OLIVER STONE
NORA EPHRON
EDWARD JAY EPSTEIN
NORMAN MAILER

Angel Franco/The New York Times

Debating art's duty to history were, from left, Oliver Stone, Nora Ephron, Edward Jay Epstein, Norman Mailer and Victor Navasky, moderator.

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What Debt Does Hollywood Owe to Truth?

Wrone

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By WILLIAM GRIMES

When Hollywood and history collide, which side wins? With "J. F. K." still agitating a national audience, the question was put before Oliver Stone, the film's director, and fellow panelists Norman Mailer, Nora Ephron and Edward Jay Epstein on Tuesday night at Town Hall in Manhattan in a debate sponsored by the Nation Institute and the Center for American Culture Studies at Columbia University in association with the Writers Guild of America, East. Before a packed house, the four discussed the duty of art to history, fiction to fact and whether George Bush could be placed at Dealey Plaza in November 1963.

Feelings ran high. "Never have I been so besieged and be-faxed by people who felt that their point of view was not represented," said the moderator, Victor Navasky, the editor of The Nation magazine, in his opening remarks. Looking out over the audience, he asked: "Will all of you out there who feel you don't belong on this panel please stand?"

It was a pro-Stone crowd, primed to sneer at what Mr. Mailer called "the mind-stultifying myth of the lone assassin," with a large percentage of groundlings eager for tales of conspiracy and cover-up, and inclined to become restless if more than five minutes passed without a fiery denunciation of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Warren Report, American cold-war policy or the Bush Administration. They got all this and more from Mr. Stone, who, as he lumbered toward the lectern, looked like a man who had bulked up by carrying the weight of history on his shoulders for too long.

In a crowd-pleasing recitation, he went over the experience of working on "J. F. K.," one that has shaken him so deeply, he said, that he has wondered aloud about the version of American history given in the books he read as a youth. Disillusionment evidently has been a bitter pill. "I've come to have severe doubts about Columbus," he said, "about Washington, about the Civil War being fought over slavery, about World War I, about World War II and the supposed fight against Nazism and Japanese control of resources."

Careering toward a climax, Mr. Stone apparently decided to drive his car right off the cliff. To thrilled

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applause, he concluded, "I don't even know if I was born or who my parents were."

Mr. Stone's dead-serious, dead-ahead approach momentarily eclipsed a fine performance by Mr. Mailer, the evening's first speaker, who contended that the surplus of theories about the Kennedy assassination makes a factual movie on the subject impossible.

" 'J. F. K.,' " Mr. Mailer said, "should be seen not as history but as myth," the story of "a huge and hideous event, in which the gods warred, and a god fell." He then delivered a series of backhanded compliments that had the effect of a skillful stationhouse beating, the kind that inflicts maximum damage without leaving any visible marks.

'Worst of the Great Films'

" 'J. F. K.,' " Mr. Mailer said, was "perhaps the worst of the great films, but one with the power to make new history." It is powerful but crude, he said, "like all of Oliver Stone's movies," which is only natural, since its maker "can be characterized as a brute." But, Mr. Mailer added, "he has the integrity of a brute."

By snuffling and rooting around "our national obsession," Mr. Stone accomplished something, Mr. Mailer said. Sometimes, he concluded, using a familiar vulgar expression, nonsense can only be driven out by superior nonsense.

In taking the high road of myth, Mr. Mailer sidestepped entirely the niggling, footnote-plagued problems of Kennedy assassinology, leaving the fact versus fiction discussion to Mr. Epstein, the author of several books on the assassination, and Ms. Ephron, who co-wrote the screenplay for "Silkwood," the 1983 film based on the life of the antinuclear advocate Karen Silkwood.

Mr. Epstein made a plea for maintaining the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. "In nonfiction the writer is bound by the universe of discoverable fact," he said. "When he reaches the limits of discoverable fact, he stops."

The problem comes, he continued, when an artist tries to mix fact and fiction. "What you get is not a hybrid," he said, "but pure fiction, because the introduction of a fictional scene or fact changes everything after it."

Ms. Ephron delivered a cool, disdainful and witty set piece on the failure of the press, specifically The New York Times, to understand the legitimate claims of art in such matters. Burned and still smoldering after her experience as a screenwriter for the film "Silkwood," which provoked criticism in the press for its treatment of biographical fact, she tried to explain the furor over "J. F. K." as the innate hostility of the press to any incursion into its territory.

'What It Was Like,' Sort Of

"What the press objects to is not your technique," she said, turning to Mr. Stone. "It's that you're there at all, that you have a political objective and that you're imposing a narrative."

The aim in films like "Silkwood" and " 'J. F. K.,' " she said, is to create "not the truth, but what it was like — sort of, maybe — in a way that journalism could never come close to."

" 'J. F. K.,' " she said, was "more ambiguous and brilliant" than its defenders. "It's not a wild and wacky look at the assassination, but a look at 30 years of assassination madness," she said.

Mr. Stone, who looked lethargic and put-upon for most of the evening, raised an eyebrow halfway at this one.

All three of Mr. Stone's fellow panelists criticized his treatment of Jim Garrison, the District Attorney from New Orleans played by Kevin Costner, as an unsatisfying figure, with none of the dark corners and complications of the actual man.

Garrison as a Means to an End

Mr. Stone defended himself on grounds of narrative efficiency and dramatic coherence. Complicating Jim Garrison, he said, would have turned the movie into a biography, when the point was to use him as a kind of spotlight to illuminate broad historical questions.

Falling in with Mr. Mailer's myth approach, Mr. Stone called the District Attorney "a Mr. Smith who goes to Washington but whose trip must end in tragedy," done in by the same dark forces that kept the American people in thrall "to a single-party superstate with its own cold-war religion, police and culture."

His remarks met with stormy applause.

In a brief question period, four counter-panelists onstage fired away at Mr. Stone, who relied heavily on a young research assistant at his side who slipped him notes on yellow paper with arcane bits of Kennedy assassination data.

An Enticing Possibility?

When a questioner from the floor asked if President Bush was a C.I.A. agent, Mr. Stone said, judiciously, "He may well have been, but I don't put him at Dealey Plaza," a delicious possibility raised by an earlier questioner. Mr. Stone suggested that a thoroughgoing investigation of the matter might be in order, however.

Max Holland, a contributing editor at The Nation, took aim at the Kennedy halo, calling the movie "a case of wish fulfillment," and remarking sourly on such events as the Bay of Pigs and the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam.

Mr. Holland also criticized Mr. Stone on more narrow factual grounds. He cited a scene in "J. F. K." in which a man is seen doctoring the famous snapshot of Lee Harvey Oswald holding the rifle used in the assassination. In fact, said Mr. Holland, technical examination of the photograph in 1979 showed it to be genuine. "A film maker crosses the line," he said, " when he bends the facts to suit his thesis."

Christopher Hitchens, a columnist for The Nation, decided he had had about enough of the Kennedy worship for one night. He noted the panelists' fondness for the notion of "American innocence, loss of same," and rejected it as "an objectionable, narcissistic formulation."

Turning the cold shower on full blast, Mr. Hitchens directed the attention of the "media haters, and I know you're out there," to the myth of Camelot as the first and grandest of the press conspiracies, a soft-focus treatment of the Kennedy era that has disguised its roots in McCarthyism and segregation.

"Let us get rid of that Arthurian metaphor with which we've been stuck ever since Jackie Kennedy went to a musical," he concluded.

Mr. Mailer softly rebuked Mr. Hitchens, explaining that although Kennedy was not perfect, "he was flexible and extremely intelligent for a U.S. President."

Conspiracy Upon Conspiracy

It was too late for Mr. Mailer, however. He had thrown away any audience good will at the theater several minutes earlier by arguing that the C.I.A. should not be dismantled and by defending the Persian Gulf war as a necessary evil. Not even a vintage Mailer rant about the nation teetering on the edge of fascism could bring the crowd back.

Yet it was Mr. Mailer who embraced, perhaps embodied, the historical complexities and ambiguities heaped up throughout the evening and showed the best chances of negotiating the wheels within wheels of conspiracy, duplicity and bad faith. It was a high point of sorts when, in a daring see-you-and-raise-you move, he tossed before Mr. Stone the juicy theory that Watergate might have been a plot to get rid of President Richard M. Nixon before he could dismantle the cold-war state. A look crossed Mr. Stone's face momentarily, the look of a man who had just been pitched a rather interesting movie idea.

"This country is so complicated," Mr. Mailer said at one point, "that when I start to think about it I begin talking in a Southern accent."