

The Evolution of Demons

Things are gonna slide, slide in all directions
Won't be nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold
And it's overturned the order of the soul.
—Leonard Cohen, *The Future*

The very least that can be said of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) is that it's not an easy film to feel indifferent about. I know people who love the film and people who loathe it, who consider it one of the best American movies of recent years, and one of the worst; those who couldn't even get through the first half hour, and those who see it regularly, religiously, who can't get enough of it. I may as well come clean right at the start and admit to belonging, however sheepishly, to the second group - to me *Natural Born Killers* is not only the key work in American cinema of the last ten years (since *Blue Velvet*, in fact), but the one, sole movie masterpiece of the '90s, and a genuine landmark in the medium, a film that, for better or for worse, looks set to pave the way for the movies of the future, into the new millennium, and beyond. Having admitted this, I should also say that a part of me not only understands but is in full sympathy with even the harshest dissenters of the film. It is, after all, a truly demonic work, one which not only dissolves all barriers of taste and manners, but finally explodes the boundaries of morality itself. At its consumer-pop-TV-trash culture level, it comes as close as any movie ever has to a genuine "re-evaluation of all values," and one wonders indeed what Nietzsche would have made of the film, or, for that matter, Adolf Hitler. (It's also amusing to imagine its possible reception by cinema audiences of 20, 40 or 60 years ago.) *Natural Born Killers* is a work of trash in the purest and most glorious sense, and it's perfectly possible to revile the film and still harbour some grudging admiration for it. What seems to me untenable is to deny it its due as a bold and ground-breaking experimental minefield of a movie, and the most truly assaultative piece of modern filmmaking ever to find a widespread audience. So far as it undermines and threatens all our ideas about morality, society, etc.—so far as it is an aesthetic act of terrorism—*Natural Born Killers* is also a work of art.

Taste is, as Pauline Kael once said, "the great divider." When it comes to disagreements of taste, then, *Natural Born Killers* may well be the supreme exemplary artifact—a veritable great divide. To say that the film is a work of art or a piece of trash is to express an opinion in clearcut terms. To say you loved it or hated it is merely to express your feelings in no uncertain manner. The declaration of one's emotional response is something one can be sure about; a declaration of critical judgment—or opinion—is not (opinions are, by definition, *unfounded*). And yet, surely there is some form of empirical standard, some acid test of taste, by which the art-work can be gauged and distinguished from mere trash? It may be that the oldest philosophical question known to us—that of "the difference between right and wrong"—has been reduced, or modified, over time, to the more obviously individual question of—the difference between good and bad taste. The fact is that taste, although the word itself refers to something that is by definition personal and innate, is, like morality of old, something that not everyone possesses, something that can be learned, developed, or

otherwise acquired (or lost). We have good taste or bad taste in more or less the same way we have good and evil deeds; only, when it comes to taste, the book of law is still largely unwritten. But, if it is coming to be accepted—at least by the more progressive philosophies—that morality is and can be finally no more than a matter of taste, it is surely the next logical step to realize that taste is no less than a question of morality.

Art is not a quantity that can be weighed or measured, and aesthetics is no science—it is, above all, a subjective affair, one that (as modern physics has revealed to be true of all things) requires an observer. Obviously, if *Natural Born Killers* plays to an empty theatre and there's no one to gasp at its amorality, there can be no "*Natural Born Killers* phenomenon" as such. But, on the other hand, if consensus opinion is that this or that film is worthless, does that necessarily make it so? Heaven forbid! Seeing as the moral majority—or mob—is the first to stake their claims to consensus opinion, and *their* consensus opinion is that *Natural Born Killers* is a harmful, dangerous, *malignant* work. Fortunately as yet, the censorship-seeking mob hasn't dared to cast judgment on artistic merit, or lack of it. Their opinions, though only that and hence largely worthless, at best, are directed at art's *sociological function*, its responsibility if you will, and hence tend to assume all the weight and gravity of morality. The question of "art", *per se*, is rarely, if ever, raised, for the very obvious reason that such a "majority" is ill-equipped to judge such matters, and largely indifferent to them, besides. They are not the guardians of art, after all, but of the "people."

It is not "the people," as such, however, that make or break a movie, artistically speaking; it is that most evasive and poorly defined of concepts—posterity. In other words: Time. Time will tell then, whether *Natural Born Killers* (hereafter to be known as *NBK*) is the cinematic watershed and social revelation I, and others, claim it to be; or whether it is the shallow and inept, and possibly pernicious, exploitation trash that so many are so eager to dismiss or condemn it as. (Indeed the cries of "good riddance to bad rubbish" and general critical—and moral—revulsion which the film has been met with in some quarters is of such ferocity that it brings to mind an earlier case, that of Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, 1960, a film which has undoubtedly been vindicated by "time," to the point that some critics even apologized for their rashness and, figuratively speaking at least, "ate their own words.")

The good thing about movies—which are the ultimate popular medium, the first truly democratic art form, literally designed for maximum accessibility—is that "time" is, in their case, a speedy judge. The history of movies spans less than 100 years, in which time we've seen the fastest and most appalling evolution of an art form ever imagined—from *The Birth of a Nation* to *NBK* in just eighty years! Seeing as most movies are designed—by committee no less—to be consumed and digested and forgotten, and seeing as there is an inherent *lack of seriousness* associated with cinema that makes it unlike any other art form (with the exception of pop music, which as a medium is even younger than film), it's hardly appropriate to have to wait a hundred or fifty or even twenty years to gauge whether or not a movie is really, culturally or socially or *artistically, significant*. Generally speaking, the verdict is out in a matter of weeks, but in some cases it may take a couple of years for the "critical community" to come to their senses, and either re-evaluate a work previously lambasted, or conveniently forget about a work they've praised to the skies, but which has since disappeared from collective memory. Such latter cases are vastly more numerous than the former, and a work that is revaluated and attains "classic" status five or ten years after its making is relatively rare. *Blade Runner* is an outstanding example; James Cameron's *The Terminator* comes to mind also, while cult horror films like *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre took some time to attain the nigh-legendary status which they now enjoy.¹ On the other hand, cases of films which on their release are briefly and insanely heralded as masterpieces, only to disappear entirely just a soon as the public has had time to eradicate them from their minds, are countless and best left uncited—if these films have been forgotten it's for a damn good reason. (The most outstanding example that comes to mind is probably Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.) In this way, "time" is a shockingly efficient and merciless judge.

Less ruthless but equally just is the manner in which once hailed, award-winning "masterpieces" such as *Ordinary People*, *Kramer Vs Kramer* and *Terms of Endearment* have since shrunk down to size and been delegated to the ranks of well-made, sentimental tear-jerkers, of some minor social importance, perhaps, but otherwise artistically insignificant. 18 years later, who really talks or thinks about *Ordinary People*? While two films which it beat for the 1980 Best Picture Award, *Raging Bull* and *The Elephant Man*, continue to grow in stature as the years roll by. Likewise, a film like *The Deer Hunter* seems to have been—in retrospect and in the light of the director's subsequent output—a mere flash in the pan; while *Apocalypse Now*, released the following year, goes from strength to strength in people's hearts and minds: whereas once it was considered a mammoth disappointment, it now looks—particularly considering Coppola's film oeuvre *since* and in the light of current movies—like a genuine, if profoundly flawed, masterpiece.

I could go on: the examples are virtually endless, but what's the point? The point is—opinions come and go, tastes change, evolve, mutate, for art itself is an unfixed quantity, something that cannot be defined or categorized by the human mind. Yet in our heart of hearts, I think we *know* when a work is truly deserving of the term "art," and when we simply want to convince ourselves that our own enthusiasm for it is somehow—aesthetically, historically—justified. There's a huge difference, for example, between declaring of a film: "I loved it, I thought it was great"; and claiming that, "it is a great film."²

8. The majority of these cases tend to be in the fantasy/horror genres, which critics are notoriously slow to recognize, and tend to wait to take their cue from audiences themselves before taking them seriously. If *Blade Runner* hadn't become such a cult phenomenon, for example, it's doubtful the critics would have taken the time to reassess it at all.

9. To give a case in point: Nobody could argue for Allan Moyle's *Pump Up the Volume* being a great movie, or even a work of cinematic brilliance, but the film has true spirit, more than just about any mainstream Hollywood movie you could care to name (and spirit may be the one thing that counts for even more than art). You could pick the film to shreds and call it mawkish, corny, contrived, sentimental, you could even call it manipulative, and you wouldn't be wrong, exactly. But you'd be missing the point, because you'd be ignoring the one thing the movie has that transcends all its flaws and makes them irrelevant: spirit. *Pump Up the Volume* is a movie that can give joy and at the same time make you look more closely at things. It's one of the few "feel-good" movies that has an honest sense of the confusion and despair which makes us—even the most cynical of us—susceptible to, and even hungry for, "feel-good" movies. And it has a true rebellious charge—it makes you feel good to be alive, and *in pain*, because it creates a sense of solidarity *in pain*, in confusion, a sense of sharing the insanity of our times, about which the only thing to say, finally, is—so be it. *Pump Up the Volume* isn't a nihilistic movie, like *NBK*, its an optimistic one, but it ends with its hero (whose last words are "Stay hard") being incarcerated for the "crime" of speaking his own mind over the airwaves and daring to make waves of his own. (Harry is, as he says, "a legend in his own mind.") The mise-en-scene of the film is presented nihilistically—that is, as hopeless, meaningless, fucked up; but the characters in the film—kids all—are presented favorably, almost romantically. Harry's message is that if you feel fucked up in a fucked up world, that means you're all right. And the film's message is—talk hard, steal the air, speak up and seize the moment: *be* creative, because that's the only sane recourse in a world that's destroying itself for kicks. It's the only youth movie I know of that doesn't revolve around sex and drugs (though rock 'n'roll is still the essence of rebellion here)—that's not *about* kicks. It's the only feel-good youth movie I've ever seen, in fact, that's about *despair*. And it pulls it off, it actually makes you

And although there are doubtless many critics and other people who would argue well into a wine-soaked evening over the relative merits of *Apocalypse Now* over those of *The Deer Hunter*, there are obviously cases where the arguments are rather less academic. *The Godfather* is a better film than *Bugsy Malone*. Opinion, or statement of fact? John Grisham is a better writer than Dostoyevsky. Opinion, or error of judgment? Surely at some point a so-called question of taste becomes simply a question of right and wrong, truth over bullshit? At which point also, then, critical judgment—or taste—becomes empirical. Obviously, history has established that William Shakespeare is a greater playwright than... a hundred other playwrights once his contemporaries who are now unknown to us because their work proved to be completely forgettable.³ In the same way, though it's early yet, "history" (i.e., man's version of things—"his-memory" might be a more apt term) will undoubtedly establish that Coppola's works, pre-*Apocalypse*—are significantly greater than his works, post-*Apocalypse*. (As a matter of fact, it already has, really, but there are always those insidious stragglers about, Rex Reed for example, who make such claims as *Peggy Sue Got Married* being "Coppola's best film since *The Godfather*." Obviously, such dissenting voices of unreason and upholders of execrably bad taste need to be eradicated, before any kind of true aesthetic wisdom can be established; and only Time—or a good slow-working poison—can do that.)

My point about all this is to ask, if there is an empirical judgment that can be cited or evoked in matters of art—just as in those of morality—where does it lie? If we can state without fear or reprisal that *The Godfather* is better than *Bugsy Malone*, or even than *The Untouchables*, can we not also state that it is better than *The Godfather Part III*, so much so, in fact, that no "trilogy" can really be said to exist at all? Or that *Taxi Driver* is not only better than *Cape Fear*, but than *Age of Innocence* also? Or *Something Wild* better than *Silence of the Lambs*? Or *Pulp Fiction* a better work than *Reservoir Dogs*? Or *NBK* better than *Henry—Portrait of a Serial Killer*? Apparently not, for I think that, to my readers at least, I have at some point in the above list moved from statements of fact into mere conjecture, and on into outright error of judgment. Yet from *my* point of view, obviously, I never strayed from the facts. So, who's right? The answer is—nobody, for now; but time will tell. When all the Quentin Tarantino hoopla has died down, in five or ten years from now, I think *Reservoir Dogs* will be forgotten; but I don't think *Pulp Fiction* will be. And twenty years down the line, when I hope we've come a *hell* of a lot closer to understanding the nature of our own demons—I think *Henry* will seem like a quaint, rather dull, though eminently "worthy" depiction of a particularly sordid subject. *NBK*, on the other hand, may be seen as a frighteningly insightful, and even prophetic, snapshot of the abyss into which we are all even now plummeting. But then, that's just *my* opinion. Get back to me in 2017.

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nostalgic to be a teenager, knowing however screwed up and confused and miserable you were, at least you weren't jaded and corrupt. (It even gets away with the line, "society is mutating so rapidly that anyone over the age of twenty really has no idea!" even though it was written by Moyle, who must have been at least thirty at the time.) If *Pump Up the Volume* is little different from John Hughes movies in which the kids are alright and the grown-ups are all stiffs, it at least presents a persuasive logic to its perversity: grown-ups are what make society what it is, in which case, it's the youth of the world who are causing it to mutate. And *that's* the spirit for you—the eternally youth-ful *enfant terrible* (the id), forever at play, whose work has only just begun. But is *Pump Up the Volume* a great movie? Only a fool would try and argue such.

10. I.e., had nothing about it that needed to be preserved in the human race memory: though it was assimilated it was then rejected, like food through the psychic system. Great works, on the other hand, continue to be recycled over and over: they live on not only in our minds and in themselves, but also through their influence on subsequent works.

Was an instant of purity worth a lifetime lie? Yeah, it was.
—Mickey, *NBK* script

Quentin Tarantino's original script for *NBK* is short and snappy, a glib, nasty and visceral piece of razor-sharp social satire. It reads well, and although the majority of it seems to have survived—in spirit if not letter—into the final film version that Stone brought to our screens, there is no real suggestion in it of the cataclysmic intensity or epic fervor which Stone's film attains. Tarantino had a lot of fun, apparently, with the script, and wrote a devilish, one-note, romantic joke on media violence, then left it at that (it was originally meant as Clarence and Alabama's fantasy life in *True Romance*). Oliver Stone, however, found something in the script that tripped off a whole world of associations in his own psyche, and, in the process of reworking it, he not only found his forté, he also tapped into something that even he may not have been aware of, or quite ready for. The film he made is a satire alright, but it's also a glimpse into the fractured mind of the consumer/serial killer, and an authentic journey into the plastic heart of darkness of a world on the brink of drowning in its own excess. In short, he tapped into his own private hell-fire, and let it brim out all over the screen.

By his own admission, Oliver Stone took on *NBK* in something resembling the spirit of attrition. He felt drawn, enticed or compelled to address the violence in his life and in his soul, and, by extension, the violence in his own movies.⁴ *NBK* is obviously the most savage and brutal film Stone has ever made, and yet, in some strange way, it *does* serve as a kind of absolution—or at least penance—for his former sins. *NBK* does not indict violence as such, while at its most basic (one might even say “primal”) level it brazenly celebrates it as a fact of nature: Mickey and Mallory are predators—they prey on those weaker than themselves, which is no more or less than what sharks and lions and wolves do.⁵ What it indicts, however—in the most savage and uncompromising, though satirical, manner imaginable—is media exploitation and propagation of violence. But to accuse the film of catering to the very tastes it pretends to be criticizing is a supremely asinine observation, because in this case, there is no other way in which the film can make its point—it follows and embodies Warhol's axiom, and becomes what it parodies. *NBK* is rorschach blot of a movie. Morally or intellectually speaking, it can be interpreted in any number of ways—as a celebration or a condemnation of 20th century insanity, or as anything in between these two extremes. What it does indubitably succeed as is a presentation of this insanity, and in order to be true to the madness and chaos which it depicts, it naturally enough must *become one with it*.

11. “I think I'm expressing doubt about life. This picture was made in a darker spot in my life. We were so far out there that it was scary. Our nature is a struggle between aggression and love. Obviously Vietnam clarified that for me, but I wasn't totally aware of it when I got back. I killed over there. I have to deal with that. I have tried. It's become apparent to me that my films are violent. People would say that for years and I would deny it, I wouldn't face up to the violence in myself. I'm beginning to now. This film came from that spot.” Stone in interview with Gavin Smith, *Sight and Sound*, December 1994, pg. 12.

12. Stone: “Mickey is a total predator. He understands the universe only from a predatory standpoint, and he justifies what he does that way. Mallory is a different question because she comes from a different space, and we clarify their different motives. But within our satire, we're surrounding Mickey and Mallory with such scumbags that predation seems like the natural, Darwinian thing for them to do in that world.” David Veloz adds: “They're almost healthy in what they do, their murder spree. Instead of being sick, they're just plain evil. In another time, they might have become heroes worthy of attention, but in the mediocrity of our times, they just become serial killers.” Quotes from *The Cinema of Oliver Stone*, by Norman Kagan, pg 229.

But *NBK* is not in the same camp as *A Clockwork Orange*, which uses phony hysteria and moral indignation as an excuse to titillate us with ultraviolence. *NBK* is wholly devoid of moral pretenses and makes no effort to disguise its baser intentions, which *are* indeed to titillate and excite us with nightmarish displays of “evil.” Above all, the film is a comedy, closer in spirit to *Dr Strangelove* than *A Clockwork Orange*; it takes nihilism to new, giddy heights and unplumbed depths, and it does so with such manifold, shameless vigor, delight and malicious enthusiasm that—for most people at least—it constitutes a rather sickening experience. This seems to have been Stone’s intention, or rather one of them. For those audiences who have mindlessly enjoyed such destruction-orgies as *Die Hard* or *Rambo*, *NBK* may take them just a little bit further into depravity than they care to go, thereby forcing them to look at their own appetites, and wonder just *where* they are leading. (*NBK* presents a more or less solid case for a natural, insidious affinity between the serial killer and both the media that exploits his actions for gain, and the public that enjoys them vicariously, for kicks.) For the high-brow critics who hailed intellectual garbage like Kubrick’s *Orange* or Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* as gruesome works of art, *NBK* is their own worst nightmare come real.

Made by the man who gave us *Platoon*, *Born on the Forth of July* and *JFK*, media darling and spokesman for a generation, the most socially conscious and politically committed filmmaker who ever lived, *NBK* comes like a gob of spit in our face, a bolt of lightning to incinerate all our expectations. For it is above all an *irresponsible* work, one that deliberately confounds and even disdains all notions of artistic restraint, social responsibility, good taste, whatever (you name it, the film throws rocks at it). There were hints in Stone’s previous work of the insane radical, for whom anarchy was the only possible answer to an impossibly corrupt society; as a director, Stone was consistently experimental and took risks, but as a writer he remained stuck in his own curiously medieval brand of morality. The *NBK* project seems to have liberated him from his own self-imposed beliefs—it gave him the opportunity, the imperative, to tap into the darker, more savage, anarchic side of his nature and to release it, like a genie from a bottle, or a demon from a hole. The curious thing is that Stone’s “socially responsible” films like *Platoon* and *Forth of July* are actually more dubious, morally speaking, than anything in *NBK*, for the very reason that they try to impose upon us Stone’s own *idea* of morality, which is better suited to the dark ages. In *Platoon*, for example, he gave us good and evil and the unformed “initiate” caught between the two, who has to “destroy” evil in order to become good. For fairy tales, this may be a more or less functionary mythos to work with, but for a man who professes to have read (and understood) Nietzsche and Jung—not to mention Carlos Castaneda—this kind of prosthetizing is a travesty, a veritable nightmare of reason. And yet, these films, even the truly barbaric *Midnight Express*, were generally hailed as works of great power and moral integrity! That *NBK*, which in some strange way shows the inevitable development—the end result—of such reactionary philosophic thinking, should be reviled and despised as morally bankrupt, and even, in one case, as “the most evil film ever made,” is somehow deliciously *apropos*. This is Stone’s *karma* (as he might put it) coming back to him.⁶

Yet I think *NBK* is the most honest and “ethical” (and certainly the best) film that he has ever made, and it’s the only one to really *look at* the *question* of violence, because it’s the

13. “*NBK* is a drastic, peculiar effort at self-purification on Stone’s part... What Stone wants somehow to do is to slough off his Hollywood identity with this movie. He wants, in some deeply tomented way, to annihilate the shell of Hollywood norms that have heretofore controlled his own and everyone else’s careers.” Larry Gross, “Exploding Hollywood,” from *Sight and Sound*, March 1995, pg. 8-9.

only one in which Stone manages to examine the state of his own psyche. In *Midnight Express*, for example, and to a lesser extent in *Platoon* also, Stone used violence in purely manipulative terms, to work on audience emotions and get them into a state of hyper-excitation, be it of rage or fear or indignation. Once they were hungry for blood, he then gave them what they were so desperate for; hence the violence became “cathartic.” But the trouble with such auto-justification is that the catharsis which the violence provided served only to release the emotions that Stone had *already built up inside us*, with a dozen lesser brutalities (those committed not by the “hero” but by the “evil forces” which the script pit him against). Hence, when the “hero” commits his act of intolerable barbarity it seems not only justified but laudable—it gives us pleasure, not only of a visceral kind, but *morally*. A film like *Midnight Express* actually condones brutality, to the extent that ordinarily mild-mannered audiences are out of their seats applauding, tears streaming down their faces, at the sight of blood (and this is called “art”!). In *NBK*, however, these same audiences are most likely running down the aisles in outrage and indignation before the film is twenty minutes in; and the only people applauding the violence are the “kids” (who admittedly constitute 80% of the paying audience), who regularly applaud similar exploits (in *Terminator* movies). And I would guess that even these “kids” feel somewhat less easy about their own ecstasy here, because *NBK* so obviously satirizes *them*, and their own morbid appetites, that their laughter is probably catching in their throats. *NBK* attacks without quarter, every quarter, it plays no favourites, spares no targets, and takes no prisoners. It is a film that roundly condemns, reviles and rejects everyone and everything in society, including itself; and yet, for all the fear and loathing that apparently feeds it and informs it, it is a curiously exhilarating experience. It has so much sheer energy that it seems irrelevant to point out that this energy is predominantly “satanic”; so much spirit that it’s just quibbling to complain that most of it is just plain *mean*.

Oliver Stone’s film exposes us for what we are—a society of vultures, living vicariously (and oh-so precariously) on the actions of others, with no sense of individual identity, other than that which we patch together out of collective fantasy, inane gossip, sordid news programs, advertising, bad TV and empty, overblown movies (like this one). His film suggests that although society may have made us what we are, it is we who have made society, hence there is no exemption, no way to play the innocent bystander. We are barely *in* the world at all, it seems, but we are most definitely *of* it.

What’s most refreshing—but also I think most disturbing—about *NBK* is that, by pointing the finger at everybody, it really points the finger at no one. Stone includes himself and his *own films* in his indictment (one of the many montages in the film includes notoriously violent moments from *Midnight Express* and *Scarface*); it’s like a declaration of guilt that begs for no mercy, and, spitting in the eye of the judge, says—who are *you* to judge, when your own corruption led to *my* crimes? (Mickey says much the same thing, in his own way). Oliver casts the first stone, alright, but he casts it at *himself*. He starts with his own sins, and by a chain reaction that moves like a forest fire, an information whirlwind, moves right on to the sins of the world. It’s the kind of revelation that few of us really want to have to deal with, obviously, and I think this above all accounts for *NBK*’s being so roundly despised by otherwise intelligent people—*not*, I might add, as immoral, malignant or irresponsible, but as mindless, worthless trash, or whatever; all things that, however much you may loathe the damn film, it quite palpably *isn’t*.

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Every act is its own justification.
—André Breton

Natural Born Killers begins with a lazy, ominous montage of animals, live and dead, sun-drenched desert and wind-swept highway, to Leonard Cohen's *Waiting For a Miracle*. At once, the film establishes a mood of millennial dread, of parched desperation, a desolate wasteland in which the future is all used up, and fantasy is the only refuge. Stone achieves a fevered, trance-like intensity in the first moments of the film and, amazingly, sustains it for the next two hours—through the apocalyptic finale and the grotesque kitsch of the ending (probably the closest a Stone film has come to a happy one). The deceptively lulling, hypnotic opening gives way to an appropriately explosive first scene, in which Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) plunder a roadside café full of rednecks (shades of *Near Dark?*), apparently for the sheer hell of it. (Mallory is dancing, and is hit on by a couple of white-trash cowboys, whom she precedes to beat senseless, while Mickey nonchalantly eats his pie). It's a virtuoso opening, and serves admirably to prepare us for what's to come (even many of *NBK*'s detractors admit that it's a great film for the first 15 minutes or so). Stone confounds all our expectations and shatters several cinematic conventions in a matter of minutes. He gives us the frail, attractive Juliette Lewis beating up a 200 lb man with her bare hands; random intercutting between color and monochrome; and point-of-view shots of a bullet and a knife as they soar through the air and connect with the intended targets (so we're not only allowed to identify with the killers, but with the instruments of death themselves!)—all this before we've even been formally introduced to the characters. Of course, we know what the film is about, even if all we have to go on is the title, and it doesn't take long to figure out—if not adjust to—the attitude which the film is taking. But even so, it's an astonishingly audacious and deliberately alienating opening scene, one which, at the same time, proves exhilarating to watch, handled so consummately that it literally sweeps us along with it.

Oliver Stone commented that, “the whole first part of the movie is structured like a virtual reality trip. The audience is in the driver's seat, but Mickey and Mallory are in charge of the world, they're having fun killing and you're having “fun” watching it. It makes you confront yourself.”⁷ And although to begin with it is utterly disorientating in effect, this disorientation only adds to the scene's emotional power.⁸ You may feel floored before you've even settled into your seat, rather like getting into a car and finding yourself going 140 before you've even got your seat-belt fastened. And the only sensible reaction is probably one of laughter.

Those who aren't laughing by this point will probably be leaving in a few more minutes—as soon as the “I Love Mallory” scene comes on, in fact. This scene (written by David Veloz), which presents Mallory's sordid past as a sitcom, complete with deleted expletives and laughtrack, proves too much for most people, but it's a fair summation of the tone which the film takes towards its subject, this tone being what is so indigestible to so many people. Mallory, we discover, is a victim of nightly sexual assaults by her father, a lewd, leering gargoyle of a man (played—in an inspired bit of casting—by Rodney Dangerfield). The mother turns a blind eye to this, and we observe how this brute rules his roost, like a vulgar, petty tyrant, goading, insulting, bullying and terrorizing his children (Mallory has a young brother

14. “Mickey says, ‘As God of my universe,’ which is a key thought...” Stone in interview with Gavin Smith, *Sight and Sound*, December 1994, pg. 10.

15. “*NBK* is not an easy movie to settle into, you can't get a point of view, you have to surrender to the movie. If you resist the movie with conventional ethics, you'll have a problem.” Stone, *ibid*, pg. 11.

also) into meek but loathing submission. All this is played as it were “for laughs,” as a sitcom in which the crudest, most repellent moments get the biggest laughs. Into this milieu walks Mickey, delivering an armload of raw meat (appropriately enough); Mickey and Mallory experience love at first sight, and between them they wreak a speedy and brutal revenge on her parents—Mallory’s father is beaten and drowned in a fish tank, while her mother is tied to the bed and burned alive; the house sets fire and the two lovers flee into the night (shades of *Badlands*), having set the little brother “free” (we never find out what happens to him).

It’s at about this point that *NBK* changes gears and begins to assume a much darker, more disturbing tone; because, while before we had been laughing like children at the mayhem and violence, now, as the canned laughter seems to mock our own glibness, and to make what we’re seeing all the more appalling, we begin to realize that the joke is on *us*. Certainly, the scene lends the film an added dimension, not only of grotesquery and pathos, but also of tragedy; because, by somehow accounting for, if not justifying, Mickey and Mallory’s actions, the incident also makes them seem more real to us. And their killing spree, by becoming less random and more understandable, more mundane, begins to seem slightly pitiful.⁹ In fact, the exhilaration of the first scene is never again repeated in the film: from now on, Mickey and Mallory’s killings are more or less circumstantial. As they are running from the law and trying to protect themselves from the encroaching forces of their own demons (their “karma”), we begin to see them in a different light; if not as losers, exactly, then at least as victims, caught in the vicious circle of their own insanity.¹⁰ Though the film sides with them throughout, that’s merely because they *are* the protagonists, and because there’s no one *else* to side with (just as in *Peeping Tom*, or *Psycho*, or *Taxi Driver*). It never once stoops to justifying or glorifying their actions, however, even though it allows us to take vicarious pleasure in them, because Mickey and Mallory never seem (after the “I Love Mallory” sequence) remotely heroic to us. They seem lost and misguided and deranged and vaguely abject, and if we enjoy their company it’s only because, I think, their actions, depraved and excessive as they are, seem somehow to be an appropriate and fitting response to the excess depravity that surrounds them. The film sets them up like this—as victims who have turned their torment into a perverse kind of victory, as worms that have turned; and it gives us this pyrrhic “victory” not as an individual triumph, but as a kind of collective justice for the society which has spawned them.

That Stone—along with original scriptwriter Tarantino, and the other writers David Veloz and Richard Rutowski—have created a vision of the killer that gets as close to the killer’s own vision of himself as anything since *Taxi Driver* is a remarkable accomplishment in itself. But this accomplishment has been undermined and largely overlooked by most critics for the very good reason that the film’s protagonists (unlike Travis Bickle) aren’t real characters at all - they are composites, pastiches, literary embodiments of a trend, a mentality, that has only come into its own in America in the last 30 years or so (since Charles Manson made the

16. “The literal interpretation of this a show-within a film is that Mickey and Mallory are ‘victims’ of abuse. But the sitcom format undermines that reading. ... Doesn’t Stone stylise the characters’ backstory to undermine the *very notion* of causal explanation? Abuse ‘explains’ Mickey and Mallory? The sitcom literally tells us this but if we accept it we’re as moronic as the people giggling on the laugh track.” Larry Gross, *Sight and Sound* March 1995, pg. 8-9.

17. Stone: “The psychology of [*NBK*] is Jungian—with a little Nietzsche. It’s really about the idea of a superman and the need to control all life and attain true wisdom. At the same time, though, while Mickey and Mallory are pursuing this, they are cursed by a demon from the very beginning and they inherit the demon at the end...” *The Cinema of Oliver Stone*, pg 234-5.

headlines, and forever destroyed the illusion of living in a sane society). Manson introduced to the public the idea of the criminal-outsider as anti-christ, that is, a kind of negative messiah, bent not on society's salvation but on its destruction. *NBK* constitutes a similar form of *aesthetic* attack to that of Manson's social one; it satirizes the media's fascination with such psycho-gurus, as pandering to them, and so making their "work" all the more effective, and propagating their ideas for its own gain (in *NBK* Mickey learns how to make the media work *for* him, and hence how to overcome society's obstacles).

NBK takes our desire for sensation and vicarious excitement—even if that excitement involves death and destruction—to its logical extreme. It presents the media as a kind of artificial collective unconscious which is geared towards ever greater sensations, to the extremes of absurdity, obscenity, insanity, but which is not only licensed as "harmless," but *sold* to us as a public service! Hence the public's desire for sensation—for sex and violence specifically—is subtly and insidiously propagated as a "healthy," "normal" and "necessary" appetite that is merely met (rather than actually *created*, which is the real truth) by the "public service" of mass media. Media madness is a special kind of madness, a technologically fostered and sustained mass "hysteria," which preys upon, and feeds and fortifies and exploits, a collective sense of panic and despair in the populace. The media operates on this knowledge that, the greater this mass-anxiety becomes, the greater will be the need for distractions—entertainment—by which our anxiety can effectively be ingored. And yet, this "entertainment" is itself responsible for increasing the level of anxiety—not only because it is piling imaginary madness on top of real, simulated violence onto actual, but, more crucially, because it is serving to further blur the line in our own minds between the reality and the fantasy. The media—which casts a spell upon the public, a hypnotic cloud or web over them, and thereby controls and regulates their thoughts and emotions and actions (the psychic "weather" which Mickey describes in the film)—is now the most formidable force of psychological "warfare" that the world has ever seen. It is, in a word, and to call a spade a spade, terrorism, of the subtlest, and therefore most effective, variety. The why and the wherefore of all this is of course far too complicated and obscure to go into; nor does *NBK* attempt to broach the subject of such a worldwide electronic conspiracy—it simply deals with the manifest effects of this "conspiracy."

But *NBK* does this better than any other single work of art that I know of—it comes closer to exposing the true nature of the psychic climate of America (and Earth), at this time, because it comes as close as any single artifact to correctly *representing* this climate. This it does in the most literal, though satirical, terms—satire being often the only way to do a reality justice (truth is certainly more absurd than fiction, if also more atrocious). What I mean is that *NBK* joins up with, becomes one with, the very concepts and trends and *forces* (occult or otherwise) which is endeavouring to satirize. It aligns itself with a collective *zeitgeist*, and embodies it so totally and whole-heartedly that it effectively takes it several steps *further* (into the millennium, let's say). At which point, it merely has to display *itself*, say "here I am," the living proof of the nightmare reality which it set out to expose. Understood at such a profound level, it's possible to see that *NBK* is a map of the abyss so committed and so determined to doing justice to its territory that it has *become* the abyss itself—and that one's response to the film depends wholly on one's own capacity or willingness to gaze into this abyss. To despise and denounce the film, then, is, to at least some extent, to acknowledge its efficacy in depicting a wholly despicable reality (or facet of reality), and its influence upon us. It is an influence which we are damned but to acknowledge and finally confront, if we are ever to shirk it.

*

Welcome to Hell!

—Warden McClusky, *NBK*

NBK is relatively devoid of structure or plot, and populated by what might charitably be described as caricatures—two-dimensional grotesques conceived, or contrived, not to come alive on the screen but merely to embody particular ideas or concepts that the filmmakers wish to convey. The film lacks any overall meaning or “message,” but is made up of a thousand diverse, wholly fragmented “points’ (not so much of light but of darkness). The film’s “structure,” what there is of it, is prismatic, but kinetically so—the film is volatile, like a dum-dum bullet sent straight to the brain of the viewer and rigged to explode on impact, outward into a million different fragments. (In this sense, *NBK* may be seen as the quintessential work of post-modernism, namely “the art form of the schizophrenic experience.”¹¹) Each of these fragments, like a facet of a jewel, contains or relates to the others. The movie is hologrammic, it’s all of a piece, despite its fractured nature, because it never for a moment loses sight of exactly *what* its aims are. These aims are nothing if not bombastic; they are incendiary, inflammatory, revolutionary, and every image, every sound, seems to conspire to unify the myriad, infernal points of darkness into a single blinding streak of light—aimed straight at the collective psyche of the audience, and designed expressly for one purpose: to split it in two.

Stone and his crew (the leading players include cameraman Bob Richardson, producers Jane Hamscher and Don Murphy, scriptwriters Veloz and Rutowski, editors Hank Crowan and Brian Berdan, musicians Trent Reznor, L-7, etc., and actors Woody Harrelson, Juliette Lewis, Robert Downey Jr, Tommy Lee Jones and Tom Sizemore) have between them invested so much energy and commitment, and such a remarkable level of anarchic spirit and personal innovation, and all these myriad elements have cohered together into such a unified vision, that the film has perhaps the highest energy level, and the most uniquely bizarre tone, of any American movie in the history of cinema. The film overflows with experimental techniques—ever-alternating film stocks, back projection, animation, slow-motion, montage, computer graphics (in one superb moment in which Mickey’s face—he’s on mushrooms—twists out of shape to reflect his inner turmoil; also in the classic whirlwind scene). *NBK* attains a pace and rhythm hitherto undreamed of in movies—the scenes break apart and flow off in unexpected directions, turn in on themselves, spiral off into infinity, and the overall impression this

18. John Belton, in *American Cinema/American Culture*, pg 308-9, citing Fredric Jameson’s “Postmodernism and the Consumer Society”: “postmodernism ignores traditional distinctions between high culture and popular culture. In terms of stylistic practices, postmodern artists rely upon *pastiche*... *Pastiche* is an entirely *neutral* practice; it conveys no perceptible attitude toward the original (material)... Postmodern works also acknowledge the primary obstacle confronting contemporary artists—the inability to say anything that has not already been said... It is no longer possible... to “invent” ways of “writing with cinema”... *For the postmodern artist, the self is not unified, as it was for classical artists, but fragmented. The self is essentially alienated, cut off from any profound identification with a community. And the self is no longer understood as a whole; rather it is layered or split.* [italics mine] As a result, in expressing themselves, postmodern artists convey only the incoherence of their internal reality. At the same time, in transmitting the reality of their social and cultural context, they reproduce only its incoherence.” Belton goes on to cite Malick’s *Badlands* as capturing this “sense of incoherence”; but indeed, *NBK* must surely be seen as the postmodernist text *par excellence*, a film that finds coherence in chaos, and creates a new language out of its own incoherence.

creates is of time itself being condensed, compressed, into a solid, prismatic block of *intensity*. (*NBK* comes closer than any action or horror movie only to the schizophrenic but also to the hallucinogenic experience.)

NBK doesn't invite scene-by-scene analysis, much less a plot synthesis or a textual summary. On the one hand, there is just too much going on here, at a surface level, while on the other, there's no subtext to get to grips with. The film's intensely over-stimulated activity—everyone from the actors all the way to the editors seem to have been working on a mixture of LSD and amphetamines—is deliberately engineered, I think, to divert our attention from this fact: that there's *nothing* going on beneath the mesmeric surface. Or, to put it more generously, the complete lack of a conventional subtext, of psychological undercurrents, or of real, three-dimensional characters, is absolutely essential if the film is to maintain its breakneck pace, and achieve its scathingly satirical, deeply nihilistic ends. There is every reason to reject, condemn or despise *NBK*, but to do so one must also be aware that, to some extent, one is only playing directly into the films' hands; and that, by reacting thus, one is being every bit as manipulated, or suckered, as those who fall down in awe of the film. (No one that I know of has ever called it *dull*, or mediocre, and certainly not predictable; it's impossible to damn *NBK* with faint praise, either, and those who slag it off mercilessly are, in some strange way, also praising it—they're giving the film its due.)

Amongst critics, most of those in favor of the film tended to concentrate on its technical accomplishments, and steer clear of any attempts to analyse its darker undercurrents. Stephen Schiff, in *The New Yorker* (August 8, 1994), admired Stone's virtuosity, and all the:

dislocation, cross-referencing, near-subliminal imagery, and ironic counterpoint he can pack into every moment of screen time. Within fractions of a second, Stone whiplashes among camera angles, lens, and film stocks—35mm, 16mm, super 8, videotape, colour, black-and-white, still photographs, bits of animation—to create an unstable, lurching spectacle that resembles nothing so much as an evening of crazed channel-surfing... Empty and repugnant as Mickey and Mallory themselves may be, their odyssey is a rich thing to watch: you feel as though you were seeing their conscious and unconscious lives, and the forces that formed them, all at once.

Gavin Smith wrote one of the more insightful pieces on the film, in *Sight and Sound*, calling it:

an investigation into the limits of filmic representation. The viewer is plunged into a phantasmagoria of aesthetic anarchy... the film flips in and out of different planes of reality—as if cross-cutting a half-dozen parallel universes—producing extraordinary moments of suspension and dissociation... Stone has made a film of defiant anti-naturalism that offsets its kamikaze sensationalism with authentic moments of twisted poetry and lyrical sensuality. There's probably not a single conventional image in the movie... If the very fabric of reality seems to disintegrate before our eyes, it may be because Stone conceives of the ten-decade atrocity that is his twentieth century as a Vietnam without end, outcome of the *ultimate conspiracy: human existence and history possessed and manipulated by invisible Forces of Evil*. In a sense, Stone... has finally lost his grip on reality—and it's the best thing that could have happened to him.

Larry Gross, in "Exploding Hollywood" (*Sight and Sound*) wrote that *NBK*:

is an attempt to look at how an “image culture” has taken over from immediate experience. Violence is a secondary symptom of a primary disease, the sheer pollution of representational imagery. Stone’s decisive energy and will to subvert are directed against the Hollywood deal itself, the unholy pact between commercial cinema’s practices, and the audience’s jaded appetites. The film demands that the audience question all regular modes of identification, and all reality of character and situation.... A brief exposure to Stone’s aggressive montage style tells us that we’re not in Kansas anymore. We’re in a radically disjunctive universe where image, action, and sensation are divorced from the narrative armature of cause and effect.

Gross describes the final riot scene as “an image of the film itself destructing, as if narrative is cannabilizing itself. Mickey and Mallory make their getaway into a dreamspace beyond all narrative coherence.”

Of all the actors involved, though Woody Harrelson holds it all together and Juliette Lewis gives the film its substance (her heartfelt performance gives us the only intimation of humanity we get), and Robert Downey Jr and Tom Sizemore get so intensely into their roles they bring card-board clichés to life, I think it’s Tommy Lee Jones who understands the spirit of the movie best of all. As Warden McClusky, with his slimy moustache and spiky hair, his sweating, pock-marked face and his cheap suit, leering, evil grin and hyena cackel—he’s an authentic freak of cinema. Jones’ McClusky (“an elegant man in his own mind”¹²) seems to have got caught somewhere between the nasty-minded, petty tyrannical head-master of a John Hughes’ comedy and the monster in a horror movie. To me, the one single shot in *NBK* which best encapsulates the queasy, surreal nightmare comedy of it all is the shot of McClusky’s face as he clings to the bars blocking his only way out of the jail, and turns sickly around to see a mass of murderous convicts swarming towards him, with one thing on their minds: his blood. His look says it all, somehow. His own hell is welcoming him back.

*

I don’t believe you’d like it, you wouldn’t like it here
There ain’t no entertainment, and the judgments are severe.
—Leonard Cohen, *Waiting For a Miracle*

The “effects” that *Natural Born Killers* had in society (those attributed to it at least) and the response which it evoked in the media at large, seem only to confirm its status. *NBK*, when taken on a purely technical or aesthetic level, was hailed as what it is undeniably is—a dazzlingly innovative piece of film-craft, one that pushed the envelope by several years on cinematic techniques and helped create a whole new film “grammar.” It was acknowledged, in a word, as “the future of movies.” As to whether this future can be greeted with anything but despair and horror, that’s another matter, and those who praised the film for its technical accomplishments were considerably less forthcoming about the subject matter of the film itself. *NBK* defies all ordinary attempts at praise, because it is such a roundly contemptuous, nihilistic, morally dubious affair that there is probably no one alive—at least no one over the age of 16—who didn’t feel at some level incensed, or at least threatened, by the act of sharing the film’s perspective. The delights that one can take in it for its anarchic wizardry, its poetic audacity, and its metaphysical complexity, are all expressly individual, even private,

19. Jones on the character, quoted in *The Cinema of Oliver Stone*, pg 230.

delights that are not easily shared. The film has “cult” written all over it, and is probably the first ever mainstream *underground* blockbuster ever made; certainly it is the most genuinely subversive film ever released by a major studio.

The media’s response—collectively speaking—was largely suggestive of this. *NBK* was a film that no one could feel ambivalent about, a film impossible to either dismiss or ignore, one that simply *had* to be contended with, one way or another. Predictably, most journalists—speaking or writing as they do for a “collective” body, or party line (be it of *Premiere*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *The New York Times*, or whoever)—opted for the offensive as their best defense.¹³ This “offensive” was not fully engaged for several weeks, until circumstances (however arbitrarily) arose that could be utilized as ammunition for the attack. Specifically, the various cases of “*NBK*-inspired” killings (“13” in all!), the first of which concerned a couple in Paris who committed a murder (or murders), and who *happened to have a poster of the film on their wall*. Slightly more convincing was the case of a couple who dropped LSD, watched the movie several times, and then “went on a killing spree,” plainly (if the facts are to be believed) “inspired” by the movie.¹⁴ And yet—a person may be inspired by *A Room With a View* to spend a week in Florence, but it might well be assumed that, if not Florence, then *somewhere*. And no one would stoop to suggesting that this person would not otherwise have ever *thought* of taking a holiday to begin with. But this warped logic is much more freely applied in the cases of supposed “psychotic” personalities, considered to be so susceptible to outside influences that the smallest stimulus can spark them off on their “killing spree.” But, by this very same logic, *if* they are so manifestly vulnerable to contamination by media-presentations of violence, then sooner or later something would surely serve the same purpose, a purpose that, in this case, was *reputedly* “served” by *NBK*.¹⁵ This is not a question

20. The more savvy publications such as *Time* and *Newsweek* chose to praise the film for its technical merits and simply declined to address its “moral” qualities. One suspects that they would have felt “square” to do so.

21. Sarah Edmundson and Benjamin Darras. Writer John Grisham, personally incensed by Stone’s movie, encouraged relatives of two of the victims, Ben Savage, murdered, and Patsy Byers, paralysed for life, to sue. Grisham’s bilious, ludicrous attack of the movie reaches new peaks of moral fatuousness: “Ben and Sarah had no history of violence... Before, that is, they saw the movie. A horrific movie that glamourized mayhem and bloodlust. A movie made with the intent of glorifying random murder...It is no surprise that *NBK* has inspired several young people to commit murder.” Grisham goes on to suggest (*demand* might be a more accurate word) two courses of action—boycotting “such films,” or filing lawsuits against them. He writes “Think of a film as a product, something created and brought to market, not too dissimilar from breast implants... If something goes wrong with the product, whether by design or defect, and injury ensues, then its makers are held responsible.” What can one possibly say to a man who compares movies to breast implants? Knowing the sulphurous odour of a designer fascist when he smells it, Stone’s reply is eloquent, acute, and to the point (intellectually, of course, Grisham hasn’t a leg to stand on, being a lawyer and not an artist): “The hunt for witches to explain socieity’s ills is ancient in our blood, but unholy for that nonetheless... artists do not invent nature but merely hold it up to the mirror... Darras and Edmunson are deeply disturbed young people with histories of drug and/or alcohol abuse and psychiatric treatment... If Dan Whyte, the killer of San Fransisco supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Masocone, could claim that “Twinkies made me do it,” what’s next? “A movie made me do it” perhaps?... Is it possible that 15,000 hours (yearly) of mostly violent television programming might have had slightly more effect on these two youngsters than two hours of *NBK*?... It gives me a shiver of fear when an influential lawyer and writer argues, as Grisham does, that a particular work of art *should never have been allowed to be made*. Strangle art in its infancy, he suggests, and society will be a better place... it is only a small step from silencing art to silencing artists, and then to silencing those who support them and so on untll, while we may one day live in a lawyer’s paradise, we will surely find ourselves in a human hell.” (All quotes from “Natural Bred Killers” by John Grisham, and “Don’t Sue the Messenger” by Oliver Stone, in *Screen Violence*, edited by Karl French, pg 227-239.

22. William Burroughs comments on the subject are instructive, and might equally be applied to film as literature: “There’s been a lot of talk about crimes incited by writing, but actually very few authenticated cases of anyone

that is ever raised, however, because the spokespersons in these cases are not interested in—or concerned with—the psychological matter of individual susceptibility itself, but only with the “problem” of media violence. What they are *really* interested in, of course, is more ammunition for their “cause,” which is the cause of censorship, or social, cultural and psychological control, under the auspices of “protection.”

The irony here is rich, in that *NBK* is primarily dealing with these questions to begin with, and the furor and controversy—and even to an extent the killings themselves—that surrounded the film were an almost ideal extension of its “argument”—a living demonstration, if you will, of the case it was making. The irony, then, is that those hysterics sufficiently committed to their own sense of importance to actively get involved in the debate chose to come down on the film itself, rather than to address the can of worms which it had served—both *per se* and *ipso facto*—to open up. This is because these moral guardians and public spokespeople are, for the most part anyway, more worms in the very same can.¹⁶

But *NBK* isn't really even *that violent*, compared with half a dozen action movies released by studios that same year, or any year since. So it's not the *blood* itself that caused offense, obviously, but rather the *tone*, the attitude, with which the film depicts its brutalities. Above all, I think, it is the way in which it presents its characters as somehow superior to everyone else around them, as not only “natural born killers” but natural predators—killers both by nature and by *right*. The film refuses to either judge or condemn (or punish) its killers, and this goes against one of the most basic rules of Hollywood morality. It presents them as products of an artificial and pathological, media-controlled environment who are, quite logically, striking back at the society which created them. In the very same way that Mickey and Mallory are driven by their own TV-bred demons to destroy and maim everything around them (even themselves), the film, more covertly, presents them as *our own demons*, stalking *us*. Mickey and Mallory are the embodiment of our repressed, unacknowledged, unconscious fears and desires which, denied natural expression, are compelled to find an unnatural outlet in an aberrational form. They are so alien to us that we can only despise and reject them as “demons,” for fear of recognizing them as our own familiars. But, in so far as we have allowed this insidious, malignant, and pernicious media blanket to come into being, in so far as we have taken cover beneath it and so helped sustain it, and in so far as this media in turn gives rise to living embodiments of its “program” (literally “*programmed* killers”)—thus far exactly are these killers our own creations. So it is not only natural and inevitable, but also fitting and *right*, that, like Frankenstein's monster, these killers come seeking satisfaction from, and revenge upon, ourselves.

Full circle. *NBK* fulfilled its very own prophecy. Like *Taxi Driver* before it, it attacked and exposed and subverted the media's incestuous, secret romance with murder, and then, subsequently, it became embroiled inextricably in this romance with the media; and, by extension, with murder itself. Because the demons that informed the film, in turn released

who has committed a crime as a result of reading a work of fiction. Any number of crimes have been committed by people who've read about it in the newspapers... So all the censorship arguments should be applied first to the daily press because they're the ones that actually cause people to commit crimes... People read a work of fiction and they know it's a work of fiction. They don't necessarily rush out and do these things.” (Victor Bockris, *With William Burroughs*, pg 6.)

23. It was the media as a whole machine-entity, a hoary-headed hydra, that raised up against and came down upon *NBK*, causing its release to be held up in Britain, forbidden entirely in Ireland, and, to date, prohibiting it from becoming available on video in both countries. Making it the first major motion picture to be so restricted from public access since *A Clockwork Orange*.

along with it, went abroad in the world, seeking after some recognition in “reality,” seeking the joy and fulfillment of becoming real (even as Travis Bickle and Mickey and Mallory sought to become real through killing, “the only door through which they enter life”). These demons then followed *their* program, and dragged their prey proudly back to society’s doorstep. Full circle.

The only common player in this chain of association—from the mind of the writer through the making of the movie, its release into the world, absorption into the culture, followed by the apparently “inspired” acts of violence occurring within that culture—the only element which is found to be present throughout this process from beginning to end (apart from the “demon,” of course)—is society. So it is at society’s door that the corpse must be laid, and upon society’s head that the responsibility landed. Any other argument is madness, and this, perversely, poetically, is the precise argument which both *Taxi Driver* and *Natural Born Killers* are making. That murder, as an individual act, is *relatively* pure, it being, after all, every individual’s right (that of free will) to decide to take another’s life, provided of course that they are prepared to face the consequences. But when a collective society chooses—consciously or otherwise—to judge this act, according to its own secret agenda, to praise or condemn it, glorify or demonize it, in order to sell it to itself (either as a form of moral terrorism or for vicarious gratification), then the true contamination begins. Because of course, an *act* in itself can be right or wrong, or partially right or partially wrong, it can be forgiven or punished, and accordingly put aside. But the repercussions of any given act are considerably further-reaching, hence more demanding of our attention (an evil deed can have *good* consequences, and vice versa). And when the media *exploits* an individual act—of madness, rage, hatred, pain, despair, or whatever—in order to promote its own goods—to sell mouthwash or life-insurance or handguns or news—then what it is effectively doing is dispersing the seeds of violence every which way, into the wind. It is doing far more than simply encouraging murder—it is *commercializing* and *intititutionalizing* it. It is creating a labyrinth of distorted truths and false stimuli through which to bring its “product” to us; and through these information highways and byways, by cable and antenna and satellite and screen—the demons come pouring in, raising hell in our very own homes. And they are Legion, alright: turn on your TV set and take a look if you don’t believe it. To quote Robert Redford’s *Quiz Show*: “We thought we were gonna get TV—the truth is, TV is gonna get us.”¹⁷

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There is beauty in life, there is a moment in the midst of this hell where the butterfly can come in.
—Oliver Stone

If the casual reader questions my tendency to invoke such “demons” at every available opportunity, let me say that this is not so gratuitous as it may seem, considering that “demonology” might reasonably be described as the one, major subtext of *Natural Born Killers*. Despite the social pyrotechnics of the film, it is metaphysics that come closest to providing a true “account” of Mickey and Mallory’s dementia. When Mickey and Mallory take

¹⁷. During the end credits of *Quiz Show*, Redford plays “Mack the Knife” over images of a laughing audience, and seems to be equating television with what Orson Welles (amongst others) called “The Smiler with a Knife” (Uncle Sam). Although a light melodrama, the film is also a disturbing portrait of the public’s willingness—its need—to be duped. Just as the smile distracts our attention from the cold glare in the killer’s eyes as the knife goes in, and just as our laughter keeps us from noticing the pain (“I split my sides”), so TV poses as “harmless” entertainment while secretly violating our psyches and contaminating our thoughts.

mushrooms in the New Mexican desert and (inexplicably) wind up at the abode of an Indian shaman, he *sees* them, with his psychic vision, to be under the influence of “TOO MUCH TV,” and to be, consequently, possessed by “DEMON” (the words are projected onto Mallory’s and Mickey’s chests, respectively, so that for a moment they become cinema screens for the shaman to *read*, like open books!) The shaman seems to be sufficiently involved with Mickey and Mallory to attempt an exorcism of some kind, though it’s all rather obscure (this is Oliver Stone’s obligatory “Indian scene,” and though it’s a good scene, what’s most surprising is how central it turns out to be to the film’s schemata). Unfortunately, he underestimates the irascibility of these demons, and also rather fatally overlooks the fact that Mickey is armed. In a moment of self-inflicted horror, Mickey shoots the shaman and flees into the desert, followed by an enraged Mallory (she tells him what he did was “Bad, bad, BAD!”). They are attacked by rattlesnakes (the shaman’s “totem” allies, obviously), and it is this turn of events that finally leads to their being apprehended by the law, outside the Drug Zone (where they seek “anti-snake-bite”), and incarcerated.

Inside the prison, in an interview with Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr), Mickey admits to being sorry about only one of his murders—the Indian—thereby proving himself capable of remorse, and that there exists *some* sort of moral code by which he operates, however obscure it may be (the Indian is the only character in the film who could be called sympathetic, and the only one who might be seen as superior to Mickey and Mallory). He then goes on to speak of his demons, with a certain wistful awareness that, perhaps, the source of all his destructive energy and diabolic inspiration, may, in the end, be his own worst enemy. These aren’t the metaphorical “demons” of the artist, either—these are the very real demons of the schizophrenic (and the shaman); the difference is—and it’s a conceit that is central to the film’s meaning—Mickey is both and neither: he has the awareness of the artist, and the demeanour (the demons) of the psychopath. The film would have us believe that “only love can kill the demon,” and Mickey and Mallory’s love for one another is seen as being strong and pure enough to overcome, finally, their insane hatred for society. In the end it allows them to transcend their own *karma* and escape the retribution, the “comeuppance,” which the script at first dealt them.

Although it fits well enough with the superficial amorality of the film (and with its prime agenda of re-evaluating—or subverting—all values), this all-too-rosy ending belies the film’s deeper intentions. It is meant to suggest not merely that Mickey and Mallory “get away with” their crimes, but that, in some bizarre, never-divulged fashion, they are redeemed by them. That the demons which they are possessed and driven to murder by have been exorcised finally—specifically I suppose during the prison riot, and by the final act of murdering the slimy TV presenter Wayne Gale. At which point, Mickey and Mallory can move *beyond* their sins and into a *new life*. The last shots of the film show then driving off in a camper van with a couple of filthy-looking kids, all dressed in garish kitsch clothing, while Leonard Cohen growls: “I’ve seen the future brother, it is murder.” Satirically speaking, the end is all of a piece with the rest of the film, and the right ending—*NBK* as I say wears its superficiality on its sleeve, proudly: it’s a profoundly empty affair. But, regarding the film’s sole subtext, the ending seems obscure at best, fallacious at worst.

Mickey and Mallory’s deaths would have been the only really fitting resolution, however predictable, both from their own point of view and that of the media (the only other point of view in the film). I suspect that the main reason that Stone rejected it (he filmed the present ending at the last moment, and substituted it for the original one, in which Mickey and

Mallory are killed in a random fashion¹⁸) was because he felt—instinctively at least—that it wasn't sufficiently original or offensive, and failed to do justice to the rest of the film. The idea of the present ending seems to be that Mickey and Mallory's demons have moved on, that they have purged themselves of their own evil—in our eyes at least—by discovering that this evil never really belonged to them, after all, but was a mere symptom of their contamination by, and involvement with, society at large. Hence the “demon” has been returned to its original source (perhaps this is what is “meant” when Wayne Gale “snaps” and becomes a ferocious psychopath, during the prison riot scenes). By the end of the film, Mickey and Mallory's madness does indeed seem minor compared to that of the media-industry and the public which maintains it, just as their 52 murders pale in comparison with the millions upon millions of murders committed by governments over the last few decades.

Mickey and Mallory have served their function then, not in killing 52 “innocent” bystanders, but in bringing our attention to the lurking dementia which they embody, but of which they are, after all, but random, and minor, symptoms. Hence, having alerted us to the presence of the “disease,” to the existence of the “demon” which is making havoc of our psyches and our society, they are able to “retire” and move on to other things.¹⁹ But death would have been a far more logical form of retirement, I think. One can't be host to demons and do their bidding and then one day simply say “adios.” Demons, traditionally, only move on once their host is either strong enough to reject them, or all used up, and hence no longer of any use to them. Mickey and Mallory, by the end of the film, are all used up. The script would have us believe they've been redeemed by love. Well, OK, maybe they have. But there's no way it can persuade us that they're ready to settle down and have a normal life raising a family, doing all the things they previously despised so virulently, and killed so many ordinary schmucks to prove it. It's simply not in their nature to roll over like that. The life the film shows them embarking upon—though it's good for a chuckle and a flash of moral exasperation—is wholly incompatible with what we know to be the characters' disposition. From Mickey and Mallory's point of view, it looks like a fate worse than death.

Besides which, if, as both Mickey and the filmmakers (and that old prophet Cohen) seem convinced, “it's the end of the world”: *where* exactly are they going to retire to?

*

Killing you and what you represents is a statement, I'm not exactly sure what it's saying...
—Mickey, *NBK*

The making of *Natural Born Killers* was itself surrounded by a shroud of dementia which the director doubtless encouraged, and even to some extent created. Stone insisted on hard rock music (much of which had been unwittingly introduced to Stone by producer Jane Hamscher) being blared out through loudspeakers during the shooting of the film, continuously, in order to keep the cast (and even the crew) in an appropriately “hyper” state

25. “In one they are killed, it's a surprise. There's a psycho who turns the guns on them and kills them. A bizarre scene, fitting that after killing so randomly, they would be randomly killed. In the other they live... I feel I used the accurate, correct ending. It has more juice.” (*The Cinema of Oliver Stone*, pg 233.) It is also more or less identical with the original ending found in Tarantino's script.

26. Stone said of his characters: “they get smart in the second half: they start to understand the world. And they transcend the prison by using the media. Get rid of the media and fucking disappear. Their only solution is to disappear and get out of the system.” (Quoted by Chris Salewicz, *Oliver Stone*, pg 97.)

of mind. He became more and more possessed by this vision he was bringing to the world, and, little by little, what began as a nihilistic exercise in confounding critics' expectations, became "Oliver Stone's exploration of evil"—the *JFK* of exploitation movies. The subject (and the environment which it created) undoubtably brought out the best in Stone. *NBK* was shot more or less in chronological order, and by the time they got to the prison sequence, all hell was literally ready to break loose. These scenes were filmed in Joliet and Statesville high security prisons, and both the convicts and many of the guards seen in the film are exactly that—convicts and guards. According to Jane Hamscher (in *Killer Instinct*), during the riot scene things got so out of hand that there was no longer any distinguishing the scene from a real, honest-to-god riot. The AD's cries of "Cut!" were drowned out entirely by the racket, while the prisoners, hearing blank rounds going off, became convinced that an actual riot was in progress, and acted accordingly—laying into the guards with full force. Cameraman Bob Richardson just filmed it all and hoped for the best; Hamscher, the only woman in the building (and judging by photos an attractive one at that), stood by and watched in a state of exhilaration, only later realizing just how precarious her position was.

In the film, it is Mickey's words, during the interview with Gayle, that spark the riot. This is the key speech in the film, the one which outlines the "philosophy" if you will, not only of Mickey but of the movie itself, and by extension, of its makers. Of course, intellectually, Stone may well believe that "murder is pure," etc. But, as James Stewart's character in *Rope* discovered to his dismay, there is a far, far cry between words and actions, though words can undoubtedly *lead* to action, if sufficiently powerful, or if unwisely or irresponsibly thrown about (as in the case of *Rope*). Mickey on the other hand acts first and thinks only later. When he speaks of the purity of murder he is just putting his mouth where his money has already gone, speaking from and for his own experience. Woody Harrelson performs the scene impeccably—Mickey is sly and malevolent, with an eerie, almost angelic kind of serenity that is indistinguishable from animal grace. He's the predator here, describing the law of the jungle, to the uninitiated ingenue Gayle, whose ignorance and arrogance make his only possible understanding of this "jungle"—that of the prey. Although Gayle is contemptuous and supercilious, and responds self-righteously to Mickey's words, the prisoners know better: to them this is the voice of unreason itself, the call of the wild, like that of Charles Manson, calling to his children to come devour their captors. Mickey is speaking *of* the demon, *through* the demon, and *for* the demon; and he is speaking *to* the demon in the prisoners, telling it to awaken and claim its own—the world and everything in it.

It's at this point that Mickey—unwittingly, following his own natural instincts and speaking his true mind—becomes a kind of Messiah, which is precisely what the media, in the form of Wayne Gayle's *American Maniacs*, has set him up to be. He didn't ask for it and he has no real idea of what it means, but Mickey instinctively seizes the opportunity to turn the tools of the "adversary" to his own advantage (just as he disarms the guards and kills them, first of all figuratively, by telling the joke, and then literally, with their own weapons). On hearing that Charles Manson's show got better ratings than his own, Mickey says wistfully, "It's hard to beat the king." But this is precisely what he goes on to do. This episode of *American Maniacs* undoubtably gets higher ratings than any before it, while, more crucially, Mickey has now, with this interview, become a cultural icon (and therefore a leader, or "guru") such as even Manson never was. Mickey gives the word, and all Hell breaks loose. He rides the tide of demons that he has evoked, out of Hades, and into freedom. And the demons now have the world; and the world gets what it deserves. Mickey for his part wants nothing more

of it—all he wants is his girl. (I think the perfect ending would have been just that: Mickey and Mallory make love while all around them the world is devoured by fire.)

NBK is the first authentically apocalyptic mainstream movie ever made. It gives us the collapse of modern civilization, not merely as something catastrophic and appalling, but also as something necessary, liberating, and, in some curious, unspoken way, desirable. Mickey with his words *reveals* the dark, animalistic side of the human psyche—he uncovers and celebrates the savage, atavistic soul of man, as an undeniable reality that must be confronted, expressed, released, and finally redeemed. This is what he calls the demon: not something alien or unknown that comes from outside us, but the most essential, basic, primal part of us, the dark, unacknowledged side of our own nature. He is saying simply—acknowledge the demon within you! Otherwise it will surely come looking for *you*, from without. He’s saying, like Manson before him: “*I am your demon!*” Acknowledge me as your familiar, and we can have a dialogue. Deny me as your enemy, and I will act accordingly.

*

After doing eleven different films with him, I see that the devil comes in many different costumes. He can be extraordinarily peaceful, and he can be extraordinarily belligerent... I think if one were to say *Killers* was about the evolution of demons, then Oliver was attempting to understand those demons, because he was part demon himself during the making of this film. I don’t mean that in a negative way. I mean that his whole creative spirit was definitely the devil, and he played with that.

—Robert Richardson, Director of Photography on *NBK*

Oliver Stone certainly played the devil (when denied or otherwise) on the set of *NBK*—his manifestly demonic tactics have become legendary in Hollywood, and few names command as much awe amongst actors and technicians as that of Oliver Stone. According to Jane Hamscher, Stone likes to keep his crew in a perpetual state of anxiety and emotional tension bordering on hysteria, or paranoia, in order to keep them performing at peak level. According to Robert Downey Jr.: Stone “created an environment that was like purgatory on a per diem... It was a nut to shoot. Every potential affront to sanity and integrity was committed.” Perhaps Stone adheres to the Charles Manson school of psi-warfare, and believes that “paranoia is heightened awareness”²⁰ Whatever his occult agenda or hidden motives, there can be little doubt that, if there was truly a demonic atmosphere prevalent during the *NBK* shoot, Stone did everything in his power to feed it.

Jane Hamscher, noting how “Oliver would be pacing around the set going, ‘There’s demons on this set. There’s demons on this set,’” remarked simply (to herself) that the demon in question was none other than Stone himself. Of course. And just so is Mickey the demon, the Serpent (in the traditional sense of both tempter and instructor)—evil perhaps, to those uninitiated in his ways (like Gayle), but also wise, to those with eyes to see beyond the means, and onto the end. The word “demon” comes from the Greek *daimon*, which is a word that can loosely be translated as “soul,” and equates with the shadow or unconscious side of the psyche. Hence although it can be seen as the destroyer of innocence—the corrupter—it

27. “The coyote is beautiful. He moves through the desert delicately, aware of everything, looking around. He hears every sound, smells every smell, sees everything that movies. He’s always in a state of total paranoia and total paranoia is total awareness.” Charles Manson. Stone himself remarked to Gavin Smith: “Controlling your universe, killing, having that power—all serial killers have talked about that sense of empowerment, they all feel a heightening of reality.” *Sight and Sound* December 1994, pg. 10.

must also be recognized as the giver of knowledge, the bringer of wisdom. I have no doubt that Stone, with his manifold obsessions and runaway dabblings in tantra, Buddhism, conspiracy theories, hallucinogens, shamanism, etc., etc., would have gladly warmed to this role, and his movies are nothing if not exercises in moral, political and social “instruction.” But, for the first time here, Stone was given the chance to hold forth on something in which he could genuinely profess to be an authority: violence, and the manipulation of the public.

The reason Mickey’s prison interview with Gayle is the best scene in *NBK* is plain enough—it’s the moment at which Stone actively gets *inside* his protagonist’s skin and begins to empathize with him, sufficiently at least to use him as a mouth-piece for his own darkest and most irrational (i.e., best!) creative ideas. There can be little doubt that Mickey means what he says, and that Stone means him to mean it—in his own way, he means it too. “Murder” here, though, is a metaphor for the work of the filmmaker (in much the same way as it is in *Peeping Tom*)—the violation of the unprotected psyche of the viewer. What Stone is saying, through Mickey, is that the artist’s work is murder of a kind—the murder of innocence—in so far as it serves to instruct or initiate the viewer into the darker realms of his own psyche. And this work is “pure” only so far as it is uncontaminated by the artist’s own personal ideas—or desires—concerning, for example, morality. Stone might be coming clean at this point, and acknowledging that, just as the mass media contaminates acts of violence with its own (moral) bias, in order to market them for the masses, so Stone himself (in his films) has been guilty of the same, albeit at a considerably “higher,” or more sophisticated, level. Yet, in the same way that *American Maniacs* passes as “news,” *Midnight Express* passes as “art”; in both cases the public is duped and manipulated into consuming something they should know better than to consume. What Stone is doing with *NBK* is, indeed, a far more pure and honest work, because in this film he bares not only his own madness, but his own method also; namely, his techniques of manipulation, being one with that of the media (however much more developed), which are here exposed, even as they are employed. All the strings are showing, which makes *NBK*, as the most overtly manipulative of movies, also the most revealing and honest of manipulations. And, by being “all about” manipulation and violence, the viewer can effectively distance him or herself from both.

NBK, though powerfully persuasive an exercise in hypnotic cinema, is also easy to resist, for those who wish to do so. Which is precisely why, I think, the film has been so reviled by so many intelligent people, who felt the need to *resist* its “advances” at all costs, and to reject its attempts to sway or influence them. The irony of course is that these same people may well respond to subtler and more insidiously manipulative works (some of which may be by Stone himself). After all, the pleasures of cinema are inextricably bound up with the pleasures of being artfully manipulated. Generally, however, the “art” of the filmmaker is “recognized” in his ability to manipulate *covertly*—to cover his tracks, as it were. Hence, *NBK* has been “punished” not for its sins, as such, but for its willingness to confess these sins, to make no bones about them. There’s no doubt that *NBK* is not a film for everyone—just as *Henry*, which is the opposite extreme, isn’t a film for everyone. *NBK* addresses the savage, irrational, depraved and “demonic” side in us, and invites it to come out and play. Hence an insightful (but *old!*) critic like Pauline Kael can take a suprisingly orthodox line on the film, and say that its “violence is used in the worst, exploitive way. It’s used to hit you and make you get all buzzed and silly.”²¹ But isn’t that more or less exactly how it makes Mickey and Mallory feel?

28. *Conversations*, pg. 181.

If *NBK* feeds this dark side within us, it is only in order to draw it out, that we may become aware of it, and so *learn* from it. Confronting our demons—or *daemon*—is what art is all about, after all. Yet there are dangers involved, obviously. *Henry*, which appeals to the moral, decent, rational side of us, asks us to be appalled by the sordid reality of what we're seeing; as such it is extremely unlikely to inspire anyone to commit murder. It gives us such a bleak and repulsive picture of violence that it's not only enough to put us off it for life, it's enough to put us off movies for life! But then, I don't think *Henry* is art, or anywhere close to it. It's certainly not trash though; at best it's a disturbingly well-crafted documentary-drama that serves to confirm what most of us surely already knew—that murder is no joke, but a nasty, sickening business with which we want nothing to do. But, for this very reason (and this is why I maintain that *Henry* is not a work of art), never for one moment does it allow us to understand, or even imagine, why anyone *would* be attracted to murder. In its own, gritty, nihilistic way, *Henry* is a pious work, a self-satisfied one, smug in the certainty that its position is unchallengeable. It doesn't exploit our appetite for violence, it exploits our need to feel above such appetites—our need to feel virtuous and good.

NBK plays another tune—the film is both art *and* trash, an almost seamless blending of the two, and it appeals directly to the demon in us. I suggest that those who reject *NBK* (and often they are the same people who embrace *Henry*) are of two kinds: either those whose demon is too deeply buried to suffer disturbance, to respond to any appeal, no matter how urgent or demanding; or else those who feel that their demon is sufficiently active, thank you very much, not to need any further encouragement. In other words, those people who don't feel the need or the inclination to deal with what *NBK* is telling them, either out of fear and denial, or out of simple, healthy awareness of their own limits. In short, those who resist the movie are the people who deny they have a killer inside them at all, and the people who simply prefer not to be reminded of what they already know, all to well. *NBK* is there to remind us of the killer inside, alright, but its technique is so bombastic, bludgeoning, and entirely lacking in subtlety or finesse, that it seems designed to turn off a vast number of people who might otherwise benefit from it. Still, that's the nature of the message, after all, and *NBK*'s "function" as a work of art, piece of trash and social phenomenon combined, is, I suspect, considerably more disruptive than productive. It's film that seems to have emerged from Hell itself, advocating the devil in all his ways.

The fact that *NBK* may have "caused" certain already unbalanced individuals to commit copycat crimes only confirms—to me—the film's success; and this is just *one* of the prices that we must pay (and we must!) if we are to let artists have their say, and the demon to have its way.²² Because *NBK* serves to alert us to the destructive side of our own natures, the only way it can effectively do this, seeing as it is *not* a "serious" study in psychosis (such as *Taxi Driver* or *Blue Velvet* is), is to actively *invoke* this side of us, and thereby compel us to confront it. For two short hours, some of us at least are forced to acknowledge a part of ourselves which would secretly *get off* on causing all the chaos, all the destruction and pain and horror and brutality, which we have kept locked up inside, for all our lives. I don't suggest that *NBK* is merely cathartic—any number of action movies can be that—but that it is also *instructive*, and potentially a deeply sobering, even enlightening, experience; one by which we may come

29. As Stephen King wrote in *Danse Macabre*, "I would suggest that there has been a great tendency, particularly when it comes to such popular forms as movies, television and mainstream fiction, to kill the messenger for the message.... The danse macabre is a waltz with death. This is a truth we cannot afford to shy away from."

a step or two closer to recognizing the lurking evil in our own hearts, and thereby *accepting it in others*. After all, any decent psychologist would admit, if pressed, that the foundation of all understanding is empathy, and that without understanding, no “cure,” as such, is possible. So, I suggest that, by invoking and appealing to the demon within us, *NBK* is actually helping us address the madness and chaos in the society in which we live, by showing us that the root of such evil is *within ourselves*. And this is nowhere found in the text or subtext of the film itself, but *in our response TO it*. So, by the same token, if, in order to help us face our own atavistic, primal nature, *NBK* actually “inspires” this nature, it follows that, in *some people*, their primal urges will be so fired up by the film that they will be taken over entirely by them, and be “driven” to commit acts of violence, appropriate to, and even in a sense initiated by, the movie itself.

That, as I say, is the price of art, and, however high it may seem, it’s a price that has to be paid. Because art must get at the truth at *any cost*, seeing as the truth will out in any case, one way or another, and better sooner than later. So these unfortunate individuals who claim “Oliver Stone made me do it,” or Mickey and Mallory, or Jodie Foster, or for that matter twinkly bars, are in danger of going through the fire for nothing, of learning nothing from their own actions, just as those “moral guardians” so eager to point the finger at a convenient scapegoat will learn precisely *nothing* about the nature of “evil” by doing so.²³ One catalyst is as a good as another, and seeing as the demon is as much a part of society as anything else, there is only one thing to be said about it. And that is: “Better out than in.”

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The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.

—André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*

André Breton’s definition of the purposes and functions of Surrealism as “an attack of conscience”²⁴ seems curiously in tandem with Belton’s description of the essence (and the appeal, or fascination) of *film noir*, as a mode of “disorientation.” Surrealism was originally a political (or meta-political) *movement* with precise, if obscure, aims and goals, and consisting of specific persons, works, etc, taking place in a particular time and place in history. Since then, “surrealism” has become, like “expressionism,” “post-modernism,” etc., less of a movement and more of an adjective: a style, a sensibility, a modality of *art* (or even of life) that can be found in a variety of works and mediums, from literature through dance, painting, music and movies. (Though there are very few American “surrealists” as such, or even surrealist movies, there are a plethora of surrealist *moments* in American movies.)

Film noir was a historical cycle in American cinema (defined by the French) which was quickly assimilated by the mainstream, but continued to live on in diverse, ever-mutating forms—as *mood*, theme, sensibility, style, etc. And although there are no actual *noir* filmmakers left, and few *noir* movies coming out of America, *noir* as such remains a distinct and popular *strain* within American cinema in general: a thread, if you will, running through certain careers, crossing the genres, and subverting or adapting the generic conventions. In

31. “Surrealism attempted to provoke, from an intellectual and moral point of view, *an attack of conscience*, of the most general and serious kind.” *Manifestos of Surrealism*, pg. 123.

some curious, none-too-apparent fashion, popular Surrealism and modern *noir* seem to share the same space, or function, in American movies, and, by extension, in the collective consciousness of moviegoers. Most films and filmmakers that betray a “*noir*” (or neo-*noir*) slant tend also to exhibit a taste for surrealist or expressionist devices (be they of style or content, or both): *The Long Goodbye*, *Don’t Look Now*, *Badlands*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Tenant*, *Blue Velvet*, *Near Dark*, *Jacob’s Ladder*, *The Terminator*, *Se7en*, *The Usual Suspects*, *The Game*, *Lost Highway*, *the End of Violence*, all these films might just as happily be classed as “Surrealist” as “*noir*.” What they have in common, besides an unorthodox approach to the presentation of their material, and an especially subjective (i.e., expressionistic) style, is a common desire—indeed, an *imperative*—to disturb, challenge, subvert, unsettle or otherwise confound not only our expectations as moviegoers, but also our preconceptions as regards life, or reality, itself. They are invariably concerned with revealing a hidden, unrecognized and generally unpleasant (i.e., threatening) side of our world—be it inner or outer—a side that we normally do not care to deal with. (Fake or imitation *noir* is to be distinguished here. Even effective imitations like *The Last Seduction* are little more than pastiches, and lack the necessary depth to be genuinely subversive, a case in point being Stone’s own *U-Turn*, which aspires to *noir* but at best achieves only kitsch.)

The common, subversive intent of these works (and in truth all works of art, however indirectly or subtly they go about it) is to awaken the dormant, unconscious, *creative* will of the individual: that primal, cosmic core of man which is both creator and destroyer, animal and spiritual, innocent and wise, that is, above all, individual, spirited, rebellious, iconoclastic. In a word—the “demon” *Id*. Because this *Id* has been smothered and repressed by a multitude of lies, of surfaces and facades and veneers that gather and amass to form an almost impenetrable, suffocating blanket of denial, the process of awakening the inner man is ostensibly a negative one. It involves exposing, penetrating, tearing off and destroying the myriad layers of protection that come between the conscious mind and its dormant, individual potential. Above all, this entails the destruction of the *illusion* of belonging to and partaking of a mass-mentality, and the revelation of the truth of our complete isolation in the universe—a hostile universe which is indeed a jungle, in which only the fittest can survive. Fitness, however, must be understood not in physical or material terms, but as an artistic, spiritual quality: the quality of *awareness*.

As William Burroughs puts it:

Creativity comes from a series of shocks in which you are forced to look at yourself. That’s what it all is. Everything outside is inside and vice versa, but you are making these aspects of yourself available in painting, writing, film, or whatever. But that results from a series of these shocks, when you find yourself doing something that’s absolutely awful.²⁵

Surrealist art above all aims to *force* the percipient to look more closely at both himself and his world, to banish ignorance, as the first step to a new order of awareness. *Natural Born Killers* is about the banishing of such ignorance. It deliberately, defiantly, confounds, disdains and reviles all our staunchest, most devoted efforts to *ignore* the reality of the circumstances which we have created for ourselves, the insanity and inanity and brutality of the world which we have inherited. It plays on our deepest and darkest, most desperate and passionate desire

32. With William Burroughs, pg. 246.

to *destroy*—everything that comes between ourselves and the truth of ourselves. In a word—the world.²⁶

As such, *NBK*, though it's way too garish and tawdry and bawdy a work to ever be called *noir*, is a true tour-de-force of pop-surrealism for the 21st century. It finds, in its own way, that "absolute reality" which the Surrealists claimed to seek, between dream and waking, more real than real.²⁷ As such, I have little doubt that the film would have delighted (and appalled) Buñuel, Breton, Dali et al, for, more than any film since *Un Chien Andalou*, *NBK* embodies and upholds the spirit of revolt (and revulsion). It thereby fulfills the unspoken promise/plea of the Surrealists, and gives us art-as-terrorism. It serves as a declaration (or re-declaration) of the true war, which is a war of the mind and the spirit, a *culture* war. It is, in short, the battle cry of the demon, against all that would attempt to quosh or deny it its natural-born rights of expression.

A word which might be more appropriate than "demon," however, is the Celtic term, "wyrd," which roughly equates with the "shadow" of Jungian psychology. The *wyrd* was said to be the sum total of all the repressed, denied or otherwise unacknowledged energies (thoughts, desires, feelings, impulses, etc.) of the individual. What's especially intriguing about the concept of the *wyrd*, however, is the way it which it is said to oppose, and therefore balance, the conscious side of a person. In other words, the kinder, gentler and more loving or honest a person is, the crueller, more brutal, hateful and deceptive his *wyrd* would be. By this token, the *wyrd* of a saint was, manifestly, a "demon," while the *wyrd* of a sinner, psychopath or murderer, might equally be considered as his or her repressed "angelic" nature! (It makes sense then that when Mickey is speaking for his demon, he is at his most serene and attractive.) By this reasoning, it follows at a more mundane, psychological level, that it is up to us to keep these two sides of ourselves in balance, and never to deny the one at the cost of the other. The shadow, although never to be mistaken for the substance, is nevertheless a reality unto itself, and must be treated as such—it is, after all, what gives *depth* to the image (and to the individual).

Breton wrote: "The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them..." (*Manifestos*, pg 10.) This process of the psychic "seizing" of previously unfronted truths is a central part of the appeal, the necessity, of movies and most especially horror movies—whose function ideally goes beyond the merely cathartic, into the *instructive*, or initiatory, function of myth.

J.P Telotte writes of leaving the cinema after a horror film in some mysterious way *purged* by the experience:

33. Stephen King writes of "envisioning an entire entrenched societal process destroyed at a stroke... In this frame of mind, the destruction of THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT became an actual relief. No more Ronald McDonald. No more *Gong Show* on TV—just soothing snow! No more terrorists! *No more bullshit!* Only the Gordian knot unwinding there in the dust." *Danse Macabre*

34. "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession." Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, pg. 14.

As we move from a dark environment abounding in psychic horrors, spiritual demons, or monsters created by our society or way of life, into a human world of light and normalcy, we cannot help but react accordingly. Rid of such terrors, even if only temporarily, we almost eagerly participate in what must seem now a more vital world and certainly a more humanly hospitable one.As Norman Bates' transformation attests, the otherness in ourselves lurks just beneath the normal human veneer and threatens to resurface some day with all its horrors. However, since we individually fashion our world, as well as the conditions under which we inhabit it, through our perceptions, the burden can be borne...²⁸

If a film, or whatever, can, by engaging us in the task of uncovering our unconscious selves, help alleviate the burden of unknowing, it may just as surely *extend* for us the world of the *known*. By giving our "*wyrd*" a means to become at least partially conscious of itself (by inspiring it, feeding it, *arousing* it, or whatever you choose to call it), it may begin to have a direct bearing—and a positive influence—upon our conscious selves. Put more simply - the more freedom our imagination is given to roam in dark and abhorrant (*not* necessarily aberrant) territories, the more we may be able to release our unconscious fears and tensions, and the more "humane" we will thereby become in our conscious behaviour. It's not even strictly necessary to get so esoteric about it: it seems logical enough to me that the more one allows one's imagination to explore the realms of "evil," and suchlike, the more this atavistic side, this *wyrd*, is released, and hence the less we need to express it in our everyday conscious lives. In a nutshell, the darker our dreams are permitted to become, the more light we may bring into our waking lives.²⁹

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Nothing makes the Great Spirit laugh harder than man's plans.
—Blind man, *U-Turn*

As a point of contrast, Stone's follow-up film (if we may be allowed to forget all about *Nixon*) seems to vindicate all the harshest criticisms levelled at *NBK*, and to prove, resoundingly and depressingly, that style is *not* enough. For about 40 minutes (roughly up to the point when Sean Penn's Bobby decides to fuck Jennifer's Lopez's Grace instead of kill her), *U-Turn* (1997) manages to be an exhilarating and demented joyride through the chaotic terrain of Oliver Stone's psyche. After that it all starts to fall apart. A movie (and the opening credits announce it as "an Oliver Stone Movie," as distinguished from his more "serious" *films*) that dispenses with character, plot, or even anything approaching clever dialogue, is in a bad spot: it has to rely wholly on the ingenuity, audacity and virtuosity of the director, and for a while—longer than we might expect—Stone pulls it off. As a short film, *U-Turn* might have made a giddy classic, but as a feature it's an embarrassment. Watching it, it becomes all-too plain that the director doesn't actually care about the intricacies of plotting or the internal drive (or even reality) of his characters, that all he

35. "Faith and Idolatry," *Planks of Reason* pg. 25,27.

36. *NBK*—though it takes the superficial form of a comedy (which is undoubtedly what caused such consternation amongst certain parties), fits I think most comfortably into the description of "horror movie." Its intentions, as well as its form and content (if not actual style), all belong to that genre most dedicated to awakening the primal fears and anxieties—for his own edification, generally—of the viewer. This Stone's film achieves such as few horror movies have ever done, and, I would guess, no "comedy" on earth even attempted.

cares about are the spins and whirls and hiccups which he can perform with his camera. Working together with cameraman Richardson, and Ennio Morricone on the score, his touch is even more assured than it was on *NBK*, but here the moral and dramatic vacuum at the center doesn't serve as a function of the movie's message, so all it does is expose its pointlessness.

Which is really too bad, because Stone has the best ensemble of actors he has ever worked with—Penn, Lopez, a transformed Nick Nolte (grizzled to the point of resembling Tom Waits), a still handsome Powers Boothe (who gets nothing at all to do), Billy Bob Thornton, Jon Voight (fairly amusing as the obligatory Indian/trickster figure), Julie Hagerty, a spunky Claire Danes, and a hilarious Joaquin Phoenix (in probably the film's most inspired performance)—and if he couldn't be bothered to give them a decent plot to work with, he could at least have made sure they had some good lines to play (it's almost incredible that the film is based on a novel—John Ridley's *Stray Dogs*—because it plays like the shabbiest collection of movie clichés). With the exception of Danes and Phoenix (whose scenes stand alone as little comedy classics that might even be from another movie), the actors here have little to do but sweat and grimace and club each other over the head with blunt instruments. There's almost no communication going on between them, no chemistry, not even between Lopez and Penn, so there's no opportunity for the performances to flower (Penn is especially lost: he doesn't seem to know if he's in a situation comedy, an action flick or a film noir; but then, neither does Stone).

U-Turn is genuinely grotesque, but in mostly the wrong ways. Stone's sensibility is just too warped, too jaded, to allow much access, and there's no way for the humor of the film to dominate as it should when bodies are falling left and right, and blood is oozing out of open wounds. It's just too damn sickening to laugh at, and what's most sickening of all is the director's undisciplined, bombastic anti-rational (and anti-poetic too) style. It's absolutely no surprise that everyone in this movie ends up dead, so the only possible point of curiosity is who will be the last to go. And when a battered and toothless Bobby crawls out the canyon back to his car—the car whose broken fanbelt got him into this whole mess to begin with—and starts the engine, there may be a laugh of recognition from the audience: Stone has given us his own version of the yuppie-deconstruction movie, only his yuppie is an poorly defined sleazeball and petty criminal with no redeeming features, hence no possibility of rebirth, no option of escape. So when the fanbelt snaps again, and he is right back where he started but critically wounded to boot, the whole thing starts to look like an over-extended, ultraviolent episode of *The Twilight Zone*: but for the wounds, it might all have happened in Bobby's head. There's no rhyme or reason to what's going on here, but there's no metaphysic underlayer either, so it's not existential, it's just senseless, absurd.

What Stone seems to have been going for is a scary, screwball murder comedy along the lines of *True Romance* or *Something Wild*, but instead he came closer to the orgiastic inanity and tastelessness of *Wild at Heart* (which also didn't know if it was fish or fowl). *U-Turn* has absolutely no emotional weight to it—it's piffle—but it also lacks the playful spirit of farce: it's nasty trash that takes itself seriously. And this final punchline, when the whole nightmare comes full circle—the only time the title starts to make sense—is what this shaggy dog story has been moving towards all along; but if we laugh, then it's mostly out of relief that the damn thing is finally over.

In contrast—though many people may also feel relief when it's finally over—*NBK* is a sensational film, in every sense of the word. It has neither heart nor soul, so it cannot possibly

be a great film, in any ordinary sense of the word. But it achieves precisely what it sets out to achieve—to present, in all its aberrant, ironic glory, the heartless and soulless madhouse we’ve come to call society: a Disneyland Inferno where murder is just another sensation and death the ultimate “ride.” It is an offensive film, a “wicked” one in almost every way (what Peter Travers called “cruelty as entertainment”), and that is exactly what makes it so remarkable. I can’t argue for its greatness, but I do think it’s the most stupendously brilliant and exhuberatingly perverse American movie of the ’90s, and the film that comes the closest to representing the spirit of our times. Splintered, obscene, indulgent, an orgy of barbarity and excess, *NBK* yet has a lurking, elusive sense of sublime mystery to it, a feeling that its willfully outrageous clash of values and images is serving not merely to shock, but to release or expose or even create something wholly unforeseen, some new, alternate and redemptive *point of view—a butterfly out of the storm*. Indeed Stone, who admits that much in the film escapes even *his* intellectual comprehension,³⁰ might well have been thinking of Breton’s words: “It is in fact from the disgusting cauldron of these meaningless, mental images that the desire to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd, distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil, is born and sustained.”

It’s no wonder that so many people hate the film, then, because it’s not easy to admire or enjoy, much less celebrate (as Stone does here), a world of contradictions or an age of monsters. But such a dirty job *had* to be done by someone, somehow; and Oliver Stone, a man for whom controversy is the air he breathes, and to whom outrage and horror are simply a way of life, was clearly the man for the job.

NBK is above all a horrific cinematic experience, but one so wild, anarchic, and viscerally, kinetically exhilarating, that one may be largely unaware of just how disturbing it really is. It strips our world down to a world of empty, soulless artifice, a world of objects, in which the only fit behaviour is one of destruction and attack. It invites us to glory in this process of annihilation, even knowing that, if we are along for the ride, we are also, inevitably, in the line of the fire. It gives us a material world devoid of spiritual values, places us squarely within it, casts judgment, and then lets rip. It gives us the end of the world as the ultimate joy-ride, it gives us murder as the supreme delight, madness as the only possible truth in a world of lies. In a word, it gives us Apocalypse. And, having already made it abundantly clear that it’s much too late to repent, it leaves us nothing to do but sit back and enjoy the show. Well, of course, this is only a movie. *NBK* expands our world so far it blows it to pieces, and what’s more, it makes it abundantly clear that there’s no hope of ever putting it back together again. If perception is the means by which we assemble our world, it may be time we found ourselves a whole new point of view. How can this be done? The movie makes no suggestions whatsoever about that, but at least it raises the question.

“When they said ‘Repent! Repent!’—I wonder what they meant?”

37. “There are things in the movie that are still beyond my fingertips, beyond comprehension—the butterfly moment, the walk into the prison with Scagnetti and the Warden, the rabbit with bloody fangs Mickey mentions in the interview, which is the last image of the movie. It’s the nature of the film and the nature of the ending.” Stone in interview with Gavin Smith, *Sight and Sound*, December 1994, pg.10.