



Medea and the O.J. Media

by John Corry

Say now that the O.J. Simpson case is gripping, and that there has never been anything quite like it before: a double murder and its aftermath played out in real time on television. When Simpson finally gave himself up at his house in California, all the network anchors went on air in New York, not adding much with their commentary, but exalting the event by their presence. There was a hint of what was to come right there. Even Peter Jennings began musing about "the enormous pressure of the media on every inch of the story."

And indeed the pressure was enormous, although it was on the media as much as it was on the story. How could the press, especially television, justify all the attention it was paying to O.J. Simpson? A redemptive reason had to be found, and almost immediately one was. Simpson was picked up on a Friday, and two days later Cokie Roberts could explain on "This Week With David Brinkley" that the story was focusing our attention on spouse abuse. A consensus began to form. On the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" the next night, the essayist Anne Taylor Fleming said there might even be an "analogue to the Anita Hill thing." The Simpson case could draw attention to the absence of women in power.

There may have been a point there. After Nicole Simpson's piteous 911 call was disclosed, the network news programs and major publications all ran pieces on domestic violence. The larger questions, though, were about race and the nature of victims, and they troubled

the press from the start. Surely Simpson had to be suffering from secret afflictions. The day after he was taken into custody, William C. Rhoden, a sports columnist at the *New York Times*, wrote about the burdens on famous black athletes:

Money and notoriety based on physical prowess can never fully fill certain voids, heal old scars, change skin tone, straighten hair, change any of those intrinsic qualities. The money is a temporary salve—a pain killer that allows the athlete to get through a day, a life, a career. Eventually the troubled soul must stop to confront the demons that have been in pursuit.

Perhaps Simpson had never been able to fill the voids, much less change his skin tone, or confront the demons. The truth was obscure, but the reference to skin tone was prophetic. *Newsweek* said Simpson had transcended race: "His genial, race-neutral style went down easily with white audiences." Rival *Time*, however, innocently reminded everyone he was black. It darkened the mug shot of Simpson that had been released by the Los Angeles Police Department, and used it on its cover.

This was a mistake. In a sensitive age such as ours, political correctness takes precedence over aesthetics. Frank Rich wrote on the op-ed page of the *Times* that by darkening Simpson's face, *Time* had sent him "back to the ghetto." Benjamin Chavis of the NAACP was more vitriolic. He said *Time* had tried to portray Simpson as "some kind of animal." The head of the nation's largest civil-rights organization was attaching a moral stigma to an ebony, as opposed to café-au-lait, color. This seemed bizarre, although in the ensuing argument, no prominent journalist or

news organization joined in to take *Time*'s side. Presumably they were afraid to. Responding to "the storm of controversy," James Gaines, the managing editor, had to explain in a full-page letter "to our readers" in the next issue why *Time* darkened the mug shot. A photo-illustrator, he said, had used computer imaging for artistic effect:

The harshness of the mug shot—the merciless bright light, the stubble on Simpson's face, the cold specificity of the picture—had been shaped into an icon of tragedy. The expression on his face was not merely blank now; it was bottomless. This cover, with the simple nonjudgmental headline "An American Tragedy," seemed the right choice.

And probably it was the right choice, and surely "An American Tragedy" was meant to be nonjudgmental. Indeed, the idea that the Simpson case was a "tragedy" would go on to suffuse much of the press coverage. A *Times* editorial even declared that it was precisely because the case was a tragedy that it had gripped the national interest. "The fall of the mighty was a central theme of classical Greek tragedy . . . and it became the spine of Elizabethan tragedy," the *Times* said. "O.J. Simpson may or may not be a 'hero' to individual citizens, but as one who was given great gifts and has been brought to a grim pass by either fate or frailty, he fits the pattern that lurks in our ancestral memory."

The *Times*, however, was reaching. The characters of classical tragedy accepted their grim passes. Medea howled out her pain, and took responsibility for murdering her children. Simpson wrote a self-pitying letter, and then fled in a Ford Bronco. If innocent he is badly muddled, and if guilty he is beneath contempt. Either way, he is not a tragic figure. In her

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column in the *Times*, Anna Quindlen chided those who felt sorry for him, and said the real victim was Nicole Brown Simpson. Quindlen was right about that, although in her feminist zeal to turn the murder into a plea for battered wives, she forgot about Robert Goldman, who had been left as dead as Nicole Simpson.

Implicit in Quindlen's column, meanwhile, was the notion that Simpson was guilty. In fact, although prominent columnists, correspondents, and anchors do not admit it—nor should they—it is likely that most agree: Simpson has committed two murders. Nonetheless, as professional participants in the drama—"the live electronic drama," Tom Brokaw called it—they have been able to cloak their feelings. Posturing defense attorneys and other sympathizers to the contrary, Simpson has not had a bad press. The tone of the coverage has been more elegiac than censorious, and "An American Tragedy" suggests that the guilt is shared, diffuse, and not anyone's in particular.

Certainly there have been exceptions, and Simpson is not necessarily pictured as nice. *People* magazine ran a notable cover story—"The O.J. Nobody Knew: All his life he worked hard to be loved. But behind the smile and the charm was a dangerous temper and a desperate need to get what he wanted"—that insisted he was nasty. Then, the day after Judge Kathleen Kennedy-Powell ruled that Simpson must face trial, the enterprising *New York Post* published the findings of two experts who had studied his handwriting. They found, the *Post* said, that he was "cowardly, oversexed, immature, tenacious, unpredictable and surly." But no other publication seemed to pick up the story, and probably that was just as well.

The defense team is claiming, of course, that the press already has convicted Simpson, and that it is impossible for him to get a fair trial. Obviously we will continue to hear this. Robert L. Shapiro, Simpson's lead counsel, once wrote an article entitled "Using the Media for Your Advantage." F. Lee Bailey, another celebrated member of the team, first became famous when he was successful in overturning the conviction of Sam Sheppard, the Cleveland osteopath who had been found guilty of murdering his wife. The case is cited in law schools as the classic example in

which pretrial publicity was used to reverse a conviction. Bailey may be seen on CNN now, arguing that he has never seen pretrial publicity this bad, and preparing the ground for an appeal if his client is convicted.

But contrast the press treatment of Simpson with its treatment of Mike Tyson, another gifted athlete who also was born poor and black. He was never seen as ambiguous, interesting, or worthy of much pity. The press was hostile toward him from the start, in part because in a sensitive age, it finds rape less socially acceptable than murder. Murder may be explained—diminished capacity, temporary insanity, disadvantaged circumstances—but rape has no alleviating factors. Attempted or alleged, it is always heinous. Moreover, Tyson practiced a brutal profession, and hit other men with his fists. Prominent journalists could not find much to empathize



with there, and although Tyson was convicted on the most slender evidence, few thought of it as a tragedy. He is serving a three-year sentence, and will not be released until next year.

Tyson had a further disadvantage. He was, by almost anyone's reckoning, ill-favored and homely, while Simpson, either in café au lait or *Time's* ebony, is extremely good-looking. The cameras linger on the one in a way that would have been unthinkable with the other. There is no contest between Simpson's sculpted cheekbones and Tyson's beetling brows. The media are susceptible to conventional beauty, and do what they can to promote it. They may pretend it does not influence their coverage, but

given the chance they extol it. When Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis died at age 64, she was eulogized for having lived the last years of her life with dignity, grace and discretion, and successfully raising two children. But *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* all ran cover photos of Mrs. Onassis at approximately age 30, while *People* filled a "commemorative issue" with similar glamorous pictures. An older, more interesting woman gave way to an ephemeral Jackie.

Obviously, Simpson has some advantages. Bailey and his colleagues notwithstanding, the press has been fair, or as fair as it probably can be, to their client. Polls by both *Newsweek* and CNN found that most black Americans believe Simpson cannot get a fair trial; but that depressing finding reflects cultural paranoia more than anything real, and it is to be devoutly hoped that Chavis, as well as the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Joseph Lowery, the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who also have joined in the argument, will in the future stay silent. *Newsweek* was right when it called Simpson "race neutral." Even the cheesiest publications have been hesitant to exploit the fact that he had a mixed marriage. Colin Powell aside, it is hard to think of another male black celebrity who has so transcended race other than, perhaps, Bryant Gumbel.

Certainly the trial will be a circus, but there is no reason to think that will be to Simpson's disadvantage. More likely it will work in his favor. Alan Dershowitz, who zipped into Los Angeles in his Lear jet, and then was uncharacteristically quiet, will emerge from hiding, and anchors and correspondents will scrupulously report all the defense arguments, while priding themselves on their balance and fairness. The preliminary hearing could be seen on ten channels in New York, while the national news programs led with it more often than not, and only "MacNeil/Lehrer" had the audacity to sometimes ignore it. Meanwhile, the old rationale of spouse abuse was dropped; the new idea was that we could see the criminal-justice system at work. Former Attorney General Richard Thornburg even told Larry King that the whole world was watching. It probably was, and you wonder what it made of it. □



Foxes

by Benjamin J. Stein

Monday

A planned lunch at a very good Italian place in Malibu called Tradinoi. It's a stunningly gorgeous sunny clear day here and I'm meeting my friend Hilda to cheer her up. She's a woman of about forty who is about to become a single mother, exclusively by choice and by plan. She's an attractive woman with jet black hair and pale blue eyes and a perpetual smile. She was once a mime, and actually used to be a San Francisco street mime, perhaps the most offensive job on earth. But she pulled herself together and now teaches mathematics to gifted children in the public schools of Santa Monica. Of course, as she often points out, what we now call "gifted" in 1962 would have been called B-average.

Anyway, I had the great pleasure of meeting Hilda in *Journey into Self-Obsession* a few years ago when I used to go regularly to that bizarre group. I talked to her after a meeting and learned that her mother, a German Jew, had been in a concentration camp for five years and survived. I later met the mother for dinner when she was out here from Brooklyn, where she operates a card shop. The Mom was self-effacing and stolid, and had an amazing sangfroid about the entire matter.

The mother's family was seized by the Gestapo in the small town in Germany where they had been cattle merchants for hundreds of years. When the Gestapo dirt entered the family house, they simply shot an

infant son, Hilda's uncle, so to speak, because he would be too much trouble to transport and murder somewhere else. The mother's parents were gassed. The mother and her sister survived as slave laborers in a munitions factory.

Hilda's mom is incredibly strong and to this day almost never gets sick. When the war was over, she took herself back to her town and to her house. An erstwhile Nazi was living there. Even though she was just 20, she ordered the Nazis out of her house, collected whatever little bits of clothing she could find, and came to America.

As organized and disciplined as Mom is, that's how unfocused and confused daughter Hilda is. She's also uniquely good-hearted, and one of the few women I know in L.A. whom I've come to admire.

About a year ago, Hilda decided that she was unlikely to get married any time soon. This is not an unusual fate in

Los Angeles, where there is rarely enough personality left for interest in anyone but oneself. She also decided that she wanted to have a baby. Specifically, she wanted a baby so that she could help to carry on her family line despite Hitler's efforts to eradicate it. And she very specifically wanted a baby to replace, so to say, or to remember, the infant uncle the Gestapo killed when they entered her mother's house *not so very long ago*.

Hilda also loves children, and considers it a gift from God just to be around them. She solicited and got a sperm donation from a friend in a faraway city, and soon became pregnant. At that point, she began to wonder if she should in fact have the baby. After all, as she often told me (whom she fatefully considered a great expert on raising children), it was a big responsibility, a big expense, and a huge expenditure of time. However, and this is what makes me like her so much, she ruled out abortion from the first moment. "I love children," she said. "I'm not going to murder my own child after I wanted one for so long. I'll just get by one day at a time, with love."

I was on my way to meet this modern hero of the pro-life movement when I heard a strange story on the car radio just as I was passing Zuma Beach, jammed with sunbathers.

"We interrupt the CBS news for a KCBS special report," said the announcer. "One of the bodies which we reported found in the Brentwood section of West Los Angeles has been identified as the former wife of football great O.J. Simpson..."

Now, this is news indeed.



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