

Picture Imperfect

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LOS ANGELES

In the first trial of the Los Angeles police officers who beat Rodney King, George Holliday's videotape was the key evidence. Jurors did not just see the tape in real time, however; they watched it over and over in slow motion and with stop action. These techniques can be useful. They can also be very misleading. Before the jurors in the second trial begin their deliberations, it should be made clear to them the many ways in which videotaped evidence can be distorted or misused.

Slow motion minimizes the violence. In the real world, a faster blow is a harder blow; a slower blow is softer. In the tape, slow motion makes the blows appear less harmful than they really were.

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Slow motion also makes the beating seem less real and more fantastic, as Elizabeth Holtzman, New York City comptroller and a former district attorney points out. One person who saw a slowed-down version of the tape said: "It looks like a ballet . . . It's definitely easier to watch this." According to Dan McLaughlin, professor of film and television at U.C.L.A., Sam Peckinpah and generations of film makers after him have used slow motion to give violence an esthetic quality.

Adding to the unreality is the fact that slow motion removes the tape's soundtrack. You cannot hear the batons hitting their mark, onlookers' reactions or Mr. King's screams.

Similarly, freeze frame distorts the tape's meaning. During the first trial, the beating was constantly put into stop action while jurors were told how to interpret what they were viewing. But freezing the action at critical points, reduces the tape's visual impact by making it seem less relentless.

The repeated showing of the videotape has hazards. Research shows that repeated exposure to televised violence desensitizes viewers. Repetition of the videotape makes the beat-

ing appear less troubling, less violent, less excessive.

While slow motion and stop action are useful in furnishing evidence and details of action, they should not be used to establish motive and intent. Those are defined partly by the speed of real-world actions. To change speed by technological manipulations is to distort the communication of motive and intent.

Take an important legal question: What caused Mr. King's movements during the beating? Was he writhing under the blows or trying to attack the police? The answer may depend on video technique. For example, when the defense in the first trial used stop action to freeze Mr. King in a posture they labeled "threatening," the frame was cut off from what preceded it, making it impossible to see if Mr. King was actually responding to blows from the police.

A single word cannot be interpreted out of the context of a sentence. A frame of film or videotape cannot be interpreted out of its surrounding action. As Mr. McLaughlin points out, stop action or freeze frame allows lawyers on both sides to manipulate

jurors' conclusions by selecting frames that support their case. Stop action can make a posture that is too fleeting to be visible at the time of an event visible and significant. Of course, lawyers have always used evidence selectively. The difference is, jurors may be less aware when they are being manipulated by realistic images than when they are being manip-

Manipulating the King tapes.

ulated by words.

Video will be an increasingly important source of courtroom evidence. If it is to serve the cause of justice, jurors and the public must learn to distinguish between the types of conclusions that can be validly drawn from slow-motion or stop-action techniques and those that are more accurately taken from real-time video or witnesses. □