The Cinema of Displeasure:

A semio-pragmatic approach to negative affect response and violent film.

by

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Abstract

The Cinema of Displeasure addresses the neglected subject of negative affect response in relation to violent fiction films. Using a cognitive-pragmatic approach, specifically Roger Odin's semio-pragmatic model of film spectatorship, this study takes as its starting point the widespread assumption that real-seeming violence is most capable of provoking a viewer's displeasure. Via two stages of viewer response analysis it evaluates the impact of both textual and extra-textual elements in the development of negative affect response to fiction film. The study reveals that negative affect responses are most intense not when the subject thinks of the images as real, but when the subject conceives of the film's enunciator and herself as real.

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Introduction

“Human beings cannot bear too much reality.”

-T.S. Eliot

The above is the sort of statement that assumes much, proves nothing and yet, is likely to inspire immediate agreement in almost anyone who comes across it. Certainly, I am one of those inclined to agree and I have dedicated my thesis to exploring this seemingly simple assumption. The impetus for this project came during an undergraduate course when my professor showed the notorious home invasion sequence from *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986). My classmates and I were warned that the clip contained graphic violence but I, having faith in my media-saturated upbringing, was not concerned. Indeed, I was once an avid action film fan and, as a child, I had considered the gore and mayhem of mainstream action movies hilarious, balletic, and ingenious entertainment. Thus, it was with no trepidation that I entered into my first viewing of *Henry*. It is difficult to convey how reviled, shocked, appalled, disgusted and disturbed I was by the footage I was shown. By its end I was seriously nauseous and the experience led to a minor obsession. I asked my peers what their reactions to *Henry* were, whether they were also traumatized by it and sickened by the thought of it. During seminar that week I plagued my fellow students with questions about whether *Henry*'s horridness is necessary, moral, worthy of human vision or worthy of banishment. I was amazed by the clip and amazed that it was capable of wrenching such a reaction from me, the jaded action film aficionado. My experience with *Henry*

piqued a somewhat morbid curiosity about negative responses to fiction films. I wondered why a viewer can watch one violent film and consider it pleasurable entertainment, but be utterly disturbed by another, similarly violent film. Does the difference lie in the viewer, the film, or both? How can we account for these different responses?

Now, years after my first viewing of *Henry*, the answers have begun to emerge. I was shown the video home invasion sequence in a documentary course and it was screened as an example of the use of video in fiction film. The point was well-taken. I can attest that this change in format can drastically affect a viewer's perception simply by creating the impression that what takes place on screen is "real." In the case of *Henry*, the impression of reality during the video sequence made the violent acts contained therein seem to me the vilest things I had ever seen. My first experience with *Henry* lies at the root of my wholehearted agreement with Eliot and his thoughts on the human tolerance for reality. Of course, I should add that my specific interest does not involve "reality" but the *impression* of reality in fiction films.¹ Furthermore, my main objects of interest are negative affect and its relation to film violence. If I were to rework Eliot's remark to reflect my particular concerns it would read, "While watching violent fiction films, human beings cannot bear too much reality." Of course, all would agree that this is not what the poet and author intended. However, my additions do not necessarily corrupt the meaning of the statement and its essential truth is reflected in the agreement among

¹ A note on what is usually a contentious term. Any attempt to define "reality" or "realness" or what is "real" is normally problematic but, because my analysis is of viewer responses, it is the respondents' task, not mine, to define these terms. My task is to discern what respondents perceive as real or realistic, why they form this impression, and what impact it has on their affective experience of a film.

film critics, film scholars and film viewers that real-seeming violence is more disturbing than blatantly fictional violence.

But what do I mean by real-seeming violence? What I am *not* referring to is graphic realism or “gore.” Anyone who has been to the movies since *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) knows that special effects can provide medically convincing visual representations of blood gushing, bones breaking, and heads exploding, and all without arousing a trace of sympathy or empathy from the audience. In fact, gore is most often contextualized within the framework of entertainment and often enjoyed by audience members. In the context of this project, real-seeming violence refers to that which is not appreciated as a special effect, nor enjoyed as a visceral thrill. Real-seeming violence does not necessarily exclude graphic realism, but it must have other characteristics that lead a viewer to feel disturbed, horrified, vulnerable, guilty, or even violated after having witnessed it. This project is dedicated to identifying these “other characteristics” and determining how and why they lead to this negative response in viewers.

My definition of a negative response is also quite specific. Film violence employs stunts and special effects that can lead to feelings of suspense and anticipation, but these are forms of cinematic pleasure and frame violence as entertainment. My attention is focused on truly negative reactions, what I call negative affect responses. Negative affect responses are negative, cognitively active, emotional reactions that viewers experience when they are confronted by undesirable stimuli. Negative affect responses make a viewer feel “bad” and can include elements of fear, guilt, revulsion, disgust, horror, vulnerability, shame, dread, etc. Negative affect responses do not include boredom,

dislike for an actor or director, or any other kind of aesthetic disapproval. There is a distinct and crucial difference between disliking a film and experiencing a negative affect response and this difference is observed in the coming pages.

Since my first harrowing glimpse of *Henry*, I have wondered about the process of viewing violent films. Why do separate films, similar in violence content, inspire drastically different reactions in viewers? To what extent does the presentation of violence determine a viewer's response? What kind of presentation is more likely to disturb a viewer? And above all, how can film violence inspire real terror, horror and displeasure in a spectator who is aware of its fictional status? Since my own response to *Henry* did not have the initial effect of answering these questions, I turned to other viewers' responses with the hope that their experiences would lead to a better understanding of negative affect response. I have gathered responses to two violent, yet very different films: *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994). Whereas I chose *Henry* because I was certain of its ability to inspire displeasure in the viewer, *Natural Born Killers* is infamously entertaining. Analysis of responses to the films is carried out in two stages. The first stage incorporates a pragmatic analysis wherein I determine what kinds of relationships exist between viewers and the films and seek to find which textual characteristics the viewers identify as responsible for their reactions². This section addresses my questions regarding the presentation of film violence and how it can affect viewer responses. The second stage is

² Although we will see that extra-textual factors play a part in the formation of viewer responses, many viewers understand their responses as reactions to the films' textual properties. The relationship between textual and extra-textual factors will be examined in chapter three.

a semio-pragmatic analysis. Semio-pragmatics is the study of how the relationship between a text and its user is formed. In this section I explore how viewers make sense of the films and I isolate some of the cognitive processes that lead to their responses. This second stage incorporates results from the preceding pragmatic stage and addresses my questions regarding how some fictional film violence is capable of stimulating negative affect response while other violence is experienced as pleasurable entertainment.

This is a very personal project and as useful as it has been in answering my questions, I hope that it is also accommodating to readers. The remainder of this introduction includes my methodology and an overview of my research. Chapters one and two are respective pragmatic analyses of *Natural Born Killers* and *Henry*. Chapter three is a semio-pragmatic analysis of responses to both films and it is followed by a brief conclusion.

Literature Review

My interest in negative affect response was established long before I began to research the topic. At the outset of this project I imagined a wealth of available resources but my preliminary foray into discussions of film violence revealed a curious absence of even the mention of displeasure. Indeed, few scholars address negative affect responses to violence. Due to pressing social concerns about the psychological effects of violent entertainment, much of the discussion of film violence focuses on understanding why viewers take pleasure in it. The following literature review, while not an exhaustive account, describes some of the major works I encountered during my research. I began

with Richard Allen, whose book *Projecting Illusion* (1995) is dedicated to film spectatorship and the impression of reality in cinema. Allen coins the term “projective illusionism” to describe how a viewer watches a film, aware that it is only a film, but experiencing it as a fully realized world.³ My hope that Allen might account for a viewer’s feelings of displeasure, however, was frustrated by his characterization of the viewing experience as one motivated entirely by desire and pleasure. When discussing film violence, Allen argues that the viewer either experiences voyeuristic pleasure, shares in the violent actant’s pleasure, or removes himself from the illusion to avoid displeasure. According to Allen, the spectator has the ability to choose his responses and assumes that viewers do not desire to feel utterly disturbed by fiction films.⁴ Correct as he may be in this assumption, his model of spectatorship fails to explain how viewers sometimes fail to avoid displeasure and experience negative affect response.

In his piece “Fearing Fictions” (1975), Kendall Walton does not deny the presence of fear in some viewing experiences but argues that the spectator’s fear is a form of “make-believe” that can be distinguished from real fear by the action that a spectator takes.⁵ Walton argues that were a spectator truly afraid of the images on-screen, he would take deliberate action to flee. For Walton, the lack of deliberate response to fear-inducing stimulus indicates that the viewer’s fear is not real and is adopted purely for the sake of amusement.⁶ As such, Walton also assumes that the

³ Allen, Richard, *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82-87.

⁴ Allen, 132-133.

⁵ Walton, Kendall, “Fearing Fictions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 1 (1978): 13.

⁶ Walton, 6-15.

viewing experience is always pleasurable and he does not account for negative affect response.

Although the title of Clark McCauley's "When Screen Violence is not Attractive" (2000), suggests an interest in negative affect response, in fact he devotes his research to discovering how negative emotions are experienced as positive. McCauley comes to the conclusion that the fictional nature of film allows viewers to enjoy violent and disgusting images. He posits two theories that he feels explains how viewers are able to experience negative emotions as positive. The first suggests that dramatically induced emotions are always enjoyable because they exist in a parallel but different reality. Such emotions are purified of self-interest and the necessity to act, and are free to be enjoyed as entertainment. The second theory explains that viewers who experience negative emotions experience an increase in arousal or stimulation. A viewer's enjoyment occurs given that an increase in arousal is enjoyable and that the fictional context reduces the negative quality of emotions more than it reduces arousal.⁷

The editor of *Screening Violence* (2000), Stephen Prince, makes a similar point when he argues that the visceral properties of cinema aestheticize everything, including violent acts. As such, he feels that it is nearly impossible to present violence on film in an unattractive way.⁸ Prince also claims that attractive film violence inspires volatile viewer responses and, in a separate and somewhat bizarre piece from David Slocum's (ed.) *Violence and American Cinema* (2001), William Rothman seems to confirm

⁷ McCauley, Clark, "When Screen Violence is Not Attractive," in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 159-161.

⁸ Prince, Stephen, "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design and Social Effects," in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 27.

Prince's argument. In "Violence and Film," Rothman suggests that during violent films, the camera can act as the spectator's weapon and provide a way for the viewer to feel as if he is inflicting harm without "getting blood on his hands."⁹ As such, Rothman characterizes the pleasure of film violence as a guilt-free way to act on one's violent impulses.

Rick Altman offers a similar but less peculiar explanation for the violent pleasures of cinema in his book *Film/Genre* (1999). Altman argues that genre films offer spectators culturally sanctioned activities and values while at the same time offering viewers the opportunity to diverge from cultural norms in favor of what he calls generic pleasure. He uses the example of the gangster film, wherein the characters' decisions to cheat, murder and steal provide the narrative content necessary to the genre and the enjoyment of generic pleasure. The spectator remains part of the culture that condemns violence but condones it in the context of the film if it plays to her generic desires. According to Altman this generic context allows a spectator to take counter-cultural pleasure in virtually any act or event.¹⁰

In "Death Takes a holiday, Sort Of" (1998) Vicki Goldberg offers a historical explanation for viewers' attraction to violence. Goldberg argues that in the late 18th century, Western European cultures experienced medical, social and religious shifts that caused death to virtually disappear from everyday life. With less exposure to death

⁹ Rothman, William, "Violence and Film," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2001): 44.

¹⁰ Altman, Richard, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 145-147.

people grew more attached to life and frightened of its increasingly unimaginable end.¹¹ Goldberg suggests that images of death, including violent films, have come to offer their consumers comfort by providing the illusion of control over mortality. She notes that such images may be “stared at, queried, turned away from, put away and later taken out again. [They do] not require action, as coming upon a dying man would, and the spectator determines whether to pay it attention or not.”¹² For Goldberg, violent entertainment is attractive because it allows viewers to cope with anxieties about death.

Of course, there are some who acknowledge the existence of negative reactions to film violence. In Devin McKinney’s “Violence: The Strong and The Weak” (2000) there is a distinction made between violence that arouses negative affect (what McKinney calls strong violence) and violence that does not (what he terms weak violence).¹³ Although McKinney suggests that violence is most disturbing when the viewer cares about the character involved, his piece does not address how and why negative affect responses are formed, but whether violent film serves any useful social purpose. In “The Violent Dance: A personal memoir of death in the movies” (2000), Vivian Sobchack addresses this same question, concluding that most film violence of the postmodern age is meaningless to film viewers and serves no valid social purpose. She attributes this to an increasingly technologized society and a more mediated relationship to the human

¹¹ Goldberg, Vicki, “Death Takes a Holiday, Sort Of,” in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28-38.

¹² Goldberg, 39.

¹³ McKinney, Devin, “Violence: The Strong and the Weak,” in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 100-103.

body.¹⁴ For filmgoers, this translates into a heightened sense of representation and the sense that movies are less real than ever. Sobchack does point out that some films are still able to depict pain and suffering in a way that is “felt by the flesh as real” (and thus capable of arousing negative affect) but she does not explore how this negative affect is arrived at.¹⁵

The question of whether film violence can be socially progressive often leads to unanswerable questions and endless rhetoric but a recent study out of the United Kingdom attempts to deal constructively with the concern. Annette Hill’s *Shocking Entertainment* (1997) is a viewer response study that seeks to determine why viewers choose to watch violent films. Using a sociological method uncommon to film studies, the book is based on a series of focus groups during which participants were asked to discuss their reactions to a selection of violent films. Although Hill’s study is essentially a study of pleasure and consumer choices, it was an important influence on this project because it also addresses what many other discussions of violent film do not, the viewer’s displeasure. Furthermore, her participants’ comments confirmed my feeling that a sense of realism in violent films is most likely to arouse negative affect response. Her respondents note that fictional violence is usually entertaining and that realistic violence is disturbing. Hill devotes a significant portion of her discussion to exploring why real violence and mediated images of real violence are disturbing for viewers.¹⁶ She does

¹⁴ Sobchack, Vivian, “The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies,” in *Screening Violence* ed. Stephen Prince, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 120-121.

¹⁵ Sobchack, 124.

¹⁶ Hill, Annette, *Shocking Entertainment : viewer response to violent movies*, (Luton, Bedfordshire, U.K: University of Luton Press, 1997), 75-78.

not, however, determine by what process fictional violence is able to arouse negative affect response, *in spite of* its fictional status.

My interest in negative affect led me to turn my attention to cognitivism, specifically Noel Carroll's "Film, Emotion, and Genre" in *Passionate Views* (1999). Carroll's specific approach to emotional response proved to be unrelated to my concerns but his piece had a major influence on the remainder of my research as it ultimately led me to explore pragmatics. Initially, I thought it would be useful given its focus on emotional responses to film. Carroll acknowledges that films may elicit many kinds of responses including sub-cognitive and cognitively impenetrable responses but he narrows his scope to what he calls emotions proper. These are cognitive responses to stimuli that are understood by film viewers as emotional and bodily states.¹⁷ Carroll maintains that most narrative fiction films are emotively pre-focused. Filmmakers achieve this by presenting characters and events in ways that will inspire predictable emotional responses. He also calls such films criterially pre-focused, noting that "[once] we recognize the object under the criterially relevant categories – like the harmful for fear or the wrongful for anger – the relevant emotion is apt [...] to be raised in us."¹⁸ Of course, a criterially pre-focused text is supplemented by "a concern or pro attitude on the part of the viewer with respect to the way in which the depicted situation in the fiction is or is not going."¹⁹ For instance, we feel anger if a character we *like* has been wronged. The combination of a criterially pre-focused text and certain concerns and pro attitudes can

¹⁷ Carroll, Noel, "Film, Emotion, & Genre," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, & Emotion*, eds. Carl Plantiga and Greg Smith (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 24.

¹⁸ Carroll, 27-30.

¹⁹ Carroll, 31.

lead a viewer to have any number of “broadly predictable responses.”²⁰ Having established the viewing process as such, Carroll suggests a new direction for cinema research:

Here, the critic, using herself as a detector, begins by noting the emotion the film has elicited in her [...] Next, using the criteria of the emotion in question as a hypothesis, she can review the way in which the filmic material is articulated in order to isolate the pertinent depictions or descriptions in the film that instantiate the concept or meet the criteria of the pertinent emotion. Additionally, she will want to determine which features of the film are designed to engender pro attitudes in viewers, along with determining what those pro attitudes are. By following this procedure, one can pith the emotional structure of the film.²¹

Given my questions regarding the extent to which textual components affect viewer responses to violent film I found Carroll’s approach intriguing. The pragmatic nature of his method has certainly influenced this project, but some of his underlying assumptions make this particular method of analysis inappropriate for my purposes. For Carroll, emotional responses are always the same, regardless of the nature of the stimulus. He does not consider that the same emotion might vary according to the context in which the stimulus is received. This seems an oversight if one considers the affective differences between the following three situations: 1) you are watching the latest blockbuster action film and the villain is about to shoot Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character in the head. Arnold appears unconcerned, even cocky; 2) you are watching the last seconds of a grim war drama. The protagonist (who is played by a phenomenal, but unknown, actor) is one of several haggard and defeated people who kneel before their

²⁰ Carroll, 31.

²¹ Carroll, 33.

captors, awaiting imminent execution; 3) you are about to be shot in the head by a desperate thug who wants your wallet. In situation number one, you may fear for the protagonist's life but your concern is superficial, as you are certain that Arnold will make a miraculous escape. In situation number two, there is a part of you that expects a happy resolution but, given the tone of the film thus far, you expect the worst. You may feel truly saddened for this man, whom you cannot easily dismiss as "just an actor," and fear for his safety. In situation number three, you would soil yourself in abject terror.

It is true that all three of these instances involve fear, but each constitutes a very different way to be afraid. Carroll does not address these fundamental differences between similar emotions and treats all emotions, regardless of the nature of their stimulus, as constant. As such, Carroll's approach is not a useful way to address my questions regarding the different affect reactions to film violence. Nonetheless, Carroll's work sparked an interest in the cognitive aspects of film spectatorship and the influence of his pragmatic method is apparent in chapters one and two.

Methodology

The object of this study is to determine by what process a viewer experiences a negative affect response after watching a film that is known to be a fiction. While displeasure is certainly not a new concept, this project is useful in that it is one of few studies to seriously and specifically address the rather neglected subject of negative affect response in relation to violent cinema. Via pragmatic and semio-pragmatic analyses I hope to first reveal which textual aspects are identified by viewers as disturbing and then

determine by what process viewers understand these textual aspects as capable of inspiring a negative affect response.

The films included in this project were chosen with these objectives in mind. *Henry* was an obvious choice, given my certainty of its ability to inspire negative affect response. The second film, *Natural Born Killers*, was chosen because it is opposed to *Henry* in virtually every way. *Henry* is a serious, aesthetically subdued, narratively sparse, minimalist, low-budget, independent director's depiction of a quiet serial killer whereas *Natural Born Killers* is a hyperactive, stylistically complex, overstated, big-budget, blockbuster director's bombastic rant about two enthusiastic mass murders. For all of their differences, however, the two films share some important characteristics. Both narratives hinge on the violent behavior of their title characters, ensuring that viewers are exposed to a great deal of violent imagery. Both were released in mainstream theatres in the early 1990s and have been categorized as part of the new wave of violent films that were released during this period.²²

Although the films themselves are important, viewer responses constitute the integral ingredient for this project. The responses consist of reviews written independently of this study. Some were written by professional film critics and have been taken from newspapers or magazines. Amateur respondents penned the remaining reviews and I have divided these into two categories. Level One responses provide a critical point of view and are comparable to professional film reviews. Their authors

²² Hill includes *Henry* and *Natural Born Killers* in this new wave, along with *Man Bites Dog* (Belvoux, Bonzel, Poelvoorde, 1992), *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), *True Romance* (Scott, 1993), *Bad Lieutenant* (Ferrara, 1992), and *Killing Zoe* (Avary, 1994).

usually display an avid interest in and knowledge of film and their reviews are coherent and literate. Level Two responses are best described as fan reviews. They are usually less lengthy than a professional review and adhere to no particular format. These reviews are not critiques, but free-form expressions of their authors' opinions. They are often littered with errors but are invaluable for the raw, informal insights they provide into the viewing experience.

The amateur reviews, as well as some of the professional reviews, were gathered via the Internet. Only two criteria were applied during the selection of reviews. The first was that viewers do not indicate a bias either in the direction of sadism or extreme sensitivity to violence.²³ For instance, reviews taken from an anti-violence religious magazine would be excluded, as would reviews from a website touted as a meeting place for ardent fans of extremely violent and horrific films. The second stipulation was that reviewers describe their reactions and responses in significant detail. If responses met these criteria they were chosen at random.

My decision to use pre-written responses stems mainly from the fact that I am not sufficiently trained nor equipped to mount a full-blown viewer survey. The tasks associated with gathering "original" responses (including recruiting suitable participants, designing questionnaires, surveys and registration forms, arranging viewings, moderating focus groups and transcribing data, etc.) were not only beyond my means, but also unnecessary given that most pre-written reviews provide unprompted, relatively unbiased

²³ I should note, however, that *Henry*'s affective power is substantial even for jaded fans of ultra-violent film. In *Killing for Culture: An illustrated history of Death Film* (1994), David Slater and David Kerekes display a blasé attitude toward many of the violent films they discuss, but note that "there is something awful about the camcorder [video home invasion] episode" in *Henry* (59).

accounts of viewer experiences. Of course, utilizing this method means that I cannot benefit from knowing each respondent's background and the circumstances under which he or she viewed the film. While such considerations may figure in future studies, at this point in time I do not take gender, social or cultural differences into account and focus only the viewer's immediate relation to the text.

Although I acknowledge that individual reactions are complex beyond even the reviewer's own understanding, to meet the needs of this project I have employed a simplified model viewer response that characterizes any response as consisting of cognitive and cognitive/emotional elements. Purely cognitive responses reflect the viewer's intellectual experience of the film and determine whether or not respondents "like" the film. Their appreciation or criticism can extend to the film's message, the craft of its actors, director or any other artist associated with the film. A positive or negative cognitive response determines whether the respondent gives a positive or negative review of the film.

Cognitive/emotional or affect responses reflect the viewer's emotional experience of the film. During the viewing experience a respondent may feel good, bad, great, terrible or emotionally neutral at any given point. However, respondents invariably indicate what emotional states dominate their responses, thus allowing their affect responses to be summarized as positive, negative or neutral. Cognitive and affect responses are largely independent of one another. A viewer may experience a negative affect response but still enjoy the film on an intellectual level. For example, one may find themselves repulsed by a film (negative affect response) but enjoy its message and

artistry (positive cognitive response). Alternatively, a viewer might find a film very funny (positive affect response) but still find the film artistically bankrupt and largely uninteresting (negative cognitive response). For this reason I suggest that the relationship between cognitive and affect responses be understood as intersecting axes wherein one end of each axis represents an extreme positive response and the other an extreme negative response, with the mid-point representing a neutral response.

On Graph A, each point represents a different combination of possible cognitive and affect responses. This graph is not intended to provide exact quantitative measurements of cognitive or affect response. Rather, it will provide visual generalizations of my analysis results. Point A represents a response wherein the viewer had an intellectual appreciation for the film and felt positive emotions throughout. Point B represents a viewer who had an intellectual appreciation of the film despite experiencing negative emotions during its viewing. Point C indicates a response wherein, despite feeling positive emotions throughout the viewing, the reviewer had little intellectual appreciation for the film. Point D is representative of a viewer who was upset or troubled by the film as well as unimpressed with it on an intellectual level. Point E represents a completely neutral response. Graphic summaries of responses to *Natural Born Killers* and *Henry* can be found in chapters one and two.

Graph A

Chapter One

1.1 *Natural Born Killers*: Film Summary & Context

At the heart of *Natural Born Killers* there lies a love story about Mickey and Mallory Knox (Woody Harrelson & Juliette Lewis), a pair of mass murderers who sometimes literally cut a path through America during a weeks-long killing spree that leaves over 50 people dead. Much of the film is relayed through a series of flashback sequences and the plot begins when Mickey meets Mallory at her wildly dysfunctional family home. Mallory's incestuous father (Rodney Dangerfield) does not approve of her instant affection for Mickey, but his efforts to keep the lovers separated are met with murderous rage. The couple dispatch Mallory's parents, proclaim themselves married, and set out on their violent road trip. Their crimes attract the attention of tabloid television star Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr.), who documents their activities on his erroneous and overblown television show, *American Maniacs*. Although Gale is careful to display phony concern for the victims of violence on camera, he spends most of his time in a joyous, ratings-induced frenzy. America's favorite cop, Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore), also pursues Mickey and Mallory. Scagnetti harbors some homicidal tendencies of his own and his pursuit of the killers leaves at least one innocent body in his wake. Eventually, Scagnetti captures Mickey and Mallory and, after beating them senseless, he turns them over to Warden Dale McClusky (Tommy Lee Jones) of Botanga Penitentiary. The narrative resumes one year later when McClusky invites Scagnetti to escort Mickey and Mallory to a psychiatric prison. The warden and detective make plans to have Mickey and Mallory killed during the trip but Wayne Gale unwittingly undoes

their plot. Gale arranges to interview Mickey on live television one day before the transfer is to take place. Inmates watching the interview are incited to riot by Mickey's remarks and, with Gale acting as a willing hostage, Mickey seizes the opportunity to rescue Mallory, kill Scagnetti, and escape from prison. Leaving McClusky to be murdered by the rioting inmates, Mickey and Mallory flee, taking Gale with them. Once clear of the prison, Mickey proclaims that he must kill Gale to make a statement about the evils of tabloid television. He and Mallory shoot him and stroll away to start a family.

Released in 1994 and made with a budget of 50 million dollars for Warner Bros. Studios, *Natural Born Killers* is described by director Oliver Stone as a satirical vision of a society fascinated by violence. The film is something of a technical marvel. Stone employs over 15 different formats (e.g. 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm formats in black and white and colour, digital video in black and white and colour, etc.) and makes over 3000 cuts over the course of the film.²⁴ He uses other technical effects like rear-projection and vertical editing (edits which reveal a character's interpretation of events) to further complicate the visual structure of the film.²⁵ The aural effects are equally complex, with Stone layering virtually every moment of film with popular songs, exaggerated sound effects or an expressive score.

The film contains a great deal of violence; over the course of the film viewers witness over 40 murders as well as several instances of extreme physical abuse. The film

²⁴ As revealed on the commentary track of the *Natural Born Killers* Special Edition DVD (2000, Trimark).

²⁵ Stone discusses this technique on the commentary track of the *Natural Born Killers* Special Edition DVD (2000, Trimark).

ignited a firestorm of controversy since its release and Stone has often found himself defending his film. In a recent interview with Xan Brooks of *The Guardian*, Stone explains, “*Natural Born Killers* was never intended as a criticism of violence. How can you criticize violence? Violence is in us - it's a natural state of man. What I was doing was pointing the finger at the system that feeds off that violence, and at the media that package it for mass consumption.”²⁶ I have divided 13 reviews of *Natural Born Killers* to reflect reviewers’ cognitive and affect responses to the film. Viewers who experience positive cognitive responses appreciate Stone’s message and agree with his criticism of those who package and sell violence. Of these respondents, some enjoy the director’s stylized depictions of violence and some feel the violence scenes are disturbing reminders of real social concerns. Most respondents, however, display negative cognitive reactions and accuse Stone of hypocrisy. Such critics observe that *Natural Born Killers* frames violence as salable entertainment, and note that several of the film’s textual traits (including a kinetic editing style, expressive set, lighting, and sound designs, a non-stop soundtrack, and gory special effects, among others) prevent them from forming a negative affect response.

1.2 Natural Born Killers – Graphic Response Summary

Graph 1.0 is a visual summary of responses to *Natural Born Killers*. Points A-D represent the types of reactions displayed by respondents, while the numbers in parentheses indicate how many respondents shared in this response. The graph is not

²⁶ Oliver Stone in an interview with Xan Brooks, “Natural Born Copycats,” *The Guardian*, December 20, 2002, <<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,862931,00.html>>.

Graph 1.0

Table 1.0

Point A: Positive Cognitive Response – Positive Affect Response

Ryan A., Level Two Respondent

Roger Ebert, *The Chicago Sun-Times***Point B: Positive Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response**

Michael Jacobson, Level One Respondent

Thresh, Level Two Respondent

Point C: Neutral Cognitive Response – Neutral Affect Response

Ram Samudrala, Level One Respondent

Point D: Negative Cognitive Response – Neutral Affect Response

James Berardinelli, Level One Respondent

Jim Emerson, Level One Respondent

Hal Hinson, *The Washington Post*Desson Howe, *The Washington Post*Jeffrey Niesel, *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*

Harvey O'Brien, Level One Respondent

Terrence Rafferty, *The New Yorker*Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone Magazine*

intended to precisely quantify reactions but to provide a graphic demonstration of general responses to the film. This graph reveals that most respondents failed to experience a negative affect response while watching *Natural Born Killers*. Table 1.0 indicates who among the respondents experienced each type of reaction.

1.3 Positive Cognitive Response – Positive Affect Response

Two of thirteen respondents indicate that they enjoyed *Natural Born Killers* on both a cognitive and affective level. Roger Ebert, who is the only professional critic to indicate any kind of positive response to *Natural Born Killers*, is impressed with the film as a social critique and discusses its relevance to contemporary events:

Maybe Stone meant his movie as a warning about where we were headed, but because of [the O.J. Simpson murder trial] it plays as an indictment of the way we are now. We are becoming a society more interested in crime and scandal than in anything else - more than in politics and the arts, certainly, and maybe even more than sports, unless crime is our new national sport.²⁷

Although violence plays a central role in the film, Ebert realizes that *Natural Born Killers* is “not so much about the killers [...] as about the feeding frenzy they inspire.” Ebert feels that the film’s meaning transcends its violent content and, moreover, that the violence is not extreme or disturbing in nature:

[Y]ou do not see as much actual violence as you think you do in this movie; it's more the tone, the attitude, and the breakneck pacing that gives you that impression. Stone is not making a geek show, with close-ups of

²⁷ Ebert, Roger, “Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer,” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 September, 1990, <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1990/09/566963.html> (April 2002). All subsequent quotes from Ebert on this film are from this source.

blood and guts. Like all good satirists, he knows that too much realism will weaken his effect. He lets you know he's making a comedy. There's an over-the-top exuberance to the intricate crosscut editing [...] and to the hyperactive camera [...] Stylistically, the film is a cinematic bazaar, combining color and black and white, film and video, 35mm and Super 8, sitcom style and animated cartoons, fiction and newsreels. They're throwing stuff at the screen by the gleeful handfuls.

He suggests that Stone “understands that celebrity killers have achieved such a bizarre status in America that it's almost impossible to satirize the situation – to get beyond real life”. Ebert feels that Stone's comedic, surreal presentation of violence is integral to the film's function. He calls Stone's film a “wonderland of murderous satire” and receives its violence almost as enthusiastically as Stone presents it. Despite its importance to the meaning of the film, Ebert hints that Stone's stylistic excess is initially distracting. He comments, “Seeing this movie once is not enough. The first time is for the visceral experience, the second time is for the meaning.” Far from a criticism of the film, Ebert's remark reveals his approval of Stone's decision to portray violence in an attractive manner, precisely because he feels that it best serves the film's satirical message.

Level Two reviewer, Ryan A., is the only other respondent to express appreciation for all aspects of *Natural Born Killers*. Like Ebert, he finds the film to be socially relevant and he expresses an interest in Stone's message:

I was [...] impressed with media reaction to acts of violence; how it's sensationalized and hyped and hyped and hyped, how serial killers have the same celebrity status as, well, celebrities.²⁸

²⁸ A., Ryan, “Natural Born Killers,” 6 October, 1998, <<http://efilmcritic.com/review.php?movie=761&reviewer=7>> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Ryan A. are from this source.

Unlike Ebert, who expresses a relatively subdued and professional appreciation for the film's violent sequences, Ryan A. provides a fan's response to the violent scenes. In his review he writes, "it's violent and it's trippy and it's hilarious." The combination of adjectives suggests that Ryan A. experiences the film's violent content as simultaneously violent *and* trippy *and* hilarious. Given that *Natural Born Killers* was a commercial success, and thus enjoyed and respected by a significant portion of the film going population, Ryan A's response does not indicate a sadistic tendency on his part. In fact, later in his response he explains that he is not normally a fan of violent films:

I don't like it because I'm into violence. I'm actually pretty much a wimp when it comes to violence and gore.

One can assume that the trippy and comedic aspects of the film combined to allow Ryan A., a self-described wimp, to enjoy a significantly violent film.

1.4 Positive Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response

Only two respondents indicate negative affect responses to *Natural Born Killers*. These responses are relatively mild and are accompanied by positive cognitive responses.²⁹ Michael Jacobson, a Level One respondent, admires the aesthetic properties of the film, along with what he feels is a socially relevant message. He adds, however, that the film is not necessarily pleasant to watch:

²⁹ When compared with responses to *Henry*, Jacobson and Thresh experience mild negative affect responses to *Natural Born Killers*. They also indicate that their negative affect responses are not as intense as what other viewers may have experienced in response to *Natural Born Killers*. I must, however, take their claims to negative affect responses as accurate and honest measurements of their viewing experiences. However mild their responses may be, they are the *only* negative affect responses to *Natural Born Killers* in this study. As such, they usefully reveal what aspects of *Natural Born Killers* are, even mildly, disturbing for viewers.

I personally appreciate *Natural Born Killers* because it is bravura filmmaking; a movie made with passion, anger, and cynicism about the times in which we live. It's not what I would call a pleasurable viewing experience—indeed, I've seen people who've watched it for the first time look a bit pale and shaky afterwards—but it is not a necessary commodity of art that it be palatable in order to be good.³⁰

Jacobson suggests that the violent content and its presentation are integral to *Natural Born Killers'* function as a satire:

What Stone has created here is an all out assault on the senses, and an uncompromising and disturbing use and juxtaposition of images designed to rattle America right down to her de-sensitized guts. He doesn't film his violence the way a typical action director might. Sometimes he makes it surreal, as we follow a bullet that seems to pause before striking home, or track a spinning knife as it crashes through a window and finds a warm body to rest in. Most of the time, we see images reflecting the psyche of Mickey and Mallory as they kill: blood soaked demons, raging fires, bits of animation. It never lets us forget that something horrifying is at work here.

Jacobson feels that Stone's stylistic approach makes the violent content more disturbing. Like Ebert, Jacobson finds the violent content unrealistic, but unlike Ebert, he takes no pleasure from it. He indicates that the overall aesthetic acts as a powerful reminder of the film's message and in fact, his negative affect response is inextricably linked to the ideas lurking behind the images. For instance, the merging of entertainment and violence in everyday life horrifies Jacobson and his comments on the "I Love Mallory" sequence reflect this:

Consider the scenes of Mallory's childhood, as we witness her receiving verbal and sexual abuse from her ogre father [...] and how unsettling Stone

³⁰ Jacobson, Michael. "Natural Born Killers." *DVD Movie Central*. January, 2000. <http://www.dvdmoviecentral.com/ReviewsText/natural_born_killers.htm> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Jacobson are from this source.

makes it by presenting it like a TV sitcom, on video tape with studio lighting, complete with canned laughter. In other words, he presents it like entertainment, because such real life horrors have actually become just that in our world.

Jacobson notes that the film's flashy aesthetic blurs the boundary between violence and entertainment and points to a similar epidemic in reality. Because he understands the film in relation to a troubling reality, Jacobson does not receive *Natural Born Killers*' violent episodes as entertainment.

The other respondent to reveal his negative affect response to *Natural Born Killers* also accepts the validity of Stone's satire. Level Two respondent, Thresh, feels that the film usefully comments on the overwhelming presence of violence in the media, citing news reports as a major example. He adds, however, that the graphic nature of the film's violence may prevent some viewers from accepting Stone's message:

Watching [...] this movie I could immediately tell it was going to be a movie that not everyone would understand, especially those horrified by gruesome scenes and extreme violence.³¹

Although Thresh finds the film's violent content gruesome, like Jacobson, he is not disturbed by gore, but rather by the relationship of the film's violence to reality:

One of the scariest things about the movie, and I quote Oliver Stone is that "Mickey and Mallory could happen any day" especially here in America. Our media glorifies violence on a daily basis, we have plenty of neglected and abused children in this country. So it's just a matter of time before something of this caliber becomes a reality in the world. It has already come close (Columbine: two kids, guns, and killing. What did it do? Spark

³¹ Thresh, "The Glorification of Violence," 6 April 2000, < <http://www.epinions.com/mvie-review-B3D-E05EF0C-38EC8103-prod4>> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Thresh are from this source.

even more school shootings) if you look at it likes (sic) this and realize how real it almost is, it becomes a whole different movie.

Thresh's negative affect response stems from his belief that social ills, like a media and violence saturated environment and child abuse, lead to real violence. He perceives the Columbine murders and the other school shootings that followed as evidence of the validity of the *Natural Born Killers*' relationship to reality and reason to be fearful of real-life versions of Mickey and Mallory.

1.5 Neutral Cognitive Response – Neutral Affect Response

Level One respondent Ram Samudrala's value judgment of *Natural Born Killers* is ambiguous to say the least. In the same review he calls the film "Stone's latest venture into the inane," "boring," "great," "an intelligent attack on your senses," and a potential "waste of time."³² His cognitive response averages as neutral and his affect response is neutral as well:

The movie is designed to shock, and at the same time desensitize. Stone seems to be parodying how the media has almost nulled the shock of a vicious slaying, but all he ends up parodying is his ability to make movies. It is true, that in the first few minutes, you are reasonably shocked, but then you get very used to the blood, the gore and the fact that the shots dance around you much like the music videos you see on MTV. After a couple of hours of this, it gets very boring. [...] Stone, in the end, doesn't do anything really shocking, because everything he does we're used to.

Samudrala feels that Stone's stylized treatment of violence leads spectators to develop immunity to violent imagery and even suggests that this "shock" aesthetic is so prevalent

³² Samudrala, Ram, "Natural Born Killers," <http://www.ram.org/ramblings/movies/natural_killers.html> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Samudrala are from this source.

in popular culture that the violence eventually becomes boring. He goes on to propose that stylized violence and its desensitizing effects lead an audience to react irresponsibly to violence:

During the movie, at certain high-action spots, nervous titters were prevalent from the audience, sometimes at very inappropriate times. What this indicates is really something I can only speculate on. I believe the laughs are an indication of a shirking of responsibility, and the whole audience reaction to the movie itself represents exactly what Stone is trying to parody.

Samudrala does not attribute these callous reactions solely to the audience. He expresses awareness that the film's style invites such a reaction. Samudrala's comments reveal an assumption that the violence of *Natural Born Killers* should be disturbing and further, that reactions to fictional violence should be judged by the same moral standards as real violence. In his experience, however, the entertaining elements of *Natural Born Killers*, such as the slick visual style and "hip" soundtrack, allow viewers to shed their moral responsibilities and laugh at what would otherwise be shocking instances of violence.

1.6 Negative Cognitive Response – Neutral Affect Response

Eight of thirteen respondents provide resoundingly negative cognitive reactions to *Natural Born Killers*, with the consensus being that the film is an utter failure as a satire. These critics also display neutral affect responses, and many of them count its unaffectiveness as another failure on Stone's part. Without fail, respondents go out of their way to describe how the director's overblown aesthetic ruins the cognitive and affective potential of the film. Hal Hinson of *The Washington Post* observes:

The main problem with *Killers* [...] is that it degenerates into the very thing it criticizes. Taken from an original story by Quentin Tarantino [...] and expanded by Stone, [...] *Killers* is intended as a gonzo critique of the mass media and, by extension, of the bloodthirsty legions of couch potatoes whose prurient taste guarantees that the garbage rises to the top of the charts. But the film doesn't make it as a piece of social criticism. Primarily this is because the movie's jittery, psychedelic style is so obviously a kick for Stone to orchestrate. Bloody, pulpy excess is his thing; it's what he does best.³³

Hinson perceives the pairing of violence and a slick visual style as evidence of Stone's insincerity. He observes that by employing a seductive aesthetic, Stone frames violence as entertainment, a tactic which Hinson notes not only neutralizes the affective elements of the violent content but also nullifies the director's message, thus transforming *Natural Born Killers* into exactly what it purports to criticize.

Level One respondent, Jim Emerson also feels that *Natural Born Killers* fails to qualify as a satire on the grounds that it becomes its own target:

Far from being a "daring" movie on any level, *Natural Born Killers* is the most brain-dead and cowardly film I've seen in a very long time. It's not that it doesn't have the courage of its convictions; it just doesn't have any convictions. Instead, it's just a barf-bag of derivative MTV imagery spiked with a heavy dose of cheap irony [...] This movie does *exactly* the same thing it pretends to be criticizing -- and gets off on it. Stone wants to have it both ways -- to condemn violence and its exploitation, and to acknowledge that it's fun to groove on that violence after all.³⁴

Although he acknowledges that viewing *Natural Born Killers* is a "disagreeable experience," he makes it very clear that this has nothing to do with the film's violent

³³ Hinson, Hal, "Natural Born Killers," *The Washington Post*, 26 August, 1994, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/naturalbornkillersrhinson_a0628c.htm> (June 2003).

³⁴ Emerson, Jim. "Natural Born Killers." 1994. <<http://www.cinepad.com/reviews/nbkreview.htm>> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Emerson are from this source.

content and everything to do with Stone's "bombast, sensationalism [,] overkill and [...] propensity to just throw up anything on the screen and see if it sticks." Emerson holds this purgative visual aesthetic partly responsible for the film's inappropriately palatable violence:

Natural Born Killers [...] cheaply sentimentalizes, romanticizes and glorifies its moronic killers so that the audience cheers them on in their murder spree - whether they're attacking a waitress in a roadside diner or one of the cardboard villains the movie sets up as their opposition.

He goes on to measure the impact of Stone's aesthetic on other viewers' responses to violence:

I've talked to friends who have said they "liked" *NBK*, but none of them could tell me why, or tell me what they thought the movie was trying to accomplish. To them it was a big-screen video game (*Doom* in widescreen!) - no more, no less. They said they just got off on the bombardment of sensations that the movie offers. [...] I think that's the test of people's response to *NBK*: If you just want to groove on the gory ride, you'll probably "like" it; if you bother to ask what the movie's up to, you realize it's just a stupid, cliché-filled mess.

Emerson's negative cognitive response to the film's message and his neutral affect response to its violence have their roots in the same problem, that is the film's manic and entertaining aesthetic.

Desson Howe of *The Washington Post* is simply unimpressed with Stone's "trite pseudo-admonishment about America's couch-potato conspiracy" and he remains resolutely unaffected by the film's message and violence:³⁵

One doesn't leave this movie profoundly shocked about our collectively inured state, or the fact that Stone got us to laugh at caricatured violence.

³⁵ Howe, Desson, "Natural Born Killers," *The Washington Post*, 26 August, 1994, < http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/naturalbornkillersrhowe_a0628e.htm > (June, 2003). All subsequent quotes from Howe are from this source.

One merely leaves puzzled and wondering: Is that it? He's not telling us anything. He's riffing on a theme and--intentionally or not--contributing to the junk pile he supposedly decries.

Howe also feels that the film qualifies as its own target and points to the pyrotechnic visuals and overblown characters as the basis for his responses.

Howe's criticism is relatively benign compared to that of Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* Magazine. Calling Stone's hypocrisy "galling," Travers is vehement in his condemnation of *Natural Born Killers* and its' attempt at satire:³⁶

Stone calls this bile satire. But it's not satire to skewer idiots. Satire respects the insidious power of its targets. Satire takes careful aim; *Killers* is crushingly scattershot. By putting virtuoso technique at the service of lazy thinking, Stone turns his film into the demon he wants to mock: cruelty as entertainment.

In addition to stating the reasons for his negative cognitive response, Travers also explains why he is unaffected by the film's violence. He begins his review by calling *Natural Born Killers* a "volcanically violent [...] surreal splatter fest" and, as a professional courtesy, he warns those readers with a weak stomach against its sensory assault. Never, however, does he indicate that the film is disturbing. Instead, he dedicates his review to explaining why the film fails to truly engage viewers. He lays much of the blame on Stone's revision of Quentin Tarantino's original script. Travers suggests that Stone's version abandons Tarantino's trademark "nuance, wit and pungent language: all the stuff that makes us care". Travers also feels that the film is "sabotaged

³⁶ Travers, Peter, "Natural Born Killers," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 9 August, 1994, <<http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/review.asp?mid=73132>> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Travers regarding this film are from this source.

by Stone's hyperkinetic editing, his disdain for language, [and] his unslaked thirst for bing, bang, boom". In other words, Stone seems more interested in special effects that affecting his audience.

Terrence Rafferty echoes these sentiments in a scathing review for *The New Yorker*:

Oliver Stone's flashy, hyperbolic *Natural Born Killers* sells itself as a shocking satiric vision of violence in America, but it's one of the least disturbing films about mass murder that you'll ever see [...]. The oddest thing about the movie is that, despite the gore and hysteria, it doesn't feel particularly impassioned; it's a frivolous barrage.³⁷

He establishes that despite generous doses of violent content and an ostensibly shocking message, the film remains powerless to inspire cognitive appreciation or affective disgust in viewers. He lays much of the blame for this on Stone's visual style:

The slice and dice editing purees everything to a thin, bland consistency: the concoction looks a little scary but it goes down like baby food. Even the hyper-kinetic visual style is soothingly familiar, from music videos, sneaker ads, and the laughably awful "trip" sequences of late sixties movies - nothing to get hung up about really. [...] When the picture is over, you realize that you've been watching it in a peculiar state of semi-attentiveness, registering the torrent of sense data without actually caring much about putting it together.³⁸

Like Samudrala, Rafferty feels that Stone's aesthetic is over-stimulating and that it has the effect of temporarily desensitizing viewers to violent imagery.

James Berardinelli, a Level One respondent, makes a similar argument. Although Berardinelli indicates that he was initially impressed with *Natural Born Killers*, his appreciation for the film's message was soured by Stone's relentless approach:

³⁷ Rafferty, Terrence, "Helter Skelter," *The New Yorker* 70 (1994): 106.

³⁸ Rafferty, 1994, 107.

As a satire on the media's infatuation with violence and murderers, *Natural Born Killers* hits the bull's-eye. The problem is, this is a one-note movie. It repeatedly hammers home the same point until the audience is bludgeoned into senselessness.³⁹

His impatience extends to the film's visual aesthetic as well:

Then there are the visuals - a virtual cornucopia of photographic tricks. Stone frequently switches not only from color to black-and-white, but from one film stock to another. He uses a variety of angles and filters. Animation, slow motion, fast motion, rear screen projection - he doesn't miss a gimmick. At times it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to focus on the story with all that's going on. Used sparingly, these sorts of devices can be very effective [...] Stone, however, doesn't know the meaning of moderation or subtlety, and opts instead for something that is excessive and self-indulgent.

Berardinelli feels that Stone's gimmickry interferes with the film's content and concludes that *Natural Born Killers* is a meaningless and unaffecting "mess."

Harvey O'Brien is another Level One respondent who is entirely unimpressed with *Natural Born Killers*. Far from finding *Natural Born Killers* disturbing, O'Brien argues that the film makes the point that everything, including itself, is meaningless. As such, he feels that the film is incapable of inspiring anything but apathy in a viewer:

It is a meaningless spectacle about the meaningless spectacle of (post)modern life. It is style without content which argues content is pointless and irrelevant. It is an ode to primal instincts (sex and death) which shoves its cinematic snout in pop sociocultural references no more profound in their employment than the collected dialogues of Beavis and Butthead.⁴⁰

³⁹ Berardinelli, James, "Natural Born Killers," 1994, < http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/n/natural_born.html > (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Berardinelli are from this source.

⁴⁰ O'Brien, Harvey, "Natural Born Killers," <<http://indigo.ie/~obrienh/nbk.htm>>, (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from O'Brien are from this source.

Although he acknowledges the cultural criticism at the heart of the film, and the technical competence required to create its visual assault, O'Brien maintains that *Natural Born Killers* fails to engage the viewer. O'Brien singles out Stone's reliance on stock footage, internal editing and television nostalgia as postmodern elements that contribute to the film's insignificance:

It juxtaposes Rodney King with *I Love Lucy* and asks not that we draw conclusions from it, but that we realize both are now part of the imagistic maelstrom which constitutes a world dead to itself and alive only to the thrill of the moment. Nothing means anything. Everything means nothing.

For O'Brien, Stone's aesthetic choices rob the entire film, including its violent episodes, of the ability to inspire any reaction and as such he finds it entirely unaffectionate.

O'Brien sees another problem in what he calls "phony" characters. He observes that, with the exception of Harrelson, "everyone [...] is encouraged to indulge their scene-stealing fantasies and outdo each other in histrionics." The combination of over-the-top visuals and outrageous characters cements O'Brien's opinion that *Natural Born Killers* is the ultimate postmodern film. This is by no means a compliment from O'Brien, as he adds that "postmodernism has proved an ample shield behind which cowards hide from dealing with their (a)moral universe." He thus suggests that via excessive aestheticizing Stone fails to seriously address the moral implications of murder.

Jeffrey Niesel also takes issue with the aesthetic treatment of violence in *Natural Born Killers*. Writing for *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, Niesel feels that the film's aesthetic properties ensure that the violent content is received as entertainment:

The violence in *Killers* should not elicit outrage. Rather, viewers should be outraged that Stone employs such seductive methods of filmmaking (the movie is beautifully shot and includes stunning animation and graphics) to make such a moralistic statement.⁴¹

Niesel feels that the ugliness of the film's many violent acts is cancelled out by the attractive way in which they are presented. He is not shocked by the violence and, like O'Brien and Samudrala, Niesel suggests that the beautification of violence is morally irresponsible on Stone's part. Niesel also addresses the impact of characterization on the film's attempt at satire, observing:

Stone consistently steps outside the boundaries of satire because his characters are so one-dimensional. Gale's enthusiasm for violence increases to the point of ridiculousness as he loses it in the interview when he starts ranting about the U.S. invasion of Grenada and starts yelling "I'm alive" once he shoots a gun. At this point, Stone's critique of violence falls apart. He makes Gale into a caricature instead of a character and shows him to be entirely irrational. [...] Likewise, Stone makes easy targets out of corrupt prison warden Dwight McClusky and cop Jack Scagnetti, whose appetite for sex rivals Mickey's and Mallory's love for murder. McClusky and Scagnetti are just as insidious as Mickey and Mallory, yet their characters are so exaggerated, it's hard to see their depictions as a critique.⁴²

Niesel's concern is that characters which have been exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness cannot function as effective critiques of the media or the criminal justice system. For Niesel, the combination of an attractive aesthetic and unbelievable characters impairs the film's attempt at satire and drains it of its affective potential.

⁴¹ Niesel, Jeffrey, "Natural Born Killers," in *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Pop Culture* 2, no. 5 (1994): 115.

⁴² Niesel, Jeffrey, "Natural Born Killers," in *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Pop Culture* 2, no. 5 (1994): 114.

After examining the above responses to *Natural Born Killers* it is apparent that most respondents fail to find the film's violence negatively affective. Indeed, we have seen that two respondents (Ebert and Ryan A.) find it entertaining and enjoyable, that nine display neutral affect responses (Samudrala, Berardinelli, Emerson, Hinson, Howe, Niesel, O'Brien, Rafferty and Travers) and that only two (Thresh and Jacobson) indicate a negative affect response to the film's violent episodes. Those who experienced negative affect responses to *Natural Born Killers* did not identify any specific textual characteristics as cause for their reactions but cited the film's address of real social problems as the catalyst for their responses. Viewers who experienced positive affect responses found the film's visual aesthetic entertaining as well as appropriate to the material. Those who had neutral affect responses to the film found that several textual traits, including visual and aural over-stimulation (kinetic editing style, expressive set, lighting, and sound design, non-stop soundtrack), outlandish characterization, a cartoon aesthetic, hyperbole, and excessive repetition and gore, prevented them from experiencing negative affect responses to the film despite its violent content.

Chapter Two

2.1 *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* Film Summary & Context

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer is a sparse film that, as the title suggests, tells the story of a serial killer named Henry (Michael Rooker). Shot in an intimate, documentary style, the film paints a puzzling and disturbing portrait of a charming and courteous sociopath. Henry is an ex-con who lives with Otis (Tom Towles), a friend whom he met in jail. The narrative begins on the day that Otis' sister Becky (Tracy Arnold) arrives to stay with the men. What viewers see of Henry's life is divided between his job as a pest exterminator, sweet conversations with Becky at the kitchen table, and his compulsive stalking of victims. At their squalid apartment, Otis displays an incestuous lust for his sister but Henry, exhibiting an intense, if baffling moral code, acts as her protector. Feeling awkward after one of Otis advances, Becky urges the two men to go out for a beer. Instead the two men begin a joint killing spree that claims the lives of seven people, including the victims of a home invasion (an episode which they videotape with a camcorder stolen from an earlier victim). Henry hides his murderous tendencies under a convincing, perhaps genuine, veneer of kindness and over the course of the film his relationship with Becky blossoms into a near romance. His patience with Otis' blank-faced stupidity, however, wanes. The conflict between the two men culminates when Henry stumbles upon Otis raping his sister and the incident, which includes a gruesome and exploitative eye-stabbing sequence, ends with Otis dead and sawn into five pieces. Henry discards Otis' body and he and Becky flee. Before they stop for the night at a motel, Henry assures Becky that they will send for her young

daughter after they have settled in a safe place. The film ends with Henry leaving the motel alone and dumping Becky's bloodstained suitcase at the side of the road.

Henry was made in 1986 on a budget of \$125,000 for producers Waleed and Malik Ali of Maljack Productions in Chicago. Ali granted first-time director McNaughton the funds with the expectation that a straight-to-video teen horror film would be the result. He was shocked when McNaughton produced the horrific, yet serious *Henry* instead. Sensing the film's potential, the producers arranged to have the film shown at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1986. The film attracted the attention of distributors but the MPAA quickly quashed *Henry*'s chances at a conventional mainstream career by imposing an X rating on the film. Waleed Ali reveals that the MPAA returned the film to its producers without recommendations to make the film more salable, "They told us they wouldn't know where to cut. The film is too disturbing."⁴³ In late 1989, after some success at midnight showings, Maljack decided to release the film without a rating on a city-by-city basis and *Henry* began to draw the attention of mainstream critics. Since then the film has developed a reputation as an art/horror hybrid and is considered a classic by horror fans and film buffs.

However, this is not to say that reactions to *Henry* have not been divided. The film is notorious for inspiring walkouts during screenings and impassioned arguments afterward. Critical response to the film is divided between those who see an artful reflection on violence and those who see real, but cheap and exploitative horror. As with my examination of responses to *Natural Born Killers*, I have divided twelve reviews

⁴³ As reported by Peter Travers, "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, <<http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/review.asp?mid=73047>> (April, 2002).

according to their author's cognitive and affect responses. Although most reviewers appreciate the film's blunt and honest gaze at a serial killer and his violence, there are those who are indifferent to the film's craft or hold it in disregard. Affective responses to *Henry*, however, are unanimously negative. Positive cognitive responses to *Henry*'s craft are typically motivated by the lead actors' performances, McNaughton's minimalist direction, and McNaughton and screenwriter Richard Fire's characterization of Henry. Many respondents feel that the film transcends its meager budget and B-movie origins and consider it a work of art. Of course, the film's detractors counter such claims by criticizing its stilted performances (only Rooker escapes reproach), McNaughton's inconsistency and detachment as director, as well as the script's clumsy dialogue and awkward attempts to inject the film with social relevance. Negative affect responses to the film vary with each respondent. The reviewers identify several disturbing elements, including a seemingly normal and likable killer, honest depictions of violence, a lack of entertaining qualities, a downbeat ending, a sense of involvement or complicity, the lack of moral order and justice, a sense of tension and anticipation, and a documentary aesthetic. Stylistically, the video home invasion sequence combines many of these elements and all but a few of the respondents identify it as the film's most negatively affective scene.

2.2 Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer – Graphic Response Summary

Graph 2.0 provides a summary of responses to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. Points A-C represent the types of reactions displayed by respondents, while the numbers in parentheses indicate how many respondents shared in this response. The graph is not

intended to precisely quantify reactions but to provide a visual demonstration of general responses to the film. This graph reveals that all respondents experienced a negative affect response while viewing *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. Table 2.0 indicates who among the respondents experienced each type of reaction.

2.3 Positive Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Responses

All respondents to *Henry* experienced a negative affect response but seven of twelve mainstream respondents also expressed a positive cognitive response to *Henry* on the grounds that it is a well-crafted and thought-provoking film. Peter Travers was one of the first public supporters of *Henry* and his praise was partly responsible for the film's modest success in the mainstream. Although he acknowledges that the film contains scenes of graphic violence, Travers admires *Henry's* conspicuous lack of gratuitous violence and identifies a level of characterization uncommon to the genre:

It's ironic that those drawn to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* by its title alone are likely to be the most disappointed. The movie doesn't shy away from gore: Bodies are kicked, punched, slashed, shot and dismembered. But half of the sixteen murders take place off screen. There's more mayhem in any of the R-rated *Friday the 13th*, *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween* movies. Those films offer supernatural villains and cardboard victims; they're easy to shake. Not so *Henry*. The film is no masterpiece, but it is spare, intelligent and thought provoking.⁴⁴

He is also impressed by the lead performance:

⁴⁴ Travers, Peter, "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, <<http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/review.asp?mid=73047>> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Travers regarding this film are from this source.

Graph 2.0

Table 2.0

Point A: Positive Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response

Mike Bracken, Level Two Respondent

Roger Ebert, *The Chicago Sun-Times*Chris Hicks, *The Deseret News*Caryn James, *The New York Times*Jay Robert Nash, *The Motion Picture Guide*

Ted Prigge, Level One Respondent

Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone Magazine***Point B: Neutral Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response**

Jon Ewling and Oscar Finkleman, Level One Respondents

David Kehr, *Film Comment***Point C: Negative Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response**Edmond Grant, *Films in Review*Hal Hinson, *The Washington Post*Terrence Rafferty, *The New Yorker*

Rooker [...] is extraordinary as Henry. Polite and soft-spoken, he uses only an occasional steely glint to betray the rage simmering beneath Henry's bland façade. It's a scary, resonant performance, and a great one (B, 22).

For all of his praise, however, Travers realizes that *Henry* is a “challenging” and disturbing film. He attributes this to what he feels is McNaughton's pointed attempt to “demonstrate how madness can wear an ordinary, even pleasing face”. For Travers, Henry's veneer of normalcy and decency makes the character, and film, even more terrifying:

At the end, Henry is still out there among us. And he's no B-movie monster in a hockey mask. He could be the guy next door. This film gives off a dark chill that follows you all the way home.

Travers is careful to note that Henry's coolness does not translate into a cold film. He credits McNaughton for maintaining a “disengaged but not dispassionate” tone:

[Henry] must remain affectless, impersonal. The film, to its credit, does not. *Henry* makes you squirm, a sane reaction to the sight of innocent people being slaughtered. The movie doesn't cop out by pretending Henry has no connection with us and our apathetic, debilitated society. Far from glorifying Henry's fury, McNaughton rubs it in our faces. Sure we recoil. That's the point.

Travers suggests that the society in which Henry lives is the same as that of viewers and notes that this connection is a frightening aspect of the film. He also notes that, by failing to glorify Henry or his actions, McNaughton has created a film that elicits an appropriate reaction to violence. One scene that arouses such a reaction is the home invasion sequence:

In the film's most terrifying scene, the one that prompts the walkouts, Henry and Otis attack a suburban family and videotape the deed. [...] Cinematographer Charlie Lieberman, a find, turned a camcorder over to Rooker to shoot this scene as Henry would. The video footage -- grainy, unfocused, crazily angled -- makes the carnage joltingly immediate. It's a stomach churner.

Travers is one of many respondents to single out the video murders as the film's most disturbing scene and much of his negative affect response stems from the sense of immediacy created by its video aesthetic.

Caryn James of *The New York Times* also highlights the importance of the video home invasion sequence. She labels the scene "sickening" but her negative affect response is mingled with a positive cognitive response to the way in which it is crafted.⁴⁵ She feels that the video murders are McNaughton's way of offering his viewers "visual knowledge without understanding, a pure and effective cinematic approach." James is among those critics who consider *Henry* a work of art and she justifies the violence as follows:

McNaughton's observations are so chilling and precise that they gain some artistic stature even when they cross the line that makes the audience voyeurs and accomplices.

James feels that the video format pushes the home invasion sequence over "the line" by implicating viewers in the act of murder either as callous voyeurs or accomplices to the crime. Her comments reveal a formidable interest in McNaughton's directorial choices:

⁴⁵ James, Caryn, "As Natural As Breathing," *The New York Times*, 23 March 1990, sec. C. All subsequent quotes from James are from this source.

[T]his intelligent, revolting, artistically made and entirely empty look at murder comes close to a cinema of pure technique. It is profoundly disturbing, even more for the questions it raises about the use of film than for the mutilated bodies that litter the screen.

James identifies McNaughton's observational style and "calm acceptance of Henry's crimes" as the film's "most horrifying" elements. She perceives a close relationship between style and content and notes that the director's lack of moral direction leads viewers to become much more disturbed by the violent acts witnessed on screen.

Jay Robert Nash of *The Motion Picture Guide* labels *Henry* a "horror masterpiece" and "a major achievement in independent filmmaking."⁴⁶ His review contains praise for *Henry*'s script and performances:

In addition to it's brave, raw screenplay [...], *Henry* benefits from some extraordinary performances. Michael Rooker is absolutely chilling as Henry, who – unlike the killers in most horror films – is a multifaceted man with a bizarre set of "morals." [...] Tom Towles is brilliant in his role [...]. There is not one false note in his performance.

Nash also praises the director's pacing and narrative construction, concluding that *Henry* is a stunning feature debut for McNaughton. His appreciation for craft, is not untainted by a negative affect response to violence. In fact, Nash states that *Henry* "surely ranks as one of the most frightening and disturbing films ever made." He goes on to explain:

Presenting his sick characters nonjudgmentally and without shrinking from gory details, McNaughton creates a world in which there is no good to counterbalance evil, where incest and rape are permitted and murder is an acceptable way to relieve tension. Providing no "good" characters to

⁴⁶ Nash, Jay Robert, ed., "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer," *Motion Picture Guide Annual* (Evanston, Illinois: Cinebooks, 1990) 106. All subsequent quotes from Nash are from this source.

identify with – not even a cop to offer us hope – and ending on a bitter, ugly note, *Henry* leaves viewers emotionally drained and deeply, deeply disturbed. Mainstream audiences are so used to faceless killers who get their comeuppance in the end (or are at least temporarily defeated) that *Henry* may simply be too much for most to take.

Nash attributes the film's power to disturb partly to characterization. Henry is at once the most moral and immoral character within the narrative and this paradox can cause unsettling complications in the spectator's identification process. The reviewer also notes that viewers may be unnerved when order is not restored at the end of the film, a convention that is expected at the end of virtually any narrative. Nash feels that, by leaving the threat at large in this manner:

McNaughton succeeds in showing just how vulnerable anyone can be to someone like Henry, a frightening reality few will want to contemplate. *Henry* forces one to think about such things.

Nash further emphasizes the issue of realism:

No film in recent memory has tapped into primal, visceral fear like *Henry* does, with its vision of a depraved world that seems at once too horrible to exist and too realistic to be denied. Hard to watch [...] and definitely not for the squeamish, *Henry* will prove an unforgettable experience for the brave souls who do see it.

For Nash, the uncommon pairing of horror and realism makes *Henry* an extremely disturbing film.

Amateur respondents also admire *Henry*, even as they acknowledge its terrifying qualities. Level One respondent, Ted Prigge begins his review by discussing the impact of McNaughton's stylistic approach to his subject matter:

I imagine if "*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*" had been directed by, say, David Lynch. He would have made a big joke out of it, and gotten itself off on the fact that it's about a man who kills for no reason whatsoever.

He'd have made it into a black comedy, and thus destroyed the entire effect of the film on the viewer. John McNaughton [...] takes a completely realistic and serious look at it and the results are not only disgusting, fowl, and wretched, but also ingenious (sic), wonderful, and just plain amazing. No one said you had to be clean to be intelligent.⁴⁷

Prigge associates the film's ability to disturb directly with its aesthetic. In fact, he returns to the matter of realism several times throughout his response:

The film is apparently loosely based on the life of a real serial killer, Henry Lee Lucas, and it almost looks like a film crew sat in with him, followed him around, and then edited (sic) it all together [...] McNaughton's direction is extremely bland, although I don't mean that negatively: he portrays Henry in a very realistic manner, not adding any wild directing techniques to what he does, and because of this digs deeper into the character than any other kind of film would have.

He also notes:

[McNaughton portrays] Henry without any subjectivity [so] that every scene is eerily realistic, so realistic that perhaps someone out there might view the film as a "How To..." on being a serial killer. But if anything, the realism scares anyone out of the possibility of becoming a serial killer, because that means you have to be as screwed up as Henry is.

Here, Prigge addresses a common concern among the opponents of violent film, who fear that viewers take example from films that seem glorify violence. Prigge observes that the realistic portrayal of Henry is so frightening and unattractive that viewers are unlikely to mimic the film's crimes. Given Prigge's focus on realism, it is not surprising that he singles out the home invasion sequence as the film's most shocking scene:

⁴⁷ Prigge, Ted. "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer." 1998.
<<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/8335/henryserialkiller.html>> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Prigge are from this source.

There's one scene that really got me: Henry and Otis attack a family in their home, with Henry shooting the entire thing on a video camera. It's an unbroken shot, and it's all the more frightening when you learn that the woman playing the mother, who gets fondled by Otis, went into shock after the scene was over. It's one of the most frightening things I've ever seen, and it would have been really cheap if it had been screwed over with by some directorial interruptance.

While this scene is an example of the film's disturbingly realistic aesthetic, for Prigge it also reveals McNaughton's detachment as a director. He feels that this detachment, while alarming in itself, also allows Henry to develop into a more frightening character:

The film simply portrays Henry for who he is, and there are no reasons applied to why he's a serial killer. [...] By not giving reasons, the film actually becomes stronger. We learn to notice things for ourselves. [...] Instead of being bogged down by some director who wants to put an imprint on this film, McNaughton is wise and doesn't allow anything to interfere with the portrait of this horrific and unexplainable human being.

Level Two respondent, Mike Bracken, shares many of these sentiments, including an admiration for McNaughton's direction and Rooker's performance as Henry. Despite this admiration, however, he is disturbed by the film and he names the enigmatic nature of its killers as one of its troubling elements:

[U]nlike most Hollywood serial killer fare, McNaughton and company make no attempt at explaining the motives behind the murder. Henry kills because he can, and probably because he takes some pleasure in it. There's no pat psychology here, no exploration of the characters' pasts, nothing more than two men who kill because it passes the time. It's a notion that makes for far more frightening monsters than those who have come to populate the standard serial killer flick.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Bracken, Mike. "John McNaughton's Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer." 4 February, 2000. <<http://www.epinions.com/mvie-review-1C53-3FD16AE-389B7368-prod2>> (June 2003). All subsequent quotes from Bracken are from this source.

Bracken continues to contrast *Henry* to other serial killer films, this time in terms of its violent content:

[T]he film offers up some disturbing scenes, none more terrifying than the videotaped footage of Henry and Otis murdering an entire family. This scene, shown through the camcorder, is shot in one continuous take, and is supremely frightening. The sequence serves as a stark contrast to Hollywood's standard treatment of victims by managing to put a human face on those being slaughtered--despite the fact that we know nothing about them at all.

Bracken acknowledges that the victims in the video home invasion sequence benefit from absolutely no character development but that their deaths are far more affecting than those of traditional "Hollywood" victims. He does not explain why this is so but hints that the scene's frightening qualities are related to its video aesthetic. Like Travers, James, Nash, and Prigge, Bracken appreciates *Henry*'s value as art, even as he is disturbed by its violence and he addresses this apparent paradox:

[I]t's hard to justice (sic) to a film like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* in a review. It's such a disturbing and revolting film that to gush over it would seem to indicate that the reviewer is extremely warped. Yet, it is a finely crafted film that manages to take an unflinching look at some highly disturbing subject matter--all without glamorizing it as so many of the other films in this subgenre do. Ultimately, it's the film that all other serial killer movies should be measured against, and for that, it gets five stars from me.

Of course, some responses are more subdued. For example, Roger Ebert grants *Henry* some praise but is careful to inform his readers that it "is a chilling film that [...]"

will horrify many viewers.”⁴⁹ Ebert notes that *Henry* is a “very good film” and compliments Rooker’s performance but adds that it is a film “intended to illuminate, not entertain.” Among its disturbing qualities, Ebert counts its “flat, unforgiving realism,” and the absence of “humor, campy in-jokes, or a colorful anti-hero.” He notes that the result is “a slice of life [...] docudrama of chilling horror.” Ebert observes that McNaughton’s realistic treatment of violence, particularly during the video home invasion sequence, “appalls many viewers,” but credits the director for “dealing honestly with its subject matter, instead of trying to sugar-coat violence as most slasher films do.” Given the aesthetic differences between *Henry* and other films of the same genre, Ebert is able to find some value in its honest portrayal of violence. Nonetheless, he is reserved in his discussion of *Henry* and ends the review on an ambiguous note:

At the Telluride Film Festival, where I saw *Henry* in September, 1989, some said the film was too violent and disgusting to be endured. Others said it was justified because of its uncompromising honesty in a world where most horror films cheapen death by trivializing it. The division seemed to be between those who felt the film did its job brilliantly, and those who felt its job should not have been done at all.

By failing to place himself in either of these categories, Ebert obliquely makes the point that one may in fact belong in both categories. His response highlights the difficulty mainstream critics face when attempting to provide a fair evaluation of a disturbing film.

⁴⁹ Ebert, Roger, “Natural Born Killers,” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 August, 1994, <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1994/08/937174.html> (April 2002). All subsequent quotes from Ebert regarding this film are from this source.

Chris Hicks of *The Deseret News* confronts the same difficulty in his review of *Henry*. He acknowledges the film's superb performances and solid direction but makes it clear that *Henry* is not a film to be enjoyed:

McNaughton's film is as disturbing as he intended. Whether you interpret that as a recommendation is a matter of personal taste. As for me . . . well, let's just say I have some admiration for this film. But I also have no desire ever to see it again.⁵⁰

Hicks notes that the actual violent content in *Henry* is no more graphic than other restricted films but observes:

The problem here is apparently that *Henry* means to treat its subject realistically, and as such it is disturbing to watch and unsettling to think about. [...] Director/co-writer John McNaughton has serious matters on his mind. He wants to depict real-life horror, random killings that have no rhyme or reason. Not those performed by the kind of killers that have dominated horror films for the past decade — this is no faceless hulk in a hockey mask who represents adult authority as he chops up promiscuous teens. The title character here is a flesh-and-blood human being who can be charming and provide pleasant company, but who gets his private thrills from taking human lives without his conscience getting in the way.

In addition to its realistic villain, Hicks discusses the film's visual properties:

McNaughton uses a gritty, documentary-style approach that heightens the realism and makes it all the more frightening. If this movie were in black and white, which automatically adds tension to a movie, I don't know if I could have made it all the way through.

Hicks notes that the documentary style of the film is unsettling, adding that the film would have been unbearably real had this documentary effect been supplemented by black and white film stock. However, Hicks recognizes that the film sometimes deviates

⁵⁰ Hicks, Chris, "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer," *The Deseret News*, 6 July, 1990, <<http://deseretnews.com/movies/view/1,1257,778,00.html>> (June 2003). All subsequent quotes from Hicks are from this source.

from this documentary aesthetic to incorporate the tone of a “cheap horror movie.” Still, when the documentary aesthetic is employed, as in the case of the video home invasion sequence, he finds the violent content of *Henry* truly shocking:

The first killing we witness is an act of aggression against an obnoxious character, so naturally, after all our training in "Death Wish" movies, we feel the guy had it coming. But then comes the clincher, as we see Henry and Otis slaughter an entire family — father, mother and son — as seen through the eye of a video camera. One long scene without an edit, given an extra level of tension when the camera is dropped and we see the rest of the scene from the floor, as if we are also a victim.

Hicks' remarks that the single-take and video format adds tension to the scene and suggests that the effect of the dropped camera places the viewer in the position of victim, thus creating an uncomfortable level of involvement for the spectator. He hints that this involvement is continued when the viewer is elevated from the position of victim to voyeur:

But the real shock is yet to come: As the scene reaches its conclusion we realize that Henry and Otis are watching the video at home, like some perverted — or more perverted — episode of "America's Funniest Home Videos." That is without question the film's most uncomfortable moment and reportedly prompts members of the audience to walk out during every showing.

For Hicks, the sense of complicity and involvement created by the video aesthetic is *Henry's* most disturbing quality.

2.4 Neutral Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response

Two of twelve respondents indicate neutral cognitive responses to *Henry*. Level One co-reviewers Jon Ewling and Oscar Finkleman assign no positive or negative value to the film's craft or message but note that "the handful of very violent scenes of depraved, terrible murder make this movie a very difficult experience to forget."⁵¹ They suggest that the film is "too disturbing for many viewers" and explain that this is partly due to the "unnerving" fact that "the filmmakers make no judgment of the crimes." They also observe how terrifyingly regular Henry's character can appear to be:

As an audience we are used to seeing the criminal mind in a certain way - we like our monsters to look like monsters (for instance, Hannibal Lecter, with his gruesome mask and straitjacket) but Henry is just an ordinary man with an ordinary, boring life. Worst of all, he shows no regret or shame for his crimes, nor is he punished for them. It is impossible to watch *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* without being predisposed to feeling unnerved by it.

Ewling and Finkleman find Henry's ability to camouflage his homicidal instincts unsettling. In their brief review, they twice mention McNaughton's lack of moral authority and seem disturbed by McNaughton's failure to comment on or punish Henry's crimes, indicating that Henry's freedom at the end of the film (when most films would punish their villains) is unsettling for viewers.

David Kehr of *Film Comment* does not praise or condemn *Henry* but he is clearly troubled by the film's violent content and he explains how the film inspired this negative response:

⁵¹ Ewling, Jon and Oscar Finkleman, "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer," <<http://www.vigilante.co.uk/ep/videos/marapr98.htm>> (June 2003). All subsequent quotes from Ewling and Finkleman are from this source.

Though far less explicit than the average slasher movie, it leaves behind an impression that is far more difficult to shake, perhaps because McNaughton's method is based on denying the physical release, the easy catharsis, most horror movies provide.⁵²

Kehr does not find *Henry* entertaining and identifies McNaughton's minimalism as unnerving:

Rather than indulge in the analytical montage, predatory camera movement, and jumpy crosscutting standard to horror films, McNaughton parks his camera in an advantageous position and quietly observes.

Kehr argues that McNaughton's presentation of violence neutralizes any thrill one may expect at the sight of screen violence and he names the video home invasion sequence as the definitive example of *Henry*'s joyless violence:

The video image tells us that there is already no hope of rescue, that the action is over and cannot be altered. And the absence of cutting – the camera lies on the floor, where Henry has dropped it after lunging to catch the just-arriving boy – tells us that nothing will be spared, but also (and somehow more threateningly) that nothing will be artificially enhanced or exaggerated for our enjoyment.

He goes on to suggest that along with the discomfort inspired by the violence, viewers also experience surprise. Kehr notes that viewers of fiction film do not typically expect to have so truly an appalling scene thrust upon them when what they are anticipating is entertainment. Referring again to the home invasion sequence, Kehr explains:

By inserting this passage of cinema degree zero within a genre as rhetorically charged as the thriller, McNaughton betrays a trust – the basic agreement between horror-film-maker and horror-film-patron that style will always act as a buffer, transforming act into effect, substance into flourish. That transformation does not happen in *Henry*, and the results

⁵² Kehr, David. "Heartland." *Film Comment* 26 (1990): 61-62. All subsequent quotes from Kehr are from this source.

are nearly unbearable. The viewer is trapped in the dead-eyed stare of the videocam, forced into a position of passive endurance. There is no release here, no purging of anger or resentment, only a growing revulsion.

Kehr refers to an implicit understanding between filmmaker and viewer that assures consumers that an aesthetic distance will be maintained during violent episodes. As Kehr notes however, McNaughton ignores this unspoken agreement and creates a negatively affecting viewing experience by portraying violence “without suspense, without thrills, without any physical release.”

2.5 Negative Cognitive Response – Negative Affect Response

The majority of respondents to *Henry* are either appreciative of, or indifferent to, the film’s honesty. However, three of twelve respondents are not only unnerved by the film but also incredulous of its status as art. To such respondents, including Edmond Grant of *Films in Review*, *Henry* is little more than a cheap B-movie slasher. Although Grant is clearly unimpressed with the film’s craft, he does acknowledge its affective power:

It does frequently unsettle its audience, and so is declared intense and “effective” on a stylistic level [by other critics].⁵³

Although Grant recognizes the film’s ability to disturb audiences he does not feel that this is achieved with great skill. He feels, for instance, that the title is entirely misleading and that, far from being a character study, *Henry* is a “broad comedy” that exploits the “fact

⁵³ Grant, Edmond. “Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer.” *Films in Review* 41 (1990): 366-368. All subsequent quotes from Grant are from this source.

that Otis and Becky are white trash, and pretty ignorant white trash at that.” He also notes the lack of suspense in *Henry*, arguing that viewers know the outcome will be unpleasant and simply expect the worst:

Henry has little notion of suspense. What is created instead is tension, tension as to exactly when Henry will explode on screen, and what method of cruelty he or Otis will use on their unsuspecting victims. Thus, *Henry* not only disturbs its audience by the violence it eventually gets around to showing, but by the way we are made to wait for that violence, to perversely want it to happen, simply so that we can get it over with.

Some respondents (for example, Bracken, Prigge, James) perceive McNaughton’s moral distance throughout the film as one of the film’s more disturbing attributes. Grant on the other hand, is most disturbed when McNaughton comments on the violence he portrays. He identifies the home invasion sequence as the film’s most truly unpleasant scene and feels that it is the single instance which he feels is significantly marked by McNaughton’s commentary:

The only scene which has even a semblance of reflection on the brutality of Henry’s world is the instant after the family slaying, in which Otis watches a videotape of the event over and over in slow motion [...] . This frightening example of how anything can be conceived of as titillating video porn communicates something very important; it stands alone in the center of *Henry*.

Ultimately, Grant recognizes, but does not value, *Henry*’s ability to disturb viewers.

Terrence Rafferty of *The New Yorker* is equally unimpressed by *Henry*. He does not consider *Henry* “a terribly interesting movie,” observing that the film simply “has a

stark, relentless quality that is sometimes mistaken for art.”⁵⁴ Rafferty compares *Henry* to *The Honeymoon Killers* (Leonard Kastle, 1970), another “deliberately flat, affectless treatment of gruesome true-crime material,” but he notes a crucial difference in entertainment value:

The Honeymoon Killers which was shot in low-contrast black-and-white, was an oddly memorable freak show – shocking, but with a distinctively wobbly, half-lurid, half-comic tone. McNaughton’s movie, loosely based on the criminal career of a mass murdered named Henry Lee Lucas is more conventionally realistic: it’s grisly, unrelieved horror.

Like Kehr, Rafferty recognizes that style can act as a relieving agent for viewers when confronted with violent content. He observes that *Henry*’s realist aesthetic grants viewers no such relief and he shows little appreciation for the discomfort the film inspires:

When it’s over [...] and you’ve staggered out of the theatre, you may wonder what this queasy exercise was supposed to be all about. Sure, it’s compelling; the nature of the material guarantees that. But it doesn’t seem to be telling us much more than that the world is a scary place and murder is ugly. We knew those things.

Rafferty’s negative affect response to *Henry* is matched by an equally negative cognitive response. For example, he refers to the video home invasion as the film’s most affective sequence but also criticizes it for its clumsy social commentary:

The most sickening murder takes place in an upper-middle-class house; we see the grim-faced Henry and the obscenely whooping Otis eliminate an entire family in their cozy living room. Is the movie also telling us that happy bourgeois homeowners should be more suspicious of lower-class beer-drinking men?

⁵⁴ Rafferty, Terrence. “Depraved Indifference.” *The New Yorker* 66 (1990): 90-91. All subsequent quotes from Rafferty regarding this film are from this source.

Hal Hinson of *The Washington Post* is also critical of *Henry*:

In most of its details, it feels like what it is -- a small-budget film made for limited release. The acting is clumsy, the dialogue awkward, and the exchanges almost comically blunt. In their rough, schematic fashion, these scenes function as an explanation for Henry's action; they're the filmmakers' attempt to redeem the story with some sort of social meaning. But McNaughton can't resolve the contradictions in his material.⁵⁵

Hinson observes a dichotomy within the film, between an art house film and a "schlock-horror cheapie." He notes for instance the contrast between "slurpy *Friday the 13th* sound effects" and the minimalist, "documentary flatness of style" apparent at other points in the film:

Given this [B-movie] context, it's hard to know how to react to a scene like the one in which Henry and Otis torture a suburban housewife in front of her husband, snap her son's neck, then kill her. Watching these scenes -- which the murderers record with a video camera and play over and over again -- we feel as if we've been drawn into something we didn't quite expect; as if, unwittingly, we've become accomplices in the making of a snuff film. There's a grotesque horror in these scenes, and it gets into your system. What you may wonder, though, is why you needed to be subjected to it.

Hinson is disgusted by the home invasion sequence and does not feel that its artistic qualities justify a viewer being subjected to the awful violence it contains. He takes the same attitude toward much of the rest of the film, commenting on the horrible affects of McNaughton's "cruel outside view."

⁵⁵ Hinson, Hal. "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer." *The Washington Post*. 4 May, 1990. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/henryportraitofaserialkillernrhinson_a0a96b.htm> (April, 2002). All subsequent quotes from Hinson regarding this film are from this source.

We have seen that of twelve respondents, seven (Travers, James, Prigge, Bracken, Nash, Ebert and Hicks) show appreciation for the way *Henry* is made. Two respondents display neutral cognitive responses (Kehr, Nash), and three (Grant, Hinson, Rafferty) show negative cognitive responses to the film. All viewers of *Henry*, regardless of the nature of their cognitive response, experience negative affect responses. Reviewers of the film indicate several textual traits which they hold responsible for their reactions including, a realistic/documentary aesthetic, a seemingly normal and likable killer, honest depictions of violence, a lack of entertaining qualities, a downbeat ending, a sense of involvement or complicity, a lack of moral order and justice, and an unrelieved sense of tension.

Chapter Three

3.1 Roger Odin's Semio-Pragmatic Model

The respondents of this study have proven adept at identifying the textual cues that they feel are responsible for their reactions to *Natural Born Killers* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. Their comments suggest that a consistent relationship exists between various aesthetic devices and affect responses to violence. We have seen, for instance, that entertaining, blatantly stylized renditions of violent acts, like those found in *Natural Born Killers*, are usually met with positive or neutral affect responses. Violence which is represented via a realistic aesthetic, like that found in *Henry*, is met with negative affect responses. However, even after homogenizing my sample group to include only mainstream respondents, drastically different responses make themselves apparent. For example, most respondents fail to be disturbed by *Natural Born Killers* (some even enjoy its violence) but Thresh and Jacobson indicate mild negative affect responses. Although I firmly believe that textual devices are a key factor in the process of viewer response, differences among respondents draw attention to the fact that a text cannot independently generate or control responses.

When studying viewer response we must account not only for textual cues but also for the way respondents process the information provided by the film. Further examination of these responses to *Natural Born Killers* and *Henry* reveal that there are different ways in which a viewer may approach a film and that these different ways of watching a film play a very important role in the formation of affect responses. By

examining these “ways of watching,” I hope to gain a better understanding as to what provokes negative affect response in fiction film viewers.

My model for this approach is based on the theories of Roger Odin, a French film theorist who, for the last 20 years, has been developing a semio-pragmatic approach to discern how film is understood by viewers. Odin’s work is made accessible to Anglophone readers by fellow film semiotician, Warren Buckland. Buckland displays a keen interest in the work of European film theorists who combine semiology and cognitive science. Semioticians believe that all perceptible phenomena have a corresponding, underlying (imperceptible) system of codes that constitutes both the specificity and intelligibility of those phenomena. Semiotics aims to study these systems of codes, not by revealing or discovering them (impossible since they are imperceptible), but by constructing them via theoretical models. Cognitive film semioticians argue that in film, the impression of unity and continuity that a spectator experiences is based on an underlying system of codes shared by all (competent) film viewers. Thus while filmic competence necessarily involves cognitive activity (which can be discerned via a pragmatic method), it also depends on a set of culturally based rules (thus, the need for a semio-pragmatic model). Buckland has published translations of Odin’s work in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* (1995) as well as interpretations and analyses of his theories in *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (2000) and it is to these texts that I refer.

The two main branches of pragmatics defined by Odin are both represented in this thesis. Chapters one and two represent the first branch, pragmatics, which studies how spectators are addressed by a film. The pragmatic approach applied in these chapters

reveals how each spectator reacts to specific textual cues. The other branch, semio-pragmatics, is that which Odin subscribes to and is based on the assumption that an image is not responsible for, or capable of, indicating what procedures are to be followed for its reading. Rather than rely wholly on the text, Odin suggests that a film viewer creates meaning by applying processes that are external to the film. In other words, the film's meaning comes from cultural rules rather than textual cues. These cultural rules are most generally embodied in what Odin calls institutions. All institutions constitute all of film and each separate institution allows for a specific kind of film communication. Some common examples are the fiction film, the documentary film, the home movie, and the experimental film.⁵⁶

Institutions are comprised of material and cognitive elements. The material dimension consists of the kind of equipment used to produce a film (e.g. camera/film), as well as the place in which the film is shown (e.g. cinema). Although the place of projection can be an arbitrary aspect of the film experience (for example, some art films are shown in commercial theatres), generally speaking, the material aspect of an institution is closely related to its cognitive dimension. This cognitive component is comprised of modes of film viewing and their corresponding operations. Odin identifies eight modes: **1) the spectator mode**, which refers to the spatial and temporal displacement of the viewer in relation to the events depicted on screen; **2) the fictional mode**, in which there is a correspondence between the relations between film and

⁵⁶ Odin, Roger, "For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film," in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed. Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 216-218, and Buckland, Warren, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77-78, 97-98.

spectator and the relations manifest within the diegesis (e.g. incomplete narrative information, long shots, obscured views and nearly inaudible sound are accepted by the spectator if she understands this as a reflection of the secrecy among characters in the film); **3) the dynamic mode**, a more visceral mode wherein the spectator ‘resonates’ to the rhythm of the film’s sounds and images (e.g. music videos are often understood via this mode); **4) the home movie mode**, which is adopted when the spectator witnesses her – or another’s – past lived experiences on film; **5) the documentary mode**, in which the spectator is informed of real events; **6) the instructional or persuasive mode**, wherein the spectator draws a lesson or truth from the film; **7) the artistic mode**, in which the film is perceived of as the work of an auteur; **8) the aesthetic mode**, wherein the spectator focuses on the technical work involved in the creation of the film’s sounds and images.⁵⁷

Each mode can be characterized by a combination of cognitive operations, which can be arranged into three categories. 1) operations concerning the representational status of sounds and images; 2) discursive operations; and 3) enunciative operations. The first category is comprised of the operation of **figurativization**, which is responsible for the visual analogy that allows spectators to recognize visual signs on film as images of the world. The second category includes operations that allow viewers to make sense of fragmented stories and images. These operations include **diegetization** (the spectator’s perception of a complete filmic world), **narrativization** (the spectator’s perception of continuity between separate images and events), and **monstration** (the perception of

⁵⁷ Buckland, 89-90.

narrative space upon a flat surface). The third category refers to the spectator's understanding regarding the enunciator, or source, of the film. Here, Odin identifies two operations – fictivization and documentarization – and unlike the figurative and discursive operations, which can be simultaneously combined in any mode, these are said to be incompatible with one another.⁵⁸ **Fictivization** is unique to the fiction film and it functions to assign fictional status to the enunciator, as well as to the spectator. It is concisely defined by John Searle in Buckland's *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*:

Fictivization is [an operation] which is applied to the enunciative structure of film, an intentional [operation] that characterizes the status, or position, the spectator attributes to the fiction film's enunciator. Fictivization consists of considering that the enunciator does not intervene as a 'real origin' but as a fictive origin: it accomplishes the act of enunciation without assuming the commitments which are normally required for this act [...] Similarly, the spectator no longer feels interpellated as a real person having to take seriously what is narrated to him.⁵⁹

Documentarization is normally applied to documentary films and under this operation meaning is arrived at differently. Buckland explains:

Both enunciator and [reader] are modalized as real, with the result that the addressee must take seriously what is articulated on screen. One consequence of this theory is that the fictive/documentary character of a film is determined, not by the (un)reality of the profilmic events, but by the modal status attributed to the addressee and enunciator.⁶⁰

Odin also notes that the documentarization operation may run contrary to the spectator's fundamental desires for pleasure:

⁵⁸ Buckland, 91-97.

⁵⁹ John Searle in Buckland, Warren, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96.

⁶⁰ Buckland, Warren, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96.

Documentarization has the effect of dislodging the Addressee of the film from his comfort as a spectator by placing him in the position of a *real* addressee, i.e. an Addressee having to take seriously, in reality, what he is offered to watch.⁶¹

Although Odin is adamant that the modes and institutions by which meaning is produced are external to the text, he does note that **internal constraints** exist in every film and that it is by testing modes against these constraints that viewers decide which modes to apply to a text. He notes these constraints are flexible and that viewers are prone to deviant interpretations due to the fleeting nature of separate film images, but adds that, for the most part, internal constraints block blatantly inappropriate modal applications.⁶² For instance, the technical perfection and organized narrative of a big-budget commercial film will not prevent a spectator from applying, for example, the spectacle, fictional artistic and aesthetic modes. However, the polished aesthetic of a commercial film does serve to block a viewer from applying the home movie mode, a mode which allows a viewer to understand poor sound and image quality, discontinuous edits and a lack of narrative structure as evidence of someone's lived experiences. If a typical viewer were to apply the home video mode to an inappropriate text, such as *Rushmore* (Wes Anderson, 1998), the reading would be so deviant as to indicate insanity in the reader. Of course, if the star of *Rushmore*, Jason Schwartzman, were to apply this mode, the reading would be far less deviant. Although the film does not technically portray 'real' events, the film is a chronicle of his work experiences and could be

⁶¹ Odin, Roger, "A Semio-Pragmatic Approach to the Documentary Film," in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed., Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 230.

⁶² Odin, "For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film," 113-15.

understood as a record of his past. Indeed, Odin's semio-pragmatic approach is a study of contexts and as such it proves a useful tool in my examination of negative affect response to violent films.

3.2 Notes on Odin's Semio-Pragmatic Model

Having applied Odin's semio-pragmatic method to actual viewer responses (Odin gives no indication that he has applied the method to any but his own responses) I have observed some aspects of the approach (specific to my concerns) that may benefit from further consideration. For instance, Odin argues that a respondent who applies the documentary or home video modes is operating under documentarization. This means that the respondent has recognized, via internal constraints, that the most suitable way to interpret a film is as a documentary film or home movie and that by making this interpretive decision the respondent shows her acceptance of the film's enunciator and her own subjectivity as "real." Odin claims that it is this acceptance (of the enunciator's and subject's real status) that causes the viewer to recognize screen actions, objects and events as things to be taken seriously, rather than as things to be dismissed as frivolous and fictional. As such, Odin argues that the affective properties of a film are intensified under the operation of documentarization. I agree with Odin on all of these points and I believe that the cognitive operation of documentarization explains why some viewers experience negative affect responses to fictional films. One is affected by a film not simply because it looks real, but because the subject thinks of the film's *enunciator* and *herself* as real.

However, I would like to address what I believe is a major oversight concerning the viewer's perception of the enunciator, particularly the validity of the enunciator. Odin establishes that viewers who apply the artistic mode recognize the director as the film's *real* enunciator. Under Odin's model, this would mean that the spectator would feel compelled to take what the director proffers seriously; at least to the extent that it is a real person's art.⁶³ In the case of *Natural Born Killers* and *Henry*, virtually all respondents apply the artistic mode and recognize Stone and McNaughton as the films' real enunciators.⁶⁴ However, responses to each of the directors' messages are drastically different. Several respondents are derisive of Stone's attempt at satire and question the validity of the director's message about violence in the media. These respondents do not display negative affect responses to the film. Responses to *Henry*, on the other hand, reflect the reviewer's respect for McNaughton and his vision, and each of these respondents display negative affect responses. Of course, negative affect responses are not determined by the artistic mode alone and other modes play a part in their formation. However, even different modal combinations cannot account for respondents, who despite displaying similar modal combinations, experience opposite affect responses. It is not enough to simply establish whether the respondent accepts the enunciator as real and I propose that the viewer's perception of the validity of the enunciator is a major formative element in viewer response. Evidence from this study suggests that a viewer's perception of the enunciator's validity derives from both internal and external constraints and in the next sections I will discuss the responses that led me to make this observation.

⁶³ Buckland, 100-101.

⁶⁴ Only Ryan A. fails to acknowledge Stone as the author of the film.

I would also like to make brief mention of the instructional mode. Odin indicates that only the documentary and home video modes involve spectators as real subjects. It seems, however, that only respondents who consider themselves as real are willing and able to apply the instructional mode to a film. Whereas a real subject seeks to receive a lesson or truth so that she may apply it in her everyday life, a fictional subject has no need of a lesson because “she” is essentially terminated at the end of the film.⁶⁵ Thus, it should be noted that the instructional mode has a direct relationship to the operation of documentarization, and to the formation of negative affect response.

Within the semio-pragmatic model, aesthetic traits identified by respondents in chapters one and two are understood as the film’s internal constraints. In the following pages I will examine evidence of the applications of modes and operations among responses to *Natural Born Killers* and *Henry*. Tables 3.0 – 3.2 provide a summary of modal applications among respondents who do and do not experience negative affect responses.

⁶⁵ Rick Altman’s model of a generic spectator does not account for negative affect responses but it is analogous to Odin’s model of a fictional spectator. Such spectators observe generic or fictional rules (which are often counter-cultural) while they watch a film but must cast off these rules at the film’s end and return to reality.

Table 3.0

Natural Born Killers**Modal Application for Neutral & Positive Affect Responses (of 11 responses)**

Fictional Mode:	8 - 73%
Dynamic Mode:	4 - 37%
Home Movie Mode:	0 - 0%
Documentary Mode:	0 - 0%
Instructional Mode:	1 - 9%
Artistic Mode:	10 - 91%
Aesthetic Mode:	9 - 82%
(Spectacle Mode):	(11 - 100%)

Table 3.1

Natural Born Killers**Modal Application for Negative Affect Responses (of 2 responses)**

Fictional Mode:	2 - 100%
Dynamic Mode:	0 - 0%
Home Movie Mode:	0 - 0%
Documentary Mode:	0 - 0%
Instructional Mode:	2 - 100%
Artistic Mode:	1 - 50%
Aesthetic Mode:	1 - 50%
(Spectacle Mode):	(2 - 100%)

Table 3.2

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer**Modal Applications for Negative Affect Responses (of 12 responses)**

Fictional Mode:	0 - 0%
Dynamic Mode:	0 - 0%
Home Movie Mode:	4 - 33%
Documentary Mode:	6 - 50%
Instructional Mode:	5 - 42%
Artistic Mode:	12 - 100%
Aesthetic Mode:	1 - 8%
(Spectacle Mode):	(12 - 100%)

3.3 Modes Applied by Viewers of *Natural Born Killers* Who Do NOT Experience Negative Affect Response

Eleven of thirteen respondents for *Natural Born Killers* fail to display negative affect responses to the film and for each of these viewers fictivization is the dominant operation. Samudrala, Hinson, Emerson, Howe, Travers, Rafferty, Berardinelli, O'Brien, Niesel, Ryan A. and Ebert each recognize *Natural Born Killers* as either *a* fiction or as *Oliver Stone's* fiction and they apply the following modes:

The spectacle mode is adopted by anyone who recognizes the spatial and temporal displacement inherent to the medium of film and all respondents in this study adopt this mode.⁶⁶ Within **the fictional mode**, there is a correlation between the film-spectator relation and the relations apparent in the film. Those respondents who apply this mode to *Natural Born Killers* understand their own sensory over-stimulation as a reflection of the media-saturated world depicted in the film. Emerson notes that within the narrative, violence is considered entertainment and viewers are encouraged to take the same attitude toward the film's many violent displays. Travers and Hinson point out that the film and Mickey and Mallory are equally frenzied, and Ryan A indicates that his experience of *Natural Born Killers* incorporated its "trippy" atmosphere. Rafferty recognizes the visual oddities of the film as a depiction of "the warped consciousness of [the] killer couple." Similarly, Samudrala recognizes the film's visual style as evidence of Mickey and Mallory's aggression. He also notes that, like Mickey and Mallory, the

⁶⁶ Because every respondent in this study applies this mode, it is considered a constant and does not require further mention or discussion.

audience considers the film's many instances of violence entertaining rather than shocking. Viewers who were not negatively affected by *Natural Born Killers* and who applied the fictional mode found their experience to mirror that of characters within the text. These respondents felt themselves encouraged to share in Wayne Gale and the public's excited and exhilarated responses to the violence brought about by Mickey and Mallory. Additionally, viewers recognized the film as an expression of Mickey and Mallory's point of view, one in which violence is rarely contextualized as worthy or even capable of inspiring a negative affect response. In this respect, viewers are privy to Mickey and Mallory's thought processes and, as fictional subjects, essentially share their motives.

The dynamic mode allows some respondents to resonate to the sights and sounds of *Natural Born Killers*. Emerson notes that those spectators who allow the dynamic mode to dominate their reading of the film will "enjoy" it and indeed, Ryan A., who applies only the fictional and dynamic modes (as well as the spectacle mode) to his reading of the film, likes the film very much. In fact, he is one of only two respondents to provide a positive review of the film. The other respondent who enjoyed all aspects of *Natural Born Killers* is Ebert and he too applies the dynamic mode to his reading of the film. Ebert calls the film a "visceral experience" and recommends that viewers plan a second viewing of the film. He offers this advice because his first experience of the film was so dominated by the dynamic mode that the film's other meanings were obscured. Although Rafferty did not enjoy *Natural Born Killers*, he seems to agree with Ebert on this last point. He describes his dynamic experience of the film as "registering the torrent

of sense data without actually caring much about putting it together.” Regardless of whether they enjoy the experience, these reviewers feel that the dynamic mode was a necessary part of their reading of *Natural Born Killers*. Viewers who adopted the dynamic mode while viewing *Natural Born Killers* were apt to understand violence as visceral episodes wherein the act of murder appears to be an interesting combination of sights and sounds rather than a serious representation of a human life being extinguished.

Of all respondents who fail to be negatively affected by *Natural Born Killers*, only Ryan A. fails to apply **the artistic mode** (which is applied when viewers consider a film the work of an auteur). Ebert, Hinson, Emerson, Samudrala, Howe, Niesel, O’Brien, Rafferty, Travers and Berardinelli on the other hand, acknowledge Stone’s ownership of *Natural Born Killers* and refer to the film as his story, success, failure or folly. Travers and Berardinelli relate their experience of *Natural Born Killers* to Stone’s other films and regard it as the latest addition to the director’s (flawed) oeuvre. Oliver Stone is a well-known director and his popularity certainly plays a part in the common application of the artistic mode to *Natural Born Killers*. Stone’s prominence, combined with the public controversy that erupted upon the release of the film as well as the director’s incredible artistic inscription upon *Natural Born Killers* remove virtually all barriers that would lead a viewer to deny or ignore Stone’s ownership of the film. Although viewers who apply the artistic mode recognize Stone as a real enunciator, with the exception of Ebert, none consider him a real and *valid* enunciator. In fact, all but Ebert refer to Stone in a derogatory fashion (Berardinelli refers to his narcissistic “misdirection,” Emerson discusses his embarrassing manhandling of Tarantino’s original script, Hinson criticizes

his “hysteria,” Howe calls his agenda “mediocre” and “trite,” Niesel feels his approach to important issues is “simplistic,” O’Brien thinks of the director as a whiner, Rafferty notes that he lacks passion and insight, Samudrala notices his lack of originality, and Travers calls him a hypocrite). Although these viewers think of Stone as the real source of the film, they obviously question his ideas and his abilities as a director. As such, *Natural Born Killers* is received as Stone’s unassuming fantasy of questionable relevance as opposed to a disturbing film about serious social ills.

The aesthetic mode is normally adopted by those with a specific interest in the technical aspects of film. As such, it is not surprising that professional film critics, including Ebert, Hinson, Howe, Travers and Rafferty comment on Stone’s technical skill. However, Hinson, Howe, Rafferty and Travers also note that the director’s aesthetic is too conspicuous, even numbing. It seems that this stylistic excess cues amateur respondents, who are not as likely to adopt this more specialized point of view, to apply the aesthetic mode as well. Berardinelli calls the film gimmicky and narcissistic, Emerson feels that Stone’s visual technique is “old and tired” and even suggests that the aesthetic treatment of violence provides a “visceral message” that Mickey and Mallory’s victims deserve their violent ends. Samudrala and O’Brien note Stone’s technical skill and Niesel notes the seductive affect of his technique.

Non-negatively affected respondents who adopted the aesthetic mode during their viewing of *Natural Born Killers* found their attention drawn, much like those who applied the dynamic mode, to the way in which the film is put together. By fixating on the techniques employed to create the substantial visual and aural effects of the film,

these viewers show their awareness of the constructed and fictional status of the events portrayed, allowing them to recognize the many instances of death as a series of special effects.⁶⁷

The instructional mode is applied by respondents who seek to extract a lesson or truth from a film. Of all respondents who are not negatively affected by the film, only Ebert applies the instructional mode.⁶⁸ Ebert feels that *Natural Born Killers* serves as a criticism of a crime-obsessed society. He refers to the OJ Simpson trial and notes similarities between the fevered reactions to murder in the film and in reality, concluding that the film is a valuable reminder of how sick such reactions are.

Ebert's response is an oddity among responses which fail to indicate a negative response. Every other respondent who applied the instructional mode to either of these films also indicated a negative affect response. Ebert not only fails to display a negative affect response, he is one of two respondents who "like" the film and find nothing disturbing about its content. He considers Stone as a real and valid enunciator and is thus able to relate responses to violence within the film to what he feels are similarly inappropriate and undesirable responses to real murders (specifically the murders of Nicole Brown-Simpson and her lover). Although Ebert accepts the relationship between the film and reality as valid (i.e. that the filmed responses to violence reflect real

⁶⁷ Application of the aesthetic mode does not necessarily indicate that viewers are operating under fictitization. In the case of *Natural Born Killers*, the aesthetic mode combines with the dominant operation of fictionalization to block reality and prevent viewers from experiencing negative affect response. It is also possible that viewers can recognize aesthetic factors that heighten the sense of reality, which may in turn encourage negative affect response.

⁶⁸ Berardinelli, Emerson, Hinson, Samudrala, Howe, Niesel, O'Brien, Rafferty, and Travers note that they are unable to apply the instructional mode given Stone's failed attempt at satire.

responses to violence), the operation of fictionalization appears to dominate his response to the film (as evidenced by his adoption of the dynamic, aesthetic, fictional and artistic modes), thus allowing him to enjoy the film as a fictional world, one that does not require solutions or responsible action, despite its resemblance to reality.

3.4 Modes Applied by Viewers of *Natural Born Killers* Who Experience Negative Affect Response

Two respondents display mild negative affect responses to *Natural Born Killers* and, with the exception of the instructional mode, this difference seems to have little influence on which modes they apply to the film. Both Jacobson and Thresh apply **the fictional mode** to *Natural Born Killers*. In Jacobson's case, it aids in his understanding of the potentially disorientating images of blood-soaked demons, etc. as reflections of Mickey and Mallory's psychoses. Thresh also applies the fictional mode and as such was able to understand "all the flashing and background images, flashbacks, and words that appear" in relation to the meaning of the film. Jacobson also applies **the artistic mode** to *Natural Born Killers* and his references to Stone's passion, anger, and "unsettling vision" indicate his acceptance of the director as the film's real and valid enunciator. He applies **the aesthetic mode** as well, expressing his appreciation of Stone's visual style and noting the effectiveness of the "hodgepodge of cameras, film stocks, effects and techniques" used throughout the film.

Both Jacobson and Thresh apply **the instructional mode** to *Natural Born Killers*, Jacobson calling the film "prophetic" in light of the frenzied media coverage of the

Columbine murder a few years after the film was released.⁶⁹ He feels that the film is “about the times in which we live” and that it reveals an ugly truth about our society’s fascination with murder. Thresh understands the film as a warning about the psychological and sociological effects of the glorification of violence in the media combined with the neglect and abuse of children. Thresh feels that “it’s just a matter of time before something of this caliber becomes a reality in the world” and he considers the film’s message critical.

Fictivization, though still operating, was less encompassing for Jacobson and Thresh. Both respondents accept their status as real subjects (as indicated by their application of the instructional mode) and Jacobson also accepts Stone’s status as a real and valid enunciator. This leads both viewers to respond to the problems and issues addressed by the film more seriously. (Jacobson applies the fictional mode and sees the film as a reflection of Mickey and Mallory’s psychoses, but rather than adopt their sociopathic attitudes, Jacobson is disturbed by the glimpse into their minds.) Applying the instructional mode, both Jacobson and Thresh feel that the film accurately reveals the ugliness of their world and both indicate that the fascination with murder and the abuse of children is disturbing in its portrayal on film as well as in reality.

⁶⁹ Jacobson’s review is of the *Natural Born Killers* DVD, which was released in January, 2000, thus allowing him to apply this historical analysis.

3.5 Modes Applied by Viewers of *Henry* Who Experience Negative Affect Response

Responses to *Henry* suggest that the film's internal constraints, including its poor sound and image quality, serious tone, use of video footage etc, serve to block the operation of fictivization. In fact, none of the respondents apply the fictional mode, with 8 of 12 respondents indicating their adoption of the documentary mode. This indicates that the majority of respondents feel interpellated as "real," rather than fictional, subjects, most of the time.

Bracken is the only respondent to indicate an application of **the aesthetic mode** to *Henry* and he employs it in relation to the film's special effects. He notes that, given the film's tiny budget, the special effects are "impressive" and that there are some shots that may appeal to "gore fans." Bracken may take some comfort in recognizing the constructed nature of some of the film's violent images but McNaughton does not consistently employ a gore aesthetic and much of the film's violence either occurs off-screen or is severely lacking in any aesthetic embellishment. Although Bracken is able to apply the aesthetic mode to some scenes (for instance, the obviously staged eye-stabbing scene), others offer no such comfort. Indeed, the home invasion sequence contains the sparsest violence and it is this scene which Bracken defines as the film's most terrifying.

All respondents for *Henry* apply **the artistic mode**. Ebert, Nash, Ewling and Finkleman, Grant, and Rafferty simply mention McNaughton's name in their review, acknowledging that he is the creative force behind the film. Other respondents assign specific praise or criticism to the director. Bracken praises McNaughton for transcending

a \$120, 000 budget, while James and Prigge respect his directorial distance and control. Travers credits McNaughton not only for exposing a frightening world but for also “rubbing it in our faces” in order to make a point. Hinson points out a division within the film between art-house and cheap horror aesthetics and he sees this contradictory sensibility as indicative of McNaughton’s deficiencies as a director. Kehr points out that it is McNaughton who betrays the spectator’s trust (by removing the buffer of style that is the thriller genre’s trademark) and Hicks notes that the director “has serious matters on the mind.” We have seen that the adoption of the artistic mode indicates a viewer’s awareness of the real existence of the storyteller but not necessarily the reality of the story. Whereas *Natural Born Killers* is generally thought of as Stone’s violent fantasy, *Henry* is understood as John McNaughton’s serious fictionalization of real events. Those who undergo the operation of documentarization conceive of McNaughton as an objective medium by which the story of Henry Lee Lucas is conveyed.

Respondents to *Henry* apply **the instructional mode** in different ways. Ebert and Travers feel that the film is a reaction against film violence that cheapens death by presenting it as entertainment and argue that *Henry*’s honest depiction of violence is illuminating. Travers also thinks of *Henry* as a demonstration of how “madness can wear an ordinary, even pleasing face.” Nash concurs, and feels that the film forces spectators to the unpleasant realization that the world depicted in the film is like the real world and that anyone is vulnerable to a killer like Henry. (He even predicts that some residents of Chicago may feel the urge to move from the city after seeing the film.) Grant applies the instructional mode when Henry and Otis are revealed to be watching a replay of the home

invasion sequence, citing it as a “frightening example of how anything can be conceived of as titillating video porn.” Kehr calls Henry the “inevitable product of a dying social class” and regards him as a characterization of a real sociological problem. Such respondents glean from the film a disturbing warning about how easily killers can camouflage themselves as regular people. For these viewers the film reveals that Henry’s world is also their world and they, as real subjects, are vulnerable to random violence as are the victims in the film. This application of the instructional mode, though valued by some respondents, is far from comforting as it causes spectators to feel more at risk in their everyday lives.⁷⁰

Half of respondents to *Henry* explicitly note their adoption of the documentary mode. Although aware that *Henry* is a fiction film, Bracken, Rafferty, Travers, Hicks, Prigge, and Hinson reveal their knowledge that *Henry* is based on a real-life serial killer named Henry Lee Lucas. This knowledge, as well as some of the film’s aesthetic qualities, leads viewers to adopt **the documentary mode**. Ebert likens the film to a “slice-of-life docudrama” and comments on its “flat, unforgiving realism.” Hicks, Rafferty and Hinson have similar responses and identify their understanding of the film’s aesthetic style within the documentary mode. Prigge seems to adopt this mode to the greatest extent. He suggests that the film looks as if a film crew assembled the footage after following Henry Lee Lucas around for a week. He even recognizes elements of an instructional or “how to...” documentary in the film’s realistic portrayal of Henry’s

⁷⁰ Viewers who are able to understand their negative affect responses as part of McNaughton’s attempt to honestly portray violence on film are able to form a positive intellectual response that at least allows them to justify their distress after it has passed. There is no indication that affect responses and intellectual responses are related but respondents who are able to justify their negative affect response as a lesson or truth may *later* take comfort in knowing that theirs was an honest reaction.

everyday life. For such respondents, *Henry* is understood as providing information about an actual serial killer and McNaughton is as the real and valid enunciator who provides this information. In addition to the reality of the subject matter, respondents understand many of the film's aesthetic features as belonging to the institution of documentary film. With documentarization so clearly in operation, respondents seriously consider what they witness on screen. Thus, rather than leave their fear and horror behind in a fictional world, viewers accept their status as real and accept the possibility that Henry represents a real threat. Respondents also indicate their status as real subjects when they express moral indignation in response to McNaughton's calm acceptance of Henry's violent acts. Respondents who consider McNaughton as a real enunciator are appalled by his failure to judge the events he portrays. Such respondents are disturbed not only by Henry's violent outbursts but by McNaughton's moral indifference as well.⁷¹

The video home invasion sequence is *Henry*'s most notorious and is identified by the majority of respondents as the film's most disgusting, sickening, frightening and disturbing scene. Odin is particularly intrigued by the **home video mode** and he identifies several textual characteristics (and their related operations) that prompt viewers to adopt the mode as they watch a text.⁷² First, Odin notes the lack of narrativization in home movies. *Henry*'s home invasion sequence begins abruptly with little narrative structuring to explain how Henry and Otis gained access to the home, how they

⁷¹ In "It was an Atrocious Film: Georges Franu's *Blood of the Beasts*," Jeannette Sloniowski notes that documentaries are normally associated with "useful knowledge, ethics, and moral improvement" and that the absence of these things presents a dilemma for viewers of images of actual violence (*Documenting the Documentary*, 1998, 172). In *Blood of the Beasts*, Sloniowski notes a "ludicrous incongruity" between the film's "bland didactic documentary manner and its intense, emotional, painful subject matter" (1998, 172). The same incongruity exists in *Henry* and viewers acknowledge its unsettling effects.

⁷² Buckland, 102-103.

incapacitated the man who is lying on the floor, or how they manage to leave the house without being detected. Odin also notes that the home movie mode lacks diegetization and this too is apparent during the home invasion sequence. Viewers are given little indication of where or when the scene takes place and there is no attempt to create diegetic coherency by accounting for off-screen space with different points-of-view (there is only Henry's/the camera's eye). The continuous shot also points to this lack of diegetic order, especially in its failure to correct the visual problem of the dropped camera.

Indeed, the video camera plays a vital role in encouraging the adoption of the home video mode. Odin argues that the acknowledgement of the camera and its operator within the diegesis blocks the fiction effect because the presence of the cameraperson creates the impression that real action was caught on film (or video) by a real enunciator. Otis addresses the camera several times throughout the home invasion sequence and Henry's presence as the scene's enunciator is undeniable. The blurred and shaky images, the dropping and taking up of the camera, the sound of Henry's voice and breath from behind the camera, and the sight of him holding the camera (as reflected in a mirror), cement in viewers' minds the idea that the footage they are seeing is "real." Odin also stresses the importance of the institutional context of home movies; specifically their tendency to be filmed and shown within the domestic space of those being filmed or filming.⁷³ This material context of the home video mode is preserved for viewers of

⁷³ Buckland, 102-104.

Henry, even those who viewed the film at a theatre, by framing of the video footage within the screen of Otis and Henry's television.

Several viewers apply the home video mode to *Henry* in order to make sense of the video footage depicting the death of an entire family. Travers, James, Prigge, Bracken, Ebert, Hicks, Grant, Rafferty and Hinson each identify the home video as the film's most disturbing scene but only Travers, Hicks, Hinson, and Kehr explicitly indicate an adoption of the home video mode. Travers applies the home video mode to make sense of the "grainy, unfocused, crazily angled" video images that Otis and Henry watch in their living room. He also makes note of Henry's (Michael Rooker's) conspicuously clumsy cinematography and understands it as an indication of the "real" status of the scene's enunciator. Kehr displays a similar understanding of the home invasion scene, noting the video image and Henry's status as cameraman. He adds that the home video aesthetic indicates that the events on screen have already passed, denying the audience the sensation of suspense or hope for the victims. He also notes that the home video perspective signals that nothing in the image will be manipulated to make the violence more palatable and that every violent act will be witnessed in its immediate, uncut form.

Hicks and Hinson make some intriguing remarks about how the violent nature of the video content complicates the application of the home video mode. This is due in part to the contradiction inherent in filming the utter destruction of a family as if it were a memory to be cherished. Home movies are normally associated with happy family moments in which the viewer, usually a family member or friend, can share. While a

sense of immediacy is normally a valued aspect of the home video mode, respondents note that the mode imbues the home invasion sequence with an almost unbearable immediacy by making it seem as if the violent images have been stripped of all stylistic buffers.

Another complication arises when viewers detect a degree of voyeurism. Hicks makes sense of the video format, continuous take, and clumsy cinematography of the home invasion sequence via the home video mode but, at the end of this sequence (when it is revealed that Henry and Otis are watching the footage at home), he recognizes an element of voyeurism, likening the scene to a “perverted episode of *America’s Funniest Home Videos*.”⁷⁴ Although he continues to apply the home video mode, he modifies it to incorporate the voyeuristic factor, which is not normally associated with home movies. Hinson also recognizes the video aesthetic and domestic context of the home invasion scene as appropriate to the home movie mode but adds that its violent content means that the scene may be better understood as a snuff film. Because they recognize that they are not members of the family unit, Hicks and Hinson consider their witness of the family’s demise as a voyeuristic act (something which they must account for as real subjects) and experience feelings of revulsion and self-disgust as a result. And yet, even as these respondents recognize that they are strangers to the family, they preserve some of the home movie mode’s sense of involvement with the image. Hicks feels that the dropped camera puts the spectator in the position of a victim, as if the video were a document of his own suffering. Hinson imagines his place behind the image as indicative of an

⁷⁴ I associate *America’s Funniest Home Videos* with the desire to view images of unplanned, often embarrassing, normally private moments – that is, voyeurism.

unwelcome power. Reviewers who admit to feeling personally involved with the image, either as a victim or as an accomplice, experience corresponding responses of vulnerability and shame.⁷⁵

3.6 Modes NOT Applied by Viewers of *Henry* Who Experience Negative Affect Response

When I began my semio-pragmatic analysis of these responses to *Henry* I was expecting to find an increase in the application of the instructional, documentary and home video modes. What I was not expecting to find, however, was awareness among respondents about which modes they were *not* applying to the film. In hindsight, it seems obvious that a viewer who is able to identify unsettling aspects of the viewing process would also be capable of recognizing what is normally comforting about it. In the case of *Henry*, viewers expressed their discomfort when they found that the film blocked several modes normally associated with the fiction film.

For instance, Kehr notes **the absence of the dynamic mode**. He feels that part of McNaughton's method is denying his audience the chance to resonate to the sights and sounds of the film. He notes that by failing to "indulge in the analytical montage, predatory camera movement and jumpy crosscutting standard to the genre," McNaughton does not provide the thrills, "physical release [and] easy catharsis [that] most horror film provide." Indeed, none of the respondents indicate their adoption of the dynamic mode

⁷⁵ Kerekes and Slater conceive of the home invasion sequence as snuff footage and recognize that this element of voyeurism is disturbing for viewers. They note that the 1992 Electric Pictures UK release of *Henry* was cut so that it is "clear much earlier on that Otis and Henry are watching a re-run of the murder on their TV set. There seems to be some comfort in establishing that it is the two protagonists who are watching a snuff film and not us, the public" (1994, 252).

and some discuss how their inability to apply this mode influenced their viewing experience. Discursively competent spectators familiar with the institution of fiction film expect certain things from fiction films, including a degree of pleasurable visual and aural stimulation (for example, attractive stars, a polished visual presentation, a distinctive score or soundtrack composed by popular artists). Comments regarding *Henry*'s bland, minimalist aesthetic draw attention to one of the ways in which *Henry* blocks not only the application of the dynamic mode but also the operation of fictivization.

Viewers also note **the absence of the fictional mode**, the mode which allows the viewer to understand the relations occurring within the narrative. Kehr, Ewling and Finkleman, Hinson, James, and Prigge observe that Henry's motives are never revealed and that his crimes are portrayed as random, inexplicable acts. Nash points out that Henry is drawn to be neither a sympathetic character nor an evil stereotype, leaving the viewer with no way to categorize or understand him. The average respondent expects to be able to apply the fictional mode. This would allow him to receive information about the narrative, so that he can develop an understanding of characters and events and ultimately feel a part of the story. By blocking the application of this mode, *Henry* further interferes with the viewer's enjoyment and the operation of fictivization.⁷⁶

Several respondents are disturbed by their **inability to apply the instructional mode**. Ewling and Finkleman remark that McNaughton makes no judgment of Henry's crimes and notes that this moral distance is disturbing. Grant makes a similar point, maintaining that with the exception of the video home invasion, McNaughton provides

⁷⁶ Kerekes and Slater note that the major points of contention for *Henry* include its somber attitude and lack of aesthetic excess (1994, 59, 65).

no commentary on the unpleasantness he portrays. Rafferty feels that McNaughton's minimalist comments on how the "world is a scary place and [that] murder is ugly" are too obvious to be of any comfort or value. James finds McNaughton's refusal to moralize, and calm acceptance of Henry's crimes to be the film's most horrifying elements. These respondents express their expectation that *Henry* should teach a lesson or reveal a truth and indicate that its failure to do so makes an already difficult viewing experience even more unpleasant.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Kerekes and Slater explain that British film censors demanded that several cuts be made to *Henry* before its release in the UK to compensate for McNaughton's moral indifference. Despite *Henry*'s similarities to *Man Bites Dog*, the latter film escaped censure because "it had a definite moral sense behind it and ultimately condemns what it portrays. *Henry* on the other hand, offers no such definition and gives the viewers a free reign on making of it what they will" (1994, 65).

Conclusion

It has of course occurred to me to apply the semio-pragmatic model to my own response to *Henry*. Having done so, my original revulsion is not surprising. The footage upset me but at the time the only way I could explain why was because it seemed “real.” Now I understand that there were very few internal constraints to prevent me from believing that what I was watching was footage that Henry Lee Lucas had taken. I was shown only the video home invasion sequence and my reaction to it was completely determined by my immediate adoption of the home movie mode. Like many families, mine had a video camera and the home invasion sequence was stylistically familiar. Though I wouldn’t have used the terms at the time, I recognized the lack of diegetization and narrativization, the direct address to the camera and the presence of the cameraman as evidence of the real status of the enunciator, and of my reality as a subject. Now, add to this the institutional context of my first viewing; it had occurred in a documentary course. I was aware that our subject matter for the day was the study of documentary techniques in fiction film. Keep in mind, however, that these were foolish undergraduate days and I cannot guarantee that my level of attention was kept as rigorously as it is now. When the lights went down and the home invasion began, all I knew was that I was sitting in a classroom, in a documentary course, watching an entire family being murdered on video. I realize now that the clip upset me not simply because it “looked real.” My response was automatic and occurred almost completely under the operation of documentarization. My negative affect response was the result of my having to take

seriously the possibility that the violent acts occurring on the screen before me could have happened. We were shown the scene until its end when Henry and Otis are revealed to be watching the video on their television. The revelation brought some relief but I was still somehow convinced that the video footage was based on events that had actually taken place. I was sick for the family, sick for the person who thought to recreate the moment, sick for the man who inspired it, and sick for myself for having had to watch it. It was an altogether unpleasant experience and I have a culturally learned discursive competence for reading home videos and documentaries to thank for it.

Years later, I have the small compensation of knowing that my original response does not speak of remarkable stupidity or sensitivity, as even those with the benefit of a fictional institutional context are disturbed by the influence of documentarization. While a pragmatic analysis of Henry and responses to it reveal that viewers find the film's realism and relationship to reality disturbing, a semio-pragmatic approach begins to reveal why real-seeming violence is capable of inspiring negative affect response. The crucial difference between films that do disturb and films that do not lies in whether the viewer thinks of the film's enunciator as real and, more importantly I think, whether the spectator takes on a real subjectivity. Viewers who understand violent films under the operation of fictivization do so as fictional subjects and are free to take on (or simply ignore) a fictional character's point of view, enjoy the film as a visceral experience, or understand it as a technical marvel. Viewers who operate under documentarization, on the other hand, understand the film's enunciator and themselves as real. They are compelled to react to the film in accordance to its relationship to reality. A real subject is

unable to avoid displeasure and her negative emotions afford no pleasure. When a real subject is confronted with violent imagery, she recoils in disgust. She may feel sympathy for the victims of violence, guilt and shame for her involvement as a voyeur, as well as fear and a sense of vulnerability upon recognizing that her world and the film's world are essentially the same.

Further study of negative affect response using the semio-pragmatic approach would ideally allow for control, or at least a more complete knowledge of, the material context of each respondent's viewing. Odin suggests that material aspects of the viewing process determine the identification of the institutional context of the film, and it follows that material elements also affect operational dominance. Variables could include solitary versus groups viewings, showings in commercial versus non-commercial spaces (think for example of the differences between a plush modern theatre, complete with snacks, and the stark quality of a dingy public hall), and even film versus video presentations. Such variables may establish whether group dynamics, environmental factors and presentation format significantly influence operational applications and the development of negative affect response.

I am also curious whether the semio-pragmatic mode is a viable method with which to study positive affect response. Identifying negative affect response is, in some ways, a simple task. Human beings tend to resist and avoid negative feelings and the presence of negative affect responses to fiction films (or any other conventionally entertaining stimulus) is conspicuous. Positive feelings, on the other hand, are welcomed in virtually any context, and fiction films are culturally sanctioned sites devoted almost

entirely to the inspiration of pleasure. As such, it may be difficult to determine whether viewers operating under the operation of documentarization are more likely to be overcome by happiness than those operating under fictivization.

Ultimately, the best way to determine how a viewer understands film is to better understand the brain of the film viewer. We owe the inception of cinema, as well as its current phase of digital revolution, to science – certainly it should be one of the primary tools of cinematic research. The cognitive realm presents a new frontier for film scholars and it is potentially a simple matter of time (and funding...) before those of us who are fascinated by both film and the human brain find themselves in laboratories as well as theatres. Until then I am content with this semio-pragmatic approach, which, despite the lack of sophisticated brain imaging equipment, has proven useful in my quest to understand negative affect response.

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