Killing is common in the cinema. Being a witness to murder has traditionally been a favourite audience activity. We've been thrilled by it in action movies, been scared by it in horror movies, tried to solve it in detective films and sat through art movies trying to understand it. What's different about the representation of murder in natural born killers is a combination of the sheer number of killings, the mode in which they are shown, the moral value attached to the acts and a particular type of audience response.

This representation of the serial killer and the use of this figure as a signifier of the social and personal decay that will bring forth the apocalyptic are not restricted to American culture. In the past few years, and to a lesser degree, the mass murder has been the focus of Belgian's Man Bites Dog, Spain's Kika and Quebec's Requiem pour un brave sans cœur. These films are each rooted in their own national cinematic cultures and the films draw on different narrative traditions to tell their stories. Both Man and Requiem, for example, borrow from playfully fictionalized cinema while techniques to represent the killer, while Kika utilizes director Noa Novak's usual repertoire of excesses. The point is that these tropes are present in films from different high/low industrialized cultures and that, despite their cultural specificity, these films present the serial killer as a symbol of the end of community, order, progress and reason.

In American cinema the mass murderer/serial killer has been a stock motif in suspense or action films. The Dirty Harry series, to name but one, could not exist without them. The social threat they represent is the context in which Harry is permitted to be dirty. One could even argue that the mass murderer as masochistic hero also has deep roots in film history. Frank and Jesse James killed dozens. But the narratives needed to give Harry, Bugsy and Tureaud Power cause and right. Likewise Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway killed as many people as Bonnie and Clyde as Brad Pitt and Juliette Lewis did in Aftershocks, but the former were glamorized even as their actions were condemned, while the latter are dehumanized even as their actions are offered as moral pleasures.

Though there are many different types of films being made at the moment, I don't think there's been as much noir in American cinema since the post-War years. But it's a different shade of noir. Films like Rome to Bleeding go beyond noir into a sublime and hip nihilism. The message may be one of exhaustion and despair, but the mode of telling is honed and
The Future is Shallow. If that were the message only in Natural Born Killers, we could dismiss it. But it’s cropping up across genres, throughout various media in many “First World” cultures.

Their love is in the mood of the nineteenth-century romantic ideal. Their visually spectacular wedding scene is a good example. They take their vows on a bridge over a river. The atmosphere of love is declared in front of the weathering of nature. Some yachts peer at them from a passing boat, but Mickey won’t ruin the serenity of his wedding day by killing any of them. They summarize their becoming one by gathering their hands clasping them and mixing blood. Molly lawn her veil into the river. A splash of pristine white falling in slow motion over pristine nature, blood, now united and belonging to both families is meant to circulate forever in the oceans of the world. Which it does. However, what we see is a slightly edited animated scene in which this drop of blood turns into a venereal snake. Their union, so fate, is a curse which poisons the world. Mickey and Mallory have sex, but it’s their killings that are organic. The first murders we see them perform through the roadmap rule are obscene. These are initially quickly edited. Then, as bullet or knife approaches its target, the camera shows us the victim’s point of view of the approaching weapon. Before another quick cut, the organ is split apart. As the narrative unwinds and more revenge is shown to be a murderer (including the police and the media), the killings become more visually poverty-stricken. The film adds its audience a vast intertextual cultural vocabulary at its disposal, it disproves Fredric Jameson’s argument that poesie is empty quotation. Natural Born Killers endlessly quotes from literature. These characters are from a socially de-historicized and culturally de-contextualized except that place in the narrative gives them a new history and a new context, and the logic of these quotations creates new meaning. It would be hard to create a totally amoral romantic couple in a different mode. Mickey and Mallory are the heroes of Natural Born Killers. Yet all they have going for them is that they are beautiful and they love each other. The film tries to make us like them (after all), aside from the murder scene, they are no worse than anyone else in the film). But we don’t need to identify with them to keep engaged and end up going along with the narrative. The speed and variety of the visuals are excellent. As with many porno films, we don’t know how to react to
Mickey and Mallory. The film shows them doing the most horrible things, but it's not as disgusting. Murder is horrible, but we sometimes get affected by it. It's a concept that hits home when we see it. Some of the situations in the film (Mickey killing his parents) are not as realistic, because they are too graphic and disturbing.

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India Now!

at the Toronto International Film Festival

Assessing the Films Screened in this Segment of the Festival —
Hits, Misses... and Programming Oversights

by STEVE PEREIRA

there was an unfortunate tendency towards the exotic impulse: advertising copy that offered cinema from "far away lands". press conferences that were heavy on atmosphere bit music rather than actual cinema. and in many cases, the cinema did not live up to the hype. the shows were often the best that one could find. the question is a matter of who was doing the looking...

What the India Now program at the Festival did offer, as promised, was a representative sampling of the types of cinema that are now being produced in India. Differentiated into three rather broad categories: there was the commercial, mainstream cinema; the independent, art cinema, including the work of Mani Ratnam, the film critic (The Indian); and finally the documentary, often a hybrid of the two.

On the commercial front, for the past couple of decades India has been leading the world in film production, with the commercial film with its distinctive style and sensibility, often involving an average of eight hundred films a year. Consider that, on any one day, a film star in the...