

Visual evidence not the whole story for King or JFK

EW 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 storming 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 seemingly more contributory to the rioting. It makes me think back to the Zapruder film, about the rearrangement of the visual evidence."

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 the 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 booting, 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 its 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.