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Rt. 12, Frederick, Md. 21701
2/20/78

Mr. Philip Geyelin
Editorial Page Editor
Washington Post
1150 15 St., NW
Wash., D.C. 20005

Dear Mr. Geyelin,

Your excellent editorial "Fact/Fiction on Television" asks ^{in saying} "Why anyone thought such tinkering with the story of Rev. King was needed is beyond us."

Among the reasons obvious to a subject expert is to say other than the facts say, which is true of the three so-called "docu-dramas" dealing with the political assassinations. All say what is not true and could not be said in a straight documentary. It is this Orwellian, regardless of what may have been in the commercializing minds.

In the Abby Mann rewriting of history his sources are as apparent as are those characters who opposed his approach. Those to whom Mann is indebted appear larger than their tall statures in real life. Those who opposed him are written down and out. (I understand that after a dispute with Rev. Ralph Abernathy Mann threatened to eliminate that part entirely.)

Without this Mann would have been reduced to repeating the work of others. Without permission and crediting that is plagiarism. With crediting the Mann's who know better than the truth have ego problems with themselves.

In revising the actualities of the King assassination Mann ^{achieved} a totality of imperfection that is not explained by his ripping off of long-time friend and associate, like-minded Mark Lane. In Lane's commercialization ripping off did not meet his ego needs. He had to improve upon truth. Thus a new and thanks to Mann and NBC more widely disseminated fabrication, that the FBI assassinated Dr. King. Mann's "improvement" of Lane's "fact" extended even to the scene of the crime, locale and characters alike.

The Mann/NBC infidelity is not accidental. Both were forewarned. Neither bothered to learn the truth.

This gets back to why there was "tinkering with the story of Rev. King."

If one is limited to fact and reason one has no basis for even suspecting that the FBI killed or was responsible for killing Dr. King. The FBI's failures and offenses lie in other directions.

But with a six-figure advance for the Lane book and \$5,000,000 in the Mann "docu-drama," who can say that fooling Mother Truth does not pay?

Three commercial TV networks, three "docu-dramas", three rewritings of history and fact.

Sincerely,


Harold Weisberg

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Fiction/Fact on Television

FOR SIX HOURS RECENTLY, television viewers had a chance to watch a production described as a "docu-drama." It purported to be the life story of the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and, like some productions that preceded it, it was a curious mixture of reality and fantasy. That, we suppose, is what this new word was coined to describe. "King," as the program was called, was a drama to which documentary interludes were added to create a more powerful impact. Why anyone thought such tinkering with the story of Rev. King was needed is beyond us. Told as a straight documentary or, if you prefer, as a drama, that story is powerful enough. But in this version, film clips of actual events were interspersed with recreations of the same events, the time sequence in which various incidents occurred was altered, and some conversations—in particular, those between John and Robert Kennedy—were figments of someone's imagination. Even people who were participants in or close observers of some of the events in Rev. King's life had difficulty separating truth from fiction as the hours rolled on.

To be fair about it, NBC did warn before each night's episode that "in some instances, dialogue, action and composite characters were created to advance the story." But even with such a warning, the program was on dangerous ground. This "docu-drama" merged two of the products television offers to the public—news and entertainment—in a way that made them indistinguishable from each other. By blurring the line, television undermines its greatest public service: letting people see and hear history in the making or in retrospect.

We are familiar with the argument that authors need a certain literary license to make dramas both realistic and interesting. But there is a difference between dramas based on current and past history; where a visual and oral record of history exists, the desirability of fabricating events, conversations and individuals diminishes drastically. There is also a difference between material written for television and that written for the stage or screen. People go to the theater or the movies for entertainment and even children quickly learn to take with a grain of salt the accuracy of historical events presented in such a setting. The same is not yet true of television, largely because of the efforts made by the producers of news programs and real documentaries to stick to the record. But it is likely to become true quickly if the spate of "docu-dramas" and similar productions continues.

"King," of course, is only the latest and most egregious offender. It was preceded by such programs as the one on Jack Ruby and Lee Harvey Oswald, in which at least an effort was made to distinguish between film clips and re-creations, and the one on Sen. Joe McCarthy. Somewhat similar, in a reverse kind of way, was "Washington Behind Closed Doors," in which every effort was made to make a piece of fiction appear to be a piece of history.

Television is much too powerful a medium of communication to be playing so loose with the line between fiction and fact. It is already hard enough to keep them separated. A "docu-drama" is as offensive to journalism and history as the word itself is to the English language.