

# Natural Born Killers

Declan McLoughlin

If one is to believe the histrionic and sensationalist media coverage that preceded the release of Oliver Stone's satirical film *Natural Born Killers*, and which ironically paralleled events in the film, a busy time may be expected for our colleagues working in forensic psychiatry. It would not be surprising if viewing of the film was to be adduced by a desperate defence lawyer as an incitement to commit acts of violence. Hopefully, no such argument would be deemed admissible as the film's formal qualities deliberately militate against audience identification with on-screen characters and incidents.

The important and complex question of the representation of violence in the visual media and its effect upon the behaviour of both child and adult viewers is a contentious one. Historically such concerns have been common when it comes to popular culture as can be testified to by the succession of threats considered to be posed to Western civilisation by the 'penny dreadfuls' of the late 19th century, the EC horror comics of the 1950s, videos in the 1980s, the Internet, etc. The video issue recently came to prominence again, unfortunately most inappropriately, following the tragic and seemingly incomprehensible murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys. The ensuing moral panic, fuelled mainly by the media – and not just the tabloid press – was reminiscent of the 'video nasty' phenomenon of the early 1980s that culminated in the stringent 1984 Video Recordings Act. The characteristic feature of these moral panics has been the scapegoating of the availability of video feature films containing scenes of violence to account for some of society's more problematic concerns, notably violent crime rates in the adolescent population. At the same time this has allowed more aetiologically relevant issues (e.g. rising levels of poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, etc.) to go relatively unacknowledged.

*Natural Born Killers* is a provocative attempt to stimulate debate about violence and the

media. The plot concentrates on Mickey and Mallory, the titular killers, whose indiscriminate homicidal rampage through middle America has earned them celebrity status thanks mainly to exploitative and thoughtless media coverage typified by the self-righteous and hypocritical posturings of Wayne Gale, host of the popular TV show 'American Maniacs'. To tell this grisly tale *Natural Born Killers* eschews the classical Hollywood narrative approach of equilibrium, disruption and restoration of equilibrium. Instead narrative is inherent in the film's imagery and coded in a wide range of cinematic forms and genres employed to depict the chaotic lives of the two main protagonists, their worldviews and the perpetually hostile environment in which they reside. This method deliberately distances the audience by allowing it to observe the screen world of the film without manipulating its participation in it. Narrative information is relayed in a frenzied montage of various materials, made possible only by recent advances in film editing technology. The film throughout frenetically cross-cuts between black and white, colour, video and 8mm stock and also avails of back and front-projection. Most scenes are shot at awkward uncomfortable angles and with unnatural lighting rendering viewing physically difficult and requiring some time to adjust. It is like using a remote control hopping from channel to channel except that you always end up watching the same programme. The content does not change but the style does and therein lies the narrative.

Two brief examples of this film-making approach and how it works are Mickey and Mallory's background stories. Brief manga-style animation sequences, interspersed throughout the film, economically provide some insights into how Mickey sees himself – a purified übermensch-cum-samurai warrior, with a line in cod-Nietzschean philosophy; black and white interludes, suggesting a

different level of realism, depict his early life intimating parental abuse and show Mickey as a child witnessing his father's violent suicide. Mallory's experiences of sexual abuse by her father and neglect by her mother are presented as a sitcom-from-hell à la 'I Love Lucy', even including canned laughter to counterpoint the depredations she suffers. The deliberate trivialisation of Mallory's experience to some extent emphasises its awfulness but also provides a commentary on how TV representation of dysfunctional family life and sexual abuse passes for entertainment.

This anti-natural approach extends to the numerous depictions of violence. There is either ridiculous visceral excess or literally a Chuck Jones cartoon approach. For instance, a bullet's and a knife's points of view are employed in the first scene of the film; as they are propelled towards their victims they stop and hover in mid-air for a few moments before penetrating their targets. At other times these strategies seem to be deliberately employed to create a dislocating hallucinatory cinematic landscape from which at times it is impossible to derive any particular meaning. Perhaps this is Stone's intention and if so it works. Alternatively, like Mickey, perhaps Stone is trying to make some sort of a statement but is not 100% sure what it means.

As hyperbolic satire on media handling of crime and violence and the media's culpability in contributing to these problems *Natural Born Killers* certainly indulges in the requisite Swiftian overkill; but, due to a heavy-handed script, it lacks the dark and unsettling humour necessary for effective satire. Oliver Stone is a serious director and is to be commended for attempting to deal with difficult topics but unfortunately he continues to pursue his bludgeoning approach to film-making. It is not sufficient just to indicate that the news, TV and other media are culpable of glamorising violence and mass murder. The director does not deserve any credit for highlighting the obvious. He would be better employed exploring the complicity of the millions of viewers who invest daily in such material, and their responses to and understanding of media representation of violence. Two recent films that have intelligently and insidiously accomplished this without any of *NBK*'s hype are *Man Bites Dog* and *Herry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. However, be prepared to feel uncomfortable about yourself.

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