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Kennedy's Death As a Conspiracy

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

In Hitler's Germany, books were burned; in Stalin's Russia, they were rewritten; and in these worlds of controlled thought, the "non-fact" reigned supreme. Or put another way, facts were hidden from public view and so for all political intents and purposes, ceased to exist. Once brought into the open, they seemed to us—like their foremost examples, the Nazi gas chambers and the Soviet labor camps—something possible on a widespread scale only in totalitarian regimes.

But during the last decade or so, this belief that the "non-fact" was essentially a product of the totalitarian imagination has been dramatically challenged. Non-fact after non-fact has been retrieved from the memory holes of

On Film

"Executive Action"
"The French Conspiracy"

secrecy in, among other Western democracies, these United States; and not simply the newly discovered non-fact of White House involvement in the non-fact of the electronic surveillance of Democratic Party Headquarters or the non-fact of American corporations making illegal contributions to campaign funds, but such earlier unearthed non-facts as those surrounding the Bay of Pigs incident or those relating to United States interests in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic.

No wonder that a recent spate of political films has taken the non-fact as its theme: from documentaries like "The Sorrow and the Pity" which aims to rescue the non-fact of French collaboration during World War II from under the official truth of generalized and heroic French resistance; through semi-fictionalized works like "State of Siege" which attempts to uncover the non-facts of the use of torture on political prisoners in Latin America and of U.S. assistance in applying these methods; to two current releases, "The French Conspiracy" and "Executive Action."

Unlike some of their predecessors, neither of these recent films makes claims for the truth-value of its specific content. What each does instead is to take an actual political event—on the one hand, the kidnapping in Paris of Moroccan leftist opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka; on the other, the assassination of John F. Kennedy—and to offer a fiction clearly identified as such which the film implies bears resemblance to the kind of non-facts which would best explain the incidents. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, this fiction works to challenge an official version

of the event; in the case of Ben Barka, it works to suggest a possible solution to what eight years later remains an unsolved mystery.

Fact or fiction, then, these films engage the viewer's political commitments and demand that they be taken as political statements, although their art, of course, does play some role in how they are received. If, for example, their characters are unreal, their plots illogical, their direction and acting poor, their political arguments will also be enfeebled. But art is only of major importance to our response when we bring with us to the film little knowledge of the events it deals with and less in the way of conviction. Where we are more knowing and more passionately involved, aesthetic value and technical skill will mean little to our reactions.

And sitting through an aesthetic disaster like "Executive Action," this point was driven home quite audibly. The whispered chorus of "Is that really true? Did that really happen?" at certain times almost seemed part of the film's musical score and testified to the intense involvement of the audience around me. That the film looked like a paste-up job done on the cheap, that its shoddiness showed not only in the weakly integrated documentary and fictional footage but also in its stereotyped characterizations and frequently illogical plotting seemed to matter not at all to these viewers. For they had apparently come to "Executive Action" predisposed to accept Mark Lane's hypothetical set of non-facts (as previously expounded in his "Rush to Judgment") that Kennedy's assassination was not the work of a lone fanatic but the rationalized act of a group of conspirators who used the image of a crazed person as its cover-up.

The specific villains of the film as conceived by Lane, as scripted with leaden hand by Dalton Trumbo, and as impersonated by Burt Lancaster, Robert Ryan, and Will Geer—are rich and powerful Southern oil men who want Kennedy murdered not because of what he has done but because of what he intends to do. And since these intentions include secret plans to make peace in Vietnam as well as to lead a black revolution, the viewer's idea of John F. Kennedy is also called into play.

Few Americans can bring a comparable involvement to the case of Ben Barka and so in "The French Conspiracy," art matters a great deal. And while it is an infinitely better film than "Executive Action," it waxes very pale in contrast to the films of Costa-Gavras on which it draws heavily for its techniques and style and even its casting. Jean-Louis Trintignant, Jean Boise, and Francois Perier, here respectively a left-wing journalist tricked into luring Ben Barka to Paris, a dishonest policeman and an honest one, all appeared in "Z," while others in the cast starred in the political films of other European filmmakers. Gian Maria Volonte, seen in "Sacco and Vanzetti" and "The Mattei Affair," plays Sadiel (the Ben Barka character).

The acting throughout is impressive, the screenplay by Canadian Ben Barzman and

Italian Easilio Franchina and the direction of Yves Boisset a good deal less so. Some seemingly gratuitous chase scenes, the tendency of nearly all plotters to meet over elegant meals, and some intermittently banal dialogue supplied by Jorge Semprun (co-scenarist of "Z") detract from the film's convincingness. Still, its essential argument that the C.I.A. masterminded the Ben Barka abduction and with the help of French gangsters, French businessmen, and the French police, as well as that of military leaders from Ben Barka's own country, arranged for the revolutionary's murder, is sufficiently well-reasoned and sufficiently respectful of what is known to prevent us from dismissing it too easily.

In any case, the political import of the film lies less in its particulars than in its general thrust. Like "Executive Action," its significance lies in its theme of the non-fact as an overwhelming phenomenon of Western politics and its reflection of the extraordinary distrust of authority and power—however democratic the society in which they operate—the use of this political mechanism has bred.

Dear Ed, Thanks for the Seed, WSJ "review" of Executive Action and what I particularly welcome, the story reporting Teamster-hot paper connection. Much as I dislike the pretensions of Executive action (which is separate from what I also dislike, the content), I do not consider this a fair review. In fact, the author stretches so to condemn it that he errs in saying what is factually incorrect, that this work carries out the line of Larré Rush to Judgement. They dispute each other....I guess Skolnick has been silent about his recent foray into DC or you'd have said something about it. Quite by accident I heard recently that he had also intruded himself into the Madison bo,bing case. Is there no limit to what Illinois considers the integrity of its courts? I do find his spending of money collected for apparently specified purposes in ways entirely different than these purposes and with no official interest in it not easy to understand. I do not believe the not making a martyr out of him line, if that is what is in official minds, no explanation. Thanks. HW 12/9/73