

What's Natural About Killing? Gender, copycat violence and Natural Born Killers

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ABSTRACT *With a lawsuit implicating Natural Born Killers in real-world violence still pending, the representation of violence in Oliver Stone's 1994 film remains a controversial issue. This article examines the gendering of violence—both in the film itself and in three of the most infamous 'copycat' cases—and demonstrates that the apparently gender-neutral term 'natural born killers' is used to disguise the normalisation of male violence on- and off-screen. While male violence is normalised, it is argued that representations of female violence emphasise transformation and undercut women's violent subjectivity through a re-positioning of women as erotic objects.*

Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* was undoubtedly one of the most controversial films of the nineties, having been linked to more real-world violence than any other movie (Shnayerson, 1996, p. 90). However, allegations that his 1994 film inspired copycat shootings in the US and France have been strongly refuted by Stone. According to the director, the film—starring Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis as murderous lovers turned media-superstars—is a satirical exposé of the mass media's glorification of mass murder. Nevertheless, in the UK, its theatrical release was postponed while the British Board of Film Classification investigated links with the US and French shootings. Since the BBFC awarded the film an 18-certificate in December 1994, the film has been linked to further murders. However, it was the apparently unrelated Dunblane massacre, in March 1996, which led Warner Home Video to postpone indefinitely the film's UK video release. Although the film had already been awarded a certificate for video and there was no suggestion that the Dunblane killer, Thomas Hamilton, had been influenced by this or any other violent movie, *Natural Born Killers* is still unavailable in video in this country [1].

Of course, *Natural Born Killers* is not the only film in recent years to have been accused of inspiring copycat violence. Indeed, it seems that it has now become standard practice when faced with acts of apparently inexplicable violence to pose the question 'are movies to blame'? So, for example, in the aftermath of the high school massacres in Denver and Kentucky, *The Basketball Diaries* was cited as a possible influence on the teenage-shooters. In England, in the same week as the Denver massacre, two teenage boys on trial for

murder were alleged to be so desensitised by ‘horror’ videos that they no longer understood ‘the enormity of killing another person’ (Gentleman, 1999). More notoriously, the British media seized on spurious links between the Hungerford massacre in 1987 and *First Blood* (see Webster, 1989, for a full discussion) and between the murder of Liverpool toddler James Bulger and *Child’s Play 3* (discussed by Buckingham, 1996, pp. 19–55).

However, it is not simply the spurious links to mainstream cinema that these and many other similar cases have in common. These crimes were all committed by young men, yet, despite the publicity and concern these cases have collectively generated, the sex of the killers—and of the killers they are accused of imitating—has gone largely unremarked.

The controversy surrounding *Natural Born Killers* appears to be unique in this respect. While the film has been accused of inspiring boy-killers in Utah, Georgia, Massachusetts and Texas, it has, most famously, been linked to three cases—one in the US and two in France—involving male–female couples. This article examines the gendering of violence both in the film itself and in reports of three of the most infamous so-called copycat crimes to demonstrate the normalisation of male violence which is disguised in the apparently gender-neutral concept of the ‘natural born killer’.

Copycats?

Before I begin to analyse the normalisation of male violence in these fictional and factual contexts, some background information about the film and the alleged copycat cases is required.

Natural Born Killers—or *NBK* as it is commonly known—does not lend itself to easy synopsis. The central characters, Mickey and Mallory Knox (played by Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) are young lovers whose mid-American killing spree has catapulted them to international celebrity, partly due to the attentions of the lurid true-crime prime-time show, *American Maniacs*, hosted by Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr.). Also tracking Mickey and Mallory is corrupt cop Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore) who rapes and murders a prostitute during his quest.

The first half of the film focuses on the killer-couple’s crimes and increasing celebrity. A flashback in the form of a spoof television sitcom, entitled *I Love Mallory*, sketches out how the couple first met and then murdered Mallory’s mother and abusive father. On the road, their body count increases daily in a 2-week killing spree, which leaves 52 people dead. During a brief sojourn in the desert, they are both bitten by poisonous snakes after Mickey kills an old Indian mystic. They are finally captured at a drugstore where they attempt to find an antidote.

A year after their capture, Mickey and Mallory are to be moved to another prison and warden Dwight McClusky (Tommy Lee Jones) arranges for Scagnetti to accompany them and assassinate the lovers en route. The day before the move, Mickey gives an in-depth live interview to Gayle for an *American Maniacs* Special. Mickey’s unapologetic admission that he is ‘natural born killer’ sparks a prison riot during which Mickey grabs a shotgun and escapes his captors, rescuing Mallory from the clutches of a lecherous Scagnetti. The prison breakout is broadcast live by Gayle who has joined in the frenzied killing. Once the couple is free, they execute Gayle in front of his own camera. A flash-forward shows Mickey and Mallory on the road again, this time with a mobile home full of children.

The violence in the film is often graphic and can be simultaneously nightmarish and

sexy. The film is shot in 18 different formats with 2500–3000 cuts, which has led many critics to compare its pace and visual style to MTV. Violent acts and images are so pervasive that it would be impossible to cut out the violence and this has been a key concern of those who claim the film has inspired copycat shootings. Yet, the links between the film and the three copycat cases that I will focus on here are hazy at best [2].

In March 1995, Oklahoma teenagers Sarah Edmondson and Ben Darras shot and killed Bill Savage and wounded Patsy Byers, both of whom were complete strangers to the couple. After their arrest, Edmondson claimed that she and Darras had watched *NBK* on video repeatedly in the days before the shootings whilst consuming considerable quantities of hallucinogenic drugs. When Darras first started talking about killing, according to Edmondson, ‘it was as if he was fantasizing from the movie’ (quoted by Shnayerson, 1996, p. 95). The teenagers were both found guilty of shooting Patsy Byers, for which they each received 35 years, while Darras was also given life for the murder of Bill Savage. In March 1999, the Supreme Court cleared the way for the family of Patsy Byers to sue the film’s makers and distributors for damages, finding that as *NBK* might have ‘incited imminent lawless activity’ it was not protected speech [3].

Six months before Edmondson and Darras went on their shooting spree, 19-year-old Florence Rey and her 22-year-old boyfriend, Audry Maupin, led the Paris police in a car chase that left 5 people, including Maupin, dead. The couple were dubbed ‘France’s Natural Born Killers’ by the international media after publicity material for Stone’s film was found in their flat and Rey, allegedly quoting *NBK*, described the shootings as ‘fate’. Although, by the time of Rey’s trial, there was no evidence that she had ever seen the film and it was not mentioned in her defence, the link with *NBK* was reiterated in the press coverage. In October 1998, Rey was sentenced to 20 years for her part in the murders although it was accepted that she had not actually fired any of the fatal shots.

In the third case, which came to trial in Paris just a week after Rey was sentenced, Veronique Herbert and Sebastien Paindavoine were found guilty of murdering 16-year-old Abdeladim Gahbiche. Herbert, who was 18 at the time of the murder, was said to be obsessed with *NBK* and it was widely reported that she lured Gahbiche to his death with promises of sex in a set-up ‘right out of Stone’s film’ (Atkinson, 1999). Unlike the Edmondson–Darras and Rey–Maupin cases, Herbert was said to be the dominant half of this couple and was jailed for 15 years while Paindavoine received 12.

As will be gathered from these brief outlines, the evidence supporting a link between these murders and *NBK* is far from conclusive and, certainly, there is no suggestion that the film was *uniquely* responsible for the crimes. However, leaving the legitimacy of the copycat claims aside, the constructions of gendered violence in the movie and news reports are strikingly similar.

In fact, as in fiction, violent crime is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men (Jones, 1991; Lloyd, 1995), so it is perhaps not surprising that Edmondson, Rey and Herbert have proven particularly newsworthy. Although the ‘natural born killer’ label has been used with uncritical frequency to describe both the male and female perpetrators, closer examination of the film and the reporting of these crimes reveal fundamental differences in the representation of male and female violence. In their emphasis on how these three apparently ordinary young women could have been transformed into killers, press reports have mirrored *NBK*’s attempt to understand the female killer whilst normalising male violence. It is inconceivable, even within the fictional world of *NBK*, that the violent woman could be ‘naturally born’, while male violence is so pervasive as to require neither comment or analysis. Representing Mickey and his fictional counterparts as ‘natural born

killers', as inherently evil or monstrous, ignores their agency, choice and hence, responsibility for their actions. To this extent, Oliver Stone *and* the international press are equally culpable as they help to perpetuate the normality and apparent inevitability of male violence.

Natural Born Killers

The masculinisation of violence in *Natural Born Killers* is at once obvious and invisible. Indeed, perhaps it is precisely because the gendered nature of violence on-screen seems so obvious that this has largely been ignored in critical responses to the film. Reflecting on the motivations of his mass-murdering anti-heroes, Stone argues:

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 whole different space and we clarify their different motives. (Stone quoted by Williams, 1994, p. 16)

The predatory Mickey is, as we will see, the natural born killer of the title while Mallory appears to come from a different, and decidedly 'unnatural', space. How Mallory got there is one of the movie's central concerns, just as the transformation from choirgirl to killer and back preoccupies the press reports concerning Edmondson, Rey and Herbert.

In contrast, the 'naturalness' of men's murderous impulses is repeatedly emphasised in interviews with Stone and Harrelson and the motivations of Darras, Maupin and Paindavoine seem to require scant interrogation in the reports of their crimes. Notably, Harrelson's portrayal of Mickey is repeatedly authenticated in interview by the actor's own life experience. Both Stone and Harrelson refer to Harrelson's father—in prison serving a life sentence for the murder of a federal judge—suggesting that Harrelson, like his character, 'came from violence'. In a typical piece, Roald Rynning writes:

[...] Stone encouraged Woody to improvise during filming. As a result, there are several things his character says that parallel Woody's own life, especially in the scene where Mickey says: 'I come from violence. It's in my blood. My dad had it, his dad had it. It's my fate'. (1995, p. 29)

The difference between character and actor are thus collapsed, Harrelson's skill as an actor allied to his 'genetic' affinity with the fictional mass murderer which Vietnam-vet Stone intuitively recognises. To then capture this violence on-screen, Stone's documented on-set behaviour was clearly abusive although reports of the on-set conditions seem to take it for granted that this is the price to be paid to work with a director like Stone on a film like *NBK* (Grundy, 1997; Hamsher, 1997). On-set, on-screen and in interview, male violence is thus both 'naturalised' and legitimated. In contrast, Juliette Lewis explicitly distances herself from her character: 'She laughs when asked if she had to live the part to be convincing. "Of course I'm faking it."' (Kaye, 1995, p. 29)

As Harrelson's genetic make-up is used to authenticate his portrayal of Mickey, on-screen, flashbacks to Mickey's childhood reinforce the assertion that he is a 'natural born killer'. In intermittent flashbacks—including a brief nightmare sequence in the desert and a flashback during his interview with Gayle—Mickey recalls a boy of around 5 years old, a passive wide-eyed witness to his parents' fighting and his father's suicide. Just before Mickey's father blows his own head off with a shotgun, he asks his child if he believes in fate, implying that Mickey's fate—like his father's—is to live and die through violence. Interestingly, Sarah Edmondson, in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, singles out this moment for its resonance with Ben Darras's childhood:

For Ben a compelling moment, Sarah remembers, was a quick flashback that appears to show Mickey's father out in a field with a shotgun, about to kill himself. The movie implies that violence runs in Mickey's family; that's why Mickey is a natural-born killer. According to Sarah, Ben's father had been abusive to his mother. They divorced when Ben was 12. A year later, his father committed suicide. (Shnayerson, 1996, p. 134)

In an article in which Edmondson's *transformation* from choirgirl to killer is stressed and explanations sought, this brief suggestion of Darras's motivation is particularly significant. The movie implies that violence runs in Mickey's family. The interviews with the star imply that violence runs in Harrelson's family. The so-called copycat killer then identifies this pattern in his own life before he murders Bill Savage.

Within the world of *NBK* male violence is pervasive. Although both Mickey and Mallory are mass murderers, only Mickey—described as 'the most dangerous man in America'—is interviewed by Wayne Gayle for the true-crime prime-time show, *American Maniacs*. The effect of this is to define the violence of *NBK* in terms of Mickey's behaviour with Mallory appearing as nothing more than an attractive appendage. The opening credits of the fictional TV show emphasise this, positioning Mickey within an exclusively male lineage of real-life 'maniacs' (Charles Manson, Charles Whitman, Richard Ramirez, Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy) providing a recognisable external context both for Mickey's behaviour and for the public consumption of it. This is underlined by the use of footage from the televised Menendez brothers and OJ Simpson murder trials, the Rodney King case and the Waco siege. Notably, Gayle situates his interview with Mickey alongside infamous interviews with Noriega, Elton John and Nixon, while fans in London compare the killer-couple with such 'great figures from the States' as Elvis, Jack Kerouac, James Dean, Jim Morrison and Jack Nicholson. As a mass-murderer, public figure and 'entertainer', Mickey fills a recognisable (male) space in Western culture.

In contrast to the non-reporting of Darras, Maupin and Paindavoine's motivations, Mickey is initially challenged to explain his violence in the *American Maniacs* interview. The 'charismatic serial killer' tells his interviewer that he first thought about killing at birth, that he 'came from violence' and that he sees himself as a demon to Mallory's angel. However, while Gayle initially challenges this naturalisation of violence, as the interview descends into bloody chaos it seems that violence is not only *Mickey's* genetic inheritance, but *man's* fate. When Mickey asserts that he is a 'natural born killer', the male prisoners signal their agreement with their fists and Gayle is easily swept up in the orgiastic violence. Indeed, throughout *NBK*, Mickey is surrounded by men whose use of violence requires neither explanation nor, it would seem, understanding—his father, Mallory's father, Gayle, Scagnetti, McClusky and an assortment of police officers, prison guards and prisoners are all implicated. Individual motivations and responsibility are largely irrelevant here. This is underlined in a flashback to Scagnetti's childhood that mixes documentary footage of the Charles Whitman killings with images of the young Mickey:

So Charles Whitman killed Scagnetti's mom and we cut ironically to a boy who is supposed to be the young Scagnetti, but in fact is the young Mickey. It's done to suggest a collective unconscious of agony. His childhood is Mickey's childhood—what difference does it make? (Stone quoted in Smith, 1994; p. 12)

Scagnetti, Mickey, Whitman—fictional and actual killers sharing a collective unconscious

of agony over which they have neither control nor, implicitly, responsibility. Indeed, for so-called copycat killer Darras, *NBK* arguably stands in for the ‘collective unconscious of agony’ and absolves him of personal responsibility.

However, if Mickey is presented as a natural born killer, the film repeatedly demonstrates that Mallory is not *born* violent but, rather, as we will see, that her violence is *reactive*, a response to other events in her life.

Transformation

The transformation of the passive, victimised Mallory Wilson into the murderous Mallory Knox is revealed in the sitcom parody ‘I Love Mallory’. The sitcom is a flashback of Mickey and Mallory’s first meeting in which Mickey, the star of the show, rescues Mallory from her sexually abusive father. Positioned near the beginning of the film, Mallory’s subsequent violence is, therefore, read in the light of her initial victimisation. This appears to have been a conscious strategy on the part of Stone and Juliette Lewis. Lewis claims to have suggested this addition to Quentin Tarantino’s original story:

[...] I mentioned that [Stone] might wanna show that something happened to this girl in her background. *It’s hard to see a girl be that cruel*. I didn’t want to disgust the audience; I want them to understand the character a little. (Lewis quoted in Kaye, 1995, p. 29, emphasis mine)

Thus, while Mickey’s background, which is not revealed until much later in the film, confirms the inevitability of his violence, ‘I Love Mallory’ emphasises the reactive nature of Mallory’s crimes. Sitcom Mallory is sexually abused by her father, her mother condones the abuse and the complicit ‘audience’ laughs along. Mickey, the meat delivery boy and star of the show, provides brief respite before he is jailed for stealing Mallory’s father’s car. As in the rape-revenge horror movie (see Clover, 1992), sitcom Mallory finds that the law supports her abuser, Mickey’s imprisonment allowing her father’s abuse to continue unchecked. The implication is clear: property is valued over women’s bodies.

However, it is here that Mallory parts company with the rape-revenge heroine who, as Carol Clover has demonstrated in a feminist re-evaluation of the genre, is more than capable of her own bloody revenge (1992, p. 138). Mickey escapes from prison on horseback to rescue his damsel-in-distress and orchestrate the murder of her parents. This is Mallory’s initiation into Mickey’s world and following her gleeful participation in the double-murder Mallory Wilson *becomes* Mallory Knox. The transformation, from daughter to wife, victim to killer, is completed with the blood wedding on Route 666.

Images of Mallory’s father and references to the abuse she endured recur at strategic points in the film, continually contextualising her violence in relation to previous victimisation and simultaneously reminding us of Mallory’s vulnerability. So, for example, when Mallory joins Mickey in killing her father she repeats his abusive words back to him (‘You stupid bitch. You will shut up. You will eat your food. You will listen to me. Are you clean? Are you sopping and wet?’) and when she sets fire to her mother she explicitly blames her for not doing anything to stop the abuse. Similarly, in turning the tables on the other men who make unwanted sexual advances towards her during the course of the film, Mallory both repeats her father’s abusive words (‘You stupid bitch’) and directly challenges her would-be harassers (‘How sexy am I now?’/‘Do you still like me now Jack?’). As she seduces the gas-station attendant she subsequently kills, Mallory has flashbacks of being groped and threatened by her father and we also learn from

McClusky that she strangles the prison psychiatrist because he asks her about her parents. Thus, Mallory is always simultaneously perpetrator and victim, dangerous and vulnerable.

If the female killer is made and not born, then there is always the hope of conversion and containment. Mallory's final appearance in *NBK* is suggestive in this respect as she and Mickey take to the road again, this time with two children and a third on the way. Heavily pregnant and dressed in a shapeless, patterned maternity smock and lilac wig, Mallory's physical transformation is marked and, indeed, she has started to resemble the mother she despised. Mallory's new role leaves the door open for Mickey's son to fulfil his genetic inheritance ('my dad had it, his dad had it' ...).

Although it is not suggested that Edmondson, Rey or Herbert were abused as children, the reports of their crimes similarly emphasise their temporary transformations into killers. While family violence permeates the working-class Wilson household in *NBK*—and, indeed, as far as Hollywood is concerned, family violence is almost exclusively a working-class problem (Holmlund, 1993, p. 141)—Edmondson's family are presented as being beyond reproach. We learn that her parents have been married for 26 years, that her father is a district judge, her uncle is the Oklahoma attorney general, her grandfather was a congressman and her great-uncle was a governor and US senator. We are told that Sarah sang in the church choir, that she rescued stray cats, that she was active in the Girl Scouts and had good times at camp (Shnayerson, 1996). In the words of an ABC News report, she is the 'least likely suspect', from the 'least likely family' (1997), a model of middle-class, passive femininity.

However, at puberty Edmondson's 'downward drift' began: 'Her world spun out of control. By 12, she was experimenting with drugs. By 15, she had a venereal disease. She painted her room black, chopped off her hair and cut her own arms' (ABC News, 1997). Edmondson's 'rescue missions' shifted focus from stray cats to troubled, junkie boyfriends (Shnayerson, 1996). Darras was one such boyfriend and, indeed, in many of the newspaper reports we learn little more about him than this. The fact that his father committed suicide and he was brought up by his mother is mentioned only in passing in a lengthy article about the killings in *Vanity Fair* (quoted above) while Edmondson's background is consistently stressed in the press reports. If Edmondson is the 'least likely suspect' from the 'least likely family,' Darras's gender, class and family background implicitly make him the 'most likely suspect'.

Notably, it is not only Edmondson's background that makes her an unlikely suspect but her present appearance and demeanour. As Mallory's final appearance in *NBK* suggests a conversion to a gender-appropriate role, so, to Michael Shnayerson, Edmondson now appears as an intelligent, model prisoner who tutors her fellow inmates in maths and warns schoolkids visiting the jail about the dangers of drugs. She 'looks like a sorority sister', rather than a convict, with 'good posture' and 'long, reddish-blond hair neatly brushed, her eyes friendly behind gold rimmed glasses' (1996, pp. 92, 134).

As with Edmondson, transformation and conversion are central themes in reports of Florence Rey's crimes and trial. An early feature in the *Guardian* has Paul Webster in search of 'the real Florence Rey—the brilliant, hardworking university student rather than the vicious cop killer' (1994a, p. 2). A neighbour confirms that Rey was 'sweet, obedient, shy and ravishing, always well dressed and well behaved' (*ibid.*) and we learn of her family background, her hobbies, her studies and that, like Edmondson, she sang in the church choir. The 'other Florence Rey', who shot indiscriminately from a moving car, was captured in 'an unflattering mugshot' just after her arrest, a photograph which briefly turned her into 'a kind of folk-heroine among the disaffected element of French

youth' (Lichfield, 1998a). This initial image of Rey, gaunt and defiant with a trickle of blood on her cheek left by flying glass, was open to contradictory interpretation. On the one hand, commentators were confounded by the image of the girl-murderer, 'a frail blonde about 5ft tall' (Webster, 1994b), yet, this image also came to stand in for her contemptuous rejection of femininity which seemed to compound her guilt. At her trial, 4 years later, yet another image of Rey was offered up for public consumption:

As she stepped into the courtroom, a number of spectators stood up to get a better view of her, the lights began to flash as the battery of photographers moved in.

She looked like a frightened animal caught in the glare of headlights. [...]

The photo session dragged on for what seemed like an eternity. The judge, Jean-Pierre Feydeau, raised his voice to hush the crowd. The trial of Florence Rey was ready to begin. The young girl sat down and wiped her eyes, while the spectators began to comment: 'She's not as pretty as they say'. (Monnin, 1998, p. 12)

The fascination with Rey certainly recalls Stone's mass-murderers turned media-superstars, but what is particularly significant here is the way the alleged killer is no longer an actual or potential subject, but the object, both of the gaze and of the investigation. Similarly, in *NBK*, Mallory's 'whole different space' is at least partly defined by her 'to-be-looked-at-ness', which is simultaneously a means of containing the threat she poses to a (male) spectator (Mulvey, 1975). This is encapsulated in one of the most prominent advertisements for the film in which Mallory appears as the object of desire, reflected in Mickey's rose-tinted sunglasses. Although both Mickey and Mallory are looked *for* (by the police) and looked *to* (by their fans) throughout the film, only Mallory is explicitly looked *at*. She is the object of the gaze and the object of investigation.

Rey's physical appearance is almost obsessively investigated in reports of the trial. She is variously described as 'childlike', 'elfin', 'waif-like', 'petite', 'sweet', 'pale-faced' and 'shy', wearing 'a little discreet make-up'. The contrast between the 'pretty pony-tailed brunette' in the dock and the infamous police mugshot is, itself, the starting point of a number of reports, as though the explanation of her crimes lies in this physical transformation (e.g., MacIntyre, 1998; Monnin, 1998; Webster, 1998).

Although her defence argued that Rey was 'under the spell' of Maupin, the quiet-spoken 'philosophy student' does not initially appear to be the 'most likely suspect'. Webster's early report describes Maupin as a non-violent rock-climber with a hatred of racism and police brutality. However, Maupin is an adjunct to Webster's primary concern, the search for 'the real Florence Rey' (1994), a search which seemed to be rewarded in the images of the bewildered, feminine defendant 4 years later. Notably, there has been no equivalent search for 'the real Audry Maupin'. Maupin may have been a pacifist but this does not render his murderous actions against police brutality inexplicable. Here, as in *NBK*, men's use of violence does not, in itself, require understanding or explanation.

Veronique Herbert's arrest and trial is a rather different story that does not seem to have had the same international appeal as Rey's trial. Herbert was widely seen as the dominant partner in the killer-couple, enticing 16-year-old Abdeladim Gahbiche into a 'sex trap' inspired by *NBK* (Lichfield, 1998b). Unlike Edmondson and Rey, there was no suggestion that Herbert was innocent of murder, nevertheless, as with these other cases, 'Veronique diabolique' (Dejevsky, 1996) is the focus of most of the press attention. While Paindavoine, like Darras and Maupin, remains a shadowy figure, we learn of Herbert's

'dysfunctional' family life, her sexual fantasies, her obsession with *NBK* and how, at the time of the murder, she had entered a world where the real and the imaginary 'became less and less distinct' (Lichfield, 1998c). As with the other women, the attempts to explain her crime show quite clearly that she is not a 'natural born killer' but has *become* a killer as a response to particular social conditions. In court, she appears as an intelligent, attractive, middle-class young woman who has been a model prisoner since her arrest, blossoming into 'a mature, thoughtful young woman,' who is, like the press-jury, 'horrified and mystified by her actions' (Lichfield, 1998c).

This emphasis on the women's physical appearances in all three cases can, in itself, be read as an attempt to re-position the women in gender-appropriate roles, as objects to be looked at rather than subjects who act. Specular objectification destabilises their violent subjectivity. This oscillation between subject and object positions is also realised on-screen, a pattern established in the opening sequence of the film which is also, arguably, the model for Herbert's reported 'sex trap'.

NBK opens in a roadside-diner. While Mickey reads news reports of their latest massacre, Mallory, clad in a bikini top and hipster jeans, selects a record on the jukebox and begins a seductive dance. A non-diegetic Leonard Cohen track is playing [4]. As a group of men arrive and ogle Mallory, the soundtrack shifts from the non-diegetic Leonard Cohen track to the music playing on the jukebox. The shifting musics, combined with the visual effects, continually remind us that we are watching a movie, creating a distance between the 'knowing' audience *of* the film (the non-diegetic audience) and Mallory's 'leering' audience *within* the film (the diegetic audience). Joining Mallory on the dancefloor, one of the men performs a lewd, thrusting dance, while his friend calls her 'pussy', 'a sweet piece of meat'. As L7's 'Shitlist' hits the jukebox, Mallory throws the film's first punches, violently turning the tables on her harasser, challenging his right to look and to touch. The eruption of sudden violence is coded as female vengeance, 'How sexy am I now flirty boy?', Mallory demands as she repeatedly jumps on her victim's back, a brief image of his former leering self underlining her motivation.

In violently returning the male gaze in this way, it could be argued that Mallory also challenges the non-diegetic spectator who has been enjoying the spectacle. However, as it has already been established that the non-diegetic audience is watching a different, specifically filmic, spectacle, their (potential or actual) pleasure in the woman-as-image is not entirely subverted by Mallory's incomplete transformation from fetishised object to castrating subject. Further, while Mallory does, on occasion, challenge her objectification, she also seeks it, performing for Mickey and expressing anxiety over her sexual attractiveness, her desire to be desired legitimating the spectator's desiring gaze. Images of Mallory dancing recur throughout the film, stopping the action while a male character or characters watch (or imagine watching) her dance. In this, Mallory epitomises Laura Mulvey's notion of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (1975), stopping the narrative to allow diegetic and non-diegetic contemplation of the woman-as-image.

Mallory is both fetish object and out-of-control weapon, often simultaneously. The instability of her subjectivity is mirrored in the reports of the copycat crimes that emphasise the women's temporary physical and behavioural transformations. These violent women are not born but made and, as such, their violent subjectivity can be safely contained while nevertheless providing a source of continued fascination. However, the space devoted to the nevertheless limited attempts to understand the women's behaviour also works to disguise the naturalisation and normalisation of their male partners' violence. The more we learn about Mallory, Edmondson, Rey and Herbert, the further Mickey, Darras, Maupin and Paindavoine disappear into the shadows.

Conclusion

The problem with the press reports of the Edmondson–Darras, Rey–Maupin and Herbert–Paindavoine cases discussed in this article is not that they are necessarily inaccurate. Edmondson and Rey may well have been influenced by their boyfriends and may have acted out of fear, love and loyalty. Herbert almost certainly did use her sexuality to lure Abdeladim Gahbiche to his death, arguably mimicking her fictional heroine to the point where she could no longer understand the difference between fiction and reality. However, what this discussion of the fictional and actual killer-couples has demonstrated is how the ready acceptance of male violence in *NBK* found a mirror in press reports of the copycat crimes. When a man commits a violent act or acts, he is more likely to be presented as a ‘natural born killer’, inherently violent or monstrous, his motivations need not be examined or understood. In contrast, when a woman commits a violent act or acts, she appears to have acted against gender and her crime requires understanding and explanation.

To simply describe an individual man as a ‘natural born killer’ indicates an essentialist attitude to male violence that is both dangerous and deeply patronising. In contrast, to attempt to understand these crimes is not to condone them but to accept that individuals—both men and women—choose to act violently in specific circumstances and that such behaviour is neither inevitable nor unchanging. Understanding how and why individuals, and men in particular, choose violence is an essential part of the project of ending (male) violence. To the extent that they fail to do this, individual movies, their critics, consumers, their imitators and their critics help to perpetuate the normality of male violence and make challenging and ending it that much more difficult. Maybe Oliver Stone has a case to answer after all.

NOTES

- [1] Although, at the time of writing (April 2000), the video remains unavailable in the UK, the 18-certificated *NBK* has been screened uncut on terrestrial television by Channel 5.
- [2] This article draws primarily on British press-reports of the three cases. *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Times* from October 1994 to June 1999 were consulted on CD-ROM alongside coverage in UK movie magazines, *Empire* and *Sight and Sound*, and *Premiere*, *Neon* and *Film Focus* (which have since folded). *Vanity Fair*’s detailed coverage of the Edmondson–Darras case has also been used (Shnayerson, 1996). Additional material in English was located online. US and French material on these cases may provide a different picture.
- [3] At the time of writing (April 2000), this case has yet to be resolved.
- [4] The term ‘diegesis’ refers to everything within the on-screen world. For example, diegetic music appears to emerge directly from the space of the film, from an on-screen jukebox for instance. In contrast, non-diegetic music is not part of the on-screen world.

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