

The Zapruder Film

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In August, Abraham Zapruder's 26-second home movie recording of the assassination of President Kennedy will become government property, in accordance with an Assassination Records Collection Act. First, however, there is the matter of compensating the Zapruder family. (Mr. Zapruder died in 1970.) The actual 8-millimeter film has been in the National Archives since 1978, and there it will stay. What is being negotiated now is the sale of the exclusive rights the Zapruder family maintains. They would like \$18.5 million. The Justice Department would like to spend much less.

Whatever the final figure, no film — it is tempting to say no cultural artifact of any kind — has been more closely examined than the Zapruder film. It has been sped up, slowed down, reversed, enhanced, and will soon be digitized. Each frame has been pored over relentlessly. Shot at 18.3 frames per second, the Zapruder film provides a split-second chronology of a shattering event. People will always remember where they were when President Kennedy was shot. But in a sense the one place we all were is behind the lens of Mr. Zapruder's camera, so dominant has it become as an image of the assassination.

That dominance is also a measure of the film's ubiquity, which poses a question in itself. Does the

ubiquity of a completely reproducible artifact raise or lower its value? The question crystallizes the strangeness of this film and, in a sense, of film itself. A thousand eyewitness narratives were born in the seconds it took Lee Harvey Oswald to kill President Kennedy, but none are as complete or impassive as the Zapruder film. On the surface, it is a transparent record of 26 seconds during a Dallas motorcade. In fact, it is more opaque than that. A viewer *learns* to see it, to identify the gestures and motions, one horrible instant after the next. To the cost of that learning each person must attest on his own.

Since the Justice Department and the Zapruder family began negotiating, the film has been re-broadcast again and again, often shown as if it were a film loop and the President's limousine were speeding beneath the freeway underpass and back onto Dealey Plaza again and again. One of the myths about our experience of the modern world is that we become desensitized through exposure to images. But even now, 35 years after President Kennedy's assassination, the Zapruder film is not just another pattern on the cultural wallpaper. The film begins, the motorcycles ride into view, and as the frames flicker past, seeming to pull time along with them, many of us still watch in disbelief, still avert our eyes from the brutality of what is coming.