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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

With Fact In Service To Drama

By WALTER GOODMAN.

In the course of guiding Charlie Rose through the shadows of Richard Nixon's mind Monday night on PBS, Oliver Stone also allowed a glimpse of the shadows in his own mind that have found their way into his movies, notably the newest, his much-discussed "Nixon."

He could not have asked for a more hospitable welcome. Mr. Rose, never short on effusion, began with the sort of adjectives for "Nixon" that often find their way into advertisements — "Brilliant!" "Intriguing!" "Extraordinary!" — and ran a few clips from the film that lived up to them.

Having gotten the courtesies out of the way, Mr. Rose used much of the hour to confront Mr. Stone with the main criticism of "Nixon," of abusing the facts in the service of drama and ideology, thus opening a revealing exchange about the movie, its maker and the shaky marriage of art and history.

"I defend what I'm doing as something between entertainment and fact," Mr. Stone declared. He allowed that he relied on intuition for his psycho-portrait of a brooding President — "We assume a lot" — but emphasized his respect for the record. His main point is unexceptionable: novelists, playwrights movie makers down the ages have played with fact, often to striking effect, and "Nixon" is indeed a striking movie.

The confusion comes when these creators, not satisfied with the lati-

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tude permitted the artist, don the mantle of historian or journalist. The producers of the recent television drama "Kissinger and Nixon," for a typical example, made much of their documentation, and Mr. Stone took the trouble to annotate his work.

But when Mr. Rose asked for the documentation that, as the movie suggests, Nixon participated in the C.I.A. plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro, the best Mr. Stone could come up with was that the man was in on lots of things when he was Vice President. Naturally, Mr. Stone explained, so high an official would be afforded "plausible deniability." This line of logic led him to conclude that his own leaps of invention were undeniably plausible.

When Mr. Rose asked about a scene of a meeting between John Dean and Howard Hunt that Mr. Stone concedes never occurred, he justified it by the requirements of drama. Defenders of Mr. Stone see such flights as service to "a greater truth" or "an emotional truth," which means something different from truthfulness. Mr. Dean, one of the movie's consultants, assured his interviewers on "This Week With David Brinkley" that "in the broader sense, it was not untrue even if the scene never happened." That is known as having your cake and eating it too.

At moments during the interview, Mr. Stone did not seem to remember his own movie. He told Mr. Rose that the real Nixon was a moderate drinker who used pills only to combat an attack of phlebitis, but the hyped images of the pills, the presence of a whisky glass in so many scenes and Anthony Hopkins's slurrings gave a very different impression. And when Mr. Stone said there was no implication that the overbearing Texas oil millionaires who appear now and then financed President John F. Kennedy's assassination, he was not doing justice to his powers of suggestion by camera, especially on audiences already warmed up by "J. F. K." (Not to mention that one of

For Oliver Stone, a meeting that never happened serves 'a greater truth.'

the cartoon Texans speaks meaningfully of ending a President's career "in a heartbeat.")

When Mr. Rose reminded Mr. Stone of harsh criticisms of "Nixon" by the Nixon biographer Stephen E. Ambrose and the journalist Richard Reeves, who has written about Kennedy, he countered with the charge that they had not paid enough attention to the conspiracy theories that he found so compelling. There we have the crux of the division between scholar and dramatist.

In both his movie and his television appearance, Mr. Stone drew attention to the Hiss case, which gave a big boost to the Nixon career. While granting that Alger Hiss, who was convicted of perjury, was lying when he told a Congressional committee that he did not know his accuser, Whittaker Chambers, Mr. Stone quickly went on to speak darkly of a plot by Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover to do in Mr. Hiss as a spy.

Mr. Stone reported that he had spoken to Mr. Hiss and was as impressed with the "emotional intensity" of his assertions of innocence as he had been with the assertions by Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans District Attorney, about plots to kill President Kennedy. The conspiracy mongering of the amply discredited Garrison formed the basis of "J. F. K."

As many have noted, the artist in Mr. Stone has always had a bent toward conspiracy; the historian or journalist in him manages to find credibility in tales that suit his ideological and temperamental predilections and excite his imagination. That can make for absorbing movies that may lead impressionable fans to take away peculiar notions of their country's history. If so, the disappointing box-office receipts for "Nixon" have their bright side.

Anyhow, Mr. Stone remarked in passing on Monday night that the Hiss case would make a good movie. Sure it would. Watch for those Texas oil millionaires.