

Natural Born Killers

The '90s vanishes up its own ass in *Natural Born Killers*, the collision of the unthinking morass that is the mind of Quentin Tarantino upon the unthinking morass that is the mind of Oliver Stone. Thankfully, it seems as though Stone's (the superior of the two writers) rewrites were pretty thorough and this is, for better or worse, the apotheosis of his artistry. It is very consciously (and self-consciously) designed in response to the most tiresome aesthetic fads of the '90s. Fincher-isms, Tarantino-isms and then-popular music video styles abound with nary a shot not tilted. It constantly draws attention to its own artifice in a way I find overwrought, preening and petulant. Perhaps it is because the stylistic excursions are ones that I don't respond to, or because they work to further the narrative rather than having the narrative give structure to ideas and formal devices. It's narrative is essentially a media/pop culture satire, but as a satire it bears so little resemblance to that which it is satirizing that it is ultimately toothless. All sorts of metafilms have tried to critique visual culture by implicating the spectator in onscreen violence. Perhaps the most respected is Michael Haneke's two abominable *Funny Games* movies, the second a shot-for-shot remake of the first. These movies are on the opposite end of the film-cultural spectrum of *Natural Born Killers*, but suffer from essentially the same problem. They fundamentally phenomenologically misunderstand the act of watching, and because of that, assume an inability to distinguish between reality and fiction. Stone's target is primarily trashy Nancy Grace-esque reporters who cover violent crimes nominally to shine a light on horror and promote conservative values that oppose them while really presenting them as an exceptionally lurid entertainment-spectacle, and beyond that, music videos, movies and television that romanticize such criminals. Haneke's is primarily horror movies and the culture around them. The social contract of engaging with violent fiction presumes that it is fiction, so these films about the thin line about fictive violence influencing real violence say more about the fuddy-duddies that made them and their own inability to negotiate these images than most consumers. The fact that real-life killers have cited *Natural Born Killers* says little about life-imitating-art, as they almost definitely would have done it anyway, but a lot about the movie's own internal confusion.

Naturally, the next question would be — can cultural confusion be effectively critiqued by an art-object whose internal logic is based on heightening that very same confusion? I think not. At best, it can be a sort of indicator. Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*, in many ways a very similar, though more ambitious film, has been taken to task by most for that very same problem, and defended by a few as an indicator. I love it. It is excessive in every way this is and in many more, politically, narratively, in scale. It never plays it safe, instead taking so many risks that never fully pay off but always being something of a marvel to behold, indicative of a type of culture and a point in the American psyche that had been largely dormant for most of the country's history and only coming to fruition these days, a part of the American psyche where the superego dies, the id takes the wheel and perverse predispositions become impossible to stop. The cycle of films released in 2013 that include *The Bling Ring*, *Pain & Gain*, *Spring Breakers*, *The Canyons* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* resulted in trend-pieces aplenty about this very state of mind. I can scarcely imagine a more suitable portrait of Trump's America than *Southland Tales*. It's a film of rage, confusion, stupidity, arrogance, juvenalia and genius. It's the

accidental masterpiece to end all accidental masterpieces. Maybe it is because I am as young as I am and missed most of the '90s, but *Natural Born Killers* just reads like an overweening and smug pastiche rather than a visionary one like *Southland Tales*. There's plenty to take away from *Southland Tales* but not enough to parse, and vice-versa for *Natural Born Killers*.

The protagonists are Mickey and Mallory Knox, married spree killers in pursuit of infamy and the thrills of fulfilling the most primal urges — loving and killing. To describe it in terms of a story structure would be a little odd (because the language of describing movies in terms of those types of literary structures is often self-defeating) but very easy (because of how conventional it ultimately is). The movie's first act which shows them together at work this mission (with flashbacks and digressions that take the form of pseudo-sitcoms and news reports, among other less-classifiable stylistic ticks) lasts for the first hour until they are arrested, when the narrative becomes about escaping and returning to their old ways. The antagonists are the police, especially Detective Jack Scagnetti and Warden Dwight McClusky, a pair of cartoons of systemically violent abusers (which I am not opposed to, as my opinion of police is considerably less admiring). The movie has a streak of such ugly, misanthropic irony that condemns just about everyone and no one is anything more than a cartoon. All in all, it's a toothless but obstreperous satire about the intersection of mass media and violence that is unwilling to understand its own targets.

From this, I can learn to be sincere, clear and concise in my treatment and complicated in my social observation.

True Romance

True Romance maintains an unresolved tension throughout. The tension is between the slick cynicism and ostentatious intertextuality of its Tarantino screenplay and the emotional sensitivity of Tony Scott's direction. This was a period in Scott's filmography in between the more arty proto-mtv style of his early work (1969-1990) and the full-out sensory abstraction of his late work (1998-2010), especially what has been called his "metaphysical romances" (*Enemy of the State*, *Spy Game*, *Man On Fire*, *The Taking of Pelham 123*). During this period, his aesthetics took on a somewhat dowdier neoclassical action style that remains effective but undistinguished within the 90s action cycle. However, unlike the charmingly sincere hokiness of *Top Gun* or the arty Euro-style camp of *The Hunger*, this very modern, very self-conscious type of writing, in the midst of his emotional acuity, results in a more straightforward accessible mode. It's perhaps the one that works as a love story the most because it's so bent on rehashing love stories, rather than abstracting the very idea through the textures of representation (*The Hunger*, *Top Gun*) or through large distances of space (*The Taking of Pelham 123*, *Spy Game*) or time (*Deja Vu*). Regardless of how much Scott brings to it, it remains crippled by its nature as a young vogue screenwriter's male nerd wish fulfillment wherein a man, who resembles the writer in a number of ways, marries a prostitute and gets involved in a Bonnie & Clyde-style lovers-on-the-run story in the mold of movies like *Gun Crazy* (without the psychoanalytic irony), *Badlands* (without the American Gothic fairy tale quality) and

They Live By Night (which it probably comes closest to in terms of affect despite being far inferior).

The protagonist is Clarence Worley (Christian Slater), clearly a Tarantino stand-in who shares his creator's fondness for kung fu movies, Elvis and comic books, who indeed, falls in love with a prostitute and takes it on himself to kill her pimp and accidentally takes a large bag full of cocaine, assuming it to be his wife, Alabama's (Patricia Arquette) belongings. They then conspire to drive to Los Angeles and sell the cocaine. Despite the more superficial similarities, Clarence seems to be following in Philip Marlowe mold, wherein a writer writes the man he wishes he was, as the Tarantino personality is sublimated into a Nicholas Ray-style romantic hero up against a world set on making them fail and conform to their own rules.

In the most accurate sense, the antagonist is this hostile world and fate, as the conflict moves between individual antagonists, like the pimp Drexler, himself a stooge for the Detroit mob led by Don Vincenzo Coccotti and even the police. Coccotti is the closest to a clear, literal antagonist that the movie comes but due to the archetypal story, he comes off as a symptom, rather than a cause. Concomitantly, the film's theme is, much like *They Live by Night*, the impossibility of happiness and security for the brazenly individual romantic heroes/victims of circumstance in a world whose reaction to their struggles range from indifferent to hostile. Now, it must be said that this film fundamentally cops out on its own terms, as the protagonist and his girl Friday survive the film's end. It's not terribly surprising, given that this film is a product of the 1990s, undoubtedly the rock bottom of American filmmaking. Keep in mind this was the decade of Francis Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man*, a work whose thesis even he has largely abandoned. As soon as 9/11 happened, the very notion that neoliberal capitalism had won out and all the worries we'd have from there on out was suburban ennui and the like completely went out the window. This film, before that period, seems completely in line with that outlook. The romantic leads in *True Romance* lack the desperation and frankly even the passion of the leads in *They Live by Night*. They can get into this mess in the first place, largely by choice, and must survive it because they are products of a culture that took nothing seriously. It encourages a type of direct emotional identification with characters to the exclusion of others and sans understanding of the larger system's workings through social observation across social cleavages, which is why it is beyond irritating and corny but often artistically irresponsible. Ultimately, *True Romance* is less a romance than it is a lousy lay.

I am doubtful that I can steal anything from a movie that is built being stealing from other, better movies and removes the cores of humanity from them in service of absolute inanity.

The Big Sleep

Howard Hawks' 1946 masterpiece *The Big Sleep* is often cited as a seminal film noir. Indeed it includes many of the gestures associated with the cycle: a private detective, a femme fatale, tenebristic black and white cinematography. I think it does not really fit. I subscribe to the theory of film noir given by critic Tom Sutpen. That it is not strictly a post-WWII cycle and does not end with Orson Welles *Touch of Evil*. Given the tenor of the critical writing surrounding noir, it is more useful to see the cycle as crime films examining the malaise and anxieties of

American life, of living in a culture that has proliferated a distinctively optimistic outlook about what all of its citizens can be, how they can live and how they could be fulfilled, while the reality of America does not offer this to most. Therein lies the state of mind where predispositions are incubated and then become impossible to stop. The cycle then lasts roughly from about 1929 to 1970, when its social function was replaced by the grindhouse. These films still must be shot in black and white and must be American. Given this primarily philosophical definition, *The Big Sleep* is too much of a star-studded A-picture where the aesthetics of desperation and hunger (of Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* and, yes, Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*) are conspicuously absent. It's pristine and clean, with crackling dialogue worthy of Hawks' screwball comedies, with just as much speed. Its foremost value isn't a fatalistic worldview, but rather incredibly expressive romantic chemistry. Bogart and Bacall were born to be/act together and to recite this type of writing. They fly off the screen and of course, make it out of the picture unscathed.

It's difficult to define the protagonist in a film like this. It would appear at first to be obviously Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe, but the nature of the hardboiled private detective is almost like that of the Greek tragic chorus, inserted diegetically into the main action. He's always there. He comments on the action. He guides us through it, but it never really means anything to him. If a main character is defined by having the clearest and most complex character arc, he is certainly not that. Marlowe is, more or less, the same in the beginning as he is in the end, if you think of it as a crime story. From that vantage point, General Sternwood is that. If you think of it as a romantic comedy with a crime story overlay, he becomes a more discernable protagonist. That interpretation works out more because in most of the great romantic comedies, the courtship and romance takes a backseat to the characters' lives outside of that until the climax.

With its legendarily labyrinthine plotting, the film's antagonist is also difficult to discern. The film begins with Marlowe being charged to find Sean Regan, who turns out to be dead and it is never really revealed who his killer is, though Eddie Mars claims it was Carmen Sternwood. Beyond that, the film plays out as a series of revelations wherein new people turn out to be involved in these crimes and the structures of power are constantly being revealed, negated and complicated. The final confrontation, however, provides us the clearest antagonist, Eddie Mars, who after Joe Brody had been blackmailing the Sternwoods over gambling debts, had taken to blackmailing them, purportedly over Carmen's murder of Sean Regan.

The inciting incident is Sean Regan's disappearance, but the continuing and always suspicious revelations and intricacies of connections and crime take over as the driving conflict. Ultimately what drives the movie's plot is Marlowe's inability to not finish his job.

Much like everything else about this movie, its themes are somewhat inscrutable outside of a strictly auteurist reading. It prioritizes things like writing, character and dialogue over themes. In the context of Hawks' other work, what is most apparent is strong communities being built out of a confluence of strong people who are very good at what they do and two people of this particularly no-nonsense disposition falling in love through the eroticism of shared self-sufficiency and expertise (often regardless of the specifics and applications of the expertise). The Hawks tends to be a ruthlessly smart professional. The Hawks woman tends to be ruthlessly smart, but almost always at a disadvantage because she lives in a patriarchal society. The Hawks villain usually shares these same qualities which is what gives him the

honor of being a villain, but is driven by less lily-white motivations and willing to go to more sinister means to realize them. In his more violent films, the heroes and villains exist as mirror images of each other who share a certain personal rigor but represent the parts of themselves that the other has failed to internalized. Eddie Mars is nothing if not smart but it takes someone like Philip Marlowe to outsmart him.

While there is a lot to admire about *The Big Sleep*, most of its values are ingrained in the classical Hollywood system of masterful craftsmen directors, great writers and great stars that look great together, which is absent from the way things are done now. Despite being inarguably an auteurist work, it is a better argument for the system than its perpetual paragon, *Casablanca* (which is secretly also an auteurist work at heart). The thing that stands out to me as something to steal is the one thing that I feel I can take — the strength and effectiveness of all characters involved. Someone just screwing up in a way that s/he should know better than to do is a contrivance that would defeat the purposes of the larger point and a truly damning and critical social analysis would constitute every doing what they do the best that they can do it and conflict still arises in spite of that, as it always does.

Burn After Reading

Burn After Reading is the least interesting of the Coen brothers' films thus far. Surely, there are ones that are far worse (see their unrepentantly cruel *Fargo* and the downright anti-semitic Hammett-pastiche *Miller's Crossing*) but they were more interesting because they took a lot of risks and had clear concerns. *Burn After Reading*, their follow-up to *No Country for Old Men*, seems to embody that which the earlier film takes as its subject — nihilism. So much is practically stated in its conclusive CIA meeting, wherein they agree that there is no lesson to be learned from the preceding events, save for "not to do it again". Whereas *No Country for Old Men*, maybe their best movie, was framed by a person's moral struggle with systems of belief that cannot be comfortably reconciled with the incredible cruelty he witnesses, this competent trifle is essentially the same story framed by what amounts to a wry smirk.

Like many of their films, it is an anti-wrong man thriller. The wrong man thriller in the Hitchcock mold operated by thrusting ordinary people haplessly into extraordinary situations that they have no control over, but are stuck in nevertheless. The Coens' inversions operate by having their often exceptionally dumb protagonists willingly involve themselves in these schemes out of greed and gradually dig their own graves. *Burn After Reading* has less of a fixed perspective than most of their work and spreads an ensemble over its runtime. The character who emerges as protagonist is Linda Litzke, a personal trainer, who, after recently fired CIA analyst Osbourne Cox leaves his first draft of his memoirs at her gym, teams up with coworker Chad Feldheimer to blackmail Cox. She wants money to pay for a slew of elective cosmetic surgery procedures. Chad and Linda mistake the information, essentially useless for any sort of espionage, for highly classified information, and Cox for a much more important person than he actually is.

Ultimately, the movie's themes are stupidity and chance. Chance has never been a particularly interesting theme to me, as it plays out as an excuse for lazy writing and

uninteresting filmmaking, indulging in one avalanche of convenience after another. Stupidity is also something I've never found interesting partly because, much like chance, there's not an awful lot to say about it and it ultimately feels too convenient. The stakes are always higher, the didactics more vigorous and the movie more effective when everyone involved does everything as well as anyone possibly could and it still does not work out. It is then when you have a statement about the human experience of the world.

My Fair Lady

George Cukor was always a journeyman filmmaker, an exceptional journeyman, but a journeyman nonetheless. His strengths were bringing the best out of the scripts and performers he had been given, in service of them rather than any point-of-view that could be delineated as "his". His best work, films like *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Women* are paragons of the virtues of the classical Hollywood studio system, perfectly crafted comedies and women's pictures whose indulgences in old school glamour and slick talking are exactly the point. Here, his assignment to adapt *My Fair Lady*, Lerner and Loewe's sing-and-dance mutilation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, works in service of the musical's extent virtues, whatever they may be, but most especially all of its flaws. Shaw's play is essentially a class-conscious precursor to *Vertigo*. It is a pointed critique of the abuse women and the lower class suffer in a hierarchical (and patriarchal) society, as well as a statement on the performative nature of class. Cukor's penchant for flowery filmmaking line up with the project in a way that is completely devoid of the irony that makes *Pygmalion* what it is. The film takes on the point of view of its protagonist, Professor Henry Higgins, and vindicates the inherent superiority of upper-class gentility, particularly with regards to precise diction. Thus a horror story about the gradual destruction of a woman's selfhood and experience is transformed into a cruel, classist, aspirational tale wherein even the lowliest of paupers could transform herself into pretty, refined Audrey Hepburn. Hepburn must take a fair share of the blame of this evil film. We've seen cockney accents played charmingly and invigoratingly (see Michael Caine in anything), but her fake cockney accent is so grotesquely overdone and grating that even if this movie weren't so reactionary and nefarious, I would hate this movie just because of how irritating it was to sit through. Humor is drawn entirely from her character's lack of refinement in the first half and her awkwardness amidst the British upper-crust in the second. She is always the butt of the joke because she is poor and unrefined. It's an anomaly in Hepburn's career which seems primarily built on the inherent frivolity, capriciousness and insubstantiality of women. All of that misogyny is here too as its underlying core that the classism is built on. The movie's theme is the worthlessness of the poor (and vote Tory). The conflict until the last act is to "change [Eliza Doolittle] into a different human being by creating a new speech for her," as Higgins himself says before she succeeds and the movie turns into what amounts to a love triangle.

In the Mood for Love

Wong Kar-wai's work in general is the cinematic equivalent of pre-pubescent poetry — flowery, treacly and shallow. There are two of his films I quite like, *2046* (an almost Wagnerian exploration of memory and fantasy reminiscent of a less-sophisticated Alain Resnais) and *Happy Together* (which restores some much-needed passion to his work). *In the Mood for Love*, however, is, along with *Chungking Express*, is the fullest realization of all of his worst qualities. Its conceit is turning into opera a romance that is expressed as exceptionally beautiful and exceptionally tragic because its principals never have sex. This plot must then become one of two things, both of which I find objectionable. The first is that this is the right thing to do, that this mutual celibacy is the thing that makes them better than their respective spouses who ran off together (rather than simply not betraying the trust of marriage). This is an inherently socially conservative and sex-negative assumption that positions sexuality, something inherently human and spiritual, particularly between two people in love, as corruptive and corrosive when it just isn't. When Wong hits puberty, hopefully he will realize that it's really not that big a deal. The second, the tragic interpretation, is that the film realizes this is an arbitrary decision based on their own vanity and filtered through social conventions. I don't really buy the second because it has no reach beyond these two toward the absurdity of adhering to social condition (à la Yorgos Lanthimos' recent *The Lobster*). Despite Wong's borderline fetishistic rendering of 1960s period signifiers, the near absence of other characters and the self-conscious mythic-ness debase any possibility of human interactive specificity, leaving it a shallow and uninteresting character study of shallow and uninteresting characters.

The protagonists are Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung) and Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung), who meet after their spouses leave them for each other and vow "not to sink to their level". Their unfaithful spouses, though never seen, would make the best case for being antagonists. However, this is a movie entirely about inner struggle, two people trying to negotiate their desires against their own morals, insecurities, pride, fears. Unfortunately, it all culminates not with a bang but a whimper.

My Movie

My movie's protagonists are the currently unnamed covert couple at its center. It's antagonist is the blackmailer, whose identity is obscured, revealed, denied and re-revealed. The driving conflict is the blackmail scheme. It is designed to have many themes whose intersection would cover thoroughly the social and interactive aspects of life. During its opening, the film will prioritize the nature of wealth. Having everything, and therefore, having nothing to want or for which to work, is one that would leave the self unfulfilled and after being acclimated to it, life would be empty and cold. The backstory, which might be shown through brief flashbacks, would show the depths of desperation that poverty induces and that would lead people to do anything to escape it, even if that means they choose security over happiness. Their sexual and artistic antics would cover the human need for creation and performance. The theft and recontextualization of the photographs would point to the nature of representation and the malleable semiotics of an artwork, particularly a photographic one which inherently has an indexical and evidentiary element, and can therefore cease to be an artwork and become a document. The bulk of the blackmail part of the plot, in emotional terms, is about fear of being

seen for what one is, fear of being seen as a fraud, fear of returning to poverty or even in prison, but most of all, fear of being seen. The ambiguity of the villain should instill paranoia, as we live in a world covered with cameras. Being watched and being recorded are quotidian parts of life in the 21st century. At the same time, the bulk of that plot would provide them meaning and fulfillment, desperation that would effectively resurrect their passions. The climactic act would be about guilt and redemptive sacrifice and what people do for those whom they love. The final reveal would discuss social stigma and the ultimate impossibility of social mobility.