

The Flicker of an Eye Means Nothing in Print

■ "JFK": Film allows viewers to experience the half-seen, partly remembered images of real life.

By OLIVER STONE

The idea of "JFK" was not so much to solve the mystery of who killed the President. The idea was to present an overarching paradigm of all the possibilities of the assassination. I would tap one perspective, then another and another. I was digging up evidence from all different places, buried like archeologist Heinrich Schliemann's Trojan walls, in several layers. As a film, "JFK" can be seen as an archeological investigation, a deconstruction, of one of the central events of American life.

"JFK" is really akin to the Japanese film "Rashomon," Akira Kurosawa's fable about the impossibility of ever arriving at a single truth. In my film, the camera reflected the search for truth. Its various angles captured the simultaneous points of view of an array of witnesses and their own fragments of apprehension.

Take the case of Lee Bowers, the obscure railroad watchman whose testimo-

ny is buried amid the thick layers of Warren Commission witnesses. On paper, his testimony is boring as hell. On paper, its significance is hard to imagine.

In the film, we start with a cut of Bower in his railroad watchtower behind Dealey Plaza, then cut to him talking as he gives his testimony at the Warren Commission hearing, then we flash back to the moment in the watchtower—a flashback in a flashback—when he notices three cars that drove up and left mysteriously, when he notices those weird people at the fence overlooking the assassination site.

The camera here is subjective. It gives us Bowers' point of view—looking out of the watchtower, seeing the gunmen, the fence, the cars leaving. He was not paying full attention. He was doing something else when he heard the shots. He noticed a faint puff of smoke. It could be someone firing from the fence.

The camera did not have a dead-on close-up of a man firing. It jerked. The image was blurred. "Did I hear it or did I see it?" Bowers asked in his testimony. He wasn't sure. "It just seemed like something funny at the fence."

The images flash on film with Bowers' voice-over. On paper you can read these words slowly, go back over them. In film, it

goes so fast—as Bowers actually saw it. The moment is gone before you can really even weigh it. Can you be sure of what you saw? Was he sure? Is it fact?

The same was true of other witnesses on the overpass and the grassy knoll. "I saw smoke over there by the fence," one said. Jean Hill, a witness on the knoll, said she thought she saw somebody firing from the fence. So in "JFK" you will see the briefest, three-frame subliminal scene of a man at the fence firing. She thinks she saw it, but can't be sure.

In short, what you see represented over and over again in the film are fragments of consciousness that, all together, add up to the reality of a moment. They are shards of an event about which the whole truth is perhaps unknowable. "JFK" is a three-hour avalanche of fragments of the truth.

But can the image lie better than the word? Do the flashes of image blind or illuminate?

I can only ask, what tells more about what happened that day in Dallas, image or "historical fact?"

Ultimately, "JFK" is not really a political film. The ultimate questions are philosophical ones: Who owns reality? Who owns your mind?

Oliver Stone is the director of "JFK."

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