

Visual evidence not the whole story for King or JFK

FEW VISUAL IMAGES HAVE HAD such devastating impact on our society as those of Los Angeles police officers beating black motorist Rodney King. But the radically different ways people have seen George Holliday's amateur video raise important questions about the power and significance of moving images.

In the midst of the riots provoked by the all-white Simi Valley jury's acquittal of those officers, 177 college professors who belong to the Society of Cinema Studies signed a petition voicing outrage over the verdict and pointing out that it "contradicts powerful visual evidence—video evidence of excessive police brutality seen globally.

"The reaction in the streets of Los Angeles and other cities is fueled by the jury's deliberate refusal to 'see' this visual evidence the way that most of us—regardless of color—saw these images."

People who make and write about films and video tend to assume that visuals take precedence over words. But the King verdict demonstrates that is not always true.

Darryl Mounger, the lawyer for acquitted Sgt. Stacey Koon, argued: "A picture is worth a thousand words, but a lot of times it takes a thousand words to explain a picture. What you think you see isn't always what you see."

Anne Friedberg, an assistant professor of film at UC Irvine who signed the Society of Cinema Studies petition, thinks it's "debatable" whether the jurors were "desensitized" to the video by their experience of having it repeatedly screened and minutely analyzed in court, as the petition contended.

"To those of us who were outraged by (the video), the more you see it, the outrage doesn't go away," she said. "But for some reason, the jury seemed to be convinced otherwise."

The underlying reason seemed to be that the jury was predisposed ideologically to believe the officers' justifications of the beating, such as the argument that King was "controlling the incident" by not being totally passive, as if that justified the violence. The jury chose not to believe the stark visual evidence of a group of armed men in uniform stomping and bludgeoning a helpless, un-

JOSEPH McBRIDE

STRAIGHT SHOOTING

armed individual.

As Friedberg observes, "Part of what is so disturbing and upsetting about the verdict and the reaction for those who couldn't believe the arguments of the officers was that it must seem in South Central L.A. that the police were caught red-handed with the visual evidence.

"The fact that it didn't make any difference, in my reading, made the evidence seethingly more contributory to the rioting. It makes me think back to the Zapruder film, about the rearrangement of the visual evidence."

A BRAHAM ZAPRUDER'S FAMOUS amateur film of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, unlike the King video, was not seen immediately by the public. I remember hearing shortly after the assassination that the film probably would be in theaters within the week, but Time Inc. bought the film and locked it away, allowing only selected frames to be printed in Life magazine and elsewhere.

As was the case with the King video, the "spin" that people put on the Zapruder film muddied the historical waters.

Dan Rather, then a CBS correspondent, saw the film the day after the assassination and told the public that when the president was shot in the head, he "fell forward with considerable violence," rather than being thrown violently backward by the final head shot as he actually was. The Warren Commission volumes transposed two frames of the film, giving the same impression.

Despite the attempts by lone-gunner theory proponents to rationalize away the backward head snap by blaming it on a "neuromuscular reaction" or a "jet effect," other observers, relying on Newton's second law

of motion, believe the stark visual evidence of that violent impact shows that a second gunman was firing from the Grassy Knoll.

WE LIVED IN A less open society in 1963, before the Freedom of Information Act and the video revolution. But like the King video, the Zapruder film, when seen by the mass audience in 1975, had a profound educational and emotional impact.

The screening of bootlegged copies of the film on TV and elsewhere helped spark a new congressional investigation of the assassination, and its inclusion in Oliver Stone's "JFK" helped bring about pending legislation to open still-secret government files.

In the King case, the black community saw the Holliday tape, waited patiently for justice to be done and found that there was no justice. Some took the only outlet they knew, by rioting in the streets. They were spurred to action by the King video, but also, more importantly, by its depiction of the "police rioting" that our society too often sanctions against black Americans.

Much more can, and will continue to be, written about the other troubling images of the L.A. rioting—the looting, the brutal attack on white truck driver Reginald Denny, the panoramas of a city in flames.

THE "SPIN" PUT ON those images has been predictable for anyone who remembers the way the media treated the Watts and Detroit riots of the 1960s. "The media imagery of the looting has been offered as if to justify the verdict, rather than (to say that) the verdict justifies the reaction," Friedberg says.

The message being put out by the media in their coverage of the rioting seems to be, as Friedberg summarizes it, "See, these people are animals. They deserve the kind of behavior the police are doling out to them. They deserve to be beaten."

Such powerful images spotlight the responsibility of the media to confront them honestly, without bias or preconception or ideological blinders, and then to delve deeply into what caused them. That has happened rarely enough in the Kennedy case, and it barely has begun in the case of Rodney King.

SHORT TAKES

NBC has ordered a movie from Viacom Prods. about teenager Anissa Ayala, whose parents conceived a baby to provide a bone-marrow donor to save Anissa's life. "Who Will Save My Life?" will be exec produced by Dick Berg and Allan Marcell from a script by Beth Sullivan and Anna Sandor. Production will begin this summer.

European moguls Leo Kirch and Silvio Berlusconi have announced the acquisition of worldwide rights to "Blue Angel," a forthcoming biography of Marlene Dietrich, with plans to produce it as a miniseries or TV movie. Written by Donald Spoto, "Angel" will chronicle the actress's life from the making of "Blue Angel" in 1930 until her final screen acting performance in "Just a Gigolo," released in 1978. Susan Pollock has been tapped to exec produce. No writer has been set.

The Fox Children's Network will sponsor "Animagination," an animation festival for Los Angeles County foster children, to be held Saturday at the 20th Century Fox lot. More than 500 youths, age 9 to 18, will attend, with suppliers Hanna-Barbera, Warner Bros. and Film Roman to participate.

Morning duo Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford have signed a multiyear agreement with NBC to host the Miss America Pageant, having hosted the 38th edition last fall. Next fall's pageant will be held Sept. 19 in Atlantic City.

Tom Langan has been promoted to co-exec producer of the NBC daytime drama "Days of Our Lives." He joined the show as supervising producer in February 1991 following a stint with "The Young and the Restless." "Days" exec producer Ken Corday is currently developing a spinoff of the show for NBC.

The Score Board Inc. has signed an agreement with Paramount Pictures, in association with Charles/Burrows/Charles, for a trivia game inspired by the long-running program "Cheers." Under an exclusive, three-year agreement, the Cheers game will be sold by Classic Games in retail outlets and on home shopping networks starting in October.

Singer-songwriter Thom Schuyler has been appointed head of RCA Records' Nashville office. He was chosen Tuesday by RCA president Joe Galante. Schuyler has written such country songs as

"A Long Line of Love," "My Old Yellow Car" and "16th Avenue." He recorded as a solo artist in 1983 and was a member of the SKO trio from 1986 to 1988.

Canterbury Distributors will handle the homevideo release of the currently lensing "Tattooed Man," first in a series of short experimental films collectively titled "Paintings in Motion Project." The pix are being produced by Calliope Maximum Prods. and directed by Queen, who appears in "Tattooed Man."

May 26 is the application deadline for the third year's program of the Chesterfield Film Co.'s Writers' Film Project, which is sponsored by Universal Pictures in cooperation with Amblin Entertainment. The project has just begun its second year with 10 new participants, each receiving a \$20,000 stipend to write screenplays in order to launch professional careers. The participants work together and with development exec and Hollywood scripters. The competition is open to writers of all backgrounds and ages, although winners are chosen primarily from university graduation writing programs in theater.

Williams to SPE as veep

Sharon Baker Williams has been named VP, corporate communications, at Sony Pictures Entertainment—joining recently named senior VP Don DeMesquita, to whom she'll continue to report, in moving over from Columbia Pictures TV.

In her new post, Williams will be involved in all aspects of SPE's corporate public relations and communications, including efforts to shape the company's image in the

corporate marketplace.

Williams spent the past four years at Columbia, beginning as a program publicist in 1988 before being promoted to manager and director, respectively, in '89 and '90. During that time, she worked on such shows as "Baby Talk," "The Powers That Be" and "227."

Prior to that, she had spent six years at CBS, first in network operations and then as a publicist at local flagship KCBS-TV.

Par, Woodbridge settle 'War' suit

An out-of-court settlement has been reached between Paramount Pictures Corp. and John Woodbridge, a professor who sued the studio claiming that the theme song to ABC's miniseries "Winds of War" was based on his 1965 song "Sans Vous."

While terms of the settlement are not being divulged, Woodbridge's attorney said his client was happy to see the nine-year battle ended.

It all started in 1983 when Woodbridge, a religion/history professor at Northwestern U. and Trinity Evangelical College in Illinois, sat down to watch the 18-hour miniseries and believed that the opening music, written by Rob-

ert Cobert, was based on his work.

The case, filed in Miami and eventually transferred to Los Angeles, went to trial last year, at which time a jury found that Cobert and Paramount had violated Woodbridge's copyright.

Yet that trial ended with a mistrial after the judge found that he had erred in his instructions to the jury.

The case was due to go back to trial this month, then was postponed until later in the summer when Paramount agreed to settle.

Woodbridge, meanwhile, has said that he will collaborate on a book about the nine-year ordeal and hopes to have it on the bookshelves within a year.