I really feel like we are stuck and it’s like Vietnam all over again”*

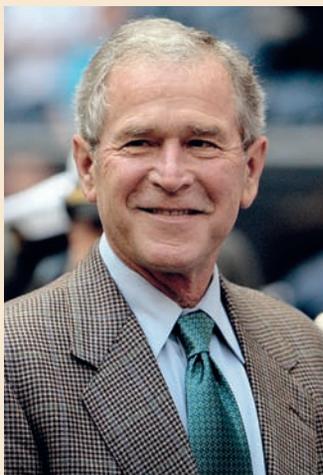
“We have a real mess on our hand. Now, we’re not fighting Osama bin Laden but the Afghan people. It’s a huge mess. This could be a disaster that is even bigger than Vietnam, and I just don’t see a way out”

“I’m disappointed that Obama didn’t take on the military. He ran on this issue of change. He had the opportunity to surround himself with new people, with new ideas. Why surround himself with the same chicken hawks?”



**“I really think Obama squandered a great chance for a change. He ran with this promise of change, but then he surrounded himself with the same people: Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates”**

*“He had a mandate for change, and a strong one. I think the time wasn’t for compromise. The time was for Roosevelt. I think he made a real blunder”*



## ON BUSH

“I was in class with Bush at Yale, so this is my generation. I feel we’ve had a misdirection of leadership”

“George Bush Jr represents, for me, that overwhelming sense of shallowness, self-pride and stupidity. He stole the election. He’s all arrogance”

*“Making a film on Bush attracted me, but it was really a nightmare for 10 years. Making that film was worse than serving in Vietnam, and then having to revisit that whole period. Bush was the most dangerous president of all time”*

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

## ON MAO

**“In China, I see a new generation, crippled with amnesia, unable to get any grasp of their history. The changes have been astonishing. People my age have moved from the Cultural Revolution to worship of another god — money”**

“Chairman Mao really interests me, of course. He’s a fascinating figure. I’ve been wanting to make a movie in China for years. I’d love to do that, but it all depends on the movie”



*“I don’t travel with a message. I just try and make movies to engage people. Movies work best subversively”*

surprising, he’s taken considerable back for aspiring to “humanise Hitler.” Courageously, he refuses to back down. “What we try to do is find patterns of things, the causes and effects. Hitler is only one character in history. We tend to look at him as a monster, and no question that he was evil. But you have to look at things in more depth, examine how he came to power.

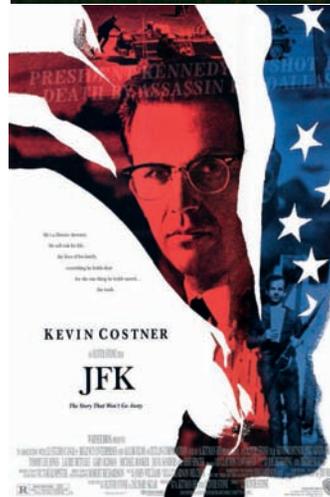
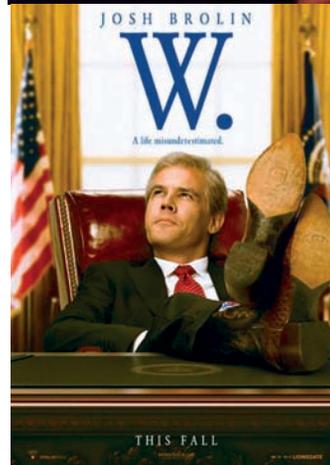
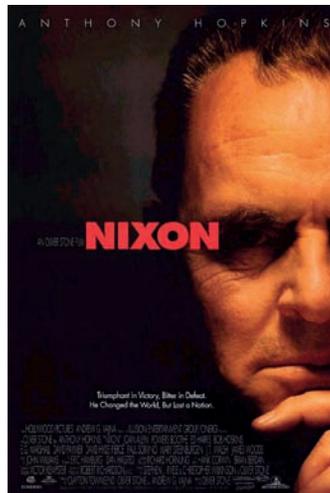
“History is subject to misrepresentation,” he adds. Few moviemakers have devoted as many reels to rectifying or — critics say — manipulating the record.

Revered by radicals, reviled by conservatives, filmmaker Oliver Stone has for decades defied the odds, skillfully positioning himself as a maker of movies that matter. Yet he is that rare Hollywood maverick who suffers no shame at the box office. Films like *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, part of a trio of anti-war films from Stone, a Vietnam War veteran, defied Hollywood logic by pushing a no-holds-barred controversial viewpoint, while still filling cinema seats.

Stone won Academy Awards as Best Director for both films. His astute ability to deliver provocative political commentary in a commercial format continued with stinging portrayals of a pair of Republican presidents, Richard Nixon (*Nixon*) and George W. Bush (*W*). More daring still was his classic conspiracy movie, *JFK*, about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

A watershed even in such a remarkable career, *JFK* is considered by many fans and film critics to be Stone’s most ambitious movie in terms of scripting, cuts and cinematography. Yet it’s also the picture that detractors most often seize upon to illustrate Stone’s callous bias, and willingness to distort information to further his leftist views. Even many longtime Stone supporters in the media attacked *JFK*.

Even today, he is clearly stung by the response. “I never saw it coming,” he concedes, a rare pained look on his



handsomely chiseled face. “The critics really set upon me.” Ironically, *JFK* is one of Stone’s greatest critical and commercial successes. Nominated for eight Oscars, it won two Academy Awards. And despite a sluggish start at the box office, it went on to gross more than US\$200m.

Stone rarely seems to give such commentary much muster. A true maverick in a world of conformists and collaborators, Stone has always gone his own way, and called his own shots. Unlike Francis Ford Coppola, who garners attention for going against the grain of Hollywood, Stone not only produces many of his films independently but also writes, researches and, increasingly, finances them.

Perhaps more importantly, he pursues an independent path that isn’t so much about lifestyle as intense political conviction. Many may attack his views but there is no question exactly what his views are, and that they matter to him. And perhaps no other director has managed to consistently meld meaningful movies with commercial reach. “We have to go for big stories, interesting stories,” he says. “Movies are about telling stories. You have to make it interesting and exciting and entertaining, otherwise nobody will watch.”

These days, Stone concedes that financing is tighter, especially for a string of films offering an unpopular viewpoint with limited commercial potential. Hence, *South of the Border* was bankrolled by South American investors. Yet he remains bullish on the power of storytelling, and the future of the cinema. “Everyone predicted that the industry was on the ropes because of the Internet, file sharing and all that. But just look at last year. Great movies were made, and the industry had a record year,” says Stone.

He insists he’s less an activist than a storyteller. “I believe in the power of movies, and that dreams can help,” he shares. “But I don’t travel with a message. I just try and make movies to engage people. Movies work best subversively.”