

Fact, Fabrication and Docu-Drama

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The millions of Americans who watched "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," the American Broadcasting Company's four-hour "docu-drama," on Friday and Sunday evenings, are being asked to vote on whether Oswald killed John F. Kennedy and, if he did, whether he was part of a conspiracy. Unless they are aware of more than the TV movie told, the audience can only have concluded that yes, he was guilty, and yes, he was part of a conspiracy that involved President Johnson, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, anti-Castro Cuban exiles, the Mafia and only ABC knows who else.

Docu-dramas, which facilely mix truth with make-believe, are much in vogue this season. There have been TV specials based on Watergate, on the life of President Kennedy's brother Joe, on the trial of Caryl Chessman, executed as a sex criminal in 1960, and on the plight of Karen Ann Quinlan, who has been in a coma since 1975. The whole genre is problematic—(How is the audience to take these offerings? As history? As entertainment?)—but none of the other shows touched as sensitive a national nerve as the assassination of President Kennedy. The Warren Commission report, innumerable exposés, endless debates and the latest, limping Congressional investigation have only succeeded in keeping doubts alive. A veritable industry has grown up around the event.

Given this unsettling situation, one might have hoped that the producers of "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" would take special pains to stay close to reality. Instead, they presented the nation with a melange of fact and fabrication, permitting themselves "inferences" which amount to as far-fetched a conspiracy theory as anyone yet devised. Without any new evidence, they put the most sinister possible twists on what is known or half known, using dramatic techniques to plant suspicions that a shot was fired by some mysterious accomplice, that witnesses to the assassination were mysteriously murdered, that Oswald was connected with mysterious Americans, Russians and Cubans.

Such insinuations cannot, of course, be proved; yet ABC promoted the show as "based on historical fact, not speculation or rumor," and claimed that a researcher made sure that every piece of information could be documented. (How, we wonder, did he document the telephone call in which President Johnson warns the prosecutor to lay off?)

From the beginning, the Kennedy assassination has been beset by inadequate investigation and overwrought imagination. A major TV show, presented with claims of painstaking documentation, has now added to the confusion. Since ABC has asked for our vote, we're glad to give it: The offense is gross irresponsibility and the network is guilty.