

'J.F.K.' Is Only Latest History à la Hollywood

To the Editor:

In "Hollywood: History by Default" (Editorial Notebook, Dec. 25), Brent Staples disparages Oliver Stone for his ahistorical representation of John F. Kennedy's assassination in the movie "J.F.K." Mr. Staples is concerned about what he decries as a trend to present film as history. He cites Alan Parker's "Mississippi Burning," as well as other films by Mr. Stone, as evidence of the threat to our understanding of events when "Hollywood becomes the culture's historian by default."

Clearly, Mr. Stone disagrees about the perceived threat to the republic that Mr. Staples hopes to warn us of; he demonstrated as much in an interview on ABC-TV's "Nightline," when he expressed his belief that audiences were sophisticated enough to tell fact from fiction. Rather, he says, he merely wished to encourage debate about the event, which the great majority of thinking Americans believes to have been whitewashed.

Mr. Stone is incorrect in his estimation of his audience. Many Americans will view what they see on the screen as reality. But isn't Mr. Staples a little late in sounding the tocsin against the misrepresentation of history perpetrated by Hollywood on the moviegoing public? Americans are more inclined to derive their understanding of history from their popular culture, whether film or literature, than from scholarly reflection, and in this they are no different from people anywhere else on the globe.

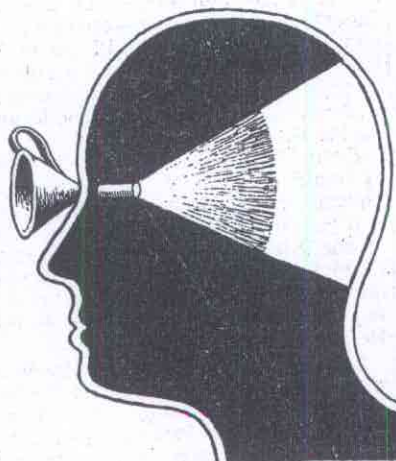
Mr. Staples says that in a presumably more responsible past, film makers changed names or added disclaimers to their productions. And the results were what? I put it to you that Americans understand more about General Custer and the Little Bighorn from "They Died With Their Boots On," about American slavery from "Roots" — all 250 years worth of the experience, about frontier life and America's westward expansion from "High Noon" and John Wayne movies, and about East Asians from Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto, than they do from professional historians.

Is it any wonder that generations of white people in this country, having seen Errol Flynn in "Santa Fe Trail" patronizingly ask seemingly contented black slaves why they preferred the stability and safety of the rule of

the white man to the promises of liberty made by John Brown, and receiving a satisfactory reply, have no idea what slavery meant to those who were put through it, nor of its legacy for African-Americans today?

And the continuing and extraordinary popularity of "Gone With the Wind," whatever its merits as great film making, reinforces the image of the strong but loyal mammy, the bumbling, inept little maid and the stoic, dependable field hands.

The representation of African-Americans in "Gone With the Wind" is surely racist, but I do not think many serious critics would suggest banning it to spare the youth of America its pernicious influence. Mr. Staples states society should "denounce bogus history," but unless society is



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prepared to do so every time a film misrepresents history, it might be more effective to teach Americans how to think a bit more critically than they do now.

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New York, Dec. 26, 1991

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Recoil From Bullet

To the Editor:

Oliver Stone, director of "J.F.K.," and other advocates of conspiracy in the assassination of President Kennedy rely on a flawed and discredited interpretation of the laws of physics. The basic idea, first published by Mark Lane in 1966, asserts that the backward recoil of Kennedy's head, as recorded in the Zapruder film, is

positive proof, according to armchair physics buffs, that a gunman must have fired from the front, hence someone other than Lee Harvey Oswald. This faulty physics is used to make the grassy knoll plot credible.

This use of freshman physics appeals on intuitive grounds, and conjures up the familiar billiard-ball collision model. Nevertheless, physical intuition needs to be examined critically in the real case, before one jumps to false conclusions. As many of my colleagues can verify, we encounter widespread misunderstanding about concepts in physics among college students, whose intuition often fails to predict correct results.

Experimental evidence does not support the premise that a backward head recoil requires a frontal assault, despite the conventional wisdom.

Luis Alvarez, Nobel Prize-winning professor of physics at Berkeley, made a detailed study of physics-related problems raised by the Zapruder film and carried out experiments published in the American Journal of Physics in September 1976.

Professor Alvarez reasoned that the high-velocity bullet impacting on a soft target would not give up much momentum or energy to the entire object, but pierce it instead and propel material forward along its path. He and his students set up an experiment in which rifle bullets were fired at melons wrapped in filament tape, to see what the laws of physics require in this case.

The result of repeated trials was that the melons recoiled in the direction of the rifle, a strikingly counterintuitive outcome. The explanation Professor Alvarez offered was that the bullet energized a fast jet of fluid and solid matter in the forward (bullet) direction, producing the backward recoil, the familiar rocket-jet recoil of Newton's law of action and reaction. This forward jet effect is clearly visible in the gruesome frame 313 of the Zapruder film and in the Alvarez melon photographs.

This experiment does not disprove conspiracy models, but the backward recoil is quite consistent with a gunman firing from the rear. We are not compelled to accept the Stone-Lane version based on faulty application of physical laws.

I. D. ABELLA
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