

The People v. reality

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue



BLURRED FACTS: O. J. Simpson (Cuba Gooding Jr.) takes a polygraph test in *The People v. O. J. Simpson* © 2016 FX Networks. All rights reserved.

I was in high school during the O. J. Simpson trial. I remember a teacher rolling a TV cart into the classroom to watch the verdict. My family was in a phase of evangelicalism that held TV and popular culture at arm's length.

Perhaps it's because I missed formative moments in popular culture that I couldn't stop watching *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, the first season of FX's new American Crime Story series. The show recreates the trial and surrounding events from the perspective of the prosecution and defense teams. Friends who obsessively watched the real trial were just as addicted to the television version as I was. A colleague who couldn't watch the season finale the first night it aired said, "Don't tell me how it ends!"

Watching *The People v. O. J. Simpson* invokes the same sense of vertigo many Americans felt watching the real trial: Where do we draw the line between a believable story and "what really happened"? Or is there such a line? Halfway through the series, prosecuting attorney Marcia Clark (played by Sarah Paulson)

mocks the defense strategy. “The defense is just making up stories,” she huffs, confident in the power of evidence to trump all. “People like stories,” responds her assistant, Chris Darden (Sterling K. Brown).

A story can remake reality, especially when that story confirms our lived experience. When black jurors found O. J. Simpson not guilty, they were not disregarding a “mountain of evidence” in favor of some half-baked conspiracy theory about racist cops. They were confirming lived experience—decades of corrupt policing had yielded a mountain of evidence that made plausible the story O. J.’s defense lawyers told.

The O. J. trial was a collision of long-unexamined racism, celebrity culture, opinion-generated news, and a hunger for what philosopher Roland Barthes called the “reality effect”—the sense that mediated events are more real than reality itself.

*The People v. O. J. Simpson* is fiction, but it draws on news shows like *Dateline* and *48 Hours*. Like these shows, reality TV is compelling: viewers love to play judge and jury. Contestant-based reality shows use the same formula, but instead of figuring out a grisly murder case, viewers vote someone off the island or follow “real people” as they fall in love, lose weight, compete in daring contests, or destroy each other’s reputations. All of these shows blur the line between reality and entertainment.

There is an added element to reality TV, an alchemical reaction that makes it unlike any scripted show. We aren’t just watching reality happen to someone else: our watching creates reality. An unknown singer is catapulted into a national performance career. The newlyweds who fell in love before our eyes dominate the tabloids. The Kardashians build an empire. Donald Trump becomes a presidential candidate.

If we are looking for the moment that precipitated our fall into the oversaturated media blitz that is our common life, we might consider the O. J. trial and Judge Ito’s fateful decision to allow television cameras into his courtroom. And we stepped off a cliff when prosecutor Marcia Clark changed her hairstyle in response to media criticism. We’ve been in free fall ever since.

Of course, when we’re watching *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, we don’t feel as if we’re shaping culture. It feels like passive entertainment: distraction, vice, or guilty pleasure. We pick and choose what we watch, or if we watch. But whether or not we participate in creating the new reality, it’s happening. This is the paradox of our

mediated reality: neat categories have broken down. Politics is blurred with entertainment; the facts are blurred with intentional fictions. Nothing stays in its place anymore.

*The People v. O. J. Simpson* is a fictionalized TV show about a real event that blurred the lines between entertainment and reality. Even as we see the irony in the situation, we find ourselves unable to look away.