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Kennedy Assassination, Dallas, 1963

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Whatever we might call Abraham Zapruder's home movie, it is more than simply accidental footage of a world-historical event. Integral to the official investigation of the Kennedy assassination that occurred in successive stages from the early 1960s to the early 1990s, it has long exceeded its forensic status to stand as a landmark cultural artifact, suffused with emotional and philosophic complexities. Far from revealing the "truth" about a mysterious, unsolved crime, it reveals instead the impossibility of knowing, of seeing beyond the frame, of getting to the bottom of one specific imbroglio or, more generally, the human capacity for violence, terror, and evil.

As the motorcade of President John F. Kennedy rolled through Dealey Plaza in Dallas shortly after noon on Friday, 22 November 1963, the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald shot the President with a P Mannlicher-Carcano carbine rifle loaded with 6.5 mm shells. At the same moment, a Dallas dressmaker named Abraham Zapruder (1905–70), stationed nearby, shot home-movie footage of the president with a Bell & Howell home movie camera loaded with 8 mm color film. Those twenty-six seconds of footage, comprising some 400 individual frames, have come to be known as the Zapruder film. It is perhaps the most celebrated, infamous, and controversial news artifact in the history of the United States.

Immediately following the assassination, the Secret Service requisitioned Zapruder's reel for processing at a local Dallas film laboratory. The next day, Zapruder sold publication rights to *LIFE* magazine for \$150,000, with the condition that the film be used in a dignified, non-exploitative manner. On 29 November 1963, *LIFE* published thirty blurry black and white frame enlargements. Its special memorial edition a week later reproduced some of these in color, but it was not until the release of the Warren Commission report on the assassination in October 1964 that *LIFE* printed a selection of frame enlargements in bright and devastating hues.

A decade later, on 6 March 1975, ABC's *Good Night America* nationally broadcast the film for the first time. Viewers were dismayed by what they saw, and debate about a possible government cover-up intensified. In 1978, the Zapruder family, while retaining their rights to the film, had it physically transferred to the National Archives and Records Administration for safekeeping. Oliver Stone reproduced the home movie in his 1992 feature *JFK* with an enhanced color, sharpened focus, and magnitude of size that had not previously been possible. Under these conditions, it proved stunning to viewers in its power, intimacy, and reach.

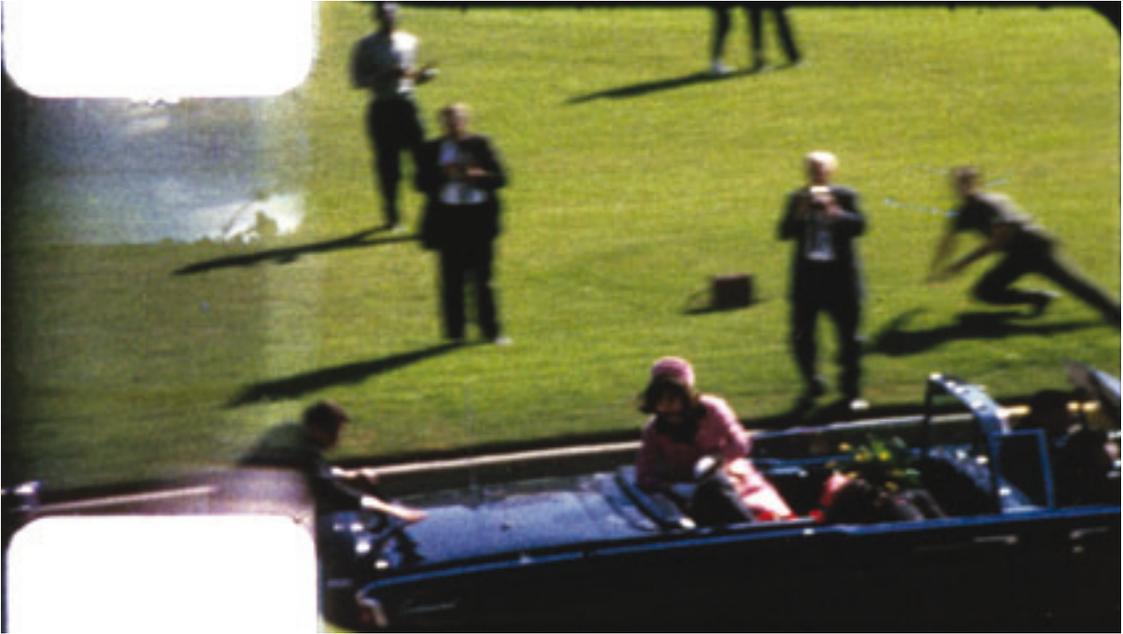


Figure 1.21a Enlargement of Zapruder frame 347, 1963 © 1967 (renewed 1995). The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.



Figure 1.21b Enlargement of Zapruder frame 371, 1963 © 1967 (renewed 1995). The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.

From the start, the Zapruder film *conveyed* news (providing visual information about an important current event) and *made* news (Zapruder was interviewed on television and *LIFE* took forceful legal action to guard its copyright). Moreover, in the intervening half century, the movie has implicitly *critiqued* news, insofar as it accentuates the epistemological limitations of camera vision: despite the countless close viewings this “eyewitness” and “impartial” document has received over the years, it has told us nothing, finally, about who shot Kennedy and why.

In highlighting senseless tragedy and inexplicable death, the film embodies the modernist art, theater, and philosophy emanating from advanced circles in Europe and America in the postwar era. Indeed, it is an outstanding emblem of that era. With its aristocratic hero tumbling from the pinnacle of power, it seems to be a modern-day encapsulation of classical tragedy. Yet there’s no catharsis here, no beam of illumination amid the darkness. From *Hamlet* or *Oedipus Rex* we come away with self-knowledge, having seen our flaws writ large in the lives of the doomed prince and king. But what does this modern tragedy teach? Only that even the best, most powerful, most charismatic of us, shining in glory, riding in triumph, may be felled without notice by the meteorite from the sky.

It’s a domestic tragedy, as well. A man is stricken suddenly, and his wife turns to him in befuddlement, not recognizing his plight. His elbows fly up and his hands jerk uncontrollably. She hastens to his side but is powerless to restore him to himself. Like some Halloween skeleton dangled on strings, he performs a demented *danse macabre* with those pumping arms and wagging hands, his nervous system twitching out of control, while she looks on aghast and makes a futile effort to stay his flailing appendages.

It is sad, too, because it is a home movie, and home movies, no matter how joyful in subject or lighthearted in tone, ultimately infuse their viewers with regret, for they show *temps perdu*—time lost, never to return, eroding the youth, beauty, and vitality of those whom we love. Even though suppliers and advertisers of home movie merchandise have done everything in their power to promote the idea that home movies or videos are about fun and joy and good times, all the same, they are melancholy documents. They make visible the decay that besets us all. They remind us that we rust.

Though miniscule in scale and thoroughly unplanned in what it shows, the Zapruder film is a modern masterpiece along the lines of Picasso’s *Guernica* (agonizing violence, political murder, death from above by unseen assailants) or Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (the frailty of the rich and powerful, the fragility of their relationships, the irreversible flow of time). To construe the movie as modern art does not diminish its status as one of the most noteworthy pieces of pictorial news in the history of the medium. It does acknowledge, however, that the film has always had a conspicuously complex and ambiguous relationship to the historical happening it is thought to have recorded. Its ontological status is equally complex: made as a private document of an insignificant local event that instantly attained global significance, it was quickly transformed into a news-industry commodity while also serving as key evidence in a series of highly publicized criminal investigations by government organizations.