

The Globe and Mail (Canada)
September 1, 1992 Tuesday

FIFTH COLUMN
LAW AND SOCIETY

Bryan Schwartz focuses on the question of whether some trials should be televised

SHOULD television cameras be allowed in the courtroom? The debate usually concentrates on how cameras will affect the people in the courtroom. But we should think about our own likely performance as viewers.

We tend to lack concentration and patience. We flip between channels to catch a moment here or there of good stuff; or we leave the TV on while doing something and count on the "instant replay" to compensate. Shows like L.A. Law present trials as a burst of short, intense confrontations. But a real trial can be long and dull. To do justice, jurors must pay close attention from beginning to end. Somewhere in the dry stretches can be a single statement that turns out to be crucial. Sometimes, a mass of tedious detail is the indispensable context for weighing the "dramatic" moments.

We tend to lack moral and intellectual seriousness. How deeply engaged can you be in something that is interrupted by an ad for cheeseballs or by your own channel hopping? Television programs themselves project an attitude of detached irony. The producers know they have more air time to fill than they have creative energy, and that the viewers are not earnest or attentive anyway. When watching a televised trial, we can be casual, even flip, about reaching a "verdict." Courtroom jurors, by contrast, are usually very aware of the power they have over someone's life.

Despite our limitations as viewers, I still think we should have a chance to see important trials. Better a flawed public discussion than none at all, or one guided by the very few media commentators who can attend that actual trial in person.

The Rodney King trial illustrates the hazards and potential of television. Most people, me included, have seen only a few seconds from the bystander's video. It looks as if the police are viciously beating a helpless victim. It may well be that they did. But a startling article in American Lawyer magazine by Roger Parloff - described by the magazine as a "careful, liberal-leaning lawyer" - suggests that matters are not so simple. Mr. Parloff watched the trial on television and, to his own surprise and discomfort, concluded that the jury might have been right.

A few paragraphs cannot begin to do justice to Mr. Parloff's analysis. But here are a few of his points. Mr. King was stopped after leading police on a high-speed car chase. He had an extremely high blood alcohol level. His behaviour was so strange and his physical resistance so powerful that the police, including those who later sided with the prosecution, all thought he was on PCP, a psychedelic drug known as "angel dust." The police, following standard procedure, ordered Mr. King to lie down so he could be handcuffed and checked for weapons. When he resisted, the police first tried using a stun gun to subdue him. The tactic failed. The bystander's video shows Mr. King jumping up and lunging at officer Laurence Powell, who testified that while trying to complete the arrest he was in fear for his life.

EVEN the prosecution's expert witness did not think the police could be found criminally liable for the first 20 seconds of their swings at Mr. King. The video apparently does not show exactly where each of the blows landed. Mr. Powell testified he never hit Mr. King on the head. A medical expert testified that Mr. King's facial injuries were not caused by power swings, but could have resulted from contact with the ground. The defence lawyers did not urge the jury to ignore the video; they actually showed it to the jury in slow motion, in an attempt to demonstrate that the officers only struck at King when he tried to stand up.

The jury was faced with difficult questions - including the defendants' state of mind and degree of force used - and had to give the benefit of reasonable doubt to the defendants. Before deadlocking on one charge and acquitting on the rest, the jury deliberated for six days.

Anyway, that's how Mr. Parloff sees things. I wouldn't want to reach my own conclusions without seeing the trial, or at least studying accounts by a variety of credible commentators. It appears likely that the police officers will be retried in a federal court. I hope cameras will be allowed in. Many of us will not have the time or inclination to pay close attention; but if enough of us do, the court of public opinion will be a fairer one.

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