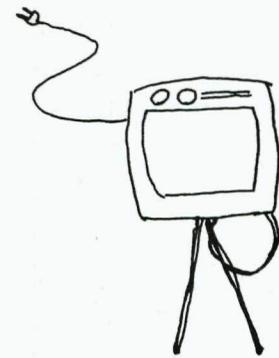


MEDIA REVIEW: TELEVISION DECONSTRUCTING THE O.J. SIMPSON TRIAL

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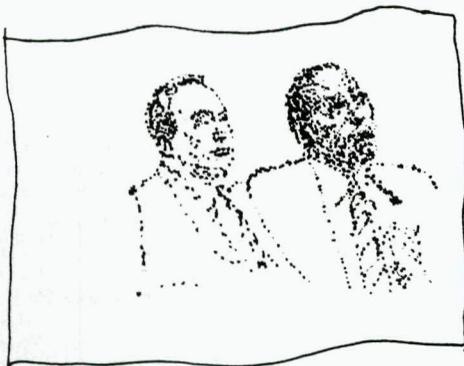
The most powerful narratives are those that evoke a common cultural memory, offering familiar characters and mythic conflicts deeply embedded in the beliefs we summon to explain human behavior. The manner in which the O.J. Simpson saga, especially the televised trial, has electrified the nation is an example of how shared narrative myths, when animated by public events, have an enormous realizing power, channeling our reactions in ways that are congruent with those multilayered stories from both our past and present. The Simpson story is a peculiarly American chronicle, recognized as such by observers across the world, who are as fascinated by our complex reaction to this drama as they are by the narrative lines of the murder mystery itself.

The riveting trial, complete with partisan lawyerly commentary, can be viewed as a text in which competing narratives are interwoven. Each of these stories has been salient at some point in the linear narrative of the trial itself. While this larger story will inevitably be resolved with a coda of some sort, whether innocent, guilty, hung jury or mistrial, the more inchoate stories of the trial have no resolution, but play as recurrent themes in American cultural life. It is these compel-



ling stories, subtexts if you will, that account for our terrible fascination with the Simpson saga.

The first and most obvious of these stories reaches back into the early American experience of slavery and continues throughout the 19th century up to the present day. It is the story that Clarence Thomas evoked in his confirmation hearings: the story of an African American man besieged, tormented and persecuted by slaveowners, law enforcement, the criminal justice system: in short, white men in power. For much of American history this story had a very bitter ending indeed — often ending in death of the African American man. Only recently (and then only occasionally) has the story ended in the redemption of the protagonist and the vanquishing of his enemies. It is striking how few non African Americans (if we are to believe the polls) seem to have any sense of how clearly the Simpson case can seem to be another chapter in that chronicle, this time with a bona fide hero as victim. In this version, Simpson's tragic flaw, as with Hamlet or Oedipus, was loving the wrong woman. His silent, brooding figure in the



courtroom evokes sympathy, even love from some of his audience. The Americanization of this story is heightened by the fact that the woman he loved was white, blonde, young and highly eroticized, unavailable to him in the ordinary course of a racist culture, available only by virtue of his wealth and fame, (through which he nearly eluded the oppressive fate awaiting the African American male in this country).

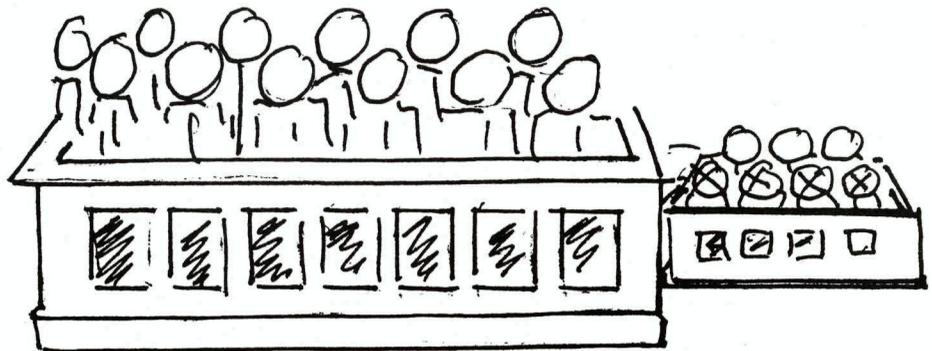
While this is clearly the dominant narrative of the trial; the failure of many in the white community to comprehend its power may be explained by the fact that the story of victimization at the hands of law enforcement has little purchase there. More significantly, in the this community the racial narrative has been muted by another powerful storyline: woman as victim of an abusive husband, powerless in the face of his insistent personality and demands. This tale has been legitimized by the modern feminist movement, especially in the middle and upper class white community, and has in turn given this movement renewed strength. As in the Anita Hill case, the fit between the trial and the feminist narrative is not perfect; since it was constructed on the image of white men (not African American men) oppressing white women. Again as in the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill drama, the text of the trial offers two competing exegeses; one's view of the winner is dependent on which interpretation is more personally resonant. Both scenarios are

powerful; neither is superior in terms of narrative quality. As deconstructionists would remind us, these stories are embedded in the text of the trial, each holding only the most tenuous relationship to the facticity of the murder: either committed or not committed by O.J. Simpson.

Other lesser narrative lines are evident: the conflict between science and common sense that was sharply drawn in the 1925 Scopes trial, where Biblical versions of creation (common sense at the time) were challenged by evolution. Here the common sense notion that O.J. Simpson is a good man, even a hero, incapable of such an act, is challenged by the forensic DNA evidence. Will the new science win over the minds of the jurors schooled in the older realities? Insofar as some of them are moved by the story of racial injustice, the "scientific" basis of the DNA evidence may be ignored. Similarly the story of the defendant's policeman friend offers two readings: was he a brave man willing to speak the truth against a charismatic and powerful villain or a Judas, willing to point out his friend to

the Pharisees? "Lo, how the mighty have fallen" may appear to some to be the most compelling chronicle in the trial; for these observers Simpson's fame and wealth, not his ethnicity, are his most salient qualities.

The lawyers seek to heighten the storylines they embrace, with the defense astutely offering observers a racial road map to make sense of the many conundrums in the case, and the prosecution relying heavily on the domestic violence theme. These narratives are played out, whenever possible, not only in the content and strategy of the opening statements, direct examinations and cross examinations, but in the personalities and characteristics of the legal protagonists. Thus it is critical that Mr. Cochran and Ms. Clark react with outrage to any personal interactions that play into their main narrative themes, making much out of personal slights and innuendos. In the final analysis, this lawyerly scenery chewing is unnecessary; each of us will view the Simpson trial the way our multiple pasts and present aspirations allow us. □



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