

What 1990s True-Crime Shows and Movies Teach about America Today

“The more things change the more they stay the same.” Originally a French saying believed to have been coined in 1849, this phrase perfectly describes our current national obsession with revisiting the great media frenzies of the 1990s.

In 2016 Americans relived the drama of the O.J. Simpson trial with the documentary *O.J.: Made in America* and the series *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*. We’ve also binge watched our way through the siege of the Branch Davidian Compound (*Waco*), the trial of the Menendez brothers (*Law & Order True Crime: The Menendez Murders*), and the arrest of the Unabomber (*Unabomber: Manhunt*). And there’s even an Oscar-winning movie called *I, Tonya*, about the life of figure skater Tonya Harding and the attack on her rival Nancy Kerrigan.

The reason I enjoy watching these shows is probably the same as for most Americans: I remember these events happening and that they were a big deal. However, it’s long enough ago that I don’t remember much detail. Hence, it’s fascinating to revisit what actually went down. In the early 1990s, the 24-hour news cycle had just been born, but there were still only a few networks and next-to-no internet. Thus, America followed these events in a collective way that’s no longer possible in today’s fragmented media landscape.

Perhaps we’re a little nostalgic for a more innocent era before September 11 and the economic crash of 2008. But it’s also depressing to see how little our country has changed. Revisiting the O.J. Simpson trial, many viewers will feel amazed at how little progress we’ve made on race relations in

the two decades since the verdict. Watching scenes of tanks being deployed against American citizens in Waco, Texas, in 1993 reminds us of Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.

The worst example of how little things have changed is the movie *I, Tonya*. Today, just like in the 1990s, America's white working class is the only demographic we are allowed to publicly ridicule. Tonya Harding was squarely part of that class. Only the second half of the movie looks at her possible involvement in the attack on Kerrigan. The first hour is devoted to depicting all the emotional and physical abuse Harding endured in her childhood and early life – first at the hands of her waitress mother and later her husband. The story is told as a dark-comedy mockumentary to allow us to laugh at this basket of deplorables – chain smokers, five-time divorcees, absentee fathers, wife beaters, men who shoot squirrels and fix trucks all day.

I, Tonya is honest about the discrimination Harding faced. In one scene, a figure-skating judge tells her off-the-record that he gave her lower marks than she deserved because she's not "wholesome" enough to represent America at the Olympics.

But the makers of *I, Tonya* seem oblivious to the fact that their movie is part and parcel of that discrimination. Not only is it acceptable for them to mock a deeply troubled segment of American society, but they are rewarded for it. *I, Tonya* was nominated for three Oscars and won a host of other prestigious awards.

Our cultural obsession with revisiting the 1990s shows no sign of abating. Let's hope the movies and series that are still to come will offer more nuance and perspective.

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