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*Television Discourse  
on the Real*

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## Television Vectors and the Making of a Media Event

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### *The Helicopter, the Freeway Chase, and National Memory*

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The contemporary transnational media web, with satellite communications, multinational media conglomerates, all-news cable channels, international news services, and the dissemination of American popular culture throughout the world, has contributed to the view of the media as a global enterprise that unites audiences across national boundaries. Media viewers are imagined as global citizens, who can access via their remote control a vast array of programming from local news to national news, from endless all-news programming to brief headlines to global weather forecasts, and from conventional television viewing to countless Web sites and on-line news sources.

Within this globalized mediascape, television is often singled out as a primary element of an increasingly unbounded world. Television, the story goes, is so easily transmitted across national boundaries, so emblematic of American cultural imperialism throughout the world, and so ubiquitous, that it has created a new global media consumer and homogenized the world audience as a global market for American popular culture. Television, it has been widely asserted, effaces national boundaries and empties the category of citizenship of meaning.

Yet characterizations of the global and hyperbole about the effects of globalization have tended to gloss over the ways that television remains at this moment of history a powerful force in the constitution of citizenship, significantly through the national experience of live television events. In both television's relentless everydayness and the moments of national trauma when people remember "where they were," Americans (as well as citizens of other countries) are incited to experience themselves as citizens through the technology of television. In the experience of watching the first moon walk, the Watergate hearings, the Challenger explosion, the Persian Gulf War, or the Los Angeles riots, or the terrorist attacks of September 11,

American viewers, regardless of the ways in which they are individually marked by difference, are addressed as members of a specifically national culture and as citizens (both literal and figurative). Similarly, it could be said that global events such as Princess Diana's funeral create simultaneously a global audience and a specifically national audience, speaking not only to the British citizenry but to all viewers as British citizens. The experience of the television viewer is an essential component in generating the sense that a national culture, a "people," exists, even as globalism imagines we have gone beyond the nation.

Hence, while television has been traditionally understood contradictorily in terms of both its potential capacity to create a global village and as a medium of isolation that can separate families and communities, it emerged ironically in the late twentieth century as a primary means through which participation in the nation takes place, in particular in times of national debate and trauma. Television is a pedagogical medium, one that instructs citizen-viewers about national culture and citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Sports events, advertising that sells the idea of America, news programs, TV movies, and tabloid talk shows are among the genres that reinforce viewership in terms of nationalism, speaking to an established set of codes about belonging to the nation. Sitting before the television screen, viewers are provided by television conventions with a sense of their fellow audience members, scattered throughout the country, watching along with them.

It is above all live television that aims to establish a national commonality among viewers. Live television events such as sports and awards ceremonies are used to promote television's claims to spontaneity and the unexpected. Indeed, the live television moment, while actually relatively rare in the many hours of programming shown every day, continues to be a defining part of television's meaning in American culture. A significant number of the conventions of television genres, such as the pseudo-spontaneity of talk show and newscast chatter, are about establishing codes of the live, and hence of television as immediate, in contexts in which often it is actually taped. The desire for the value of live television is the reason why many moments of television are live for no inherent reason, such as the convention of newscasters reporting live from sites where news events took place earlier in the day (but that are now without activity). The immediacy and urgency that such moments can produce is thus central to the definition of television.

This quality of liveness has often been seen by cultural critics as evidence of television's negation of memory and history, defined as it is by simultaneity, banality, distraction, flow, and catastrophe.<sup>2</sup> Yet it could be said that the presence of television as live marks events as historical precisely through television's capacity to interpellate viewers as citizens. Indeed, studies show

that people often misremember where they first heard of national events by imagining themselves in retrospect as having seen the event first on television.<sup>3</sup> The events through which history is confirmed via television range from the crucial and the tragic to the trivial. In other words, live television can create a sense of the national in events of no apparent historical significance. This does not mean that history is increasingly trivial, but rather that the trivial can acquire meaning through its status as live television and its tele-historization.

This essay examines the intersections of television technology with the construction of national culture through an analysis of the ultimate all-American event of television of the mid-1990s: the televised freeway chase of O. J. Simpson in June 1994. What are we to do with the fact that one of the primary "television events" of the 1990s consisted of millions of viewers tracking the chase of a Ford Bronco driving on the (miraculously empty) Los Angeles freeways on a Friday afternoon, followed by twenty police cars? This event offers a means to examine the complexity of communication vectors that establish the contemporary media event and the role of active viewer participation in codifying television events as both newsworthy and nationally significant. This was simultaneously a global, national, and local event, through which the increasingly complex geography of television was revealed. The O. J. Simpson freeway chase demonstrated the rich mix of genres of contemporary media events in that it was at once a sports event, a crime drama, a car chase, and a moment of national trauma. This event demonstrates that within the global terrain of television, the national and the local are constantly in play—in other words, that the role of television at this historical moment is in part to reassert the national in a global context. This essay thus intends to capture this play by approaching this singular event through a number of different frames: the geography of global, national, and local media vectors, the role of the news helicopter and the freeway in the construction of a media event, the interplay of genres in television news events, and the role of television in the creation of cultural memory.

### Media Vectors: The Geography of the Media Event

The space of television events is defined by the transmission of images through media vectors. Hence, the contemporary media event has a highly complex geography. Through the interconnections of satellite technology, portable broadcast video equipment, television news helicopters, cellular telephones, and radio simulcasts, media vectors create a geography into which television audiences are inserted. It has been argued that this renders the living room a virtual space, obliterating notions of public and private,

and effacing national boundaries. For example, in his book *Virtual Geography*, McKenzie Wark notes:

[Global media vectors] can make events that connect the most disparate sites of public action appear simultaneously as a private drama filled with familiar characters and moving stories. The vector blurs the thin line between political crisis and media sensation; it eclipses the geographical barriers separating distinct cultural and political entities; and it transgresses the borders between public and private spheres on both the home front and the front line.<sup>4</sup>

The global media event, defined by its instant transmission around the world, affirms both the powerful state of multinational media networks and some form of global unity through its establishment of the newsworthy. The Persian Gulf War of 1991, occurring ten years after the establishment of CNN (Cable News Network) and soon after the development of satellite phones and electronic news gathering equipment with the capacity for instant global transmission, marked the beginning of the instant global media event. Despite the fact that the American coverage of the war was highly restrictive and censored, it was seen as establishing the collective, live, global television audience. Since that time, there have been several events that have contributed to the live, global television experience, most recently, the spectacular television coverage of the tragic events of September 11. These events define a space of electronic transmission, a network of communication vectors crisscrossing the globe, to be shared by spectators unified in their act of watching. Each event is as much about the extended reach of televisual transmission as it is about the event itself.

The matrix of electronic, virtual, and televisual space can be seen as a global space; however the new geography of television also constructs national audiences, whether of wars fought on foreign terrains, relayed by satellite back to the national audience, or events of national importance that are transmitted live throughout the world. The television coverage of Diana's funeral, for instance, was designed to export a particularly ritualistic form of British national identity throughout the world as much as it was directed at a national audience. In addition, it could be argued that the global coverage of the Persian Gulf War by CNN served more to Americanize the war and produce nationalist sentiments than to obliterate concepts of the national.

While these events may have had a broader reach in the context of these expansive communication vectors, their coverage also underscores common assumptions about television viewing that long preceded them. For instance, the idea that television coverage provides a "better" view of an event than the experience of being there, which forms much of the promo-

tion of contemporary media events, has long been part of the discourse of television, in particular televised sports. David Morley and Kevin Robins have pointed out that there have even been cases where the trauma experienced by the television viewer of a tragic event, as opposed to the direct participant of that event, has been seen legally as more pronounced "by virtue of the camera's ability to bring into sharp focus events that might not be as clear to an observer of the real event."<sup>5</sup> It may be that the television view of an event provides more of an omniscient view that affords a sense of structure and explanation that one might not experience in person. Yet the fact that most audience members experience world events through television and not in person also has the effect of heightening the desire to actually be at a sports event, the scene of a catastrophe, or a freeway chase—to witness with one's body and perhaps become part of the event itself. In other words, television creates media events that then elicit the desire to participate beyond the screen itself.

The construction of a local, national, and global television event and the desire of viewers to place themselves within the frame are fundamental aspects of the most notorious television event in the United States in the 1990s, in June 1994 when O. J. Simpson and A. C. Cowlings attempted to flee law enforcement on the Los Angeles freeways. Driving a now-famous white Ford Bronco, Simpson and Cowlings were spotted by passing motorists after the Los Angeles police announced that Simpson had fled his home, where he was about to be arrested for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman.<sup>6</sup> While the actual murder had been a media story of phenomenal proportions, and the subsequent two trials of Simpson (and his acquittal in the criminal case and conviction in the civil trial) were to epitomize a 1990s media frenzy, the car chase was itself an extraordinary and unexpected event. The freeway chase was watched by 95 million viewers, including 68 percent of Los Angeles TV viewers.<sup>7</sup> Once the Bronco was spotted and police began pursuit, the media vectors of the event quickly took hold. Television news helicopters followed the car, transmitting the image live on several channels. The freeways were quickly closed ahead of the car, which, unlike most car chases, was traveling at a leisurely speed of 45 mph. This was because the police had been warned by Cowlings to keep their distance since O. J. had a loaded gun and was threatening suicide. It was a Friday afternoon, the highest traffic time of the week, and hundreds of thousands of motorists were either on or attempting to get on the roads. People began to call in to radio talk shows to discuss the events and to plead with O. J. to give up, presuming that O. J. and Cowlings were listening in the Bronco. At the same time, thousands of drivers pulled over on the freeway and lined the overpasses to witness the Bronco pass by as if it were a kind of sports marathon, holding signs and

cheering the men on yelling "Go Juice Go!" and "The Juice is Loose!" O. J. and Cowlings had several conversations with the Los Angeles Police Department on a cell phone throughout the chase, and detective Tom Lange eventually persuaded Simpson to give up.<sup>8</sup> All of this was taped by news helicopters and cameras on the ground and broadcast live to millions of viewers, finally pushing the National Basketball Association (NBA) finals, a major sports event, off the screen. The chase ended a few hours later when the Bronco pulled into the driveway of Simpson's Brentwood home, and he turned himself into police after requesting and drinking, however absurd this may sound in retrospect, a glass of orange juice.<sup>9</sup>

O. J.'s flight from the police drew upon codes of the sports event and the genre of the cinematic car chase. What geography was defined by this event? Where did it really take place? On the freeway, where crowds stood by with signs (for both O. J. and the TV cameras)? On the radio, where callers presumed O. J. was listening to their pleas? Through the cellular phone on which O. J. spoke to the police? On television, where the tracking of the white Bronco (already linked to its fellow Bronco as evidence of the crime) pushed the NBA finals into a little box on the screen? The Simpson freeway chase was a media event of intersecting vectors in which the notion of national and local participation was reinscribed. Two aspects of this event deserve more discussion of how they created its geography of media vectors: the helicopter and the freeway.

#### Scanning the Urban Landscape: The Helicopter as Icon

Many communication vectors were at play in the Simpson car chase—cell phones, live television and radio transmission, and telephone calls to radio and television commentators. Not the least of these elements was the role played by television news helicopters. It was the capacity of the TV news helicopter to transmit the image of the Bronco driving on the freeway that made this a television event and alerted both television and radio audiences to the location of the vehicle. Indeed, it could be said that the "imagined community" of American culture often is facilitated through events that become national precisely because of the presence of news helicopters.

The helicopter's signification of American technological power is not incidental to its role in flying TV news cameras and audiences into new terrains. Furthermore, the use of the helicopter in American culture today, as a war machine, a police device, and a news mechanism, cannot be separated from its signification in the Vietnam War. The helicopter was the most important machine of the "theater" of the Vietnam War. The dense terrain of Vietnam made the helicopter an essential mode of transport, and it rapidly acquired both symbolic and mystical value. The helicopter was often

the only means of rescue, support, and transportation for the troops. Helicopters were used almost exclusively by Americans in the war, thus symbolizing America's dominance in the air and weakness on the ground in a guerrilla war. Alasdair Spark writes, "The helicopter became the American touchstone, symbolising a transcendent American power incarnate in metal—the Vietcong were aware of it, and awarded high honours to soldiers who downed ships."<sup>10</sup>

Helicopters quickly acquired associations of both the cavalry and the Indians of the American West, no doubt aided, according to Spark, by the Army's policy of naming them after Indian tribes—Sioux, Iroquois, Chinook, Cheyenne, and so on. In the literature of the war, the helicopter is presented as the ship of rescue and release as well as a machine to be admired, if not loved. Michael Herr wrote of the Loache helicopters in his well-known book *Dispatches*, "It was incredible, those little ships were the most beautiful things flying in Vietnam (you had to stop once in a while and admire the machinery), they just hung out there above those bunkers like wasps outside a nest. 'That's sex,' the captain said. 'That's pure sex.'"<sup>11</sup> For Herr, the helicopter was the ultimate memory trope, a "collective metaphor," and "the sexiest thing going": "saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, heat, vitality and death. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

In its constant rescripting in Hollywood Vietnam War films, the helicopter signifies both the haunting memory of the war as well as the power and failure of American technology. Films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) use the "thuk thuk" sounds of the helicopter rotors as a primary motif, and helicopter scenes of rescue (in the *Rambo* series) and abandonment (in *Platoon*) are recurring motifs. As Spark writes, "The helicopter, like the soldier, is a veteran of Vietnam."<sup>13</sup> When Saigon fell in 1975, Americans witnessed the evacuation of the city as huddled masses grabbing onto the rails of departing helicopters. The image of Americans pushing their helicopters off aircraft carriers into the sea was profoundly symbolic of the nation's political and technological defeat.

After this symbolic demise, the recuperation of the helicopter has taken place through its role as a machine of urban environments and television vectors, in other words, from *Apocalypse Now* to *Boys 'N the Hood*. Armed with its associations with both the cavalry (invading the frontier space) and the Indians (as warriors), the urban helicopter also carries its signification with the guerrilla war of Vietnam. In Los Angeles, the helicopter is a primary means by which the LAPD patrols neighborhoods and engages in chasing suspects. In this context, one can see the tangled traffic of Los

Angeles streets operating as a counterpart to the jungles of Vietnam—the helicopter provides the means to travel above it and awards power to those who do. In addition, the Los Angeles news media are hugely dependent on news helicopters for news events and traffic reporting. In the city of Los Angeles, the helicopter replays its role of charing the frontier—no traffic jam, no potential criminal, no neighborhood, no celebrity wedding is safe from its intrusion.

The helicopter is a conduit of geographic space that links the city through its images, marks the panopticism of the urban/suburban space, and extends the vector of the freeways to the rest of the country. The city is constantly surveyed from the air and increasingly defined by the aerial view of the helicopter lens. Los Angeles is haunted by the sound of helicopters; many Vietnam veterans in L.A. find themselves ambushed by memories with the constant refrain of the rotor blades. With thirteen media helicopters, Los Angeles defines the space of news from the air more than any other U.S. city.<sup>14</sup> Hence when O. J. Simpson and Al Cowlings drove through the Southern California freeways, it was the presence of television news helicopters as simultaneous mechanisms of urban surveillance, traffic monitors, and news generators that defined the media event.

#### The Freeway as Theater and Containment: Rewriting Traffic

The freeway has long been considered the primary symbol of Los Angeles, both in terms of its initial promise as a non-toll road that would pave the way to L.A.'s automobile-driven, mobile future but also as the dominant means through which the contemporary urban and suburban landscape of the city is conceived. The freeways are what distinguish Los Angeles from the modern urban environments of New York and Chicago or the boulevards of Paris. They allow, in many ways, for the analysis of the city as a postmodern landscape defined by velocity and transit and as a city of the future, teetering on the abyss. In 1973, Reynard Banham described Los Angeles as defined by four regional "ecologies": surfurbia (the beach cities), the foothills (Beverly Hills, Bel Air), the "plains of Id" (the central flats), and "auropia" (the freeways as a way of life).<sup>15</sup> Hence, the freeways are central to defining the geography of the city. The freeways both demarcate and divide the neighborhoods of Los Angeles and have long been implicated in the vast discrepancies of wealth between the rich and the poor as well as in the racial tensions of the city. Freeways cut through the neighborhoods of South Central and Inglewood; they traverse nowhere near the wealthy enclaves of Beverly Hills.

The freeway is both a means by which neighborhoods and trajectories are defined but also how daily life is organized. People refer to freeways as

unique, calling them "the 10" or "the 405" as if each were an individual. Traffic is a constant in the life of most residents of Los Angeles. As the source of traffic congestion and the site of daily mobility and interaction of citizens, the freeway is a primary site of news in Los Angeles. It is as if every day the trials and tribulations of ordinary citizens—getting to work, doing their jobs, keeping it together—are enacted by the news of traffic and freeway events and given historical import. The lanes of the freeway are the most obvious shared symbolic space of the city, yet they are defined not as a place so much as a vector; a place to drive through rather than to be in. While communication vectors define the linkages of different media, the vector of the freeway is a line that signifies transit and is never a destination itself. Margaret Morse defines the freeway as non-space, displacement, and a form of derealized space. "Channels of motion dedicated to one-way, high velocity travel," she writes, "freeways are largely experienced as 'in-between,' rather than enjoying the full reality of a point of departure or a destination."<sup>16</sup> Yet even as it is a space in between places, it could be argued that the L.A. freeway is also a central theatrical place in the city, established through the surveillance of the television news and traffic helicopter.

The freeway as a form of racial containment has also been a dominant narrative of Los Angeles. As a vector that inscribes the geography of L.A., the freeway has often been described as a means by which suburban and urban space is segregated, the roadways that drive over and render invisible the inner-city neighborhoods they traverse. While this sense of the freeway as a safe space removed from dangerous neighborhoods shifted in the early 1990s to the freeway as a potential site of danger because of road rage—specifically people shooting at cars that cut them off—the elevation of the freeway over the city remains a primary trope in its public representation. Yet the symbiosis of two central freeway events, the police chase of Rodney King and the freeway chase of O. J. Simpson, calls into question any simple analysis of the freeway's racial symbolism. It was inevitable that with Simpson and Cowlings, the image of two black men being chased by a flank of police cars (albeit at 45 miles per hour) would evoke the previous L.A. freeway chase of Rodney King, driving (apparently) in excess of 90 miles an hour before he was beaten by police under the watchful eye of an amateur video camera. Yet the Simpson freeway chase defied simple analysis of the freeway as a racially marked space. This was not the freeway through which white Angelenos drive their cars above and over poor black and Latino neighborhoods, the freeway as the vector that insures the invisibility of South Central. Here was a black man returning to the enclave of his wealthy white neighborhood under the buzz of the helicopter, with the police delicately giving him an escort, driving past the ghettos. That this was an escort, rather than a hostile chase, would seem to contradict Simpson's

defense that he was framed by white police officers. That defense, which succeeded in the criminal trial, linked Simpson symbolically to the figure of Rodney King, a linkage facilitated by freeway stories.

Yet clearly Simpson's freeway chase was marked by race even as it rescripted the racial text of the freeway. The television news helicopters rendered Simpson either suspect or celebrity, and as a black male celebrity he was inevitably marked as the black sports hero. Television coverage of the freeway chase allowed the image of O. J. as the black male suspect to be replaced by O. J. the black male sports hero, running past the cheering crowds. Simpson's media representation was contingent on a limited group of stereotypes into which he could be inserted.

### Cell Phones and Talk Shows: Talking the Nation

The space of the O. J. Simpson freeway chase was created not only through the vectors of the freeway and the surveillance of the television news helicopter but also through the newly embraced phenomenon of talk radio shows and cellular telephones. This was crucial not only to public participation in the event but also to the negotiations between the police and O. J. that eventually led to his peaceful surrender. It is probably safe to say that if O. J. had fled in a time before the cellular phone, his confrontation with the police could have been significantly different. Indeed, when Simpson arrived at his house but still refused to leave the Bronco, there was a temporary breakdown in communications with police because the battery on his cell phone had run out. Even though proximity would at that point have allowed him to speak to police in person, the negotiations were still happening only on the cell phone.

In November 1996, one year after Simpson was acquitted in the criminal trial and during the civil suit against him, the LAPD released a transcript of his conversation with police on his cellular phone. In the transcript, Detective Tom Lange asks O. J. to think of his children and tries to convince him to drop the gun with which he is threatening to commit suicide. At one point, in contrast to his later claims against the police, Simpson says, "Ah, just tell them I'm all sorry. You can tell them later on today and tomorrow that I was sorry and that I'm sorry that I did this to the police department."<sup>17</sup> The release of the transcript completed in a certain sense the public fantasy of the event, which included many rumors about what was actually said between O. J. and the police and speculation about Simpson's frame of mind when he attempted to flee.

At the same time, cellular phones and call-ins to radio and television stations during the freeway chase established an electronic space for the participation of the listening public. Listeners at home watching television and in

their cars listening to the radio called in large numbers to radio talk shows and television stations to speak to O. J. These actions were predicated on the belief that Simpson and Cowlings were listening to the radio precisely because they were in a car. Simpson's first wife, Marguerite, was speaking to KNX Radio when she shouted out to O. J., "Run, go, run, keep going" and several members of the National Football League called radio stations asking him to give up.<sup>18</sup> That it is unknown and unlikely if Simpson heard any of the pleas on the radio does not diminish the public fantasy, facilitated by the technological vectors, that he could have heard them. This collective fantasy was acted out in the television movie *The O. J. Simpson Story*, made in 1995, in which O. J. listens to the radio call-in pleas and is heartened by the crowds. This is a national fantasy—the fantasy that the nation called out to O. J. to forgive him and to beg him to live, and that he heard these calls. It is the listener who authenticates the message of the radio talk show.

Radio talk shows, which are more dependent on call-ins than television talk shows, became central to concepts of public discourse in the 1990s. During the Simpson freeway chase, television newscasts interviewed experts such as psychiatrists and forensic pathologists and also took on the format of radio call-in shows, laying the sound of talk over the helicopter images of the Bronco. This occasionally placed celebrity television news anchors in the unscripted context of fielding unverified calls. In one particularly bizarre moment, ABC anchorman Peter Jennings took an on-air call from someone who had convinced his producers that he was a neighbor of Simpsons, near the scene of the action. When at the end of his statement he said in a strange accent, "Ba, ba, booeey to you," a phrase that is a signature of radio bad boy and talk show host Howard Stern, they surmised that a fan of Stern's show was playing a joke on them.<sup>19</sup>

As a central element in the contemporary public sphere, the radio talk show is a means through which ordinary citizens can feel that they are speaking to each other and a national audience. So it could be argued that the explosion of participation and interest in radio and television talk shows at the end of the twentieth century has been fueled by a desire to feel that one can participate in some form of public debate. The genre of talk shows has also always been about allowing viewers to feel that they are witnessing the private lives and authentic selves of celebrities. The public fantasy of the talk show in the Simpson freeway chase combined both this desire to witness a celebrity in a private moment and the desire to speak to a national audience.

### The Freeway Chase as Media Event

While the media event of the Simpson freeway chase took place through the complex intersections of television news helicopters, cellular phones, and

radio call-ins, another primary element of the event was the participation of spectators alongside the freeway and on overpasses as the Bronco drove by. In what would later provide the strangest images of the event, people crowded the edge of the road shouting encouragement to Simpson and holding impromptu signs with phrases such as "Go Juice Go!" The technologically defined space of the event—from freeway vector to media vector—had also established the freeway as a particular space. This was not a space merely traveled through but a space of performance and audience participation in which people were prompted to place themselves bodily in the event (and before the television cameras).

Yet what could the codes of behavior at such an event be? The crowds that lined the overpasses stunned reporters by cheering on O. J. as if he were running for a touchdown instead of being a man pursued by police as a murder suspect. This was a national sports event in which simulcasting rendered those who had front-row seats (the spectators on the side of the road) the stand-in audience for the television viewers. That the goal of O. J.'s run was unclear, that the only obstacles he had to traverse were not defensive linebackers but betacam operators, did not lessen the crowd's enactment of sports fans' protocols.

The aspects of the chase that enacted the codes of a sports event were aided by its coincidence with the NBA finals. This posed a dilemma not only for the stations that were broadcasting the game, between the New York Knicks and the Houston Rockets, but also apparently for their fans. Some stations cut away entirely from the game, and others put the tense final minutes of play into a small box in the corner of the screen so that viewers could watch both. Hence the audience that was watching the incident when it began already included a large number of sports fans.<sup>30</sup>

O. J. was thus contained in the event within his role as black sports icon, so that his transgression—at this point, more of a transgression of lack of will and a display of weakness than anything else—was rescued by his quasi-touchdown run, his final run past the crowds. This was the endless reenactment of the O. J. run: O. J. the football player's run, O. J. the Hertz salesman's run through the airport, and O. J. the crime suspect's run. It was also the run of O. J. the celebrity held within the panoptic view of the television news helicopter, a machine whose role it is to invade celebrity enclaves.

Yet this event was, for many observers, really a story about traffic. For many people who live in Southern California, the shock of "O. J. is running away" was equaled by "My God, look how empty the 405 is on a Friday!" The Simpson freeway chase took place during the prime traffic time of a Friday evening, when people in Los Angeles are in the habit of scheduling their lives according to heavy traffic jams. The freeway chase produced sig-

nificant traffic problems both because of the strategic shutting down of certain entry ramps to the 405 freeway to allow the Bronco to pass (a police strategy usually used for visiting dignitaries such as the president) and because of the crowds who went to line the freeway in order to see the spectacle themselves.

The iconography of the chase, from the legacy of the western, the road movie, and the television police drama, is specifically coded American, and there are certain ingredients necessary to its construction: an outlaw outnumbered by police/authorities, speed, obstacles, and the potential of the chase to get away. Yet the Simpson chase took place at slow speeds that no self-respecting freeway driver would ever attempt, with Simpson and Cowlings feeling enough in control to order the police to keep their distance. There were no obstacles in their way. In the endless rehashing of the Simpson chase on national tabloid shows, which took about a week to be completely milked, I saw one revealing rendition, a replaying (perhaps on *Hard Copy*) that laid over the image of the Bronco the soundtrack of none other than *Thelma & Louise*. Suddenly it all made sense—O. J. and A. C. as Thelma and Louise, the chase, the pan back from the car to reveal twenty police cars in pursuit. And the final moment when Thelma and Louise know they are doomed because what rises up before them from the Grand Canyon but a helicopter.

Yet cognizance of the media event as an event in itself prompted reporters and participants to see it as "history in the making." Many observers standing along the highway or on overpasses told the press that they felt the event was both historic and sad. One told CNN, "I just wanted to be part of history." News commentary, as usual, attempted to instantly establish the event as historical, comparing it both to the Kennedy assassination and the Persian Gulf War. These comparisons were not because it was an event of consequence but because it was an event with a huge television audience, one through which national unity was supposedly created. At the same time, the news media was clearly in thrall of the entertainment drama of the event, in which real life appeared to trump Hollywood. For instance, NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw described the chase as "a scene that is playing out that no scriptwriter, no dramatist, could possibly conceive." Rumors that O. J. was holding a gun that was a prop from the ill-fated Warner Brothers pilot *Frogman*, in which Simpson had starred, demonstrated the permeable boundaries between social arenas that characterized the media event.<sup>31</sup>

The freeway chase as sports event and the heir apparent to the western chase is also crucially tied to the freeway as the primary site of theater in Los Angeles, both as a "theater" of war and as the stage from which Los Angelenos speak to the city at large. Freeway chases are an increasing staple of

the evening news in Los Angeles, so much so that one occasionally wonders if the LAPD and local news stations are not working together to produce them. One outcome of this phenomenon, beside the recent proliferation of TV shows such as *The World's Scariest Police Chases*, is the use of the freeway by citizens to make statements to a national news audience. This happened most violently and tragically in Los Angeles in May 1998 when Daniel Jones pulled over on the ramp between two major freeways, the Harbor Freeway (the 110) and the Century Freeway (the 105), unfurled a banner making a statement against HMOs, set himself and his truck on fire (with his dog inside) and shot himself on camera. Motorists had called the police when Jones began pointing his shotgun at passing cars, and both freeways were closed. As the police closed in and television news helicopters monitored his actions, local television shows cut away from children's programming to show the event live. Estimates are that more than 900,000 households saw the suicide live on camera, including large numbers of children. (One station, KTTV, which cut away from children's programming, ran a warning that asked children to go get their parents.)<sup>22</sup>

This event prompted an immediate outcry against the tactics of television news to cut away from regular programming in order to turn freeway incidents into media events. There was much hand-wringing and apologies from the media, which prompted some rethinking of live coverage policies (including instructing a seven-second delay), but for the most part the public debate was short-lived.<sup>23</sup> Two months later, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story about how a construction company employee who was run over and severely injured by a piece of heavy equipment only survived because his boss, who was caught in the immense traffic jam resulting from Jones's suicide, decided to make an unscheduled visit to the work site. This kind of redemptive story about fate and the freeway proliferates in Los Angeles and adds to the mythic and symbolic status of the freeway.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly the Jones suicide could become a media event because of the presence of television news helicopters, and Jones presumably chose this site as the place from which to speak to the media—a place of guaranteed media coverage. This instant media coverage is the result not only of the visibility of the freeway from the air but also because all traffic stories are news stories. One of the major aspects of the Jones suicide was that it closed two major freeways in the city for several hours, thus creating a huge traffic jam that lasted well into the evening. It was thus primarily a traffic event. As one LAPD sergeant put it at the time, “the whole city is at a standstill.”<sup>25</sup> Whether enacted in the codes of a sports event, as most car chases including the Simpson chase are, or in the codes of a public forum, freeway incidents such as these form a symbiosis between the television news helicopter and the traffic story.

The freeway chase or incident is also centrally about the process of witnessing. With the constant repackaging of freeway chases into TV shows, the genre of the freeway chase has taken its place among crime and disaster coverage. It is now possible for addicts of freeway chases to join the Pursuit Watch Network, which for \$9.99 for three months will page them whenever a freeway chase is being covered by a television news helicopter.<sup>26</sup> In each case, the aerial news camera functions as a means through which viewers are allowed to feel they are witnessing as viewer/citizens and hence as members of a larger audience.

### Television Memory: Reenactments

As the Simpson saga, from freeway chase to courtroom drama, emerged as the national story of the 1990s, it claimed national and global attention to an extraordinary degree over a period of several years. It can be credited in retrospect not only with establishing Court TV as a staple of cable channels but also with invigorating radio talk shows and aiding in the more recent proliferation of all-news cable channels. The case also functioned as a primary forum through which the general public learned about the legal process. This is a source of concern for many legal experts, who feel that the difference between this trial and most criminal trials, both in terms of legal tactics and the effects of media coverage, made it an unfortunate site of legal pedagogy. However, it could be argued that one of the effects of the trial is that most Americans now understand the concept of “reasonable doubt.”

Certainly this was in all its aspects a made-for-television event, both with its inception in the freeway chase and its televised courtroom dramas. The Simpson saga fed into the ontology of television, which is defined by repetition, reenactment, and docudrama. Each phase, be it freeway chase or courtroom spat, was endlessly replayed, endlessly reenacted, endlessly analyzed. Indeed, the freeway chase was both reenacted in the TV movie and was actually perversely predicted in popular culture with the film *Speed*, which was released just prior to it. It was also uncannily replayed when O. J. was released from jail upon acquittal and was driven home in a white van at slow speed, followed by a phalanx of police cars under the gaze of many television news helicopters. He was greeted at his house by A. C. Cowlings. At the time, news reports stated that O. J. was deliriously happy to see, above all else, the freeway. ABC news anchor Peter Jennings, remarking upon the strange symmetry of the events, paraphrased Yogi Berra in stating, “Does this seem like déjà vu all over again, folks?”<sup>27</sup>

The media event of the freeway chase is thus not simply defined by the virtual geography of its media vectors, it is also defined through its reenactment. Its meaning is constantly rescripted, narrativized, replayed. This, in

essence, is how television operates as a site of cultural memory. Many cultural critics, such as Stephen Heath and Fredric Jameson among others, have written about television as a force of anti-memory, the endlessly postmodern repetition of events that makes no history. However, I would argue that this interpretation does not allow for the role of repetition and reenactment in memory. Indeed, television's reenactment is much closer to the fluid ways in which memory operates not as a stable force but as a constantly rewritten script. Renarratization is essential to memory; indeed, it is its defining quality. We remember events by retelling them, rethinking them, and, according to Freud, by reconstructing their narratives in light of new stories in our lives. Television repetition, either in the form of repackaged footage or the dramatic reenactment of television movies, is thus a memory-making process rather than a negation of cultural memory. It is a contemporary making and remaking of the historical.

So, the story of Simpson's freeway chase played out its trajectory through cultural memory as a continuously replayed television script, inseparable from the TV images it generated. Ironically, participation in the national television audience rendered citizens suspect for the task of jury duty, one of the few tasks that Americans are actually called upon to do as citizens. Prospective jurors in the Simpson case were grilled about their participation as viewers of the media spectacle, and the jury itself was sequestered for the duration of the trial in order to keep them away from media coverage. (From the prosecutors' point of view, this decision clearly had negative consequences, since many of the jurors were understandably very unhappy about being sequestered.) At the same time, the idea that the media coverage of the freeway chase and the murders created a national audience also worked to render suspect those who had not participated in it. One prospective juror later made headlines, and was clearly regarded as a kind of freak, when she professed to not know who Simpson was or what had happened.<sup>25</sup> Media citizenship can thus be seen as taking over the category of traditional citizenship. Participation in witnessing the Simpson freeway chase was understood as the work of citizen-viewers, an activity that produced an important commonality in its audience.

Television, in its capacity to render all events as both simultaneously legitimate and suspect, made this event, continuously rescripted, one of national memory. The Simpson freeway chase was witnessed by a global audience, for whom the event was characterized as a specifically (and perhaps perversely) American one; by a national audience, for whom the chase was a witnessing of a celebrity hero; and a local one, in which the theater of the freeway was reaffirmed. Television operated in this event to affirm both the national and the local as primary sites and in turn to construct O. J.'s sad story as one of American tragedy. The nation is also a continuously

rewritten script, a mediated concept that is reassorted, refigured, produced through tension and conflict. It is not a stable but rather a shifting and fluid terrain. In this sense, television is a species of pedagogy not only about what it means to participate in the nation but about the instability of the category "nation" itself.

## NOTES

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1. See Lauren Berlant, "The Theory of Infancile Citizenship," *Public Culture* 5 (1993), 395-410.
2. See, for instance, the essays in Patricia Mellencamp, ed., *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
3. See Ulric Neisser and Nicole Harsch, "Phantom Flashbulbs," in *Affect and Accuracy in Recall*, ed. Eugene Winograd and Ulric Neisser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and my discussion of the Challenger explosion in *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), chap. 1.
4. McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 15-16.
5. David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 131.
6. According to the California Highway Patrol, Chris Thomas and Kathy Ferrigno, a young couple who were on their way to go camping, called in the first verified sighting of the Bronco. Minutes later it was spotted by an Orange County sheriff's deputy. The car was spotted at 6:25 and the chase lasted until after 8 p.m. Jim Newton, "I'm Sorry for Putting You Guys Out," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994, A1.
7. Karen Heller, "Simpson Case Seems to Stain All It Touches: A Year Later, No End to O. J.," *Arizona Republic*, June 11, 1995, A1; Associated Press, "L.A. Eyes Glued to O. J. Ride," *Daily Variety*, June 20, 1994, 1.
8. Christopher Reed, "Transcript of Calls Reveals Desperate Man," *Guardian* (London), November 28, 1996, 22.
9. Cable News Network (CNN) News, June 18, 1994.
10. Alasdair Spark, "Flight Controls: The Social History of the Helicopter as Symbol of Vietnam," in *Vietnam Images: War and Representation*, ed. Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (London: Macmillan, 1989), 89.
11. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon, 1978), 160.
12. *Ibid.*, 9.
13. Spark, "Flight Controls," 102. Because the sandy desert terrain in the Middle East is destructive to helicopters, they were used less in the Persian Gulf War. Hence their iconography in the United States remains tied to the Vietnam War.
14. These helicopters are now priced at \$100,000, whereas several years ago they cost \$1 million. They carry "high-powered gyrostabilized cameras" that can

magnify up to seventy-two times. Kathy Haley and Rich Churchill, "Chopper Wars Heat Up the Sky," *Broadcasting and Cable*, September 21, 1998.

15. As quoted in Greg Hise, Michael Dear, and H. Eric Schockman, "Rethinking Los Angeles," in *Rethinking Los Angeles*, ed. Michael Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996), 2. See Reynard Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973).

16. Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television," in *Logics of Television*, 199. Morse is drawing here in part on the work of David Brodsky, *L.A. Freeway: An Appreciative Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

17. Reed, "Transcript of Calls," 22.

18. Geordie Greg, "Run, Run! Nation Joins in the OJ Murder Sensation," *Sunday Times* (London), June 19, 1994.

19. Tom Kiska, "How TV Covered the Simpson Chase," *Detroit News*, June 18, 1994.

20. Gregory Gross, "Sports Fans Strain to See Twin Bill," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 18, 1994, A1.

21. Associated Press, "L.A. Eyes," A1.

22. Greg Braxton and Brian Lowry, "TV Stations Reconsider Live Coverage Policies," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1998, A19.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Mike Downey, "A Life-and-Death Tale of Freeways and Fate," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1998, A3.

25. Alan Abrahamson and Miles Corwin, "Man Kills Self as City Watches," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1998, A1.

26. Deanne Stillman, "Cops on the Freeway in Pursuit. Who Can Turn It Off?" *New York Times*, February 28, 1999, 43.

27. Robert Laurence, "Media Saturated Ending Bring the Public Spectacle Full Circle," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 4, 1995, A3.

28. Tribune News Services, "Potential Juror in Simpson Trial Truly Uninformed," *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1996, 13.

## Tomorrow Will Be . . . Risky and Disciplined

TOBY MILLER

24-hour programming on the Weather Channel has a wonderful narcotic effect. Not only is its focus so narrow as to exclude 98 percent of all human excitements, but we've spent an entire evolution trying to insure our safety from the elements. So what could be more soothing than the contemplation of huge climatic events reduced to a pixelated 19-inch image, rendered in cartoon symbols and schematic maps and narrated by preoccupied "weather hosts."  
—*Daniel Menaker, "My Favorite Show"*

Weather comes to us in a state of culture. It is tempting to get metaphysical about the weather by stressing the elemental humanness that supposedly emerges as we battle it.<sup>1</sup> And its spiritual significance has been restified to by almost a century of fights between physicists and theologians over whether heaven or hell is hotter, given the Bible's ambivalent calculation of these matters.<sup>2</sup> But the weather is equally to do with the mundanity of the quotidian. And our mediated ways of knowing the weather derive not from a disinterested search after truth but from the "demands of specific clients": the informational needs of rural producers, airlines, and the military, and the commodity needs of advertisers. Their preparedness to pay large sums to satisfy those desires grants the weather exchange value.

Weather also comes to us in a governed form. U.S. presidents have long invested in creating a human-run climate, back from the time when Thomas Jefferson maintained that "rain follows the plow."<sup>3</sup> Clearing land westward would make rain for the plains in time for cultivation—a miraculous homology between expansion and the nationing of weather. The gamut of modern attempts to control weather runs from firing cannon and rockets and ringing bells to inserting dry ice in supercooled clouds, including the splendidly named "Soviet hail suppression scheme."<sup>4</sup> In 1961, John F. Kennedy proposed that the General Assembly of the United Nations embrace the project of modernity in a thoroughly technological way—weather was to be mastered, brought under human domination so that populations would no longer be susceptible to its caprices. He called for "cooperative efforts between all nations in weather prediction and eventually in weather control."<sup>5</sup> This "cooperation" took many different forms, of course, notably the