Conclusion

It has been over twenty-five years since O.J. Simpson stood trial for murder. His widely televised criminal case, dubbed the Trial of the Century, involved far more than the death of two people; it proved the victory of the sensational on American television, oftentimes at the cost of mutual respect and morality. Simpson's *cause célèbre* was framed and argued around television and reflected the changing media landscape in the US in the 1990s. By incessantly (re)interpreting events and narrativizing people, reality TV successfully conflated legal proceedings into entertainment programming. As has become apparent in the discussion of the Bronco Chase in the first chapter of this study, the genre capitalized on its hybridity to provide viewers with a multiplicity of frameworks and narratives through which knowledge was negotiated and constructed. The findings of this study point to the dangers of unrestrained media access to legal proceedings and demonstrate the distortive practices that dominate the reality TV realm. Due to the continuous and steady transmission of hypermediated images, the Simpson case was transmuted into a national media spectacle, creating a sense of proximity and immediacy to the events which, in the process, transformed audiences into witnesses and co-producers of the unfolding events. By taking advantage of the social and political conflicts in the country, the Simpson megaspectacle was artificially produced and maintained to increase the media's influence and create opportunities for financial and personal investment. In the process, the city of Los Angeles was reconceptualized as a marketplace, where "the ebb and flow of its energies [was] continuously organized by the objective of doing business" (Blum 181–82). Street vendors in front of the courthouse sold merchandize and other trial memorabilia and were among the most insatiable businessmen to take advantage of the proceedings in their desire to maximize profits.

The performative staging process can also be extended to the confines of an entire city, forming what Richard Schechner called the "direct theatre" (Schechner, *Future of Ritual* 86). The O.J. Simpson trial accentuated the significance of Los Angeles and specific places in the city as tourist attractions, sought out by locals and foreigners as the pivot of the proceedings. In this context, the city can be understood as a "system of desire organized around the search for experience"

(Blum 262). Fans and connoisseurs of the Simpson case, for instance, visited and inspected the former crime scene or the athlete's Rockingham estate and travelled to the victims' burial sites. Drawing on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's findings in *Destination Culture* (1998), "tourism stages the world as a museum of itself" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 7), infusing it with symbolic meaning and identity in a "constant spectacle of an ethical collision between the old and the new" (262). The direct theatre also involves "revolutionary street action" (86) such as the protests that erupted in the wake of Simpson's acquittal on the streets of Los Angeles, unearthing divisions and conflicts, which can be understood as "ritually necessary, temporary disruptions of an underlying unity" (86). Equally, reality-themed programs, through their position in a "social and media matrix" (Hill, Reality TV 6), transfer larger social and political issues onto smaller and more compact public scales, whereby the city is transformed into "a scene of collectivization" (Blum 3). In the academic field, it is indeed widely recognized that "the realms of city and theater have become intermixed" (Sennett 109).

When describing the process by which the urban city is converted into an object for consumption the way Los Angeles was in 1995, Saskia Sassen and Frank Roost speak of "place marketing" (Sassen and Roost 143), and Susan Fainstein and Dennis Judd assert that "[c]ities are sold just like any other consumer product […], where an unceasing flow of events constantly unfolds" (Fainstein and Judd 4). It is a reality that holds truth for the city of Los Angeles, then and now. L.A. became symbolic of "the city as a locus of the destabilized common situation" (Blum 88), opened up to what Judd and Fainstein call the "tourist gaze" (Fainstein and Judd 7). However, "[i]t is rarely evident that a location must be visited […], some significance must be assigned to it that invests it with importance" (4). The aforementioned pre-verdict CNN news report, for instance, put emphasis on the "swelling" of crowds, highlighting the supposed newsworthiness of the adjudication on the one hand and the communal gathering it represented on the other hand. The cultural and political importance of the O.J. Simpson trial was further stressed by the information that precautionary measures had even been taken on a federal level, and the President of the United States was aware of a murder trial which was, in reality, simply one of many others happening at the time. Fundamentally, there was nothing particular about the Criminal Courts Building (renamed Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center in 2002) or the immediate area surrounding the building. Many trials had been held at the site prior to the Simpson case, but rarely did they spark major national interest. Before turning into a symbolic place for social debate, 210 West Temple Street was "a piece of available open space" (Tuan 240). However, it is in the very nature of space that it can be transformed into "a stage for the life movie" (Gabler 211), either provided to the public conventionally (e.g., through the planned and commercialized concept of Disneyland) or by allowing people to provide it for themselves (212). The impact of the Simpson trial attracted people who sought to "immerse themselves

in life—that is, a confusion of sounds, colors, and movements that nevertheless are undergirded by a sense of order and common purpose" (Tuan 240, emphasis original). From this perspective, it is not surprising that historian Thomas Bender wrote in 1996: "It seems as if our best middle-class vision of the city today is that of an entertainment zone—a place to visit, a place to shop; it is no more than a live-in theme park. Such a city is a tourist site, even for its residents" (Bender, *LA Times*, 22 December 1996). In this sense, the Los Angeles County Superior Court gained notoriety as the main stage for the "site-specific theatre" (Tompkins 225) of the Trial of the Century, collecting $400 million in hotel taxes, as people came to the city to watch the show live on site (Reed 174).

In similar fashion, the crime scene at Bundy and Simpson's Rockingham estate were staged as tourist attractions, where people travelled to in order to experience the places where Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman had been killed, or the Bronco Chase found its dramatic end. The understanding of those areas as public attractions forced city officials and new tenants to actively and aggressively destroy those symbols of the Simpson case. 875 South Bundy Drive in Los Angeles, California, no longer exists. After being sold in 1997, the new owner of Nicole's condominium immediately began remodeling the exterior to detract tourists. Subsequently, the front gate, walkway, and the entrance to the building were significantly altered, and the address was changed to 879 South Bundy Drive. Similarly, Simpson's house in Brentwood at 360 North Rockingham no longer stands. After losing the civil suit in 1997, his property was foreclosed, and the mansion's new owner demolished the historic building to turn a tourist attraction back into a residence. According to Alan Blum, the city is shaped by continuous movement and stasis and coming and going. Motion, sedentariness, and "[s]paces, just as persons, persist and decline, are put to various uses, replenished, or left to rot, to abandonment and deteriorations" (Blum 236), or ultimately, destruction. These measures in the Simpson case forced *American Crime Story*'s production design team to build their own sets for the events they wanted to film. The murder scene, for instance, was in fact completely artificial and recreated on an empty lot in Brentwood one block from the actual site.

According to Blum, the distribution of scenes throughout the city also "enduce[s] people to explore territorial boundaries" (182), and he asserts that "the culture of the city is located as much in its topography of scenes as in its formal institutions" (183). The burial ground, as Joseph Roach elaborates, is one of a city's locations "where the gravitational pull of social necessity brings audiences together and produces performers […] from their midst" (Roach 28). Led by the desire to see and being seen—quite similarly to the cheering fans that filled the streets during the Bronco Chase—people understood the cemetery as a site for self-exhibitionism and participation. Likewise, Rojek establishes a connection between religious practice and celebrity when he argues that "[i]n secular society fans build their own reliquaries of celebrity culture. Always, the organizing principle behind the reliquary, from the

standpoint of the fan, is to diminish the distance between the fan and the celebrity" (Rojek 58). This is the reason why cemeteries, where celebrities are buried, become popular tourist attractions. For instance, upon googling "Nicole Brown Simpson grave," the search engine lists numerous short videos, which have been uploaded to the video-sharing website YouTube by amateur filmmakers, showing their audience around the famous graveside. One channel, named *Steve's Trips Down Memory Lane*, entices potential viewers with the title "FAMOUS GRAVE TOUR: Remembering Nicole Brown Simpson At Ascension Cemetery in Lake Forest, CA." Another, only 47-second-long video, uploaded by the user Richard Yates, explains "How to find Nicole Brown Simpson Grave." The existence of public interest in finding the female victim's resting place indicates the changing understanding of the modern city. The filmmakers often narrate their trip and by doing so, become active performers in their own videos: "The great city is a theater. […] All city men become artists of a particular kind: actors" (Sennett 119). Steve, for instance, opens his video with a direct greeting of his audience: "Hey, good morning, everyone. I'm here this morning in Orange County […] at the Ascension Cemetery, where Nicole Brown Simpson is buried" ("Famous Grave Tour"). He first points out what a beautiful and warm Los Angeles day it is, forcing him to find protection in the shade of a tree, before casually transitioning into an explanation of the 1994 murders. In the next shot, Steve displays Nicole's grave, but actively aims to stay in the frame as well (01:03), even wondering "I don't know if you can see her grave behind me there" before deciding to "turn around so you can actually get a better view of it" (01:06). Similar to Walter Benjamin's notion of the *flâneur*, Steve "takes the city as his stage and promotes his own peregrinations as the necessary action that enlivens the landscape for his consumption" (Bennett 78) by intertwining information concerning the case and the Ascension cemetery with background information about himself. The viewer learns that in 1994, he "actually lived just a number of miles away" ("Famous Grave Tour," 03:44) from the cemetery, but at the time, he was not interested in visiting famous graves, yet. Now, however, being "semi-retired," Steve finally finds the time "to go do things, […] [he] didn't have time to do when [he] was busy working" (04:01), and he is "glad to be here today" (04:15). In the background, soft wind chimes hanging from a nearby tree provide the musical accompaniment to his narration. Steve also lets his audience know that the Ascension cemetery is indeed "a pretty small cemetery and the grave is easy to find if you want to visit" (01:37). The location's full address, phone number, and website link are conveniently provided in the information box under the video. After four minutes, his tour ends with a final close-up shot of Nicole's grave. In the upper left corner of the video, a smaller window pops up, offering to take the audience to another one of Steve's videos, titled "FAMOUS GRAVE TOUR: Remembering Ron Goldman At the Valley Oaks Cemetery in Westlake, CA."

The website *www.death2ur.com* is another source of information pertaining to famous burial sites. Arranged in alphabetical order, the user can choose from a great

number of celebrity names. Upon clicking on the desired title, the visitor is taken to a new page, which contains numerous photographs of the grave as well as short explanations of any headstone inscriptions. Ronald Goldman's family, for instance, engraved the ankh, an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol, on his stone. The respective short text on *death2ur* next to Ronald's photograph explains that

> [i]t was a symbol that Ronald Goldman took to represent his own life. After a rocky period, he had gotten things going in the right direction again. He had taken a job as a waiter and began working toward his dream of owning his own restaurant which he would call "The Ankh." It was a dream that would never be. (http://www.death2ur.com/ronald.htm)

A Google search leads the interested party to the *death2ur* YouTube channel, where the website's still pictures are enriched with amateur videos. There, too, one can find a grave tour around Nicole Brown Simpson's resting place. The unknown cameraman begins his video by filming his two companions, a man and a woman, casually dressed in denim wear and t-shirts, standing and staring at Nicole's grave. The man sips a hot beverage from a white disposable cup while the woman fixates her camcorder on the headstone ("Nicole Brown Simpson's Grave," 00:10). A sea of flowers lines the grave, and the cameraman and his friends notice that some are arranged in a cross formation (00:53). As they walk away from the site, the audience is able to listen in on their interaction. One of the interlocuters gets excited at the thought of potentially encountering members of the victim's family at the gravesite, to which one of the other speakers interjects that they might even see O.J. Simpson. Picking up on the cue, the filmmaker shares a story with his friends and audience about the day of Nicole's funeral, where Simpson was also present: "He actually looked into the casket and gave her a kiss and said 'Sorry, Nikki.' Yeah, her mom heard him say that. Then she said, 'Did you kill my daughter,' he goes, 'I loved her.'" The cameraman stops walking and captures Nicole's gravesite from a distance, then zooms in and concludes his two-minute video tour with a final, "Yeah, sorry Nikki."

The three chapters of this study explicate how, facilitated by the episodic nature of legal proceedings and driven by commercial interests, celebrification and storytelling played key roles in the social performances and the sensationalization and mediatization of the Simpson case. The findings presented here indicate that the media deliberately focused on the personalities the public desired to see, thereby explaining why prosecutor Marcia Clark's hair and clothes moved to the foreground while the life and death of the murder victims disappeared into obscurity. The danger herein lies in the reductionist principles of social typing and celebrification processes. As was discussed in the analysis of the glove demonstration in the third chapter of this study, complex characters and circumstances are trivialized, yet identified to be of major significance. Consequently, even though research indicates that television viewers are not the once believed passive consumers of mass media, the latter

has power over what the audience thinks *about*. Had the focus of attention not been so stoically placed on the O.J. Simpson case, the public could have noticed the significance of other events that were happening in the country, e.g., the Oklahoma City Bombing in April of 1995. These findings accentuate the media's agenda-setting power and stress that the television medium does not denominate a pre-existing meaning but rather produces interpretations as an active "signifying agent" (Hall 64). Hence, the multiple narrative strings introduced over the course of the Simpson trial highly differed from each other, but were always advantageous to the presenter's desired point of view. It was left to the jury (TV audience, spectators…) to denominate the most credible account. Prosecutor Christopher Darden, e.g., described the murders in Brentwood as "rage killings" (Court Transcript, 27 September 1995) and O.J. Simpson's premeditated decision to inflict violence on his ex-wife as a "homicidal fit" in the wake of being left by both Nicole and his then-girlfriend Paula Barbieri. Indeed, Gerbner et al. assert that violent rhetoric "plays a key role in television's portrayal of the social order" (Gerbner et al. 180). As the following court transcript from Darden's closing argument illustrates, acts of physical aggression are readily recited to produce emotive impact, describe unequal power relationships, and reinforce conventional concepts of morality:

> He [O.J. Simpson] made a choice that day. He chose Nicole over Paula and he lost them both. […] This is a rage killing and it is up front, and it is personal and that is why you see all the brutality that you see. […] And he is using a knife because he is there to settle a personal score, a personal vendetta that he has. […] And the rage that he has, the anger, the hate that he has for her that night at that time, […] it flows out of him and into the knife and from the knife into her, into her. […] With each thrust of that knife into her body and into Ron's body, there is a […] gradual release of that anger and that rage and he stabs, and he cuts, and he slices until that rage is gone and until these people are dead. And after that rage is gone, he is better. […] He just walked away. […] He is a murderer. He was also one hell of a great football player, but he is still a murderer. (Court Transcript, 27 September 1995)

O.J. Simpson's defense team presented numerous counter-narratives to the State's theory and relied on their client's professional achievements to imply that Simpson's service in the National Football League ultimately left him incapable of murder:

> O.J. Simpson by all accounts has trouble with lateral movement from moving side to side because you saw […] those knee operations that basically spell NFL, National Football League […]. That is the price that a running back pays. And while I'm talking about running backs, wasn't it interesting yesterday that Ms. Clark in her argument says O. J. Simpson was a football player. He used to run through the line, and he has the killer instinct. […] O. J. Simpson hasn't played football for 15

> years. The man is 46 years old now. He's not going to run with anything anymore. But she doesn't know much about sports, does she, because a running back avoids trying to be hit. It's what he does. […] Played football 15 years ago and he was the best at what he did. He won the Heisman Trophy, according to his daughter, the day she was born. Emblematic of the best football player in America. (Court Transcript, 27 September 1995)

Admittedly, it is the nature of trials to present different narratives in prosecution and defense of the defendant. However, I suggest that it is this very characteristic that opens legal proceedings up to public entertainment and exploitation, as there are seemingly no limitations or moral boundaries to the narrative propositions made in court and the media. In this context, narratives of shame and humiliation take center stage and are emblematic for the tabloidization of legal proceedings.

Notably, the O.J. Simpson case was not a 'megaspectacle' that was exclusively consumed by a local and national audience. Rather, the 1990s marked a time when the popularity of factual genres and the success of the Courtroom Television Network allowed for the globalization of legal performances. The Irish newspaper *Sunday Tribune*, e.g., reported on O.J. Simpson's 47th birthday on July 10, 1994, which he spent in jail while standing trial for the murders. Reporter Michael Miller wrote:

> As Simpson languished behind bars, his attorney prepared for what could become the trial of the century, if the massive live television coverage and media exposure thus far is any indication. Even the preliminary hearing has received gavel-to-gavel nationwide coverage, with each of the three networks broadcasting live from the courtroom. (Miller, *Sunday Tribune*, 10 July 1994)

Even international news media outlets were thus aware of the impact the extensive coverage could and would have on the murder trial. In October of 1994, the German newspaper *Die Zeit* published Michael Schwelien's almost novelistic article on the case, titled "Die letzte große Rolle des O.J. Simpson" ("O.J. Simpson's Last Great Role"):

> Angetan mit tadellosem Anzug, Zuversicht im Blick, entbietet O.J. den Kandidaten für die Jury ein höfliches *good afternoon*. Diese, eher Durchschnittsamerikaner, die normalerweise bei einer ersten Begegnung *hi* oder *how are ye doin'* sagen würden, zögern erst, antworten schließlich im Chor ebenso manierlich: "Good *afternoon*." Respekt. […]
>
> O.J. macht es sich bequem. Er legt das Jackett, nicht aber die Krawatte ab, zieht sich einen weißen Golfsweater über. Er macht sich sorgfältig Notizen. Harte Arbeit steht bevor, gemeinsam stehen wir sie durch. Entspannung. […]
>
> O.J. ist nicht wiederzuerkennen. Dies ist nicht der O.J., der am 20. Juni im Vorverfahren düster dreinblickend "unschuldig" hervorpreßte, als er Stellung nehmen mußte, ist nicht der O.J., der ohne Krawatte—Selbstmordgefahr—und mit

> gesenktem Haupt schon die Tür zur Todeszelle geöffnet zu haben schien. […] Dies ist der O.J., der alle Footballrekorde brach, der in Werbespots für den Hertz-Autoverleih durch Flughafenhallen raste, der O.J., der in den Filmkomödien "Die nackte Kanone" mitalberte, dies ist der richtige O.J., zuversichtlich, aus vollen Lippen und mit wissenden Augen lächelnd. (Schwelien, *Die Zeit*, 14 October 1994, emphasis original)

The excessive national and international interest in the Simpson story can be attributed to the fact that the case provided all the necessary and beloved elements that characterize traditional crime shows such as *Cops*, *America's Most Wanted*, or *Undercover Stings*: the enigmatic murders, the car chase and arrest, the unpredictability and suspense, the violence and danger, the drama and tragedy, the revelation of dark secrets, and most importantly, the unequivocal and reassuring definition of what and who was good and bad.

Certainly, one might argue that the 1990s are over, and the popularity of televised trial proceedings has receded. At first glance, this seems to be the case, indeed. After the O.J. Simpson trial, Court TV faced declining numbers in viewers and revenue. Ownership of the channel changed numerous times. In 1997, Time Warner bought out Steven Brill's stake and in 2008, Court TV was replaced by truTV, which ironically implemented comedy series into its programming. There is little left of the crime network Steven Brill had once envisioned and brought to life. Similarly, the influence of celebrity seems to be in decline if judged by viewer ratings of award shows in the US. In an online article for *TIME Magazine*, Judy Berman cites the sinking audience numbers for the Academy Awards (Oscars), with an unprecedented low of only 23.6 million viewers in 2020 from a previous average of 40 million, as an indicator of the end of celebrity culture as we have known it (Berman, *TIME*, 16 January 2020). Likewise, in his article for the online publication *IndieWire*, journalist Tyler Hersko claims that "[t]he 71st Emmys Was a Catastrophic Failure for Awards Show Viewership" (Hersko, *IndieWire*, 23 September 2019). One of the reasons for this development seems to be TV producers' refusal to concur with contemporary viewing habits:

> As for the prominence of streaming, it's the elephant in the room that the Emmys, regardless of which network is hosting it, needs to begin addressing. No, network and cable TV isn't going anywhere […] but streamers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are steadily producing a larger chunk of the television shows that define the cultural zeitgeist. Streaming is the new norm for the distribution of television shows, yet viewers need access to the Fox channel to tune in to the Emmys. (Hersko, *IndieWire*, 23 September 2019).

One is left wondering if celebrity culture is slowly going extinct in a time and age where the public seems fed up with the larger-than-life status of actors and refuses

to worship them for being better-than. In his fiery article, Freddy Gray describes this very sentiment:

> Another year, another dreadful Oscars, another round of moral lectures from the beautiful people. It's all so tiresome. The only reason most people pay attention to these irritating award ceremonies is precisely so that they can be irritated. […] All these people [celebrities] are ridiculous. Nothing they say makes any difference to anything. Actors are increasingly aware […] that nobody cares what they think. At some unconscious level, these actors must know that they don't really know anything about politics or the real world. They can't admit this to themselves, of course, human nature being what it is, so they double down. They convince themselves that any angry reaction to their moralizing is an indication that they have dared to speak truth. How brave they are! And so the infuriating cycle continues. Actors end up almost trolling the public, and the public trolls them back on social media. (Gray, *Spectator USA*, 10 February 2020)

Considering these circumstances, one is initially inclined to assert that the popularity of a celebrity's public prosecution is now a monument of the past. At second glance, however, a different truth is revealed. Since the Simpson trial, numerous other cases have been extensively covered on television and sparked passionate public debates. Consider, for instance, the trials of Casey Anthony (2011), Dr. Conrad Murray (2011), George Zimmermann (2012), or Jodi Arias (2013), to name a few. As the analysis of the verdict coverage in the third chapter of this study has shown, even the Simpson trial continues to spark public interest, documentaries, and filmic adaptations due to lack of a general sense of closure. *American Crime Story* (2016) has introduced the case to a new audience and recaptured older viewers in its attempt to bring back the events onto the television screen. The juxtaposition of the original media coverage with its filmic pendants revealed that although the series thrives on dramatizations, exaggerations, additions, and omissions, the line between reality television and fictional formats is fine and oftentimes hard to pinpoint. Instead of representing two opposing ends of the spectrum, reality formats and TV adaptations share production processes and narrative discourses as well as elements of fact and fiction, unveiling a relationship of reciprocal influence.

Additionally, Court TV has also returned in new form: updated and fully digital, it offers livestreams, clips, and complete hearings of popular cases (https://www.courttv.com). In the "About Us" section on the website, the reader learns:

> For nearly two decades, Court TV brought high-profile courtroom dramas into American living rooms. Continuing that legacy, Katz Networks is rebooting one of the most iconic brands in television history. The new Court TV is devoted to live gavel-to-gavel coverage, in-depth legal reporting and expert analysis of the nation's most important and compelling trials. The network will run 24 hours a day,

> seven days a week and will air on cable, satellite, over-the-air and over-the-top. (https://www.courttv.com/about-us/)

Furthermore, the network's connection to O.J. Simpson, its most popular defendant, remains unbroken. The complete 2008 trial of *Nevada v. O.J Simpson and C.J. Stewart* is available in the "Trials on Demand" section of the website. Conclusively, as long as television exists, crime and celebrity will dominate its programming, in particular on reality formats. Fact and fiction will continue to coalesce, and audiences will be transformed into co-producers of media spectacles in the attempt to create collective national experiences.