

a deep sense that the world is unjust, which points to a more collective sense of social inequality. To enjoy it when things go badly for 'rich and famous people' is a way of imagining cosmic (rather than political) justice taking its toll. Commiseration and indignation are equal ingredients of the pleasure of [such] . . . gossip. (Hermes 1999: 81)



Figure 4.11 'Saint Diana': a figure combining glamour and virtue.

- Q How much news have you read about anti-landmine campaigns since her death?
- Q What might this suggest about celebrity-led news?

Two US examples of melodrama's legacy for news

A striking example of the persistence of US melodramatic imagery in news seems to have been at play in two huge 1990s US news stories which transfixed the attention of US audiences. In 1994 a black motorist, Rodney King, was beaten to the ground by Los Angeles police. The beating was captured on video, but the police were acquitted in a controversial and much-watched trial. A little later O. J. Simpson, a sports celebrity, commentator, Hertz rental car spokesman and film actor, was acquitted of the stabbing to death of his white wife, Nicole Brown Simpson. A hundred million viewers watched helicopter shots and listened to cellular phone contact as LA police cars trailed O. J. Simpson's car as he tried to evade arrest and threatened suicide (see McLaughlin 1998).

Arguably *part* of the power of these two personalized news stories (only one of which involved a celebrity) was the way they 'replayed' two key nineteenth-century US fictional melodramatic moments, two whose icons and images have dominated the imagination of mainstream US media. The best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) generated white sympathy for black victims of slavery through an iconography of racial violence and the moving image of the black slave beaten to death (a resonance for the Rodney King story). The hit silent film *The Birth of a Nation* (US 1915) 'answered' this with images of black man as sexual threat to white woman (a resonance for many, though not all, US blacks who took the side of 'OJ': see Williams 2001).

We need to understand this power of fictional shapings within 'factual' news in order, as Linda Williams puts it, 'to get beyond the grip of a melodramatic habit of mind'. Although undoubtedly some of 'the OJ story' discussed the very problem of the ways that celebrity coverage turned the trial into a 'media circus', this took attention away from another part of the murder trial which was not available for such resonance. The harrowing playback in court of the tape of a 1993 emergency phone call (classified by police as 'potentially life-threatening') from Nicole Simpson could not, in the same way, become part of such resonant imagery. 'The differences that are associated with the routinised, everyday nature of domestic abuse "do not perform well" in court or in a public sphere where spectacles hold powerful sway' (McLaughlin 1998: 89).

ACTIVITY 4.6

Think of the most memorable news story involving celebrities which you encountered recently.

- Can you trace the two approaches Hermes outlines in the way you, or others you know, seemed to engage with it?