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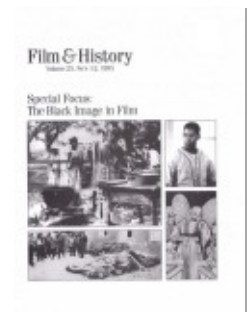
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*The O.J. Simpson Interview Videotape* (review)

Drew Philip Halevy

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# The O.J. Simpson Interview Videotape

(VHS Videotape 139 minutes, H&K, LLC, 1996; \$ 39.95)



he O.J. Simpson “defense” tape is interesting, and not only for what is said on it. If we overlook the need for money (which Simpson readily admits at the beginning of the tape), the video is an interesting commentary, since a man who was acquitted of all charges feels compelled to redefend himself in the arena of public opinion. More importantly, the tape became a subject of great controversy when Simpson found himself unable to market the product through obvious outlets. In the crudest cut of all, even the *National Enquirer*, which made millions of dollars from the Simpson case, refused to carry ads for the tape.

The program itself is somewhat of disappointment, as there are no shocking revelations by Simpson. The tape is however, a very good and probing interview carried out by journalist Ross Becker. At the beginning of the interview, Becker states that the only limitations on the interview were that he could not ask questions about Simpson’s children, Simpson’s finances, or post-trial lawsuits.

The program is in two parts. The first section is the interview between Becker and Simpson. In the second section, Simpson conducts a tour of his home and grounds. (He does so to dispute some of the claims made by the prosecution during the trial. We even get to go out to the curb where the Bronco was parked so “carelessly” on the night of the murder.)

Throughout the interview, Ross Becker is unwilling to accept Simpson’s answers at face value, and instead asks probing follow ups, at times pushing Simpson to defend his position. All the hype and controversy aside, it is a thoughtful, well-conducted interview. Becker states at the beginning of the tape that he kept a copy for himself, so that Simpson could not distort the substance of the exchange during post-production. An example of Becker’s persistence is seen in the issue of blood evidence. When pressed on this crucial topic, Simpson tries to finesse the answers by claiming that he does not think that it is his blood that was found in the

Ford Bronco. Becker keeps pushing the defendant to be more specific—on this question and others.

On the family side of the story, Simpson gives an insight into his life with Nicole Brown Simpson, and spends a great deal of time refuting the media images of his “abusive” marriage to Nicole. Simpson also points out many of the inconsistencies in the prosecution’s argument.

Toward the conclusion of the tape, Simpson gives a strong indictment of how his tragedy has been reported, especially by the media. He argues that the media presented rumors and conjectures as fact; in his own mind, he has been denied a forum in which to defend himself—hence, the importance of this tape as a way to the American public around the existing networks.

He also makes pointed references to criticism that he has tried to make money off the trial (through the sale of this tape) and yet no one seems to criticize Marcia Clark or Fay Resnek for their books and profits.

There is a shortage of benchmarks with which one can measure the value of this tape. The closest example is the Dianne Sawyer interview with Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley. Sawyer was widely criticized for interviewing Jackson and Presley with kid gloves and accepting their answers at face value. In sharp contrast, Ross Becker’s

questions pushed Simpson many times over key points; certainly, the first half of the tape does not coddle the witness.

The tape provides an interesting commentary on both our legal system and American culture.

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The jury system portrayed in the film *Twelve Angry Men* has given way to a media circus where no one seems in control. It is no longer truth that is of the highest

value, but the shock value of the story that can be sold to the highest bidder. Tabloids such as the *National Enquirer* made a fortune on the coverage of the Simpson trial, yet (self-righteously) claimed that it was above carrying advertisements for the defendant's tape. Simpson was also unable to put advertising on television. In the end, the defendant—both in and out of the courtroom—resorted to using direct marketing with an 800 number (1-800-OJ-TELLS) to deliver his message.

The Simpson trial also gave Americans a glimpse into how America's courts do—or do not—work. The sacred jury system, so long a crown jewel of the American legal system and symbol of America's democratic justice, has come under attack. (The criticism did not start with the Simpson trial, but is part of a larger debate that has its roots during the first Menendez trial and has expanded as jury decisions against corporations have resulted in some infamous cases of “deep pockets” judgments.) The Simpson trial does, however, take this reconsideration to an extreme. It held the nation's interest for months, and in the aftermath we have found ourselves questioning the future of our democracy and the relationship of media to our perceptions of social issues.

A few months after the trial, a national survey sponsored by the DePew Foundation found that the American public was watching less television news and that the networks had lost credibility with the public. The O.J. tape comments on this development in two ways: first, the tape itself symbolizes the proliferation of the means by which citizens can obtain information in our multi-media and internet age; second, it just may be that the networks lost considerable trust in their exploitation of the Simpson trial. We may be seeing the end of network dominance of information in an information age.

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### May 30-31, 1996; Siena Conference on WWII

Too late for this edition, but *Film & History* readers should take note that this is an on-going conference at which veterans and scholars meet in an amicable fashion. Contact:

Prof. Thomas Kelly, II  
Dept. of History  
Siena College  
515 Loudon Rd  
Loudonville, NY 12211-1462  
(518)783-2595 and fax 4293  
Kelly@siena.edu

*Film & History* will be represented by John O'Connor, Peter Rollins, Robert Fyne, and Bob Matson. It is possible that Carmine Bartone will be there. For 1997, the conference will be held from May 29-30. The deadline for proposals is December 1, 1996. Send an abstract of the paper along with a c.v.

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### March 26-29, 1997

#### National Popular Culture Association/ American Culture Association

This conference will be held at the Marriott Rivercenter Hotel in San Antonio, Texas and now offers a special area entitled “Film & History.” Contact the new Area Chair:

Robert Fyne  
63 Wick Drive  
Fords, NJ 08863  
RJFyne@aol.com

There will be a workshop conducted by Carmine Bartone and James Ferreira. Also, as many panels as we can assemble. There will be a special reception for *Film & History* folks.