At the height of his notoriety, the iconoclastic director of *Wall Street* (1987), *JFK* (1991), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) was both box-office behemoth and the undisputed *enfant terrible* of mainstream American filmmaking. Since those heady days, however, Oliver Stone has become so resolutely unfashionable that a subeditor at a prestigious stateside journal recently admitted to this writer that commissioning a review of a book on Stone could have serious repercussions for his scholarly reputation. Now that Stone is widely perceived to have lost his political edge, a serious-minded volume about Stone includes the close involvement of the director himself. Stone agreed to interviews with authors Ian Scott and Henry Thompson over a five-year period and permitted research in his Santa Monica archive. This access provides the foundations for the book’s key strengths: the transcribed interviews are lively and characteristically detailed, and *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* contains an abundance of riches for readers interested in convoluted production histories, aborted projects and off-screen squabbles. “Given the degree of access,” the authors admit with a covert nod to criticisms of Stone’s *Comandante* (2003), “it is a legitimate to question how a critical distance between authors and subject could be maintained” (viii). Scott and Thompson preemptively answer this question in three ways. First, by avowing Stone’s openness to criticism; second, by emphasizing Stone’s insistence that “we should work with the facts and tie any conjectures back to that factual base”; and third, by declaring that Stone “never sought any editorial input” (viii). Unfortunately, it is a combination of this Gradgrindian pact and the authors’ self-evident admiration for their subject that ultimately proves the book’s undoing.

*The Cinema of Oliver Stone* is organized into five chapters based around core themes in Stone’s oeuvre: “War,” “Politics,” “Money,” “Love,” and “Corporations.” The book is at its strongest when it encourages reevaluation of films often dismissed as minor works. Both *U-Turn* (1997) and *Savages* (2012) are accurately held up as stylized allegories of neoliberal dystopia, while Stone’s turn to low-budget documentary work in the 2000s — including a trilogy of films about Fidel Castro and the ambitious television series *The Untold History of the United States* (2012) — are understood as part of a continuum with his famously polemical work of the 1980s and 1990s. The most rewarding chapter — “Corporations” — makes a powerful case for Stone’s career-long interrogation of the transformation of the postwar United States into what the director dubs a “corporate oligarchy” (202).

These are all fairly superficial observations, however, and *The Cinema of Oliver Stone* is frustratingly constrained by the authors’ refusal to critique Stone’s work in anything but the mildest terms or engage with his films on a conceptual level. This is troubling for all sorts of reasons, not least because while the very best writing on Stone has been attentive to the ideological fantasies and political blindsides of his films, it has simultaneously enriched our understanding of their deep structures and
emotionally seductive mythos. Important insights from scholars such as Robert Kolker, John Orr, Marita Sturken, and Robert Burgoyne are depressingly absent from the book, both literally and in methodological spirit.¹

Moreover, the book inexplicably sidesteps the influential body of recent work on the political efficacy of melodrama as a prototypically American mode of expression. Scott and Thompson erroneously argue that Stone’s feature films become essentially “melodramatic” only after Nixon (1995), yet Stone’s feature films have always been affective melodramas to their core. It is no coincidence that the single most iconic sequence in Stone’s entire career is the mournful slow-motion death of a Christ-like American marine in Platoon (1986), all elegiacally scored by “Adagio for Strings.” This puritanical avoidance of conceptual “conjecture” is underscored by the authors’ most evasive tactic: briefly signalling their awareness of a problematic aspect of Stone’s work before swiftly moving on to more empirically firm terrain. Any Given Sunday (1999) is given a deserved slap on the wrist for its regressive gender politics, but this fleeting critique only serves to underscore the authors’ broader elision of the way(s) Stone neurotically maps his political agenda onto discourses of race, gender, and sexuality.

To be an “adherent” of Stone’s work, the authors swoon, is to embrace a dissident, antiauthoritarian worldview committed to “a rebuttal of neo-conservative hegemony” (239), but the love-struck politeness of The Cinema of Oliver Stone rarely reflects such a boldly oppositional stance. Indeed, it is no small irony that a volume intended to rehabilitate the derogated reputation of a notoriously masculinist director is itself often found to be critically impotent. As the clear-eyed Snowden (2016) attests, Stone has certainly not lost the courage of his long-standing political convictions, and the time is right for a balanced and incisive scholarly volume about a director who – for all his flaws – has established himself as the popular chronicler of postwar American disillusionment. The Cinema of Oliver Stone, sadly, is not that book.

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