

# *University Wire*

November 17, 2004 Wednesday

## **Society's Theater of Violence Comes through in Peterson Trial**

**By Michael Martin, The Dartmouth**

[Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH] – On Friday, Nov. 12, 2004, the jury in the Scott Peterson murder trial reached a verdict. After less than eight hours of deliberation, the jury found Scott Peterson guilty of murder in the first degree in the death of his wife, Laci Peterson, and murder in the second degree in the death of his unborn son, Conor.

In a murder mystery that lasted nearly two years, the announcement of a guilty verdict was met by the cheers of hundreds of followers of the trial who waited anxiously outside the federal courtroom in Redwood City, Calif. And across the nation, thousands more sat captivated in front of their televisions as all the major networks – CNN, Fox News, CNBC, to name a few – counted down the minutes until the trial's live audio feed.

Last month, on the popular CNN debate show “Crossfire,” Jon Stewart, comedian and host of Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show,” accused the hosts of “Crossfire,” the liberal Paul Begala, former Clinton campaign strategist, and Tucker Carlson, the young, quick-witted conservative, for turning news into “theater.”

Stewart argued that the show's back-and-forth nature, its endless jokes and quips contributed to a construction of the media not as an unbiased source of information, but rather a theatrical production to be viewed with the same entertainment intrigue as a television sitcom. Indeed, in the context of the Scott Peterson trial, the consistent media coverage transformed the trial into a hyperbolic national spectacle: People became obsessed with the trial, and as a result its culmination was a media crescendo. Why was America fascinated with the trial? Was it the nature of the crime? The people involved? Or does it speak to a larger notion, that of a prevailing societal desire for violence?

In an interview with CNN's Rusty Dornin, the correspondent who covered the Scott Peterson trial, Dornin claims that the national obsession with the case stemmed from its circumstances and inherent contrast: The Petersons were a good-looking, middle-class family. Laci was an expectant mother, and her disappearance on Christmas Eve of 2002 drew immediate national attention. She argues that for many, the Peterson trial represented the shattering of the American Dream, and as a result the story became irresistible. There are striking similarities, however, between the Scott Peterson case and other legal battles that garner substantial media attention.

This past summer, in the midst of the Scott Peterson trial, Mark Hacking, a 28-year-old hospital orderly in Salt Lake City, was arrested for the murder of his wife, Lori Hacking, who at the time of her death was reported to be five weeks pregnant. And the aftershocks of the O.J. Simpson murder trial still resonate in the national conscious as more cases of violent domestic crime arise.

Yet, not all murder cases receive such attention. Only four months before the disappearance of Laci Peterson, the body of Evelyn Hernandez, a 27-year-old California resident who was in her third trimester of pregnancy, was found by police washed up in the San Francisco Bay. The case received relatively little coverage at the time, and once the news of Laci's disappearance broke, Evelyn Hernandez vanished from the media spotlight. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the No. 1 cause of death of pregnant women is violence committed by their partner or spouse. This would suggest that domestic violence is not a rare phenomenon. So why was Laci's murder so popularized, particularly in comparison to Evelyn's? Dornin suggests that people do not want to know why a welfare mother was murdered by her boyfriend, but are more interested in the shock value inherent in the murder of an attractive, middle-class white woman by her husband.

Could it be, however, that the national obsession stems deeper than from just the circumstances of the case? Is our fascination with the Scott Peterson trial and cases like it related to our tendency to slow down on the highway when there is a car wreck? Has the popular media overexposed images of violence, such as those in war, to the point of desensitization? Regardless of its source, violent images pervade the news, and consequently our national culture absorbs them with an unparalleled fascination.

Sentencing in the Scott Peterson case is set to begin on Nov. 22, 2004. While the nation awaits the outcome of whether Peterson will face life in prison or the death penalty, perhaps we should ask ourselves why it is we care. Why it is that we choose to become enraptured by this trial and others like it. Regardless of the cause, we all become, even if unintentionally, audience members in a theater of violence.

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