


Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Oliver Stone

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, September 9th, 2020

Oliver Stone wrote an autobiography titled *Chasing the Light*, chronicling his personal and professional life up to 1987, when he turned 40 and won a Golden Globe then an Oscar as best director for *Platoon*, a movie that he wrote about his own experience in Vietnam as a 20-year-old soldier in 1967 and 1968.

When I interviewed him in 1986, he explained why he enlisted in the Army “My father was to  the right and I was brought up in the belief that we were fighting communists in Vietnam, that I would be serving my country and doing the right thing there. I believed the romantic illusion about war based on the John Wayne and Audie Murphy movies, and volunteering to go to war seemed a way for me to fulfill the rite of passage to manhood.” He came to realize that “The Vietnam War was in my opinion a tremendous tragedy, a mistake in foreign policy, the United States entered into a war without any moral purpose or integrity.” He was inspired by classic anti-war films like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) directed by Lewis Milestone from the 1929 novel by Erich Maria Remarque, *La Grande Illusion* (1937) by Jean Renoir, *Paths of Glory* (1957) by Stanley Kubrick with Kirk Douglas.

Stone explored the Vietnam War in two more films. *Born of the Fourth of July* (1989) with Tom Cruise playing Ron Kovic, a paraplegic veteran and anti-war activist. He said in an interview I wrote for the the Italian film monthly *CIAK*, when I was their Los Angeles Correspondent. “No matter how much I deny it, Vietnam will stay with me until the day I die. It was the central event of my adolescence; I was nineteen to twenty-one then, I came of age in Vietnam, so I will always feel associated with that generation of young men. Vietnam is never behind us, George Bush would like to believe that, and so did Ronald Reagan, but if it were forgotten, then those men would have died for nothing.”

Heaven & Earth (1993) is about the experience of the war from the perspective of a Vietnamese woman, Le Ly Haislip, who wrote two books about it. Oliver Stone said, “I’ve achieved something with these three films that is very rare in a human life, that you can not only go through a war and survive the damn war, but then you can go back and do your own story, then do the story of a man in a wheelchair, then a Vietnamese peasant woman’s life story. Now I’ve reached a place where I’m gentler, happier and more compassionate, more in touch with the spirits and not as driven.” Maybe that’s because he has become a Buddhist. “Buddhism is not a religion, it’s a way of life, a philosophy that I’ve always been interested in it, as well as Tao and Confucius. I feel that Buddha allows for Jesus and for many of the Christian beliefs. I don’t find any contradiction.”

I found the book *Chasing the Light* exciting and revealing, because I had followed Oliver Stone's career from the beginning, when he wrote the screenplay of *Midnight Express* (1976) directed by [Alan Parker](#), until his last film, *Snowden* (2016) with Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Edward Snowden, but I didn't know all those details about his personal life. He is the son of a Catholic French mother, Jacqueline, and a Jewish-American father, Louis Stone (born Silverstein), a stockbroker. His parents divorced when he was 16. He was married to Najwa, a Lebanese woman who worked for the United Nations, then to Elizabeth, a blonde Texan, with whom he has a son, [Sean](#), born in 1984. Since 1996 he has been married to Sun-jung, a woman from South Korea, with whom he has a daughter, Tara, born in 1995.



Elisa Leonell, Oliver Stone (c) HFPA 1997

So when I interview him, virtually, as a journalist in the Hollywood Foreign press, I ask him what he has learnt by revisiting his past. "That is part of the whole experience of growing up and maturing. I discovered, writing the book, that I was fundamentally torn between mom and dad. My mother was free spirited, she was a rebel, and she made a lot of mistakes too, but she was very loving and giving. My father was establishment conservative, he was law and order, he played by the rules, but at the same time he broke the rules constantly. They were completely different people and they never really belonged together; it was a romantic relationship, a beautiful love story, but it didn't work. So I am like many children of divorce, who wonder if there are wanted, if they belong in the world, because their parents screwed up. And there are all these issues that come up because of that relationship. I have been divorced twice, but with my third wife, we have been together for twenty-plus years and that harmony has been very helpful to my daughter, because we haven't split up. So right now I value family and a harmonious relationship between a man and a woman beyond pretty much anything."

I thank him and tell him: "You have to try and give us another movie." He replies, "I'll try."

Featured image (c) Elisa Leonelli 1987

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