
Natural Born Killers, violence and contemporary culture

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Summary:

This article focuses on Oliver Stone's controversial film, *Natural Born Killers*, in an attempt to determine the relationship between its use of multiform images and viewers' reception of the film. Specifically, the question is raised whether its concatenation of variegated images and image-types does not, perhaps, contribute to the systematic eradication of the distinction between the realm of cinematic images and everyday social reality, in this way preparing the way for a certain kind of social behaviour on the part of the viewers.

Opsomming:

Hierdie artikel fokus op Oliver Stone se omstrede film, *Natural Born Killers*, in 'n poging om die verhouding tussen Stone se gebruik van uiteenlopende beeldmateriaal en gehore se resepsie

van die film te bepaal. Meer spesifiek word the vraag gevra of die aaneenskakeling van hierdie pluriforme beelde en beeldtipes nie moontlik bydra tot die sistematiese uitwissing van die onderskeid tussen die sfeer van filmbeelde en alledaagse sosiale werklikheid nie, om sodoende



A scene from the movie: Natural Born Killers

die weg voor te berei vir 'n sekere soort sosiale gedrag by kykers.

One of the most familiar symptoms of the fact that we live in a postmodern culture is the collapse of rigid genre distinctions and characteristics according to which artworks were tradition-

ally classified, such as documentary, detective novel, psychological drama, comedy and the like. What "characterises" postmodern texts (instead of "works") is precisely the absence of any unifying characteristics or principles according to which they may be classified. Small wonder, then, that critics often differ about the specific category that such a text or film belongs to, even if such debates may lack the relevance they once had.

In the case of Oliver Stone's controversial, *Natural Born Killers*, matters are further complicated by the fact that it seems to go further than the avant-garde film's resistance to narrative structure - to such an extent that it sometimes functions like an experimental videotext, with its incessant, rapid succession of images and image-complexes which radically undermine "normal" time-awareness.

The film-script was written by Quentin Tarantino, who has attained notoriety in recent years as director of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and most recently *Jackie Brown*, as well as for scripting *True Romance* (1993) - all of them films which overflow with violence of various kinds, but mostly reflect the modern world's obsession with guns. The extraordinary thing about the violent scenes in these movies (especially *Pulp Fiction*) is their virtually seamless con-

nection or interwovenness with humorous scene-sequences, love-scenes, and so on, with the result that the violence becomes "normalised" in the process (cf. in this regard Olivier 1996, which focuses on this aspect of *Pulp Fiction*). In other words, the shock effect which one would expect them to have, largely disappears or is reduced to the level of everydayness. Tarantino's success with this strategy is measurable by the startling fact that some members of audiences often seem to find the bloodiest scenes screamingly funny, while some are apparently uncertain about how to respond.

In *Natural Born Killers* the excess of violence is also transformed on screen, by way of Stone's direction in a manner that differs radically from Tarantino's mainly realistic approach as director. The technique by means of which Stone reconstructed the events surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy in *JFK*, namely an alternation between diverse kinds of audiovisual as well as visual material (documentary stills and film sequences, combined with his own originally filmed rendition of events) is carried to extremes in *Natural Born Killers* in terms of the sheer conventional variety, as well as the changing structure of the image-sequences. As a result, the "story" or narrative of mutually infatuated mass murderers Mickey and Mallory is not really a story, given the virtual absence of any

narrative structure. It is left to the audience to glue the loose, apparently arbitrary sequence of images and image-flashed together into a narrative of sorts, with more or less the following (meagre) result: Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) leave a three-week long trail of blood, starting with the horrific murder of her abusive, incestuous father and conniving mother, and continuing in random fashion through the countryside. A television journalist, Wayne Gayle (Robert Downie, Jr) exploits the opportunity to promote his own career by elevating Mickey and Mallory to superstardom by means of the media.

Virtually overnight the two psychopathic killers are transformed into sex symbols with a global cult following, in other words in all those countries which can be reached by means of the international news media (from satellite television to news magazines). The climatic moment in the film is reached when the journalist conducts a "live" television interviews with Mickey in prison, and the latter, in response to a question, nonchalantly claims that they have murdered dozens of people because he and Mallory are probably "natural born killers". From Wayne Gayle's ecstatic reaction the audience can gather that he regards this statement by Mickey as a jewel in the treasure chest of the history of tele-

vision journalism.

Natural Born Killers leaves one in no doubt that Oliver Stone is, technically speaking, a master filmmaker. It should be added that the film may be read as a parodic satire, with a vaguely recognisable Bonnie and Clyde-theme, but (in typical postmodernist fashion) without any psychological dimension which could help explain the murderers' motives. Their killing spree is literally without rhyme or reason. All that Stone's film provides is a series of images and image-configurations - fleeting surfaces and forms lacking any illuminating coherence. What some critics have pointed out regarding contemporary music videos applies to Natural Born Killers as well: all that seems to remain is the arbitrary play of signifiers which we call postmodernism...

But what about the supposed satirical character of the film? Stone himself has indicated that it was meant to show how today's media transform criminals into heroes, and the juxtaposition of photographic images of mass murderers like Charles Manson and Ted bundy with the gruesome image-sequences of Mallory and Mickey's indiscriminate slaughter does lend credibility to a satirical understanding of the film. And yet, something is lacking for such an interpretation to be plausible. Is it irony, parodic critique,

humour that permits genuine laughter, as comedy does? Strikingly, audiences tend to laugh intermittently, even frequently, in the course of viewing the film although there are no truly comic scenes or situations. It is rather a case of uncomfortable laughter in the face of the grotesque, the macabre, and sometimes the demonic - for instance in the scene-sequence where the audience is introduced to Mallory's weird family in a "sitcom" context, with her ludicrously grotesque father touching her lasciviously to the accompaniment of a built-in studio audience's canned laughter. (For a thematisation of the symptomatic - mainly visual - functioning of the phenomenon of the "grotesque" in an exemplary postmodern film, namely David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, cf. Olivier 1992).

Despite the fact, therefore, that it may be understood as a satire regarding the central role of the media in our society, *Natural Born Killers* does not, in the final analysis, succeed as such. Intra-filmically, one witnesses the irony of two unscrupulous mass murderers being transformed into cult figures by the media, regardless of the reasons for their sudden prominence. They virtually become public figures in the process. But precisely this accurately perceived functioning of the media in postmodern culture is such that any critical effect which the ironic-satirical moment

in the film could possibly have had, is undermined. When we remind ourselves that, as the British social theorist John Thompson (1990) has argued at length, we live in an increasingly



A scene from the movie: Natural Born Killers

mediated society, the improbable popularity of Mickey and Mallory becomes more plausible. But in addition to this we should not forget that Stone's film itself shares, as important media component, this mediating function with the rest of the media. In other words it contributes significantly to the shaping or construction of viewers' subjectivity (i.e. their "selves" as source of judgement and action). To put it in concrete terms: our actions are co-determined by the information, the image-configurations and diverse representations which reach us through the media. But why should the fact that *Natural Born Killers* contributes to the construction of the "postmodern subject" neutralise its potential (and intended, if we accept the director's

bona fides) satirical effect? Largely because, instead of incorporating a critical element into the structure of the film - in the guise of, say, a reflective commentator-character, or a moment of comicality or ridiculousness - the movie simply allows the incoherent, disruptive image-sequences to perform their shaping function unchecked and unmodified in relation to a predominantly uncritical audience.

Add to this the continual alternation between "black and white" and colour sequences, cartoon inserts, superimpositions, "realistic" scenes, still photographs, "morphing" distortions of facial features, and more, then things start falling into place. This technique of kinetic image pastiche-structuring ("destructuring" would be more fitting) systematically undermines a realistic experience of the intra-filmic world in which Mickey and Mallory wreak bloody havoc. Concomitantly the film's quasi-experimental, video-esque structure also affects the manner in which audiences experience the glut of violence in the film, namely in equally unrealistic terms. Some viewers have been reported as saying that the only reason why they found the violence "bearable" was its comic-strip character, probable because of the distance that it creates between the screen and the audience.

It may be argued that, for this very reason, the film is innocuous regarding viewer-reception - after all, if its presentation of violence is one of de-realisation, surely no harmful effects could follow. Such a position would overlook an important consideration, however. Audiences may indeed find that the violence strikes them as being unreal, but at the same time they tend to associate the context within which it occurs with the social reality of television journalism (i.e. of the media) and of regular occurrences of murder, assault or rape. The result is that the true character of such acts of violence is systematically obscured by means of a kind of anaesthetising effect accompanying the diaphanous layer of de-realisation imposed on them by the film-techniques mentioned earlier. In other words, instead of presenting violence in all its horror (the way a movie like *The Untouchables* does, for instance), *Natural Born Killers* presents it in disguised, bearable form, but simultaneously makes of it the very fabric which holds the film's fragmentary elements together. It is not difficult to understand that all of this, which has the effect of eroding the distinction between real violence and its representation by means of hyperreal images, must unavoidably affect people's behaviour. (Elsewhere - Olivier 1998 - I have examined this effect of mediated images on people's behaviour at length, using Freud's early

theory of the mind to understand the puzzling social phenomenon of especially violent "mediated behaviour".) This is because of the weakening of their ability to distinguish these images - given their pseudo-journalistic format - and those that populate daily television news-broadcasts, supposedly representing real events. With the omnipresent reduction of reality to images in the media, is it at all surprising that viewers' sensitivity to the true nature of violence is anaesthetised? Perhaps we should take it more seriously than we usually do that so-called "copy-cat" killings have occurred which seem, undeniably, to be linked to the viewing or reception of films like *Natural Born Killers*. In fact, Stone's film has been implicated in cases of such killings (cf. Gleick 1996; Olivier 1998).

It is significant to note that, in *Visual Pleasures* (1989), film theorist Laura Mulvey distinguishes between "narrative" films and films of "spectacle", depending on which of these constitutes the dominant structuring principle in a specific movie: the coherence of narrative or the spectacular character of image-configurations. She further posits a connection between narrative film and the Freudian ego, i.e. the coherence of reason, on the one hand, and between film of spectacle and the chaotic irrational functioning of the, id, on the other.

According to this classificatory schema, *Natural Born Killers* belongs to the category of spectacle, where image-complexes and image-sequences comprise the decisive structuring principle. Set in the context of contemporary culture, we are confronted with the implication that Stone's film may be seen as a symptom of extreme irrationality - an insight which is, to say the least, cause for concern. Nor can we ignore its irony. After all, this embodiment of social irrationality (if such a reading is indeed valid) was constructed by means of an advanced form of technical rationality, namely state-of-the-art film technology.

One should add that Mulvey is not alone regarding her awareness of the dwindling fortunes of narrative in our culture. Several cultural critics and philosophers have pointed to this dying of the art of narrative communication or storytelling, from Walter Benjamin in the 1930s to Paul Ricoeur and more recently Richard Kearney (1988). Ricoeur, for example, has raised the startling possibility of a culture without narrative communication (Kearney 1988:315). The fact that films in which "spectacle" seems largely to replace narrative as structuring principle appear to be in the process of becoming the norm rather than the exception - think of any number of recent (especially "Hollywood" -) films such

as Armageddon, Deep Impact or Meet Joe Black - may be a sign that the possibility of such a culture is not all that far-fetched. But the question is whether it is desirable. Each one of us has her or his own "story", after all. But when technologically advance, mass cultural products in our everyday environment continually undermine this familiar mode of communication, as *Natural Born Killers* does, it could happen that the everyday capacity to narrate our lives to one another will be replaced by a kind of social co-existence which borders on schizophrenia. And such a cultural condition would be "normal".

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