

Natural Born Killers: A Postmodern Analysis

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Introduction

Postmodernism in creative works exhibits itself in many forms. So many in fact that arriving at a concise definition of postmodernism is difficult if not impossible. While its manifestations are often easily identified, the summary description of its symbology remains elusive. Clearly, there are certain "telltale signs" which lead one to read a work as postmodern. A recent work that seems particularly suited to a postmodern reading is Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers*. One of the favorite targets of postmodern critique is popular culture and its tools of communication. *Natural Born Killers* offers scathing criticism of the media (particularly television) and its depiction of violence. In fact, Stone (along with screenwriter Quentin Tarantino) goes far beyond a simple condemnation. He depicts the effects of television on a generation that has not known a world without it. He demonstrates the manner in which television exceeds its ostensible calling; we do not simply receive information from the medium. Yes, information is imparted, but more importantly our expectations, our world views, and our culture are permanently altered by television.

Stone attacks television from several angles. Television genres from sitcom to news bulletin all play an important role in his commentary. This essay will examine Stone's critique of television genres. It will examine the themes uniting seemingly diverse television means and shed light on the all too often similar ends. It will unpack meaning as I see it in the multimedia text of image, word and soundtrack. Inevitably it is in the eye of the beholder to determine whether this film is the conglomeration of absurdity and hyperbole, or whether it is a startlingly realistic view of the media industry and its effects on our culture.

Sitcom Representations

Natural Born Killers provides a running critique of television from start to finish, beginning most prominently with the television sitcom. Many have criticized the depiction of American family life in the sitcom. At the surface, sitcoms offer merely a sanitized picture of daily life. Early sitcoms such as *Leave it to Beaver* were so tame, so ideal in their representations of the American dream, that it is unlikely that they represented any real family in the audience. The Cleavers were an example of what might be achieved from *cleaving* to the American dream; the ideal suburban reality that one might realize from hard work and family values. It is likely that even a 1950s television audience did not take *Leave it to Beaver* as a realistic representation. In hindsight it can be unequivocally identified as a romantic ideal.

We have come a long way since *Leave it to Beaver*. Can you imagine Ward and June sitting down to dinner with Al and Peg Bundy of *Married with Children*? Can

you see Ward complimenting Peg on a wonderful meatloaf and Al responding "yeah Peg, I'd rather spend the night with this meatloaf than with you!" Clearly, the character of the sitcom has changed along with that of society.

One could argue that the character of society may not be altogether different. Today's permissiveness may be new only in regard to public expression, not individual wants or desires. Certainly, today's sitcoms seem more unbounded only if we use as a measuring stick the frequency of sexual innuendo and bathroom humor. Yet the sitcom many not have changed quite as much as we would like to believe. The plot lines of today's sitcoms are not so different from those of yesteryear. The typical sitcom has always taken some type of family unit and then showed us week by week how members of that family learn valuable moral lessons. Sometimes the family unit is a single dad with three sons; at other times it is a nanny or housekeeper raising a boy and girl. As for the values promulgated, sometimes it's the youngest child learning that cheaters never prosper; at other times it is the father learning that his children are not little babies anymore. Point being that while the language and attitude of sitcoms may have evolved, the genre as a whole has been consistent in the types of information conveyed. We as audience members have been inundated season by season with the same messages (literally the same messages; sitcoms recycle the very same plot lines year after year, simply applying the lessons to its own characters). Subtly, years of exposure have trained us to view certain life lessons in terms of the television sitcom. Roseanne and Dan Connor are genuinely more like the typical nineties family than Ward and June were like that of the fifties. But that is merely better packaging. The messages are the same. And the reality is that our families do not walk around snapping off rapaciously witty one-liners like fire from an automatic weapon. Though we may be led to believe otherwise, the sitcom family of today is a far cry from representative; the fact is that our lives are composed of elements that plainly cannot be communicated in the genre of a family sitcom.

Oliver Stone certainly seems to be getting at this point in *Natural Born Killers*. We learn early on that Mallory comes from an abusive family. Certainly television in the nineties has not shied away from depicting the lives of abused children. A decade's worth of low-cost Sunday night television movies have been fueled by this topic. When we first learn of Mallory's upbringing Oliver Stone lifts his film out of "real time," out of an exaggerated but real telling of the Mickey and Mallory story. Suddenly we are transported to the set of "I love Mallory," made to look like "I Love Lucy," including a reminiscent introductory title graphic. Stone has gone out of his way to present us with what would normally amount to the stereotypical sitcom family: Rodney Dangerfield as the father, Edie McClurg as the mother. Both these actors are known to the audience as "classically" comic characters due to previous roles. Yet *these* characters do not behave like sitcom characters; their dialog is inappropriate and the subject matter taboo.

Rodney Dangerfield's character is the opposite of everything we expect from a sitcom father. He is verbally abusive. Even within Stone's critique, it is disturbing to hear Dangerfield's character call his daughter a "stupid bitch" and proceed to massage her buttocks, all while a laugh track provides what, in a real sitcom, would be perfectly-timed laughter. This conflict between expectation and reality is precisely what Stone has hoped to depict. The scene being played out is grossly

inappropriate for a sitcom family but all too unfortunately reflective of many families in the real world. It serves to remind us that the world of a sitcom is still, despite its feeble attempts at verisimilitude (e.g., an unemployed father or a gay friend), a fantasy world. In this anti-sitcom, Mallory is the product of very real abuse. She transcends the confines of the sitcom daughter; the lesson she learns is that morality has no meaning in her world. At the end of the half-hour there is not pat lesson she can take away. To escape this sitcom world she and Mickey must cast off morality; they eventually exit this obscene fantasy-land only by murdering her parents. As she says to her brother, "you're free Kevin." That line brings the episode to a stereotypical sitcom close. Applause is heard.

The News and Exploitation

The crux of Stone's analysis is the relationship between television and violence. Mickey and Mallory are his prototypical violent duo. They are his conflation of Bonnie and Clyde, Sid and Nancy, Eric and Lyle, and Tonya and Jeff. Yet they are more than this; their depiction goes beyond any of these real-life duos. They are not simply characters. They are a combination of romance and violence incarnate. They are at the same time both loving and murderous. They dance romantically, starry-eyed, as they walk away from brutal human slaughter. Their strange combination is aptly expressed when Mickey becomes restless and Mallory pleads with him in angry desperation:

Mickey: "This is the 1990s. In this day and age a man has to have choices. Man has to have a little bit of variety."

Mallory: "What are you talking about variety? Hostages? You want to fuck some other women now? Is that what you're talking about now Mickey? Why'd you pick me up? Why'd you take me out of my fuckin' house and kill my parents with me? Ain't you committed to me?"

Stone has elevated these characters from pseudo-real sitcom characters to hyperreal killer-celebrities. Appropriately, he now dramatizes their actions through a hyperreal television mode: tabloid television news. The audience is introduced to Wayne Gale, host of *American Maniacs*. Gale is a slimy reporter of pseudo-news, in the vein of *Hard Copy* or *A Current Affair*. He has the stereotypical Australian accent that is foisted upon an American audience as a mask of dignity obscuring a most undignified subject matter. *American Maniacs* does a profile of Mickey and Mallory in typical pseudo-news fashion, complete with interviews of the neighbors, re-enactments, and sensationalistic editing.

Why has Stone selected the pseudo-news instead of "real" news programming? At first glance, such pseudo-news programs seem of trifling importance; tabloid television does not carry the credibility of traditional network news. Yet tabloid television news suits Stone well for one of his objectives seems to be to lay bare the thin line dividing news from entertainment. The primary difference between real news and pseudo-news is that pseudo-news is more readily willing to compromise journalistic integrity for the sake of entertainment. I claim *more* readily because I believe Stone to be positing that both real news and pseudo-news eventually achieve the same effect. Both need to entertain us in the race for ratings. When tabloid news programs begin to steal thunder from traditional news programs, the

networks lower their standards and the two begin to blur.

This phenomenon has been illustrated over and over again in recent years. Tabloid news programs have gained an edge in their credibility in spite of their lack of integrity. Because tabloid news programs see no ethical violation in paying for interviews, they have been able to outbid traditional news sources for stories. In the past, interviewees would not have sold their stories to tabloid programs fearing that their credibility would be compromised. Yet as more and more tabloid programs succeed in reporting an entertaining version of the truth, newsmakers are encouraged to sell their stories, rather than give them away free.

An Engendered Appetite for Violence

Natural Born Killers is, above all else, a commentary on how, as a society, we condemn violence while hypocritically glorifying it in the media. Mickey and Mallory are evil incarnate; yet they are also stars. While television has publicized their exploits, it has only done so because Americans have a consuming appetite for the real and the terrible. When Mickey and Mallory are finally apprehended, we see their fans gathering outside the courthouse; they laud Mickey and Mallory as exemplary of the new rebelliousness. Signs are waved: "Murder me Mallory!" Mickey and Mallory have become an enterprise. They grace the covers of magazines from *Newsweek* to *Esquire*.

What is the damning effect of this insatiable American appetite for violence? Can violence in the real world be linked to violence on television? Surely, fame without fortune is too little incentive to tempt the average individual into an evil act of his/her own. Perhaps the real danger is that we become anesthetized to real danger. With the sitcom, we always approached what we saw with this underlying knowledge that it was not real. So too was the case with television dramas, music videos, and video games. In the past, only an hour or two per day (and even that only by FCC regulation) were we exposed to programming which we were led to accept at face value.

The upshot is that when sensationalistic news programming becomes the primary form of entertainment (All-O. J.-All-The-Time), we are ill-prepared to understand what we are seeing. Yes, we know it is real, but we approach it as we approach all television: distant, entertaining, say-and-do anything to keep the viewer's attention. Does the teenage viewer really want Mickey to murder her? Or is she merely worshipping an image that no longer has a value that equates to its actual meaning?

Oliver Stone meticulously documents that way in which television obscures the real meaning of violence. Consider the scene in which Wayne Gale, the *American Maniacs* anchor, travels to prison. This scene mirrors the classic manner in which television breaks down the wall between the acceptable social element (the audience) and the unacceptable social element (the mass murder). It has been played out many times before: one-on-one interviews that transport Charles Manson, Son-of-Sam, or John Wayne Gacy right into our living-rooms. When Geraldo interviews Charles Manson we are led to believe that Geraldo has taken his life into his own hands to enter a prison and confront one-on-one the murderous beast. What the camera does not reveal is the very controlled environment in which this interview occurs. It does not reveal the probable fact the Manson faces the

barrel of a gun during the length of the interview. Nor the fact that Geraldo is surrounded by a horde of guards who remain ready to intervene at Manson's slightest twitch (all of which can be conveniently edited out of the final product).

In the end, due to the highly-controlled nature of the interview, we see a beast that seems somehow less beastly. Perhaps his words are repugnant; but is he threatening? It would seem not. At least not in such a way as to spoil the entertainment value, the thrill of seeing and conquering this demon.

Stone's interview between Mickey and Wayne Gale proceeds in much the same way. We see how controlled an exercise the interview is supposed to be. We see too how little the reality of the information being disseminated matters to the disseminators. Gale concentrates intently on Mickey as he asks sensationalistic questions hoping for a like response.

Mickey: You don't understand Wayne. You and I aren't even the same species. I used to be you then I evolved. From where you're standing you're a man. From where I'm standing, you're not even an ape. You're a media person...

Wayne: Are you done? Let's cut the BS and get real. Why this purity you feel about killing. WHY FOR CHRIST'S SAKE! WHY! DON'T LIE TO ME!

Mickey: I guess Wayne, you got to hold that old shot gun in your hand and it becomes clear like it did for me the first time. I realized my one true calling in life.

Wayne: What's that?

Mickey: Shit man, I'm a natural born killer.

Suddenly a bell sounds, the cameras stop and we see exhilaration on Wayne's face. The meaning of what Mickey has just uttered is irrelevant. The line between credible news and entertainment, violence and simulated violence has been obliterated. Mickey has just provided a sensationalistic closing that will drive the ratings through the roof!

Technique

In its critique of television and the glorification of violence, *Natural Born Killers* pays very close attention to technique. By technique, I mean the subtle way in which television implements detail to guide our interpretation. It is certainly worthwhile to take a closer look at the manner in which Stone both uses and parodies technique.

I have already discussed at length, commentary on the sitcom genre and on tabloid news programs. However, throughout *Natural Born Killers*, Stone stresses the way in which producers of programming can manipulate our expectations and interpretations.

Soundtrack

The use of the soundtrack is particularly important to this film. In a 1994 interview on America Online, Stone asserted that approximately 100 pieces of music are heard in the film. Stone varies musical genres just as quickly as he does media genres. The musical impact of sitcom-style sound effects becomes glaringly obvious against a backdrop of sitcom-*inappropriate* dialog. We hear the upbeat symphonic melody of a 1950s sitcom as Rodney Dangerfield's character screams at his daughter, "You stupid bitch. You watch your language or I'll kick the shit out of

you like I do (your mother). So if your ass is in this house, it's my ass." This strange juxtaposition does more than parody the sitcom genre; it demonstrates how such music trivializes even sitcom-*appropriate* language. Thus music predetermines the way in which we receive the dialog. In the end, the understanding we will have is as much a result of the music and visual image, as it is of the words spoken.

Stone demonstrates this point on another occasion as well. When we first meet Mickey and Mallory, they are in the process of a massacre at a roadside diner. This scene is marked by raucous blues music, a saucy action soundtrack. This music seems particularly appropriate as Mickey and Mallory carry out their acts of violence in a manner that is at one time both brutal and sexual. Yet when they complete the killings they suddenly engage in a romantic embrace. The music changes to Edith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose." Again, the glaring inappropriateness of this music immediately following such violence unequivocally underscores the realization that we are being manipulated by the soundtrack. Usually, we as an audience are supposed to remain unaware of this manipulation; Stone calls it to the forefront, making us aware that the soundtrack is simply one more communication technique in the director's arsenal.

Constructed Reality

Just as I have demonstrated that the soundtrack of television piece causes the audience to form preconceptions of the content, so too expectations can be established by genre. I have demonstrated how Stone achieves this at the broadest level regarding the sitcom and tabloid news. However, it is possible to look at the specific techniques established by these and other genres as subtle yet powerful determinants of meaning. One such technique is the ability of a director or author to write operational ground rules into a script. These ground rules become presuppositions for all the events that happen. This technique works very well in fictional works where an author must maintain control of an audience's suspended belief. In *Natural Born Killers*, Stone subtly demonstrates how constructed reality becomes possible when television reports on real world events. What we find is that a technique once used largely to facilitate suspended belief in fiction, becomes a dangerous force in our interpretation of real events.

As Mickey and Mallory proceed on their extended killing spree, media reports spread the word that Mickey and Mallory always leave one person behind to tell the story. Wayne Gale, the *American Maniacs* anchor, uses this piece of detail to enliven and sensationalize the story of Mickey and Mallory to his viewers. In point of fact, this detail is not untrue; they do seem to relish leaving one person alive at the end of each spree. Yet this tendency of theirs is not an unalterable rule of the Mickey and Mallory universe; the following example is Stone's painfully clear lesson on how constructed reality affects an audience.

When Mickey and Mallory arrive at a large drugstore in search of snake anti-venom a single clerk is in the store. He is back behind the counter watching an account of Mickey and Mallory on television. At last he finds himself alone in the store face-to-face with Mickey who is pointing a gun at him, ready to fire. He pleads right off, "I'm the only clerk left! I'm the only clerk left!" In the reality constructed by television this necessarily will save his life. The tendency of Mickey and Mallory to leave one person at each scene alive is not simply a matter of factual record;

television, without consulting Mickey and Mallory, has informed a nation that this is a rule of the game. But the fact is that Mickey and Mallory have no such hard-and-fast rule. In this case, they would certainly have no reason to leave him alive since they had killed no one else in the store. As Mickey responds, "You keep forgetting...I don't kill you what's there to talk about?"

Wayne Gale, the producer and anchor of *American Maniacs* falls victim to this same piece of constructed reality. Near the end of the film, Wayne has transformed from reporter of the news to participant in the events. He has joined Mickey and Mallory in their escape from prison, thinking that he has become like them. In his mind he has bonded with them, earned their respect. Of course, he has presumed to understand the workings of their minds. At the film's close Mickey, Mallory and Wayne are doing a closing sequence for the camera that has been transmitting the events nationwide since the prison riot began. When Wayne asks Mickey to do a wrap-up, Mickey replies, "we're gonna do a wrap-up all right, Wayne. But it won't be you staring in the camera, looking dumb and acting stupid. Instead you're gonna being staring down the barrels of our shotguns and we're gonna being blowing your brains all over that tree back there." Wayne cannot believe this; it must be a joke, after everything that has happened. As a last resort he exclaims, "don't Mickey and Mallory always leave somebody alive to tell the tale?" He has bought into his own construction (and has expressed it in just the sensationalistic way he might have to an audience of millions). "We are," Mickey responds, "your camera."

Shared Cultural Knowledge

Another technique employed by Oliver Stone in his telling of the *Natural Born Killers* story is a reliance on shared cultural knowledge. This technique is seemingly not one that Stone is attempting to expose but rather one that he uses effectively to make his point about our appetite for violence. Mickey and Mallory and the media coverage that their killing spree engenders is at once reminiscent of many major media events. The adoring fans surrounding the courthouse screaming for Mickey and Mallory and holding signs such as "Murder Me Mallory," clearly remind one of the fans who surrounded O.J. Simpson as he made his way through Los Angeles in the white Bronco.

An even more overt reference to shared knowledge was used during the capture of Mickey and Mallory outside the drug store. The camera focuses on Mickey, the detective Scagnetti, and the remainder of the police at the scene. After a brief struggle Mickey is subdued. After he has been incapacitated the mass of officers push him to the ground and kick and punch him as the camera pulls back. The American viewer instantly recognizes the reference to the Rodney King beating. The camera angle is the same; the camera keeps pulling back until all we can see is a tangled mess of flying arms and legs landing blows without reprieve.

The use of shared knowledge serves a few purposes. At a basic level, it enables Stone to communicate a significant amount of information in a matter of seconds. More obliquely though, Stone employs it to reinforce this notion that what we see on television becomes a vocabulary of thought. A "Rodney King"-style beating, as repulsive as it is, becomes increasingly less repulsive to us as it is repeated over and over. As sensationalistic news stories proliferate, we become numb to the violence we see. As a result it takes more to shock us; when to shock is to entertain

it means that the media must dig deeper to dredge up fodder even more repulsive still.

Concluding Thoughts

At the close of *Natural Born Killers*, as the live broadcast of Wayne Gale's death is abruptly halted, Stone cuts to a montage of real footage of recent news events. These scenes include the Menendez brothers, Tonya Harding, Rodney King, the Branch Davidians in Waco, and last but not least O.J. Simpson. Stone has not left us dangling; unequivocally he is telling his audience, shouting even, that the coverage of Mickey and Mallory is **not** a wild exaggeration. It is startlingly similar to the real events packaged and delivered for entertainment value everyday. The violence of Mickey and Mallory is exaggerated when juxtaposed with the acts of the Menendez brothers or the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman. Yet the media coverage of those exaggerated acts is frighteningly real.

It is both appropriate and ironic that as I have written this essay, the networks have been providing round-the-clock coverage on the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. It seems that terrorists of as-of-yet unknown origin have seen fit to destroy hundreds of lives with a car bomb in defiant protest of the United States government. Every regularly scheduled program is subject to preemption or at least ongoing interruptions.

Rescue squads are pulling the bodies of children from the wreckage. I do not know these victims, yet I moved nearly to tears. I find myself waiting anxiously for each succeeding special report. Have they reached the day care center on the ground floor yet? What does our President have to say? And what of these villains; have they left a trail as plain as day, as psychotics seem wont to do? I find myself not wanting to wait to read it in the morning papers. Each minute is killing me; I NEED TO KNOW NOW!

Am I a hypocrite as well? I would prefer to think not. The car bomb in Oklahoma is a national tragedy; to broadcast reruns of *The Brady Bunch* while a nation waits and worries would itself be a crime. This sentiment does not necessarily conflict with my reading of *Natural Born Killers*. The film condemns the recklessness of media in *glorifying* violence, not reporting it. When violence is a breaking story, it is an obligation of television to report it. When a nation sits impatiently waiting for the harsh truth, it is incumbent on television to deliver it swiftly.

What the film appears to condemn is the processing and manufacturing of news as a means of entertainment. When violent acts are sensationalized and packaged for sale, we find our appetite for the harsh truth falsely stimulated. When this stimulation is repeated over and over again, we find ourselves always craving more. Does this constant craving not necessitate a lessening of our condemnation?

The all too real message that underlies the absurdity in *Natural Born Killers* must not be ignored. Rather it must be tempered with the legitimate role of broadcast media. The call to content producers to use the medium responsibly will always go unheeded. But each of us as viewers has the final say. When television oversteps its bounds, the solution is simple. Turn it off.

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