

**“The Social Construction of Nature
and Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*”**

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Oliver Stone’s 1994 film *Natural Born Killers* was, upon its release, immediately revered and reviled by critics. This story of Mickey and Mallory Knox, two lovers who indulge in a killing spree across the American southwest, are subsequently caught and incarcerated, and then escape from prison in a violent jailbreak, has been celebrated as “a slap in the face, waking us up to what is happening” (Ebert), and dismissed as “an ejaculatory farce, but without satisfaction or rest” (Denby 46). Whether praising or condemning the film, the existing criticism on *Natural Born Killers* concerns itself almost wholly with two of the movie’s major themes: the perceived proliferation of violence in post-Kennedy America, and the predilection of American mass media for transforming murderers into global celebrities on a par with an Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe. But there exists a third major theme with which the film is intensely interested, but one which regrettably has not been fully analyzed by reviewers or scholarly critics: the ideological role of nature (in particular, of animals) in many arguments exploring the ineluctability of human violence and hence that violence’s amoral essence. Despite whatever shortcomings might prevent *Natural Born Killers* (henceforth referred to periodically as *NBK*) from being an entirely insightful analysis or original indictment of American violence or the mass media, this essay

argues that it is as a serious interrogation of humanity's complicated relationship with the natural world and its animal denizens that Stone's film is redeemed from dismissal.

The film's interest in nature is most often invoked through the character of Mickey Knox (Woody Harrelson). In order to attain a secure foundation for his conviction that human murder is biologically determined, and therefore a natural expression of amoral instincts that society should not forbid or condemn, Mickey attempts in several ways in the film to undermine the perception in those around him that the human and nonhuman worlds are distinct. We see this connection between the human and nonhuman realms established most obviously in the quasi-totemic tattoos with which Mickey has chosen to mark his body, tattoos depicting dangerous animals such as scorpions and snakes. Also, in a comment to be discussed in more detail below, Mickey makes a rather blatant connection during his prison interview with Wayne Gayle (Robert Downey, Jr.) between his own identity as a mass murderer and the essential identity of nonhuman predators such as wolves. But what appropriations of the natural world such as Mickey's visual and verbal references to various animals rely upon is an assumption that the natural world, with all the plants and animals comprising it, is ultimately knowable in some static and undistorted essence by its human observers.

It is precisely this conviction held by Mickey that the natural world can be seized upon, whittled down, and reduced to some knowable, static essence such as "predation," "harmony," "fidelity," and so forth, that the film – particularly through its visual grammar and its recurring imagery – works so strenuously to destabilize. *Natural Born Killers*, in short, is a film that strongly suggests that all experiences of nature are always already socially created and culturally mediated, and therefore it views with skepticism our abilities to experience nature in anything approximating a pre-cultural, Kantian thing-in-itself state.¹ According to the view of nature the

film promotes, a view often referred to as a social constructivist position, humans always experience nature through the distorting lenses of cultural discourses such as those associated with art, pop culture, religion, economic policy, politics, and so forth. Even science is assumed by some of the staunchest adherents of the social construction view to offer only biased representations of nature, given the fact that all experiments and all scientific data are arranged and interpreted according to historically and culturally conditioned discursive communities. For prominent advocates of the social construction view (such as Neil Evernden and Stephen Vogel), the danger in not recognizing nature's social constructedness is that people may not realize how manipulative and untenable attempts to ground ethics, ideologies, and normative values in nature are.² As history has amply demonstrated, everything from the Nazi reverence for war to the relegation of the Jews, Irish, and various dark-skinned races to animal status have involved the attempts by one group to convince others that their version of nature is an authentic, valid, and ideologically neutral one.³ As Evernden states, often "nature is reformulated to become the kind of entity that will demonstrate the norms we wish to discover, and both nature and biology are pressed into the service of social reality" (16).

One significant aspect of *NBK* that many commentators have remarked upon and that is integral to the film's project of promoting a social constructivist view of nature is that the film is shot in a visually complex and intentionally over-the-top style. The film is hyper-kinetically edited, shifting between color and black-and-white, and mashing together shots using different formats and different color filters. Also woven into its celluloid tapestry are such baroque elements as animation and "found footage," the latter of which includes clips from television commercials, nature documentaries, and Hollywood action films (including Stone's own scripted films *Scarfare* and *Midnight Express*). These "found footage" clips are often rear-projected

during a scene, meaning that while a scene is being filmed, Stone integrates film footage from other sources by projecting those scenes onto a wall, or inside a door frame or window pane, located in the background of the scene. As one critic approvingly summed up the style of the film: “Regardless of what particular borrowings, thefts, evocations, and homages one can trace in *Natural Born Killers*...the point is that the stunning visual phantasmagoria of the Stone’s film sings the remarkable range of options available to the filmmaker” (MacDonald 114).

As indicated above, it is precisely this “visual phantasmagoria” employed by Stone which allows the film to articulate its social constructivist stance when it comes to arguments regarding the “naturalness” of murder, and it is this imagery which works so successfully to undermine the biological determinism view of murder such as that espoused by Mickey Knox. Even though Mickey suggests that essential parallels exist between human and nonhuman aggression, and that animals are ultimately knowable and hence ripe for appropriation into intellectual systems such as his own defense of murder, *Natural Born Killers* reveals that Stone doesn’t concur with Mickey that the animal world is easily reducible to static, verifiable essences. What is at stake in an analysis of the visual vocabulary and grammar of the film (in particular, its images of animals) is that such scrutiny will work to undermine the position of critics who think Stone’s views on murder can be collapsed into those of Mickey Knox, and therefore (this line of thinking goes) that Stone and Knox believe murder is justified because it exists in the *amoral* realm of nature and of the instincts of wild animals.⁴

Such an interpretation of Stone’s film not only misrepresents his views on violence and murder, but it also willfully ignores entire elements of the film’s visual style that respond back to and undermine the dialogue Mickey Knox delivers in his attempts to legitimate murder. The proponents of this interpretation of the film which collapses Stone into his character Mickey

Knox are drawing, I assume, mainly upon two prominent scenes in the movie: one being the scene in which Mickey and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) have holed up in sleazy hotel room with a female hostage; and the other being Mickey's post-Super Bowl, "live-from-prison" interview with the tabloid journalist character, Wayne Gayle.

In the hotel room scene, Mickey lies on the bed, flipping aimlessly through various television channels, while Mallory bathes and then begins dancing seductively on the bed for Mickey. In one of Stone's innovative uses of rear projected imagery in the film, the hotel room window in the background of the scene becomes a canvas upon which various moving images appear, images ranging from violent clips of movies such as *Scarface*, to historical footage of Josef Stalin and of heaps of concentration camp corpses, to scenes of hippos fighting with one another and of a female praying mantis eating the remains of her recently killed mate. It is the juxtaposition of those last two types of scenes (i.e. historical footage of warmongers and their atrocities, and of animals being violent towards each other) that must be responsible, at least in part, for inspiring commentators on *NBK* to make remarks about the film such as the following: "*NBK* does not indict violence...it brazenly celebrates it as a fact of nature: Mickey and Mallory are predators – they prey on those weaker than themselves, which is no more nor less than what sharks and wolves do" (Horsley, II, 300-01). However, such interpretations as this one of the film are not taking into consideration the full scope of the film's use of animal imagery, and therefore such interpretations miss Stone's more subtle points about the role of nature in late 20th century American culture.

Among the characters in the film, the one who best qualifies as the embodiment of opposition to the social constructivist position on nature would be Mickey Knox. This opposition is clearly glimpsed in what must constitute the other vital piece of evidence from the film for

commentators who insist that Stone himself views human murder as essentially tantamount to the amoral violence of the nonhuman world. I refer, of course, to the prison house interview with Wayne Gayle. In this nationally televised interview, being aired live after the Super Bowl, Mickey tries to defend why he committed so many murders by suggesting an ontological kinship between himself and an animal like a wolf. “The wolf don’t know why he’s a wolf; the deer don’t know why he’s a deer,” Mickey explains to Wayne and his television audience of millions. “God just made it that way.” Mickey goes on in the interview to argue for the existence of “a demon” that lurks at the core of humans. At one point, Mickey exclaims to Wayne while pointing at his chest: “Everybody’s got the demon in here, okay.” Simpson’s interpretation of Mickey’s references to “the demon” appears quite sensible. “The demon,” Simpson observes, “is Mickey’s metaphor for the inborn human desire to kill” and a metaphor for everybody’s “collective memory of the hunt” (127).

What strikes me as a fundamental misreading of the film, however, is when scholars like Simpson argue that Oliver Stone has no qualms with arguments explaining violence such as the one Mickey espouses in his televised interview. Simpson asserts: “No matter how much the film superficially insists that the media environment is to blame for rampant murder, the title ‘natural born killers’ non-ironically suggests determinism, that Mickey...[is] a human embodiment of the ‘natural’ killing instinct symbolized by the rattlesnakes that litter the film’s landscape” (128). However, rather than employing Mickey as a mouthpiece for his own belief in an ontological connection between human and nonhuman violence, Stone uses Mickey in the prison interview to foreground a problematic ideological move that is a popular tactic of everyone from advertisers to warmongers to environmentalists: if you can successfully associate your product,

behavior or ideas with the realm of nature, it is then, as Evernden argues, “beyond reproach” because it is now “in the realm of the absolute” (24).

Mickey’s ideological maneuver that attempts to defend violence can operate in the interview with Wayne Gayle only by reducing the complexity of a wolf to its predatory behavior and by reducing a deer to its role as prey, all the while ignoring other interpretations or other facets of those intricate creatures’ lives. As scholars such as Karla Armbruster have shown, such fetishization of nature’s aggression and activity, as opposed to its passivity and more benign behaviors, can be the side effects of our over-exposure to “the nature documentary version” of animals. Armbruster writes: “Perhaps the most widely remarked on are [a nature documentary’s] tendencies to feed our culturally encouraged desire for speed and conflict, making non-human nature itself seem slow and uneventful by comparison...Everywhere the camera turns, animals are stalking prey, mating, fighting and raising their young” (222-23).⁵ In short, when Mickey lectures Wayne and the television audience on the realities of nature, the question a social constructivist would want us to ask about Mickey’s use of animal references is the following: *whose version* of nature and of animals is Mickey deploying in the interview?

People should always sit up in alarm when somebody tries to assert that nature is reducible to a static cluster of concepts, such as balance, cooperation, and order, or – conversely – to a cluster such as competition, violence, and exploitation (as Mickey does with his wolf and deer example). Choosing to ignore either side of these diametrically opposed, yet equally present, aspects of nature is to “create a new ecology to better serve [one’s] purposes – that is, to better substantiate [one’s] arguments” (Evernden 9). We might point out here that as the movie transitions into its second half, the one that largely takes place in prison after Mickey and Mallory’s capture, Stone includes a prolonged shot, accompanied by unusually tranquil music, of

two monarch butterflies delicately perched on a flower in the prison yard. With the inclusion of this image, the film is already beginning to show us how narrow Mickey's upcoming discussion of nature will be during the Wayne Gayle interview. To responsibly invoke nature, you need to have your eyes on both the carcass-shredding hyenas (which Stone includes a shot of during the prison interview), as well as the nectar-sipping butterfly. Mickey, obviously, only has his eyes on the former of these two.

In other words, Stone displays his nuanced understanding of the role of nature in American society by repeatedly showing his audience how relative, biased, and socially constructed Mickey's perception of nature is. The realistic images of animals that are provided by the nature documentary footage scattered throughout the movie are constantly undermined and complicated by the film's repeated references to other socially constructed representations of animals, such as those found in various religions, mythologies, fairy tales, advertisements, and cartoons. Any interpretation errs when it asserts that the film endorses Mickey's argument that his own murderous inclinations are "natural" (and hence beyond reproach) simply because they fundamentally resemble the behavior of predators like wolves.

As certain scenes in the film and as certain snippets of dialogue reveal, Stone is aware that the animal always comes to us already covered over by the shell of preformulated values and narratives. Consider, for example, the rattlesnakes that are part of a recurring visual motif throughout the movie. Random cut-away shots to this dangerous animal abound, and they are a part of the film's opening montage of images, obviously inviting the viewer to associate Mickey and Mallory's violence with the "natural" and hence amoral violence of a rattlesnake attacking its prey in the desert. Mickey tries to condition us during the prison interview to see his previous murderous deeds in just such a way. But Stone has cleverly integrated several other perspectives

on the snake that clue us in to the fact that the snake does not always have to signify violence, aggression, and death.

When Mickey and Mallory go to the Drug Zone store in a desperate attempt to procure the anti-venom that will save their lives from the snake bites they suffered after killing their last victim, the old Native American man, Stone slowly zooms in on the front of the Drug Zone building which prominently displays a caduceus, the winged staff with two snakes wrapped around it. This ancient symbol, most often associated in our contemporary society with the medical community, here connotes not death and violence, but health and healing. And during the prison interview, at the point when Mickey is rhapsodizing about the redemptive power of his love for Mallory, he pulls open his shirt to reveal a tattoo on his chest that almost exactly matches the caduceus on the Drug Zone store. Here, on Mickey's chest, the intertwined snakes represent his love and commitment for Mallory, and his sense of a close connection to her. And finally, although Mickey tries to get us to believe that a predator can not help but be a killer every chance it gets, the old Native American man's uncanny ability to pick up and caress the rattlesnakes that inhabit his desert hut demonstrate that Mickey's insinuations that nature is always reducible to its predatory aspects is patently false, or at best, only partially accurate.⁶ In short, Stone labors throughout the film to show us that any reference to predatory animals like snakes is always a slippery affair, because the animal can only be referenced at the intersection of a wide array of competing discourses and symbolisms that depict vastly different "realities" of that animal.

And Stone does not stop at rattlesnakes. The film also showcases the ideological malleability of wolves, polar bears, and rabbits in our culture. For example, after "supercop" Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore) apprehends Mallory at the Drug Zone, Mickey throws down his

guns and, by way of announcing his reluctant agreement to surrender, snarls: “Come get the big bad wolf.” It is an obvious reference to the character assassination performed on wolves by hundreds of years of folk and fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood.”⁷ And when the prison interview with Wayne Gayle cuts away to its first commercial break, it is, significantly, to a commercial from the highly successful 1990’s advertising campaign by Coca-Cola depicting smiling polar bears savoring bottles of Coke. In these commercials, those efficient hunters of the Arctic have been thoroughly anthropomorphized and dispossessed of any of the ferocity they possess in the wild. Perhaps most interestingly, when informing Wayne Gayle during their interview about a recurring dream he has had since childhood, Mickey tells us of being in the dream a rabbit running around in the woods, and one that, as Mickey describes it, “kill[s] all of the other animals.” At this point in the film an image of a giant rabbit, looking as sinister as a dragon, floods the screen. One would be hard-pressed to come up with a more idiosyncratic and incongruous version of a rabbit than Mickey’s description here of his dream-world experience of being an insatiably predatory rabbit.

The point of drawing attention to these moments in the film is to demonstrate that far from aligning himself with Mickey’s violently Darwinian view of nature (as scholars like Simpson have suggested), Stone instead goes to great lengths to show the myriad lenses that are available in our culture for viewing the animal, thereby exposing Mickey’s selective use of nature to justify mass murder as being as ideologically slanted as any of the others which inundate our culture. For Stone, as for most other practitioners of the social constructivist position on nature, there simply is no presocial, prelinguistic essence of the animal that we can empirically know. There are only the competing multitude of narratives and images that provide a kaleidoscope of perspectives on the materially existing animal.

Critics of the social constructivist position, such as the one Stone promotes in his film, argue that human beliefs about nature threaten to degenerate into solipsism and idealism. Scholars such as Eileen Crist and David Demeritt have written critiques of the constructivist position faulting it for portraying the natural world “as mute, intrinsically meaningless, ontologically indeterminate, epistemologically unavailable, and aesthetically bankrupt” (Crist 503). For these critics, social constructivists reduce nature to mere “white noise.”⁸ Demeritt and Crist call for more recognition of the ways in which not only human cultural constructs shape and influence the natural world, but also the ways in which the natural world *reciprocally* molds our thinking about it through its material existence. Additionally, critics of the constructivist position believe that such a position can get muddled in hopeless relativism and endless “language games,” and that by “[r]ejecting reference [to materially existing nature] as the ground of truth begs the question of how to decide between competing knowledge claims about nature and the environment” (DeMeritt 781). That is to say, there are certainly *better* and *more accurate* representations of nature than others. But perhaps the most strident criticism of the constructivist position arises out of a perception that too much emphasis on representations and competing discourses about nature distracts people from the urgent work of attending to the myriad impending catastrophes in the natural world, such as those associated with the build-up of greenhouse gasses. As Crist argues: “At the level of analysis...instead of attending to the degradation of natural systems, constructivism focuses exclusive attention on *human discourses* about it” (510, emphasis in the original).

Yet even though *NBK* revels in its exposure of the competing discourses that swirl around plants and animals, Stone (like Crist and Demeritt) is not oblivious to problems associated with too much of an emphasis on cultural constructions of nature. There is also a keen sense in which

the film acknowledges materially existing animals as being no better off for our fascination with them, and as suffering and dying beneath the meta-level of discourse, often as a result of the careless and callous actions of humans. For example, Mallory and Mickey may share in the film an apocalyptic fantasy of Mickey bearing down from the skies on a mythically-charge white horse, but the film depicts actual horses in the movie only as being locked up in pens on a prison work farm. The old Native American may seem paternal and benevolent to the rattlesnakes that share his living space with him, but we must not forget those are the severed heads of rattlesnakes we glimpse adorning his boots. And in a subtle detail from the film that not many people have commented upon, when Mickey first meets Mallory during the *I Love Mallory* mock-sitcom sequence, Mickey arrives at her home in a blood-splattered butcher's apron, delivering "50 pounds of beef" for Mallory's father (played in a perfect piece of casting by Rodney Dangerfield). Stone provocatively insinuates here that Mickey comes to desire murder on some level not through anything like an ontological kinship with predators like wolves and snakes, but rather through a breakdown in the untenable contradiction undergirding the sanctioned killing of animals on a massive scale by a society that then turns around and condemns the murder of people. By giving us this brief glimpse of Mickey as literally a butcher, Stone forces us to confront the idea that it is only our "speciesist" prejudices (as Peter Singer would say) that so often causes us to reserve moral repulsion only for the murder of another human, for the meat-packing industry can exist only by training its work force to resist being overly disturbed or squeamish about the shedding of blood on an industrial scale.⁹

What these visual reminders of the death of materially existing animals reveal is that Stone is, at least on some level, aware of the problem with some of the "social construction of nature" discourses; namely, that they risk becoming devoid of any consciousness that there still

exists actual entities that can suffer, die, or go extinct, regardless of how cultural constructions refer to, mediate, or interpret them. As Eileen Crist writes: “constructivist analyses of ‘nature’ favor remaining in the comfort zone of zestless agnosticism and noncommittal meta-discourse...this intellectual stance may function as a mechanism against facing the devastation of the biosphere” (511). Although Stone may not be referencing anything as colossal as biosphere degradation or species extinction in the film, he is immune from the charge of being hopelessly lost in floating signifiers and meta-discourse for, as the above examples from the film illustrate, he is aware of actual animal death and animal oppression lurking at the core of the various discourses about animals. As opposed to Mickey’s use of the animal to justify murder, or the Disneyfication of polar bears by the Coca-Cola company, or the villainous casting of wolves in fairy tales gestured towards by Mickey during his arrest at the Drug Zone, *NBK* suggests at times that the one perspective on the animal that is the most reprehensible and the most hypocritical in our society is the one that sees it as both an ideological and physical resource that is endlessly disposable and to be used in whatever way humans see fit.

Although we have yet to see if *Natural Born Killers* becomes the classic film about American violence that some have hailed it to be,¹⁰ it is undoubtedly a singular movie standing apart from the rest of the fare produced by major Hollywood studios due to its interest in the *ideology* of nature. As this article set out to prove, the visual style of the film, one of its most celebrated and definitive features, allows the movie to do what so few films do: explore nature not as a simplistic and easily understood materially existing entity, but as a contentious political, cultural, and philosophical category. This article proceeds to enter the critical debate regarding exactly what degree of irony Stone intended the film’s title to be taken by arguing that an increased attentiveness to the film’s complex use of nature imagery reveals how patently

distorted and manipulative Mickey's appropriation of nature is. However, although Stone's film boasts deep sympathies to the social constructivist position on nature, it also avoids that position's frequent blind spot of forgetting that, whatever our epistemological limitations with regards to the natural world, materially existing plants and animals do suffer and die. *NBK* might not inform its audience of anything they didn't already know regarding the mass media's insatiable appetite for shockingly violent news stories and of its tendency to turn mass murderers into superstars, but the film is a remarkable text positioning itself at the heart of some of the most contentious and important issues in contemporary animal studies and environmental ethics.

Notes

¹ The Kantian thing-in-itself (or *ding-an-sich*) refers to noumenon, i.e. an object or event as it exists independently of being experienced by human sensory apparatuses or human cognitive structures. Kant discusses the concept of the noumenon in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

² Anna Peterson usefully draws a distinction between “hard” vs. “soft” social constructivist positions: the former views humans as living entirely in the realm of culture and doggedly denies that there is such a thing as materially existing nature “out there,” whereas the latter position recognizes materially existing nature, but remains largely agnostic about the human capacity to know it perfectly and fully. On the “soft” vs. “hard” positions, see Anna Peterson, “Environmental Ethics and the Social Construction of Nature.” As implied near the end of this essay, I would say that Stone is interested in exploring the “soft” constructivist position, and its ramifications, in *NBK*.

³ See, for example, the bestializing of the Irish in the 12th century *History and Topography of Ireland*, written by Gerald of Wales, a text that was composed to provide ideological justification for the imperialist expansion of Henry II’s power into Ireland. Or, much closer to our own time, we could point to the infamous verminization of Jews in Nazi propaganda films, such as *The Eternal Jew*, for examples of ideological appropriations of nature.

⁴ For examples of critical assessments of the film that perceive Stone as attempting (like the character Mickey Knox) to defend human violence as completely natural in his film, see the following: Boyle’s “What’s Natural About Killing?”; Horsley’s *Blood Poets*, vol. II; and Simpson’s “The Politics of Apocalypse in the Cinema of Serial Murder.”

⁵ For additional comments on the (mis)representation of the natural world in nature documentaries, see Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*.

⁶ Here I would point out that Stone (as is the case in so many of his movies) seems guilty of an excessive romanticizing of Native Americans, and of their interactions with and attitudes towards nature. This tendency has a long history, of course, and might be said to have reached its zenith with such texts as the alleged Chief Seattle speech, later proved to be a fraud, that begins “How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land?” and which was appropriated by the burgeoning environmentalist movement in the Sixties, and with major Hollywood films like Kevin Costner’s *Dances With Wolves*. For a controversial corrective to such overly whitewashed representations of Native American ecological practices, see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*.

⁷ For a useful history of cultural and literary antagonism towards wolves, see Lopez.

⁸ In addition to the articles by Crist and Demeritt, see Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* for a study that tries to navigate a harmonious path of sorts between the extremes of social constructivist and realist accounts of the natural world. See also David W. Kidner, “Fabricating Nature: A Critique of the Social Construction of Nature.”

⁹ Singer’s discussion of human “speciesist” beliefs is included in Chapter One of his seminal text for the animal rights movement, *Animal Liberation*.

¹⁰ See, for example, the effusive praise for the film in Horsley’s *Blood Poets*, II, 294-333, *passim*; or the summary of positive reviews of the film in Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Oliver Stone*, 246-48.

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