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# 'Executive Action' opens

By Mary Knoblauch

IF "EXECUTIVE ACTION" had come out three years ago or even six months ago, I might be able to forgive it. If it were logically put together as "Z" was, or if it had some respect for historical accuracy, I might find it in my heart to appreciate what it is getting at so obtusely.

But when a film suggesting that a bunch of businessmen plotted the death of President Kennedy opens the weekend before the 10th anniversary of his death, I smell the dirtiest kind of money-grubbing opportunism it has been my misfortune to witness as a movie critic.

I think Mark Lane, who has spent the last decade questioning the results of the Warren Commission report, is sincere, and I am willing to believe that his collaborators Dalton Trumbo and Donald Freed were sincere in their wish to reopen the case. The same goes for the cast.

But I am suspicious about the people who provided the money for the film, coming as it does in the shadow of Watergate and superimposing the wicked businessmen conspiracy on Mark Lane's thesis that the FBI and CIA were at fault.

"Executive Action" is two films, and neither of them is complete. Those who have not read Lane's book will be unable to follow the convolutions of the plot, and those who are too young to remember those days are going to be confused by the intercutting of newsreel and fictional footage.

The film is in showcase theaters, and while it is interesting in the way that a gory accident is fascinating, it is

at heart a despicable attempt to make money from a nation's grief.

**FILM FESTIVAL NOTES:** The jury named the C film "Morgiana" Best of the Festival and awarded special Gold Hugo to Satyajit Ray "for his achievement in cinema over two decades, culminating in the film 'Distant Thunder.'"

The jury, which included critic John Russell Taylor, son, London film expert critic emeritus Claude Rains, Prize of "The Bitter End" Germany "as a film of stature as a film of authority."

The jury's first feat was to award the Goat's Prize to "Spies"

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# 'Executive Action'

## panders to rumor

"EXECUTIVE ACTION" may be the most offensive movie speculating about President Kennedy's assassination, but it is not the last, and its coming was probably inevitable after "Z," "State of Siege," "The Mattei Affair" and all the rest of the films about conspiracies.

Conspiracy has become a useful catchall explanation for everything that goes wrong. Its rise to popularity paralleled the skepticism that met the results of the Warren Commission report, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Mark Lane, who collaborated on "Executive Action," was one of the first to question the commission's findings. Most Americans still have a hard time swallowing the commission's report, but whether that doubt was raised because of shoddy police investigation, insufficient regard for Oswald's safety, the pure shock of the occurrence or because the truth has not been discovered has yet to be resolved.

"Executive Action" crassly melds a bunch of big business conspirators onto history and calls that a movie—never explaining how they were so sure Oswald would do what they hoped he would that fateful day.

Conspiracy is an easy explanation for parade routes, Secret Service and police inefficiency, telephone blackouts, material witnesses that died soon after, and all the rest. But it is not necessarily the right explanation, nor is it a convincing one in the film's terms. It is simply convenient and topical in light of Watergate and political corruption at the top.

Our next venture into this story will be "The Parallax View," a fictional film based on a novel about some witnesses to a murder, who are systematically murdered themselves. Parallels with the Kennedy assassination are unmistakable, and that film's success will no doubt lead to even further flights of fancy.

**THE POINT IS** that conspiracy is a lot easier to live with than the mad individual act. I would suggest that given the record of government and private conspiracies in the past [price-fixing, Bay of Pigs, Watergate], it is unlikely that any conspiracy on the level suggested by "Executive Action" could survive unexposed for a decade. [A whole police department, the conspirators themselves, an assassination squad, the FBI, the CIA, and several other government agencies are at least obliquely involved in the film's conspiracy.]

It's too big not to spring a leak somewhere, and yet



Mary Knoblauch—

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people come out of "Executive Action" wanting to believe it literally and completely.

Eight people were brought to trial in Chicago for "conspiring" to provoke all those demonstrations during the 1968 Democratic Convention. The Catonsville 9 and the Harrisburg however-many were accused of conspiracy. There are even books theorizing on conspiracy in the death of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. There is talk of conspiracy in the current energy crisis—in fact, there is hardly an issue of national concern in the last decade where conspiracy has not been mentioned. [Remember the conspiracy to cover up the Pentagon Papers, and the one to reveal them?]

**WE THRIVE** on conspiracy because the thought of a single individual having the power at whim to turn a nation upside down by assassinating the President is just too terrible to contemplate. Conspiracy is nicer, because it implies rational planning and rational action and a group of people, not irrational horror.

We loved the conspiracy trial here, because it excused us from contemplating just how many people were angry about the country and the political process.

We gobble up tales of conspiracy in the energy crisis, because it saves us contemplating the fact that before too many decades go by we will run out of oil completely at our present rate of consumption, and we ought to think of some alternative means of power. That's frightening. It's much easier to think of conspiracies by oil companies or Arab governments than it is to take responsibility for our own conspicuous consumption of energy and our reluctance to fund research into alternatives.

"Conspiracy" is more palatable than "incompetence," "madness," "corruption," "error," "carelessness" or any of the other terms that might truly be applied to events we suspect are the work of "conspiracy."

"Executive Action" should have spent its money confirming or denying its suspicions rather than restating them selectively and arbitrarily to promote its theory of conspiracy. Now it just panders to its own fearful, unsubstantiated suspicions.