The College of Communication & Information Sciences Diversity Forum Presents

Film Screening and Discussion

CRISIS: Behind a Presidential Commitment

Wednesday, March 13, 2013
7 p.m.
Gorgas Library
Room 205
TV: Too Many Cameras

Documentary on the Segregation Crisis Termed Just a Peep Show

By JACK GOULD

THE White House decision to permit candid cameras in the offices of President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy during last June’s segregation crisis proved to be as thoroughly ill-advised as many had anticipated.

The ensuing documentary, entitled “Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment,” was belatedly presented last night by the American Broadcasting Company.

The cause of curiosity was served but not history or information. And the price paid was the appearance of the private deliberations of the executive branch of government being turned into a melodramatic peep show, with homespun family touches to lighten the tension between Federal officials and Gov. George Wallace of Alabama.

Robert Drew, producer of the program, achieved a formidable coup: his presentation surely will stand as a prime example of governmental surrender to the ceaseless and often thoughtless demands of the entertainment world.

Last June, cameras were positioned by Mr. Drew in the office of the President, in the office and home of Attorney General Kennedy, in the headquarters of the Federal officials in Tuscaloosa, and at the site of the confrontation on the steps of the University of Alabama.

The candid close-ups of the President showed him looking more haggard and worn than he has ever appeared on TV. For the most part he was heard speaking only in dis-outfoxing the Governor inevitably pushed all the deeper issues to the background.

Moreover, just before the decisive showdown with the Governor, the Attorney General was seen with his charming daughter Kerry, who had a chat with Mr. Katzenbach in Tuscaloosa. Was a moment that to the outside world at least seemed fairly tense propitious for presenting one’s youngster before the TV cameras?

The staged quality of the hour was particularly exemplified in a sequence involving Mr. Katzenbach in Alabama. With a firm display of Federal sternness, he and an aide ordered reporters and other persons away from his radio-equipped car; he must talk in private to the Attorney General—so viewers of last night’s managed news film could clearly hear his words, it turned out.

If Mr. Drew promised Federal officials that he could operate discreetly without intruding on the content of the events, then he little knows the human reaction to the presence of cameras. Time after time a viewer could see for himself that the participants were conscious of the lens, which automatically raised the question of what was being done solely for the benefit of the cameras. In a moment of governmental crisis, just such a concern should not be present in the first place.

Channel 13, the educational station WNDT, very alertly last night ran a half-hour discussion of the Channel 7 program; its title was “Crisis: Presidency by Television?”

Film on Kennedys In Alabama Crisis Set for TV Oct. 28

The film in which President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy discuss Gov. George C. Wallace in connection with desegregating the University of Alabama will be televised on Oct. 28 from 7:30 to 8:30 P.M. by the American Broadcasting Company.

The film was made with the permission of the Kennedys. A two-man camera team was stationed in their offices on June 10 and 11 as they talked of what to do in case the Alabama Governor interfered with the registration of two Negroes at the university. Another camera crew covered Governor Wallace on the same dates.

On June 11 Governor Wallace defied a Federal Court order calling for desegregation. He later stepped aside when confronted by federalized National Guard troops.

The Xerox Corporation, maker of photocopy machines and supplies, said yesterday that it would sponsor the documentary, which is entitled “The Crisis.” A.B.C., which had first considered televising the documentary early in September, decided to withhold the program pending its sale to an advertiser.

“The Crisis” was produced by Robert Drew Associates, an independent company that has made other documentary films for A.B.C.
WELCOME
Caryl Cooper
Coordinator, Discerning Diverse Voices Symposium

AN AUDIO FLASHBACK
George Daniels
Department of Journalism
“Media and the Moment: A Panel Discussion in June 2003”
Featuring Robert Drew, Producer of CRISIS;
Jim Lipscomb, Alabama-based film crew, CRISIS;
Mary Ann Watson, media historian

THE SCREENING

CRISIS: Behind A Presidential Commitment

THE DISCUSSION

Mike Letcher
Production Manager
Center for Public Television

Kari Frederickson
Professor and Department Chair
UA Department of History

CLOSING REMARKS
In 1960, when Robert Drew produced “Primary”, it was recognized as a breakthrough, the beginning of what came to be called “Cinema Verite,” in America. “Primary” was the first film in which the sync sound camera moved freely with characters throughout a breaking story.

Drew, a former LIFE magazine correspondent and editor, wanted to expand LIFE’s candid still photography into sound and motion pictures. Before John F. Kennedy’s inauguration, Robert Drew screened “Primary” for him in West Palm Beach.

“At that time I was proposing that we make a new kind of history of the presidency,” recalls Drew, “that we would see and feel all the things that bore on the presidency at a given time the expressions on faces, the mood of the country, the tensions in the room so that future presidents could look back at this and see and learn. And I thought Kennedy, who had written a history book, might agree that history should be recorded in a different way.”

“Crisis” documented the showdown between Alabama Governor George Wallace and President Kennedy over the integration of the University of Alabama.

Wallace vowed to stand in the school house door to prevent the registration of two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood; Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the President were committed to upholding a federal court order that demanded the admission of the students.

In the Oval Office, the President and Robert Kennedy hammered out a strategy they hoped would gain admission for the two students without having to jail the governor: in a first try to register the students, they would allow the governor to turn them back; in a second try, the President would take over the Alabama National Guard. Meanwhile, five Drew teams ranged from the Oval Office to the Justice Department to the University of Alabama, capturing the human details of a drama deeply affecting the country, the civil rights movement and the presidency.

“Crisis” was described by reviewer John Horn as “an milestone in film journalism.”