

The zapruder footage essay



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On the 22nd of November 1963, one of the most controversial pieces of film this century was produced. Abraham Zapruder recorded the entire assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on 8mm tape. Recently, I saw a documentary on the footage. It included interviews with the important faces of the story who tell the history of the film, whose hands it fell into, and what happened to it. The documentary has managed to reawaken the mystery surrounding the conspiracy, provoking much thought in those who saw it. Although the Zapruder footage was nothing more than an amateur home movie, it has proved to be the most important home movie of all time.

The Zapruder footage shows many crucial factors associated with the assassination. Firstly, It shows the motorcade turning down Elm street, consisting of a limousine and a police escort. The open topped limousine contains John F. Kennedy, Jackie Kennedy, Connally - a secret service agent, and a driver. As the procession moves up the road, Kennedy starts to clutch his throat with both hands with Jackie looking over him to see what has happened. Seconds later, in frame 313, Kennedy's head is hit, his head explodes backwards, and what is left of him is thrust backward, then forward again. Jackie Kennedy then climbs over the back of the car, but is pulled back in.

There is no sound on the film so we cannot hear any gunshots, and the visual quality is poor. Zapruder had vertigo, so he couldn't hold the camera still, he was startled at the gunshots, and that didn't help him keep it steady, and the camera was very basic, and the resolution was of a very low quality. This makes it very hard to be certain about the finer details, but we can definitely

see that Kennedy is hit at least twice. The rest is up to speculation.

Depending on how you read the evidence, there can be many conclusions.

After the film had been processed, Richard Stolley, a journalist from Time-Life magazine, heard about the tape. Stolley phoned Zapruder up, asking to see the movie. Zapruder agreed and Stolley attended a screening of the movie alongside some Secret Service agents the day after the assassination. The movie shocked everyone in the room, as Stolley mentions in the documentary. Stolley decided to buy the tape from Zapruder and did so for \$250, 000. The tape was not shown on television. Instead, stills from the movie were published in Time-Life magazine, but frame 313 was left out. Stolley said he left that particular frame out to protect the public from a horror such as that. This may be the case, but there is also the possibility that Stolley was ordered by the Secret Service agents not to show frame 313, the frame that might have proved that there was a second gunman. That, again, is speculation and cannot be proved.

The documentary also included an interview with Abraham Zapruder. It is an interview from nearer the time of the shooting, as Zapruder died in the 1970s. He originally wanted to shoot the film so his grandchildren could see the president and had no idea about what might happen. He comments on how alarming and disturbing the film was to everyone who saw it.

The film was made available for researchers to see in the government archives, but the film was worse quality than the original copy, and very little could be seen. Illegal copies were also made, but were, again, of little use to

anybody. A better copy was rumoured to be kept in Time-Life magazine's vault.

In 1975, the full, high quality movie, including frame 313, was aired for the first time on public television. Geraldo Riviera was the man who showed the film on " Good Night America". He received a lot of abuse from Time-Life and the Zapruder family, but he argued that the public had a right to know. He described it on the television as an execution, implying that the shooting might have been organised by the government, maybe even legal. It definitely tells us that Kennedy was killed for a purpose. This is not too farfetched, as many people inside and connected to the government were unhappy about Kennedy's policy, especially regarding the Vietnam war.

The documentary seemed to concentrate most of its interviews on people in the media. It interviews Stolley, who is a journalist for a magazine, and quite a few film directors and producers. The men in the movie industry talk mainly about Zapruder's lacking cameraman skills. They call it " Zapruderism", when the quality of film is awful, but the content is amazing. They refer to the film as a form of art.

Following the release of frame 313, rumours of a government conspiracy went around. Jim Garrison was the main opposition to the official government theory of a lone gunman. He came up with the " Magic Bullet" theory, which stated that if there was a lone gunman, the bullet fired must have taken an impossible route through Kennedy and Connally, twisting, turning and waiting in mid-air. The bullet, having taken this path, would then have come out virtually intact, something that has been proved impossible. Garrison

proposed that there were many teams of gunmen, all shooting at the president, including a team behind the grassy knoll.

The mood of the documentary was very elegiac and mournful. The music it played was very typical of America at that time, but also very emotional. The people talk of the events in a sombre fashion and the pictures in the documentary are, in a way, quite moving aswell. The documentary, made in 1993, certainly conveys the feeling that something was lost when the President died.

After watching the documentary and surveying the facts over and over again many times, there are a few arguments that seem to be more believable than others. Jim Garrison's theory that there were many teams of snipers makes much more sense than the Warren Commission's theory of a lone gunman with a magic bullet. The shot that killed Kennedy seemed to come from the front, as his head was thrown backward and his head exploded out in that direction aswell.

The Texas book depository was located behind the limousine, so the fatal bullet cannot have been fired from there. There was also a rumour that the reason that Jackie Kennedy jumped out of the back of the limousine was to recover a piece of the President's brain. This could be possible, but it seems more likely that she just panicked in the situation and was not connected to the assassination. One thing is certain, however: it will be a long time before we find out the truth.