

Knocking 'Em Dead Natural Born Killers At The Box Office

BEING KILLED 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.

The representation of the serial killer and the use of this figure as signifier of the social and personal decay that will bring forth the apocalypse are not restricted to American culture. In the past few years, and in movies alone, the mass murderer has been the focus of Belgium's *Man Bites Dog*, Spain's *Kika* and Québec's *Requiem pour un beau sans-coeur*. 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 and playfully fictionalize cinéma vérité techniques to represent the killer, while *Kika* utilizes director Almodóvar's usual repertoire of excesses. The point is that this trope is present in films from different highly 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 murderers/serial killers have 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 romantic hero also has deep roots in film history. Frank and Jesse James killed dozens. But the narratives needed to give Henry Fonda and Tyrone Power cause and right. Likewise Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway killed as many people in *Bonnie and Clyde* as Brad Pitt and Juliette Lewis do in *Kalifornia*, but the former were glamorized even as their actions were condemned, while the latter are deglamorized even as their actions are offered as sensual 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 *Romeo is Bleeding* go beyond neo-*noir* into a sublime and hip nihilism. The message may be one of exhaustion and despair, but the mode of telling is frenzied and

BY JOSE ARROYO

exciting. Though the serial killer appears across genres, there are generic considerations (if not quite determinants). The killer is used to different effect in different genres, running the gamut from the cute *Serial Mom*, which drew on camp for comedy, to the scarily mundane *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, which drew on documentary for a realism effect.

The figure of the serial killer is the signifier of the malaise of the millennium. We might have several theories about why society is shit (capitalism, capitalism, capitalism) and we might have several theories why people may become killers (society, society, society), but, as the popularity of "JoJo's psychic Alliance" indicates, we can't really explain it rationally. The films point to a combination of social factors, psychology and economics as possible "causes" of serial killers. But they are so partial and yet so bewilderingly large that one would need a different culture for prevention. The serial killer represents everything that's out of control with our lives. To "fix" it would be like fixing a microchip on a computer. We know something is wrong, we know it's because of our culture (and many of the films point a finger to the media), but it's all represented as so complex that we can't begin to understand and we know we can't fix it. I'm still waiting for a film to say you can't fix the chip because you need a whole new board. For now, however, films like *Natural Born Killers* seem to be saying society sucks, everything is corrupt, and it's going to get worse. But don't kill yourself yet because there's still desire. All you need is love. Yet, as we are told in *Romeo*, "what makes love so frightening is that you don't own it. It owns you."

These films are deliriously romantic ones in a nineteenth-century sense. Love is all-encompassing and out of control. The sublime is no longer found in nature. What these films will have us look upon with awe and horror now is no less than the fall of civilization. A visceral reaction from the audience is their intention. A body gushing blood in death throes merely underlines how social decay is not merely imminent but already in process. These films reject reason in favour of mysticism for explanation. (The shaman scene is one of the most embarrassing ones in *Natural Born Killers*). And their characters find meaning only in their passions.

Spectacle and Sensation

To see *Natural Born Killers* is to notice, shockingly clearly, how much the Hollywood cinema has changed in the past twenty years. While the Academy may still give its awards to old-fashioned "realistic" dramas that critique society in some way by focusing on how some issue or moral dilemma affects an individual, most Hollywood products—and certainly the largest box-office films—focus on spectacle. Hollywood may distinguish between its "serious" films that "move the human spirit" and its action/adventure/sci-fi spectacles that'll kill 'em at the b.o. But serious filmgoers tend to find these categories much more fluid than most daily film reviewers. How safe, tritely uplifting and crushingly middle-brow can Hollywood's version of "serious" be? Check out *Quiz Show*. And for commentary on the human condition at the end of the century, one could do much worse than pay attention to *Blade Runner*, *Robocop*, or *Total Recall*. The "spec-

tacular" film has become the site at which pleasure and depth most commonly intersect. Which is not to say that all spectacle films have depth. I'd need some persuading to see *Jurassic Park* as other than a thrill machine.

One can make a broad distinction between Hollywood's "serious" films and the spectacle films. And it's not budget. "Serious" films tend to be old-fashioned. By this I mean that the narrative tends to focus on character and relationships, the editing is slower, the *mise-en-scene* attempts a faithful reproduction of places and events, and acting is an important vehicle of meaning. In other words, serious relies on the classical Hollywood paradigm of filmmaking (and in particular its notion of quality). Spectacle relies more on showing things and less on character identification to generate affect. The narratives tend to be punctuated by quickly-edited scenes of cars crashing, blood gushing, imaginary worlds exploding, finely-honed semi-nude bodies fighting. In short places, people and events one tends not to happen upon (except occasionally downtown).

Perhaps the greatest difference between films in the classic style and the new spectacle films is the emphasis on sensation. Films such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Robocop* may both want to critique, explain and help their audiences understand something. But the former does so primarily by soliciting an emotional response, the latter by a visceral one. Both do so through visual means, though the latter relies much more on dialogue. The mode of narration is also different. In classic cinema the manipulation of character and theme through time, for example, was heavily indebted to the nineteenth-century novel and theatrical melodrama. The representation of space was heavily indebted to painting, particularly in its adoption of Renaissance space. The above (plus editing) is the bulk of *Fried's* cinematic vocabulary. One can't say the same for the spectacle film. The classic style is merely one component of the spectacle film's repertoire: avant-garde techniques and advertising images are some of its many elements.

Seriously Stallone

Oliver Stone makes "serious" films: *Salvador*, *Wall Street*, *Heaven and Earth*, *JFK*. The titles say it all: big themes, the major issues of our time. They scream their seriousness so loudly they scare off the censors who have prohibited the distribution of *Exit to Eden* and *Reservoir Dogs* for similar levels of sex and/or violence. Stone paints a big canvas, with large brushstrokes and very little subtlety. His are testosterone movies. The Vietnam War, *Wall Street*, the Kennedy assassination, are all explored as moments that not only transformed American culture, but that also reshaped the meaning of masculinity in America. These events are critical to American culture because they reveal how that culture is in crisis. And by having men at the centre of these dilemmas, they also reveal how masculinity itself is also in crisis. The moral issues in Stone's films are resolved when a character takes an ethical position that is conveyed by an action. For example, when Tom Cruise energetically flexes his biceps to wheel himself into the convention in *Born on the Fourth of July* he has

finally taken on the moral responsibility to speak against the war and thus become a bigger man.

Stone's movies rarely whisper when they can shout. Their analysis of society is vulgar. Characters are represented in a Manichean fashion. To think of Tom Berenger and Willem Dafoe in *Platoon* or Michael Douglas and Charlie Sheen in *Wall Street* is to contrast the bad rat with the good rat. Sheen becomes a man when he acts for the good and becomes a citizen. These patterns recur in a most dazzling visual fashion in *Natural Born Killers*. But *Killers* differs in that it falls outside the broadly humanist tradition of Stone's oeuvre. Almost everyone in *Killers* (and certainly everyone who stays alive) is a rat.

Pomo Blues

The beginning of *Natural Born Killers* sets the tone for the rest of the film. Leonard Cohen is singing "Waiting For a Miracle." But the scene is set in a diner in the desert. We are shown images of a coyote, a snake, a large animal decomposing and Nixon on television. The film stock varies from filmed video to Super 8 to 16mm to 35, from black and white to colour. I don't think there's a specific reason for these choices. The effect is meant to be cumulative: we live in a society of images, a society of spectacle, and it's decomposing. The miracle won't come. We'll get on someone's shit list (the title of the next song on the soundtrack) and we'll get squashed by a car just like that scorpion we see in close-up getting run over.

Mickey and Mallory Knox (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) live in a postmodern world. They are surrounded by a kaleidoscopic mediascape. Their only sense of social history is what they see as they channelsurf through various TVs: *Leave it to Beaver*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *The Wild Bunch* and *Scarface*. To them, these shows have become more real than reality. This incursion into hyperreality extends to the representation of Mallory's personal life which we see as a TV sitcom à la "Married with Children." Here there is no extended family. The nuclear family is one in which the mother is powerless, the younger brother is a brat and the father is a Rodney Dangerfield who owns the rest. Incest and rape elicit the same moronic canned laughter as a burp would. Stone wants to show us how the media influences our interpretation of our own experience. In one scene, Stone superimposes the slogan "too much TV" over Mickey and Mallory. What is the result of "too much TV"? *Natural Born Killers*. Mickey and Mallory feel only when they love or kill. Their love is expressed as a heartfelt perversion of romantic ideals. Mickey is the knight in shining armour, except that he delivers meat and his hands and clothes are bloodied. He rescues Mallory from incest only to enable her to kill her parents and go on a murder rampage. Their feelings for each other are intense and heartfelt. "You belong to me," he tells her. "When I look up at the stars, I know you'll be looking at the same ones." They are fated for each other, they are each other's missing piece. Their rings (serpents coiled over skulls) are each one's reminder that they belong to the other. If life is mostly a bad sitcom, intense passion can occasionally transform it into a good video clip.

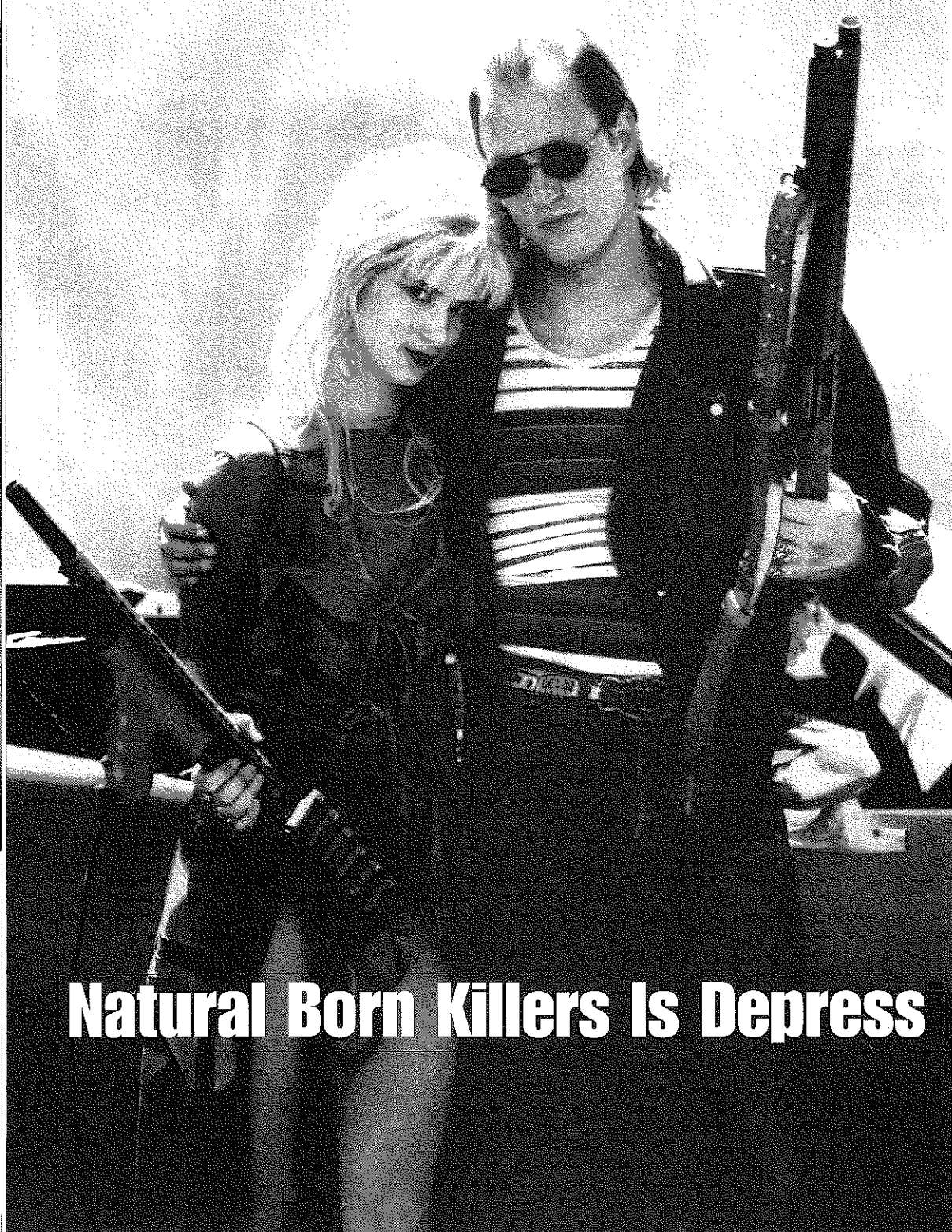
Their love is in the mould of the nineteenth-century romantic ideal. Their visually spectacular wedding scene is a good example. They take their vows on a bridge over a river. The awesomeness of their love is declared in front of the awesomeness of nature. Some yahoos jeer at them from a passing truck, but Mickey won't ruin the sacredness of his wedding day by killing any of them. They symbolize their becoming one by gashing their hands, clasp them and mixing blood. Mallory throws her veil into the river. A splash of pristine white falling in slow motion over pristine nature. Their blood, now united and belonging to them both, is meant to circulate forever in the oceans of the world. Which it does. However what we are shown is a quickly edited animated scene in which this drop of blood uncoils into a venomous snake. Their union, so fated, is a curse which will poison the world.

Mickey and Mallory have sex, but it is their killings that are orgasmic. The first murders we see them perform at the roadside cafe are operatic. 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 to their organs splattering. As the narrative unwinds and everybody is shown to be a murderer (including the police and the media), the killings become more visually perfunctory.

The film assumes its audience has a vast intertextual cultural vocabulary at its disposal. It disproves Fredric Jameson's argument that pastiche is empty quotation. *Natural Born Killers* endlessly quotes from culture. Those citations are seemingly socially de-historicized and culturally de-contextualised except their place in the narrative gives them a new history and a new context, and the *bricolage* of such 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 mystical shaman, they are no worse than anyone else in the film). But we don't need to identify with them to keep engaged and to go along with the narrative. The speed and variety of the visuals are enough.

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Natural Born Killers Is Depressing

Mickey and Mallory. The film shows them doing the most horrible things, but it does so excitingly if not beautifully. Murder is horrible but we sometimes gasp with pleasure when we see it. Some of the situations in the film (Mallory killing her pump jockey because he was too eager and gave her the worst head she's ever had in her life; Robert Downey Jr. eagerly becoming a killer) elicit the same kind of nervous laughter as do films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Blue Velvet*. Yet, in order to engage with

Mickey and Mallory at all, we can't see them as too horrible. Thus, most of the time we are asked to share their point-of-view. The major characters they kill are scum (the father's a rapist, the detective kills his partners during sex, the warden is arranging their murder) and most of the minor ones are mostly fat white trash and thus disposable (the contempt in which poor white people are held in contemporary cinema is at least another article if not a Ph.D. dissertation). Mickey and Mallory are victims and scourge. There is cure neither for them nor for us.

Natural Born Killers is depressing. Yet I found it riveting to watch. The film is a sensational, serious spectacle. It's the work of artists with a substantial command of the medium at their disposal and only the most crushing banalities to communicate.

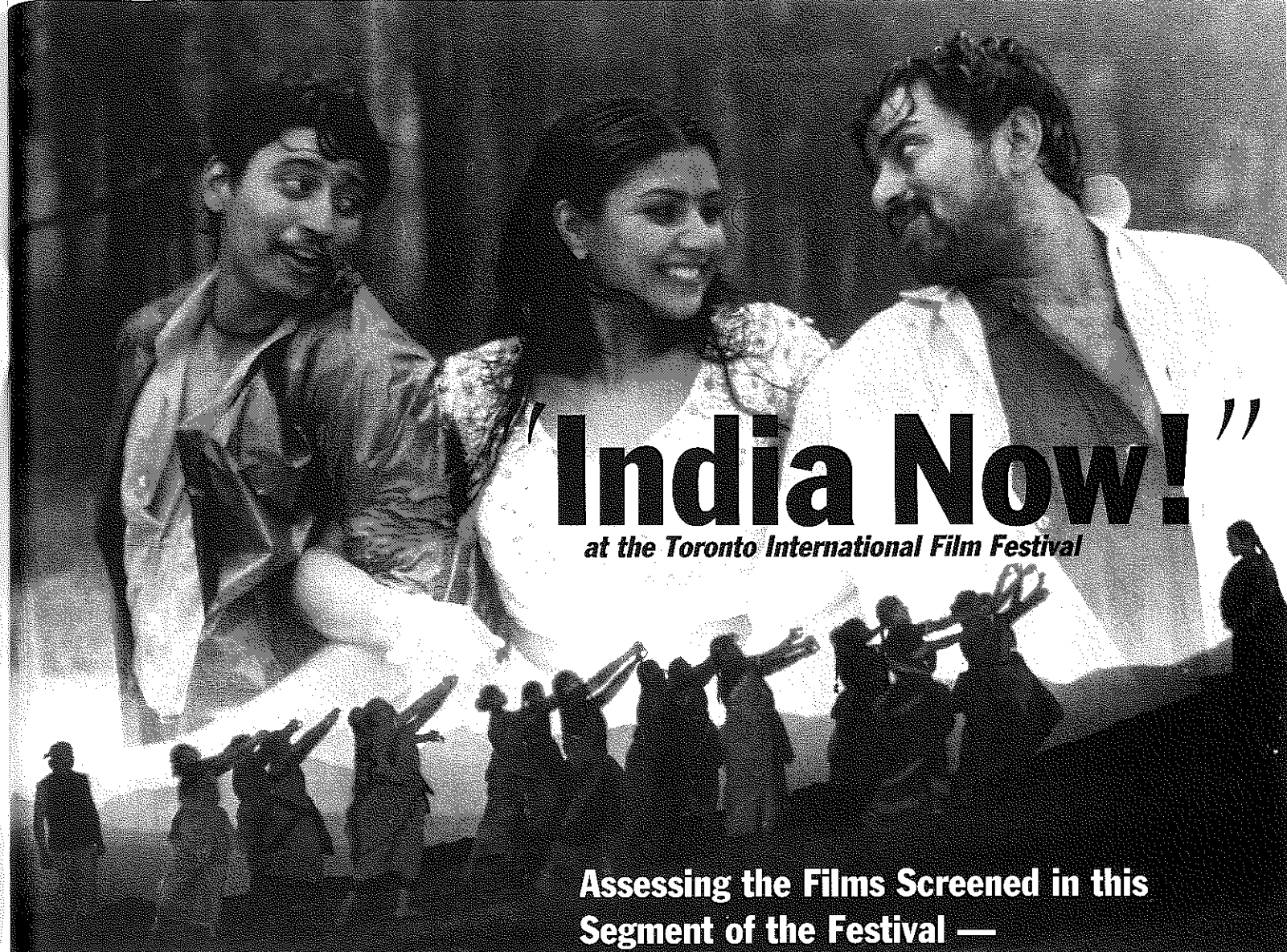
The future is murder. It's a bit shallow. If that were the message only in *Natural*

Born Killers, we could dismiss it. But it's cropping up across genres, throughout various media in many "First World" cultures. In one of the last songs in the film, Leonard Cohen warns that "the blizzard of the world has overcrossed the threshold and overturned the order of the soul."

Unfortunately, artists are more interested in representing the crumbling of the old order than in imagining the construction of new and better ones.

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Stills courtesy of Cinematheque Ontario. p.10: *Requiem pour un beau sans-cœur*. p.11: *Natural Born Killers*, *Serial Mom*. p.14: *Natural Born Killers*



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 (sitar music wafting through air pungent with the smell of samosas) but very short on substance; program notes that evoked "caravans and elephants and sumptuous cloth"; introductions to films that invoked a colonial legacy (Noah Cowan introducing the film *Bollywood* to the audience as "the jewel in the crown" of the program!). Then there was an inexplicable lack of work from women filmmakers—of the twenty-three directors represented, just two were women—an embarrassing ratio given the number of women now producing exciting new work in India. And ultimately there was nothing particularly exciting about the work presented. This was surely not

the best that India has to offer. I do believe the programmers, though, when they say they chose "the very best films we 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 or genres of work that are now being produced in India. Separated into three rather broad categories, there was the commercial, mainstream cinema as seen in the work of Mani Rathnam; the independent art cinema, as in Goutam Ghose (*The Kite*) or Adoor Gopalakrishnan (*Servile*); and finally the independent documentary scene, the best-known exponent of which is probably Anand Patwardhan (*Father, Son, and the Holy War*).

On the commercial front, for the past couple of decades India has been leading the world in film production, with the commercial film mills spinning out an average of eight hundred films a year. Consider that, on any one day, a film star in the

BORDER