

# Road Sickness: The Case of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*

## Mal des transports : le cas de *Natural Born Killers* d'Oliver Stone

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### Article abstract

The “violent” road movie is unique in the panoply of the genre. Under discussion here is Oliver Stone's controversial *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a piece that the director has described as a commentary on violence as the American social ill. Using this notion of illness, of organic pathology, as a central thematic node, the article proceeds to examine the violent modes of cultural mobility present in the film's themes, its narrative arc and finally, in its editing techniques. At the thematic level, Stone's equation of the cultural and the biological taps into modern currents of reflection on violence proposed by theorists such as Michel Foucault (1975) and Yves Michaud (2002). At the narrative level, Stone's killers are expelled like diseased bodies, consigned to the highways and back roads configuring the synaptic space between the fixed cultural centre that rejects them and the two emphatically mobile cultures that allow their malignancy to metastasize: an American frontier culture of human cast-offs and native nomads defined by the locomotion of the car, truck, trailer or caravan (Rapping 1999); and an international media culture that disseminates their image to the remotest corners of the globe. Finally, at the levels of cinematography and editing, an ethical question is asked with reference to the work of Baudrillard (1995): could the pathological “locomotion” prevailing in Stone's narrative be read in tandem with a cinematic “media-motion” that is equally pathological and violent? Does *Natural Born Killers* draw the spectator into a flux of images and sounds that is artfully constructed to offend, to induce sickness? Can a flux of images and sounds be pathological, violent or criminal?

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## ABSTRACT

The “violent” road movie is unique in the panoply of the genre. Under discussion here is Oliver Stone’s controversial *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a piece that the director has described as a commentary on violence as the American social ill. Using this notion of illness, of organic pathology, as a central thematic node, the article proceeds to examine the violent modes of cultural mobility present in the film’s themes, its narrative arc and finally, in its editing techniques. At the thematic level, Stone’s equation of the cultural and the biological taps into modern currents of reflection on violence proposed by theorists such as Michel Foucault (1975) and Yves Michaud (2002). At the narrative level, Stone’s killers are expelled like diseased bodies, consigned to the highways and back roads configuring the synaptic space between the fixed cultural centre that rejects them and the two emphatically mobile cultures that allow their malignancy to metastasize: an American frontier culture of human cast-offs and native nomads defined by the locomotion of the car, truck, trailer or caravan (Rapping 1999); and an international media culture that disseminates their image to the remotest corners of the globe. Finally, at the levels of cinematography and editing, an ethical question is asked with reference to the work of Baudrillard (1995): could the pathological “locomotion” prevailing in Stone’s narrative be read in tandem with a cinematic “media-motion” that is equally pathological and violent? Does *Natural Born Killers* draw the spectator into a flux of images and sounds that is artfully constructed to offend, to induce sickness? Can a flux of images and sounds be pathological, violent or criminal?

*Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article*

Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994) makes a spectacle of mass murder. A road film about two lovers on a homicidal spree, with the sensation-hungry media helping instead of

hindering them, it follows in an American movie tradition of violent couples fleeing the law and murdering as they go—Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); Terence Malick's *Badlands* (1973); Tony Scott's *True Romance* (1993). Like the characters of these previous films, Stone's Mickey and Mallory Knox are overblown caricatures. The type of violence that they perpetrate is one of Hollywood artifice at its most transparent, occurring at a hysterical pace and interspersed with surreal imagery intended to reveal what the viewer already suspects from the film's blunt title: these are natural born killers. Just what does Stone accomplish? Is this a postmodern vision of violence in American culture? Is it a morality tale or simply another action movie made to abuse the nerves? Such were the questions that divided critics—both in academe and the popular press—at the time of the film's release.<sup>1</sup>

It may have been an error to insist on finding a rational motivation behind this film when what makes it unique in the Hollywood repertoire, and invaluable in an academic exploration of the road movie genre, is most likely its pathos: specifically its expression of one of the deregulatory effects—and affects—of living in a violent culture. This is, quite plainly, “illness.” Social violence equated with physical illness, with symptoms of nausea, with the insidious, creeping pathology of cancer, forms a thematic node or core that disseminates both in the discourse surrounding *Natural Born Killers* and in the film itself. The United States, Stone explains in an interview with Charlie Rose, suffers from a violence “metastasized” by the media, the police and the prison system: “Overkill has developed a loss of perspective. It is not just the media. It's the prisons, the police. We are all kicking in to the violence.... We're becoming metastasized... a cancer. The prevention elements are part of the committing elements.”<sup>2</sup>

Out of this cultural illness, Stone would later insist, came an act of illness: “*Natural Born Killers* comes from those two years that I really felt disgusted; everything was coming up. I just felt sick, and I just expressed it as a kid would.”<sup>3</sup> Stone has recourse to a potent biological metaphor to explain both the film's central theme and the technique underlying its editing.

The metaphor is intriguing and offers a line of enquiry into the film. First, how might this equation of the cultural and the biological tap into modern currents of reflection on violence? Second, how might it inform the modes of cultural mobility present in the film? Under examination here are three of these modes, the first two implicit in the film's themes and the third concerning itself with Stone's technique as a filmmaker. The Knoxes themselves exhibit two pathological modes of being in movement. As they travel down the highway in their Challenger convertible, the tabloid media follow in their wake, capturing and disseminating their image. This metastatic media-motion, with its alienating effect and trans-cultural sprawl, will be the first mode of mobility under investigation. The second is the Knoxes' locomotion, their actual physical displacement through the narrative arc. Stone portrays his killers as a diseased body expelled from the cultural centre, consigned to roam the periphery until it finally crosses into an inter-cultural space where it becomes disenfranchised, isolated and vulnerable. It is in this space that Mickey and Mallory have their moment of clarity and ultimately succumb, quite literally and physically, to the social ill that they personify. The third and final pathological mode of mobility concerns itself with the formal aspects of the film, with the media-motion generated by Stone's editing. Under scrutiny here is the film's flux of images and sounds, a flux that is at once a violent assault on the senses and an unspoken indictment against a criminality of a metaphysical order. This is the crime of "acting out," a term used by Baudrillard (1995) to indicate the pathological projection of the self through the techniques of cinematic and televisual media into a morally bankrupt "univers spectral et sans problèmes" (p. 61).

### Cultural Violence in Biological Terms

- Mickey Knox, when did you first start thinking about killing?
- Birth, I was thrown into a flaming pit of scum forgotten by God... I came from violence. It was in my blood. My dad had it. His dad had it. It was just my fate.
- No one is born evil. It's something you learn.

At the centre of this bit of prison interview between Mickey Knox, one of the film's killers, and a tabloid television host, seems to be confusion between the terms of the nature-nurture debate, or better yet an unwillingness to distinguish between them. Is the propensity for violence genetic? Does it emanate from within? Or is it more like a virus that slips in from the cultural outside? Mickey seems to affirm both hypotheses at once, or perhaps to reject the question as futile. A violent culture, he explains, invades the blood at the moment of birth and integrates at the cellular level, becomes a genome passable from father to son. There is no point in drawing a distinction between nature and nurture, for the behaviour is assimilated so rapidly and at such a foundational level of character that it becomes the subject's nature either way. The interviewer, for his part, is quick to re-establish the normative line: nobody is born evil. Violent behaviour is learned, an illness impinging from without, one that can be managed, controlled, perhaps cured by proper rehabilitation.

This simple exchange of views, directed towards a tabloid television audience, nevertheless points up important trends in modern scholarship addressing the questions of culture, criminality and violence. Mickey identifies himself ontologically with his violent culture, which he equates quite simply with natural law. There is no conflict for him, but rather a symbiosis between nature—as killer red in tooth and claw—and her most natural offspring: “It’s just murder, man. All God’s creatures do it in some form or another. I mean, you look in the forest, you got species killing other species.... The wolf don’t know why he’s a wolf; the deer don’t know why he’s a deer. God just made it that way.” The interviewer, on the contrary, thinks in clinical terms. A violent culture is a pathological environment that the subject assimilates through defective relationships forged in any number of socio-cultural spheres. What this brief exchange reveals, to sum up, is a conflict between a view of essentialist evil and the clinical view of the subject “pathologized” by violent culture.

This syntagm between essentialist and clinical conceptions of violent behaviour is at the centre of Foucault’s reflection in *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and in his subsequent seminars at the

Collège de France (1997), where he takes Hobbes's political philosophy to task.<sup>4</sup> Violence and criminality, he suggests, have been the subject of a global and democratic re-thinking in modern culture. The essentialist absolutes of good and evil that prevailed until modernity, as well as Hobbes's notion that power relations in the social realm describe a linear movement downward as the stronger impose their will upon the weaker, have been replaced with a clinical and diagnostic mode of thinking and a conception of society as bio-political whole, an organic system in which aggressive relations of dominance and submission play out at the most diffusive, capillary levels. Criminal violence, in other words, is now seen as a pathology circulating in the living tissue of the social. The role of institutions such as the police and the prisons is to diagnose, treat and ultimately contain it, perhaps forcing it into latency and remission. They cannot hope to eradicate it, however. Yves Michaud (2002, p. 217) follows the thread of Foucault's thinking to its open ended conclusion: "Le social est traversé et pénétré par la violence et on ne peut plus se raccrocher à une miraculeuse perspective eschatologique pour échapper à cette situation. Il faut se résoudre à un monde social et politique habité par la violence, polarisé par les stratégies de pouvoir et la stratégie tout court."

How might this biological metaphor be conducive to the type of violent road movie that is *Natural Born Killers*? Put more simply: why a road movie about a killing spree? An answer may well be Stone's choice of the word "metastasis." He uses it to posit violence, the American social ill in terms of an aggressive, destructive mobility, and in this sense it could very well intersect with the notions of "mobility" and "transfer" implicit in the road movie genre. "Metastasis" means "transfer"—from its root in the Greek "methistanai" (to remove or change place) to its sixteenth-century rhetorical sense of a "rapid shift from one point to another" to its modern pathological sense of malignant spread. A metastasis involves a body abandoning its docile state and becoming pathological. It mutates, disjoins and roams through the system, destroying healthy tissue. The pathogen's destructiveness is tied to its flight, its dislocation and movement. Its containment, on the contrary, is tied to the restoration

of stasis—the cancer is localized and excised, or it is immobilized through radiation and chemotherapy; the criminal is localized, arrested and either held under surveillance in prison or diagnosed and subjected to rehabilitative treatment. The type of violence perpetrated by Mickey and Mallory Knox is one that can only be sustained “in transit.” Olivier Mongin, in *La violence des images* (1997, p. 34), characterizes their particular mode of being in transit as a “fuite en avant.” The killers flee forth, forever outpacing and outdistancing the institutional forces that would neutralize them, restore them to stasis.

### **Metastatic Media-motion, or the Killer as Television Nomad**

“The prevention elements are part of the committing elements,” were Stone’s words to Charlie Rose. The institutions that once contributed to the resilience of the social tissue, that were once instruments of repression, are now abetting the proliferation of violence. Of all these institutions, it is the television media that get the lion’s share of criticism in *Natural Born Killers*. As Mickey Knox and his wife Mallory flee forth, tabloid television scavenges along behind, reporting their every move to a worldwide television audience. In this important sense, the killers’ mobility describes not only a south-bound vector from Texas to New Mexico, but also a globally diffusive one carried by electronic signals through the ether. Their actual physical displacement will be discussed shortly. Under examination first, however, is this metastatic media-motion. How does it represent the Knoxes? How does it disseminate their image inter-culturally in a swath from the United States to Europe to Japan?

The media, Elayne Rapping (1999) suggests with reference to the biological metaphor set out by Foucault, enter into one of two possible relationships with violent social behaviour. The first type is designed to vilify and cast criminals out. The media represent violence as a disease pervading the social tissue. The disease, however, is also terminal, untreatable and impinging from a place forever on the outside of so-called “normal society.” Infected by a cultural environment that is essentially alien to well-socialized people, violent perpetrators are portrayed as irredeemably other, as monsters or freaks (p. 256). Violent crime—

like African killer bees or the Asian bird flu—is something exotic, always generated by cultural circumstances beyond those of the law-abiding, always impinging upon the latter along vectors that must be tightly controlled.

In this paradigm of representation, violent criminals are essentially nomads. The deserted strip of highway where they are pulled over by the state trooper, the fleeing automobile out of which they are summoned or forcibly removed, the trailer that they call home, the way station, gas pump or roadside diner where they steal, kill or incite a brawl: these are their landmarks. It is the paradigm fostered by *echt-vérité* tabloid television series such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted*, series that reinforce the incorrigible otherness of their subjects by expelling them into the fringes of society to offend randomly. They are monsters, explains Rapping (1999, p. 257), because they are deliberately situated in a “political imaginary... far from any community in which traditional family life might thrive.... This is a landscape of highways, strip malls, trailer parks, and convenience stores, where churches, schools and office buildings—the institutions that make up normal society—have no place.”

The places listed by Rapping—highways, trailer parks, roadside *cafés*—are precisely those of transfer, where Mickey and Mallory Knox move, commit their crimes and are aggressively pursued by the press. Tabloid journalist Wayne Gale follows them from one crime scene to the next with a television van, a hand-held camera and a microphone. Framed by nothing but an endless, deserted highway, he provides his running commentary on their crimes and stages mock re-enactments. The latter have an over-hyped, circus-like quality, the actors a baroque assemblage of movie stars, famous athletes and unwitting extras. Gale manufactures interviews with the absurd denizens of this outer-space: overfed truckers and cowboys, suspicious-looking loiterers, scantily clad waitresses, police officers who appear to be on the wrong side of the law. What results is a television news program that delivers both a comforting reassurance and a threat: the reassurance that these killers are not like you or me, that they circulate in a counter-culture of aliens and misfits; and the threat that both they and their counter-culture are forever



pressing on the limits of normal society. *They may be headed to your community next* is the implicit message of each episode.

Stone makes singular cinematic use of these barren landscapes of transfer, transforming them periodically into whirling dream pools where violent images springing from the characters' memories, desires and emotional states stream by in a nauseating flux. In other words, this alien space outside of culture is periodically re-cast by Stone as his characters' subjective inner space, one that consistently and compulsively interrupts the narrative arc in a way that imitates the channel surfing of commercial television. Marsha Kinder comments on this dual mobility constructed by Stone. At times the killers in their automobile are seen travelling the no-man's-land of the interstate highway. At other times they and their automobile are "strangely suspended (usually at a slanted angle and with artificial lighting) in front of a fake dream screen on which a wild *mélange* of images from their cultural and personal reservoir of memories is rear-projected" (Kinder 2001, p. 77). The monstrosity of the outer landscape as framed by Gale's television camera parallels that of Mickey and Mallory's inner landscape, which Stone himself frames as a composite of galling television images.

There is a second type of relationship between the media and violent social behaviour, however, and it is particularly apt for describing the type of malignant media-motion that broadcasts the killers' image inter-culturally, making them a global phenomenon. This second type perverts the tenets of the Foucauldian bio-political paradigm by over-extending them in their natural direction. One of the effects of the modern clinical view, suggests Rapping (1999), has been a democratization of criminal behaviour. Everyone is susceptible to transgress violently much like everyone is susceptible to the flu: "Murderers, muggers, inner-city drug dealers, and gang members are very much like us, only they have given in to their dangerous and antisocial impulses." Rapping examines television series such as *Law and Order*, where the criminals are portrayed as acting on "emotions that we all share but manage to keep in check." One of the criteria of shows such as these is the explicability of criminal behaviour: "Who dunnit?" is answered with sociological,

psychological, and moral analyses that make sense to us all” (p. 255). Reading and understanding the criminal’s motivation and *modus operandi* is like reading and understanding the symptoms of a documented illness. Criminal behaviour in social systems is henceforth identifiable with organic pathologies occurring and recurring within biological systems. The media represent these criminals as integrated within the same system as normal, well-behaved citizens: “The city, from its highest social reaches to its lowest, is portrayed as an organically unified community in which all members, regardless of race, class, or gender, share a common human nature,” Rapping remarks (p. 254).

“In the perverse manner of modern times,” Stone says of his characters, “they become pop heroes... because people relate to them... because they feel the same way about their own lives.”<sup>5</sup> Foreseeable here is a mode of media representation that takes this propensity to identify with the criminal to a pathological place. The media can exchange the cloak of abomination for an aura of desirability, can represent the criminal as a figure of adulation. Homicide becomes the ritual sacrifice performed by the romantic hero striving to slough off the bonds of a repressive system. The hero is identified at the beginning of his or her trajectory as human, but gradually evolves in the public eye to something higher, “super-human.” Indeed, Stone’s characters finish by entertaining delusions of *grandeur*: “You’ll never understand, Wayne. You and me, we’re not 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 an ape.”

How does this fame-seeking mode of media-motion manifest in terms of inter-cultural mobility? First of all, it makes the malignancy of American cultural violence global. Stone cuts regularly to street interviews in London, Paris and Tokyo, where fans hail Mickey and Mallory as heroes, inscribing them in the pantheon of American movie celebrity. Inexplicably, during Mickey and Mallory’s arrest at a remote highway pharmacy, a Japanese news reporter is on the scene communicating the details of their arrest live, in Japanese, to Tokyo. The most obvious effect of this global cult of American violence is a

pathological homogenizing of youth culture, which increasingly marches to Hollywood's drum. Kinder (2001, p. 76) describes this media-motion as an agent corroding inter-cultural differences:

What does it mean to grow up in a culture that is saturated with a constant flow of violent images from personal memory and media and constantly remixed into new kaleidoscopic combinations? This question is seen with respect not only to the film's notorious outlaw couple... but also their legions of teenage fans all over the world, who are increasingly homogenized by the same corrosive images.

The "corrosion" in question is that of inter-cultural difference. Despite their nations and languages of origin, these youths are carbon copies of each other in their American dress, their mannerisms and their aspirations to follow in the footsteps of their heroes.

This corrosion of inter-cultural difference is of course tied to notions of American cultural hegemony, and ultimately to colonial expansion. More than one scholar has interpreted the killers' mobility as Stone's homage to the American killer/warrior, whom he identifies with certain potent cultural *ethoi*. The road movie apparatus, designed for rapid mobility, mass murder and global media dissemination, is equated with the apparatus of conquest in colonial times. The Knoxes, in their automobile, become the perverse, postmodern machinery of Manifest Destiny. According to Jane Caputi (1999, p. 153), "*Natural Born Killers*... delivers a conventional sermon about the beauty, erotic thrill, freedom, masculinity, and sacred character of American violence." Stephen Schiff (1994) likens Mickey and Mallory to American colonists slaughtering their way westward. They are the courageous Indian killers of old. In the film's opening credits, Cara Mariana (quoted in Caputi 1999, p. 153) observes, they can be seen in their Challenger convertible "crashing unconcernedly through a series of signs that read 'Road Closed.'" Around their automobile flash images of galloping horses foaming at the mouth, and indeed at a crucial turning point in the film, they do murder a native. "In *Natural Born Killers*," Mariana concludes, "the doctrine of Manifest Destiny,

which inspired and justified the conquest of the land and indigenous people of North America, is turned inward... to conquer the human spirit and soul.”

### **Metastatic Locomotion, or the Killer as Ailing Nomad**

The second mode of malignant mobility under examination is that of Mickey and Mallory’s actual physical displacement through the narrative arc. Malignant pathologies need a propitious culture to survive. They inevitably fail once the culture that compels and sustains them is removed or radically altered. For Mickey and Mallory, this propitious culture is a North American modernity defined by the freedom of the road and the automobile, by mass media saturation, and by a premium placed upon violent modes of transcendence. The turning point in the film is where the killers cross an inter-cultural boundary, conflict with a foreign people and way of life that isolate them, and turn their “fuite en avant” into a reflexive self-questioning and ultimately a pathological self-devouring. This conflict with the cultural other leads them for the first and only time in the film to a certain wisdom regarding their own nature and to a sincere sentiment of guilt and self-doubt.

Their illness manifests in a subtle evolution. First they lose their pursuers. The towns that they traverse on the edge of the desert are strangely without media presence or police protection. “Is there such a thing as a copless town?” asks Mallory. Then they lose their orientation and deadly focus and begin driving in circles in the middle of the desert. Frustrated at being lost, Mickey lashes out at his wife with the same epithet that he had killed Mallory’s father for using: “All I see is desert... Turn left! Turn left to what, *you stupid bitch!*” While they quarrel, they run out of gas and their automobile comes choking to a halt. Disoriented and nauseous, Mickey stumbles out of the car and vomits while Mallory continues ranting. They set off together on foot and eventually find themselves surrounded by Native American shepherders. From automotive modernity, the killers are suddenly thrown back into a nomadic culture where the car reverts back to walking and the highway to grazing land.

The pivotal scene begins when they knock on the door of a Navajo shepherd's hut and ask for gasoline. Here they experience a failure of the most rudimentary of communicative channels, language itself—not to speak of the smooth technological channels of communication that allowed them to spread their criminality to the four corners of the globe. Neither the Navajo nor his young grandson speaks English, so they are reduced to an exchange of simple gestures, which includes the invitation to take food and shelter. Having lost a son in Vietnam, the Navajo himself is hard bitten by violence. He is the figure of the reclusive misanthrope who has retreated both geographically and psychologically to the horizon of a culture that he abjures, “horizon” both in the sense of a vantage point just beyond the outer limit, and of expectation and prophecy. The Navajo is appropriately named “red cloud,” and indeed he acts as a specular surface in which modernity can see both its pathological present and its doomed future. Mickey and Mallory see themselves here for what they are and become illuminated with the signs of their pathology. Alternately, the words “sick,” “sad,” “ghost” and “demon” flash across their chests as they eat in uncomfortable silence across from their host. The young boy looks at Mallory and asks his grandfather in Navajo:

- Is she crazy?
- She has sad sickness. She is sad, lost in a world of ghosts.
- Can you help them, Grandfather?
- Maybe they don't want to be helped.

The killers sense through this contact with the impervious other the weight of their own crimes. “You feel demons here, Mallory?” Mickey asks. “I think we're the demons,” Mallory replies. That night while sleeping, Mickey has a fever dream about his violent father. In a reflexive, half-conscious gesture of defence against this ghost from his past, he grabs his rifle and murders the Navajo.

This is the intolerable transgression: “You are dead!” Mallory cries out, “You killed life! He took us in there! He fed us!” Following its nature, the pathogen has destroyed the host life which sustains it. For the first and only time in the film, the

protagonists are struck with remorse and self-loathing, and they get a taste of their own poison, quite literally. Stone exercises a rather commonplace, yet no less effective, type of poetic justice. He sends his killers stumbling out of the Navajo's hut and into a pit of rattlesnakes. From here, they begin their self-devouring gesture; the malignant body succumbs to its own pathology. Poisoned, feverish and vomiting, they manage to steal a truck and drive on blindly until they come across a pharmacy. Stone suffuses the edifice in green light—the colour of sickness—in order to force his characters' medical crisis to the fore. Before they can find anti-venom, however, an employee trips the alarm and the police arrive. The scene outside the pharmacy is eerily reminiscent of the snake pit. In the latter, nature's mechanisms of defence and repression surround and strike at the killers. Now it is society's antibodies, state troopers, which surround and strike at them with stun guns and billyclubs. The killers are beaten into submission and brought to jail.

The following questions were raised at the beginning: Is this a postmodern take on violence in American culture, or is it a morality tale? The first tenet of postmodern thought is the fundamental instability of all epistemological and ontological constructs. Torturous suspension, a lack of closure, is its hallmark. What cannot be overlooked, however, is that in Stone's film a most traditional, Biblical episteme is evoked: the Cain and Abel myth. Those who are born evil are cast out to roam in the Land of Nod ("Wandering"). Mickey and Mallory's physical displacement through a world of highways and strip malls could be interpreted as a form of atonement or expiation (Mallory murders her family; they both murder an Abel figure in the character of the Navajo shepherd, and are genuinely remorseful for it). It appears, then, that *Natural Born Killers* conforms to an Old Testament view of morality, and in this sense provides a type of closure in the formula of the morality tale.

However, there are also many fundamental points of disjunction from the Cain and Abel parable. Mickey and Mallory's remorse over the Navajo's death is in the end fleeting and superficial, and they return ultimately to their homicidal "fuite en avant." Cain's transgression is marked by self-consciousness and

remorse. In the Old Testament account (Genesis 4-16), he hides his face from the world. Mickey and Mallory do the diametric opposite. It is by mobile mass murder that they show their face to the world both literally and figuratively, that they establish their presence. Cain's transgression is a submission to impulses that he knows to be "savage" and "base." The Knoxes are convinced that their ability to prey randomly upon humanity is a sign of divinity. It is perhaps this paradoxical co-existence of the Biblical parable along with everything that overtly contradicts it that allows us to consider *Natural Born Killers* as Stone's inversion of the Cain and Abel parable, one that satisfies an American cultural need for closure while remaining at the same time appropriately, and in a "postmodern" way, unresolved.

The biological metaphor of the malignant and mobile pathogen—as invoked by Stone and developed with reference to Foucault—is better able to account for both Mickey and Mallory's temporary submission to remorse and for the subsequent recovery of their metastatic mobility. For their trial, conviction and prison sentence constitute only a temporary remission. They regain their strength and effect yet another violent disjunction. Helped by media-induced adulation, they succeed in inciting a riot, escaping from prison and "hitting the road" once again. As pathogens, they are now more resilient for having resisted the organism's repressive measures. They invade the tissue at a more insidious level and proliferate. The killers have gone underground, and as the credits roll, the spectator sees the inside of a Winnebago full of children, all under the watchful eye of a very pregnant Mallory.

### **Media-motion Sickness: Violence and the Image Flux**

The third and final mode of malignant mobility concerns itself with the media-motion generated by Stone's editing. "Media-motion" describes the situation where the subject, in the relatively immobile—although by no means passive—stance of spectator or auditor, attends the unfolding of a motion produced by the media. In this particular case, it would describe the relationship between the seated spectator and the flux of images and sounds produced by Stone's film. Here arises the

question of a possible parallelism between the notions of locomotion (or human mobility as it is represented thematically in the road movie) and media-motion (or the mobility implicit in cinematic projection itself). Could the violent and pathological locomotion forming Stone's thematic parallel an equally violent and pathological media-motion artfully constructed to offend, to induce sickness? Can a flux of images and sounds be pathological, violent or criminal?

One could easily get a visceral sense of an editing style that Stone himself has described as bulimic. The typical Hollywood motion picture, in its temporal unfolding, counts well under five hundred cuts paced over two hours. *Natural Born Killers* compresses over three thousand cuts into the same time frame. The typical picture attempts to conceal its cuts, to make them flow seamlessly together in service to the narrative. *Natural Born Killers*, on the contrary, makes them brashly explicit by interspersing heterogeneous and non-diegetic film shots into the sequence, some at near subliminal speed. The same principles of profusion and disparity also apply to Stone's shot composition, which makes a "vertigo" of Sergei Eisenstein's (1987) principle of "vertical montage." Playing with rear projection and digitally superimposed graphics, he stacks single frames with multiple contrasting image and sound tracks unfolding synchronically. When all of this is combined with the constant canting of camera angles and the rapid shifting of colour schemes and film stock, the overall effect is nothing short of a motion sickness induced by visual and acoustic over-stimulation. Eisenstein was an advocate of the single shot composed of multiple layers of contrasting elements. Stone, in this film, forces this principle to an extreme.

Equating this image flux with the violent mobility of the film's themes, however, requires a step beyond this sort of impressionistic "gut response." Olivier Mongin makes an attempt in this direction, suggesting a connection between cultural violence and the image by way of the Foucauldian thinking discussed earlier. The latter, just to recall, posits violence as a pathogen pervading the social tissue at the capillary level, one subject to positivist modes of diagnosis and repression.



Violence, in other words, has evolved from an essentialist to an existentialist conception. It has entered, Mongin suggests, a “deuxième âge” where it can no longer be framed in static dichotomies like good and evil, or in the socio-political contexts that justify its escalation. Violence just *is*. “Un état de nature,” it forms a continuum with all conceivable types of natural flux, including that of the cinematic image:

La violence “à l’état de nature” ne connaît ni origine ni fin. Ce premier constat invite à comprendre un double phénomène: le rapport entre le flux de la violence et le flux des images.... Quand la violence apparaît brusquement comme une déferlante et s’emballe indéfiniment, l’image du flux s’impose: elle exprime l’indétermination de l’état de nature. En ce sens, il n’est pas interdit de voir un lien entre le flux des images visuelles.... et le flux indifférencié de la violence.... On est d’emblée pris dans la violence, on n’y tombe pas, on n’y chute pas, la violence est déjà là.... Tel est le nouveau “cercle de la violence,” une violence “tourbillonnante” dont on ne peut sortir (Mongin 1997, pp. 28-29).

The all-permeating and self-sustaining mobility of the new violence meets an art form created out of the permeation of light through film stock and the self-sustaining mobility of twenty-four frames per second. The locomotion of Stone’s roaming killers now seems to find its most suitable expression in a vertiginous media-motion that, like the new violence itself, “apparaît brusquement comme une déferlante et s’emballe indéfiniment.”

### **Criminalizing Media-motion: Baudrillard**

Mongin’s metaphor—and of course it is just that—has a certain appeal, especially in the context of the violent road movie, where the pandemic “déferlante” of roaming violence is free to associate not only with the cinematic image flux, but perhaps as well with the spinning and un-spooling film reel, and further still with the spinning wheel of automotive locomotion. One can follow this path of associations as far as one wishes, but it would seem that any substantial connection between violence and the cinematic image would necessarily involve a questioning, an accusation, perhaps even a criminalization of the filmmaker’s motivation and his medium. Is there something “criminally vio-

lent” in Stone’s bulimic motivation—“everything was coming up. I just felt sick, and I just expressed it as a kid would”—or in the medium through which he purged his illness?

Stone refers to his directorial style as a vomitus, a predominantly intuitive projection of the self through the techniques of the cinematic medium. There is a connection here between this admission by Stone and what Baudrillard (1995) has referred to as “le crime parfait.” For Baudrillard (2000, p. 63), this act of purging oneself through technical media, or of losing oneself in motion created by media, constitutes a crime against the Real, which he posits as a vital illusion:

For reality is but a concept, or a principle, and by reality I mean the whole system of values connected with this principle. The Real as such implies an origin, an end, a past and future, a chain of causes and effects, a continuity and a rationality. No real without these elements, without an objective configuration of discourse.

What humanity considers real, in other words, is a constellation of concepts sustaining a delicate illusion. For this reason, he calls it “the concept of the Real.”

This concept of the Real keeps humanity at a safe distance from what he calls the “perfect reality,” which is non-continuity both rational and temporal, which is in fact the non-entity of a universe that he casts in atomistic terms, as nothing more than pure mobility, pure energy flux. The virtual landscapes that modern media create are made to unmoor—Baudrillard goes as far as to say “to murder”—the concept of the Real and to bring humanity closer to this perfect reality, which is beyond conception, an “ex-terminate” reality—for all intents and purposes an oblivion. The artist expressing himself through his or her technical medium, or the spectator in thrall to it, is in fact expelling him or herself toward a “horizon de disparition,” that of both the concept of the Real and the self. “C’est se projeter dans un monde fictif et aléatoire, qui n’a d’autre mobile que cette violente ab-réaction à nous-mêmes” (Baudrillard 1995, p. 60). Baudrillard evokes this enthrallment and expulsion in terms of the same nauseous metaphor that Stone uses to describe the

motivation of *Natural Born Killers*. He calls it “acting out,” “l’éjection la plus radicale, le rejet quasi biologique,” of the self “dans d’innombrables prothèses techniques” (p. 60).

In “acting out,” the subject extends naturally into the virtual worlds in which he or she loses him or herself. In his convulsive creative outpouring, Stone extends himself into a film that makes an ostentatious display of its cinematic technicity. More importantly, he makes his characters “act out,” he extends their bodies into and through the technicity of the virtual world into which they have irremediably expelled and lost themselves: that of commercial television. Mickey and Mallory are wraiths, lost in a television world that they no longer distinguish from reality, expelled into a superconductive ether of static signals and erratic channel-surfing. The reason for their hollowness and cartoon-like quality is Stone’s deliberate strategy of making them virtually indistinguishable from tabloid television characters. He casts their tragic childhood as an absurd television sitcom. He punctuates their trajectory with all manner of meta-discursive signals—channel switching, Coca-Cola commercials and docile families watching them on their living room televisions—indicating that they have very much become part of this virtual world from which they have long alienated themselves.

It is a world where they have found a comforting refuge from morality, from any sentiment of guilt or remorse. Baudrillard levels an indictment against virtual worlds, not only those of television but of cinema as well, projected in all of its “fascinating”—in the sense of riveting or transfixing—mobility across vast screens in the solitude of dark theatres. Bound up in the concept of the Real are the anguish-causing dichotomies of good and evil, right and wrong, self and the other, subjectivity and objectivity. Media-motion can erode the structures permitting the identification of these dichotomies, which are alone responsible for stigmatizing violent urges and confining humanity to an ethos that abjures criminal behaviour:

Car le concept de réalité, s’il donne force à l’existence et au bonheur, donne encore plus sûrement force de réalité au mal et au malheur. Dans un monde réel, la mort aussi devient réelle, et secrète un effroi à sa mesure. Tandis que dans un monde virtuel,

nous faisons économie de la naissance et de la mort, en même temps que d'une responsabilité tellement diffuse et accablante qu'elle en devient impossible à assumer. Sans doute sommes-nous prêts à payer ce prix pour ne plus avoir à exercer perpétuellement cette tâche écrasante de distinguer le vrai du faux, le bien du mal (Baudrillard 1995, p. 62).

Explicit here is a signal ethical disconnect on the part of those who vent their anguish in virtual worlds. Stone, who accuses his characters—and of course through them American culture—of this disconnect, has been obliged to defend himself against those who accuse him of it as well. After all, he himself admits having expelled himself in the virtual world of his own film. Ironically enough, in his film Stone delivers an indictment against the artificial world of television and its nefarious effects, yet he uses the artificial world of cinema as a loophole to escape indictment himself. This is only a movie, he contends to Charlie Rose, mere artifice. The pertinence to Baudrillard is perhaps most striking here. In the artifice of media-motion lies the crime, Stone argues through his vicious killers. Yet in this same artifice lies the exoneration from ever having to assume responsibility, he insists when confronted about his own acting-out.

Stone's film, with its Hollywood sensationalism, nevertheless offers up a nexus of themes—criminality and violence, illness and mobility—susceptible to analysis at a number of intriguing levels. At the socio-cultural level, it suggests an interface with Foucauldian thinking on criminality. At the narrative level, it informs the malignant and therefore self-defeating locomotion of the killers on their homicidal spree. Finally, at the metaphysical level, it suggests a potential indictment against the media-motion of television and cinema. It is perhaps at this last level that the contribution of this dark film is best measured. Created to accuse the virtual world out of which it is itself composed, it must necessarily commit the same crime that it condemns and then find a way to artfully extricate itself from criticism. Whether he justifies this paradox by calling his film a hyperbolic satire reminiscent of Swift, or whether he resorts to the Baudrillardian loophole where the virtual world is at once the crime and its exoneration, the very fact that Stone must have recourse to this

reflexive and self-critical gesture—one that hooks into complex currents of reflection on criminality, violence and the metaphysics of the media-generated image—takes him and *Natural Born Killers* beyond the realm of the one-dimensional action film. It is perhaps fitting that the judgment of this unique film remains torturously suspended, unresolved, like the fate of the characters themselves, who persist in their mobility long after the closing credits.

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#### NOTES

1. See Barker 1995, 1995a, 1995b.
2. Oliver Stone, from a television interview with Charlie Rose on *The Charlie Rose Show*, 16 August 1994.
3. Oliver Stone, from an interview with Charles Kiselyak, *Chaos Rising: The Storm around Natural Born Killers*, Pioneer Entertainment, 2001.
4. If I have chosen French (instead of American) theory to read *Natural Born Killers*, it is because it uses biological and pathological metaphors in its discourse on criminality and violence within social systems. Because the present article springs from Stone's use of the same metaphor to justify this film and describe its creation, theorists such as Foucault, Michaud and Baudrillard seemed a natural choice. It has been pointed out to me that *Natural Born Killers* may be one of a number of Hollywood films from the 1990s (*The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Wag the Dog*) tailor-made both to confirm and be validated by Baudrillard's theories. As such, they may exist with Baudrillard in a closed dialogue that does not speak to American cinema at large. The point is valid and accepted with gratitude although the extent of Baudrillard's influence on these films and on *Natural Born Killers* in particular is difficult to ascertain.
5. Cited from the director's commentary accompanying the film.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### Mal des transports : le cas de *Natural Born Killers* d'Oliver Stone

Ryan Fraser

Le road movie à caractère violent occupe une place unique au sein du genre. *Natural Born Killers* (1994), le film controversé d'Oliver Stone dont il sera question ici, se présente, aux dires du réalisateur, comme un commentaire sur la violence en tant que véritable « mal social » de l'Amérique. À partir de cette notion de maladie, de pathologie organique, cet article se propose d'examiner les différents modes de mobilité culturelle engrangés par cette violence, à la fois dans les thèmes du film, dans sa trame narrative et dans son emploi du montage. Sur le plan thématique, le rapprochement qu'effectue Stone entre le culturel et le biologique fait écho aux réflexions modernes sur la violence, entre autres celles qu'ont proposées Michel Foucault (1975) et Yves Michaud (2002). Sur le plan narratif, les assassins, tels deux corps malades, se voient confinés aux autoroutes et aux ruelles, qui configurent l'espace synaptique entre un centre culturel les rejetant et les deux cultures foncièrement mobiles grâce auxquelles le cancer qui les habite pourra se répandre : d'une part, une culture de l'Amérique frontalière, celle des laissés-pour-compte et des nomades, définie par le déplacement des voitures, camions et autres caravanes (Rapping 1999) ; d'autre part, une culture médiatique internationale qui dissémine l'image des tueurs aux quatre coins du globe. Enfin, le traitement de l'image

et du montage soulève une question qui fait référence au travail de Baudrillard (1995) : cette locomotion « pathologique » qui prévaut dans le récit de Stone ne témoigne-t-elle pas d'une médiamotion tout aussi pathologique et violente ? *Natural Born Killers* cherche-t-il à plonger le spectateur dans un flux d'images et de sons savamment construit de manière à l'offenser, à lui transmettre une maladie ? Un flux d'images et de sons peut-il devenir pathologique, violent, voire criminel ?