

DAVID VARETTA

Killing off viewer interest: a conspiracy theory

ONCE AGAIN, TELEVISION HAS DISCOVERED the hard way that viewers can get too much of a good thing, as the flood of JFK-inspired fare this month backed on programmers.

The crowning blow came Sunday, when ABC's two-partter "JFK: Reckless Youth" arrived with a remarkable whimper — delivering the worst rating ever for the opening installment of a network miniseries during the regular season.

If broadcast in a vacuum, the slickly produced multi-partter might very well have captured an audience. Unfortunately, "Reckless Youth" arrived as part of a crush of programs commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, including — all within a 10-day period — a Larry King special and a repeat of the documentary "Four Days in November," a new "Frontline" documentary, an NBC movie from the point of view of Lee Harvey Oswald's widow, and a pair of two-hour CBS specials on Kennedy that aired last Wednesday and Friday.

Add to that the four-hour PBS documentary "The Kennedys," which played in September, and last summer's tawdry USA network movie "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair." Even "A Walton Thanksgiving Reunion" — which many turned to as an alternative to "Reckless Youth" — carried a Kennedy assassination theme.

CBS viewers were at least spared a possible Wednesday-through-Friday JFK hat trick by the three-hour Thursday finale of "Return to Lonesome Dove." The only tricks missed last week would have been broadcasts of Oliver Stone's "JFK" and Lerner & Loewe's "Camelot."

In fact, throw together the programs mentioned above, NBC's upcoming miniseries based on Joe McGinnis' book about Ted Kennedy and such past miniseries as "The Kennedys of Massachusetts" (1990) and "A Woman Named Jackie" ('91), and CBS could well have found its solution to that retransmission consent conundrum — KFC: The Kennedy Family Channel. How could any cable system resist?

Just scanning local listings, without even witnessing last week's cavalcade of Bad New England ac-

BRIAN LOWRY CHANGING CHANNELS

cents, could anyone have been completely surprised that "Fatal Deception: Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald" was NBC's second-lowest-rated Monday movie this season? Or that "JFK: Reckless Youth" was met with almost total disinterest?

THE SAD ASPECT OF ALL THIS is that those involved in these productions — for all their toil and sweat — never really had a chance. The public was clearly so overstuffed with reminiscing about JFK that their only desire was to pull out of the network motorcade.

Then again, overkill is hardly a rare experience on TV. Newsmagazines, local news, talkshows and tabloid syndicated fare have blithely pushed forward on topics like Michael Jackson, Amy Fisher and the Menendez case, rehashing the same stories and subject matter again and again, each time acting as if they've rediscovered the world.

One might chalk it up to hubris — the assumption that everyone else can do a topic, but we can do it better — or simply a lack of creativity, courage and imagination.

Why creativity? Because it didn't take a genius to figure out that 30 years from Nov. 22, 1963, would be viewed as a milestone. Why imagination? Because no one really added anything new to the JFK legend with their programming. Why courage? Because it would have taken guts to be the network *not* offering a program to mark the assassination, particularly if one of the other guys scored big with its entry.

That handwagon-chasing and outright cannibalism underscores what can go wrong with the networks' decision-making, which often involves churning out derivative programs when it's obvious that viewers are getting enough of that type of material — if not on that

network in that time period, then elsewhere.

NETWORKS MAKE SIMILAR MISTAKES in their conventional scheduling moves, most recently in the high-testosterone posturing by ABC and NBC over the scheduling of "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman" vs. "seaQuest DSV" at 8 p.m. Sunday. The "we won't blink first" mindset, which began even before lineups were announced last spring, has seemingly prevented both shows from breaking out to become the larger night-building, franchise-type hits they might have been.

Granted, flagrant programming overlap succeeded once with the three Amy Fisher movies, but

The public was so overstuffed with JFK shows that their only desire was to pull out of the web motorcade.

don't bet on it happening again soon. Based on a smattering of past exercises in duplication, there's every reason to believe the "Long Island Lolita" case was an anomaly — an alluring mix of bawdy elements and "did he or didn't he?" skepticism that landed in the public's lap at just the right time.

What all this imitation, cloning and convergent evolution really does is exhibit disdain for the viewers' intelligence — the belief that those rubes out there will gobble up whatever's fed them. The same mentality leads to cookie-cutter movie sequels, but at least those are adequately spaced to provide the illusion of something new. With the JFK hysteria of the past few weeks, TV hasn't even made the pretense of showing such marketing savvy.

The public tends to forgive such media excesses, but that doesn't mean they'll indulge all of them. So when the seemingly inevitable second, third and perhaps even fourth Menendez telenovela splashes across the dial, don't be surprised if viewers grasp their remote controls firmly and just say "no."