

## *Natural Born Killers* is a natural born disaster

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*Natural Born Killers*, Oliver Stone's latest film release, stars Woody Harrelson (*Cheers*, *The Cowboy Way*) and Juliette Lewis (*Cape Fear*), both talented young actors and both big box office draws. And the crowds are being drawn to *Natural Born Killers*, but not necessarily because of Harrelson and Lewis or even for Rodney Dangerfield's cameo appearance.

Instead, *Natural Born Killers* is making a killing in sales because of the wave of controversy surrounding the violence and explicit language in the film, as well as Stone's using the movie as a metaphor for modern American culture and media.

*Natural Born Killers* is about two older teenagers who subconsciously decide that the way they take revenge for growing up in abusive homes is to kill anyone in their path. The movie

opens in a typical rural diner with Mickey (Harrelson) ordering key lime pie and Mallory putting a quarter in the jukebox.

Everything appears to be ordinary, despite the fact that they are from out of town. While Mickey begins eating his pie, Mallory dances seductively to the music. At the same time, a truckload of hunters pulls up to the diner.

Stone then reminds the audience that his film is not about ordinary events but about death. He directs the camera to a close-up of the truck's tire running over a scorpion in the road. He then cuts to the top of the truck for another close-up of a dead deer tied to the roof. Stone gets so close that we can see the water in the deer's eyes, so that the deer appears to be crying. While these images of death foreshadow the rest of the movie, they pale in comparison with gruesome deaths of Mickey and Mallory's victims.

The audience senses imminent danger when one of the hunters begins dancing and flirting with Mallory. As his comments become more crass, the music stops, and Mallory ends her dance. But the hunter continues to come on to Mallory.

She decides that she does not want to listen to him anymore, uses several choice words, and then Mallory, a petite woman, attacks the hunter, punching and kneeing him. He hits her back, and before the audience realizes what is happening, Mickey and Mallory are firing guns, killing the three hunters.

Mickey and Mallory's trademark is to allow one person to live so that s/he can tell the authorities who committed the murders and robberies. Mallory plays "Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo" in order to pick whether the cashier or the waitress dies. After destroying the diner, killing four people, and robbing the store, Mickey and Mallory leave, expressing their love for one another and kissing passionately.

This bizarre, explosive behavior is repeated throughout *Natural Born Killers*. Mickey and Mallory's killing is a game, and Stone carefully crafts this metaphor by switching back and forth from cartoons to reality during the murders.

The cartoons of Mickey and Mallory look like those in violent video games — the men have bulging muscles and the women have sensuous curves and wild, dark hair. When a murder is about to take place, Stone reveals the action in cartoon images, as though the audience were seeing the insides of Mickey and Mallory's heads. He then replays the action in real life.

Life seems to have no significance for them, and they believe that they were born to kill. For Mickey and Mallory, murder is a game of the hunter and the hunted.

While in jail, Mickey makes the analogy that he and Mallory are like the larger animals in the woods who prey on the smaller animals. He explains that just as the animals have a way of disposing of weaker animals, humans also have the natural instinct to do the same. The difference is that humans have created laws to stop that natural instinct.

Stone has several agendas in *Natural Born Killers* that at times over-

shadow the film itself. In an effort to show how the American public seems to be mesmerized by mass murders, Stone uses Robert Downey Jr. to play a Geraldo-like reporter who is willing to do whatever it takes to get the scoop on Mickey and Mallory. Downey's character understands the public's obsession with violent criminals and even says "the bloodier the better."

Through Downey's character and the use of documentary clips of Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer, Lorena Bobbit, the Menendez brothers, and even O.J. Simpson, Stone attempts to criticize both the American public and the media for celebrating violent criminals.

Stone's other agenda is to reveal both the demise of the American family and the breakdown of the morals on television. Using clips of old family-oriented shows such as *Leave It To Beaver*, Stone compares the typical family of the 1960's with the typical family of the 1990's.

Mickey and Mallory's memories of her family are conveyed in the form a television show. The "show" is ridiculously exaggerated. The colors and patterns used on the set clash, representing the chaos in the home. Rodney Dangerfield plays her drunk father, who abuses her sexually, physically, and verbally. He fondles her and makes references to their having sex while her mother giggles nervously and says, "Now, let's be nice."

Stone's satire of the American family and the television industry includes the audience's applauding whenever a four-letter word is used, a sexual innuendo is uttered, or a sexist comment is made.

The abuse that Mallory must endure is treated as normal behavior by her family, and Stone seems to indicate that our country is becoming so conditioned to abuse, murder, and violence that we are no longer shocked by them.

Stone makes his point that *Natural Born Killers* is a depiction of real life, but his depiction is so terrifying and so exaggerated that it is hard to get past the blood and gore to concentrate on his message.

*Natural Born Killers* is now showing at Blue Ridge 10.

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