

Review Essay

Natural Born Killers and the Cancer of Information

Introduction

Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (NBK) has been linked, somewhat tenuously, to copycat murders in the United States and France. Furthermore, in June 1995, Senator Bob Dole cited NBK as a prime example of 'mainstream deviancy'. The film has become a sort of lightning-rod for the self-appointed guardians of morality. What is it about this film that has aroused so much controversy from so many diverse elements of established society? What message, if any, is Stone offering us? Is the violence of NBK self-serving or does it have a higher purpose? Do the two main protagonists in NBK glorify violence? What role does the media play in our day-to-day lives? Does Stone offer any solutions?

Media and the substance/semblance dichotomy

One of the main sequences of NBK is based around the sensationalist media, and more particularly, Wayne Gale, who hosts, writes, directs, and produces his own show, 'American Maniacs'. Stone shows how the sensationalist news media promotes and reflects itself, packaging violence and fear into commodities that can be sold to the public. In the program, events follow each other in a dizzying, stereotypical, unreal and recurrent fashion that dulls the senses, while providing an uninterrupted concatenation for the allotted time space. This news, and Stone is saying all news, has a duration of use and exchange value, a shelf life similar to the brand name of a designer shirt. Things have stopped being real. Rather, our communications process offers a form of hyperreality; what Jean Baudrillard refers to as a 'cancer of information' (Baudrillard 1988:166-184). Gayle makes no secret of the fact that his show is devoid of any tangible reality and is rather 'junk food for the brain'. He has no qualms about repeating the previous night's show because the 'nitwits out in zombie land' will never know the difference. In NBK, Gayle is meant to represent all media forms, as is made clear at the end of the film when Mickey and Mallory execute Gayle, *ipso facto* effectively killing the media, the 'Dr Frankenstein' they accuse of creating their Frankenstein (note the symbolism of the handcam, the transmitter of image, running out of film after Gayle is shot — 'CUT TO BLACK' are the final words contained in the original screenplay: Tarantino 1995).¹

While identifying that NBK was intended to be a satire on our culture's appetite for violence and the media's craving of it, the majority of critical opinion has attacked the film on the grounds that it somehow desensitises the general viewing public to the effects of violence and degenerates into the very thing it is trying to parody, namely a media

1 Even though this version varies only marginally from the actual screenplay used by Stone, Tarantino wanted his name removed from the credits.

agent using graphic brutality as a vehicle to enhance ticket sales. As John Grisham (1996) claimed in his scathing rebuke of the movie and its implied role in a copycat murder spree throughout Mississippi last year, 'Oliver Stone always takes the high ground in defending his dreadful movies, but *Natural Born Killers* is a relentlessly bloody story designed to shock us'. Nevertheless, NBK, and more particularly the response it engendered, demonstrates the realisation that we live in, and consequently through, the technology of the image. Jean Baudrillard (1990a:89) states:

the truth of the mass media is that they function to neutralise the unique character of actual world events by replacing them with a multiple universe of mutually reinforcing and self-referential media.

Whereas the media attempts to anaesthetise the sensibilities of the public by providing an 'aesthetic hallucination of reality', Stone goes about systematically debunking the constructed gap between image and reality. Firstly, showing the ludicrous attempts by Gayle to turn Mickey and Mallory into a more comforting, and hence, more consumable product. Secondly, at the same time, while displaying the offences they commit in raw uncensored glory (rather than surreal TV re-enactments), Stone is somehow liberating reality from the depths of TV hyperreality. The reason Stone can conduct this critique and somehow avoid the pitfall of becoming that which he condemns is because the medium of cinema has not been completely subsumed into the monolith of television, and retains the ability to mirror reality. As Baudrillard (1990b:162) opines:

Here it [TV] contrasts with the cinema which (though increasingly contaminated by TV) is still endowed with an intense imagery — because it is an image. This is not simply to speak of film as mere screen or visual form, but as a *myth*, something that still resembles a double, a mirror, a fantasy, a dream, etc. None of this in the TV image ... it is a miniaturised terminal that immediately appears in your head.

Oliver Stone meticulously documents the way in which television obscures the real meaning of violence. In NBK, this perversion of reality finds its highest formalised expression in the prison interview scene between Mickey and Gayle. This scene typifies the classic manner in which television breaks down the wall between the acceptable social element (the audience) and the unacceptable social element (the mass murderer). Whether it was the Manson-Geraldo interview (from which much of the actual NBK interview is based) or the *Dahmer-Inside Edition* one, the public is all too familiar with idea of the media transporting monsters into the living room. In Gayle's interview, fact has been domesticated and made to perform clearly formulaic functions creating suspense, shocking through surprise or grotesque confession, evoking a tense but ultimately reassuring atmosphere in which we know that though the villains may look daunting, it is the heroes, such as the hard-nosed anchor man, who always wins in the end. When Geraldo Rivera interviews Charles Manson, we are led to believe that he has taken his life into his own hands by coming face-to-face with the devil himself. The viewer, oblivious to the highly controlled nature of the interview, sees a beast who is somehow less beastly. While his words may be repugnant, he or she is less threatening. The interview is a way of disarming threatening figures by dressing them up as circus or cinematic attractions. In other words, we are attempting to make them familiar and consumable. As Amy Taubin (1991) puts it, television and other popular images of the serial killer are 'a substitute and a shield for a situation so incomprehensible it must be disavowed'. Baudrillard (1990b:161) describes this process as follows:

A cold event warmed up by a cold medium for masses, themselves cold, who are going to experience only a posthumous emotion, a tactile and dissuasive shudder that will enable them to let the catastrophe slip into oblivion with a sort of aesthetic good conscience.

In this way, media capitalises on violence, but capitalisation and glorification are not the same thing. Most often, the mass media assures its consumers that they are normal and those who commit acts of violence are abnormal or subnormal. Irrespective of the amount of violence depicted, most newscasts and current affairs shows are designed to make the viewer feel like a well-protected sheep who will come to harm only if he strays from the flock (or the 'herd' as Nietzsche calls it). Mickey is wrong when he accuses Gayle and the media of 'buying and selling fear'. Instead, they are buying and selling protection from the fear they promulgated to begin with (that is, by establishing boundaries delineated by the image). The reason many viewers are disturbed by the content of NBK is not because it encourages violence, but because it offers no reassurance against it. The 'bad guys' are not punished at the end; we are not even sure who the 'bad guys' are. Like other landmark films such as *Blue Velvet* and *Clockwork Orange*, which diverge from the optimistic rationalism established by Socrates and carried through eighteenth century literature into the modern day,² there are no tidy moral lessons at the end, thereby forcing the spectator to understand his or her feelings about these highly personal matters, rather than reinforcing what society says he or she *should* feel (sympathy, disgust, rage, etc).

Alison Young (1996:20) claims that as a result of the anxiety arising from the fact that we live through images, and the fear of any reality encroaching upon us from the boundary of this hyperreal existence, we call upon the image as bearer of light to destroy the horizon, 'we ask the image for consolation'. To serve such ends, Gayle's interview of Mickey shows an apparent duel (albeit a verbal one) between the two combatants; Gayle synonymous with Durkheim's 'us', Mickey with the outsider whose violent acts have come to be designated as being beyond rational comprehension — the peripheral 'other'.³ Stone, however, gives the viewer an unimpeded vantage into the controlled nature of the interview. In the original script, Gayle instructs Scott, his producer, how he wants Mickey's interview shot: 'I want to create the illusion that this is just Mickey and I chewin' the fat all by ourselves. So make sure you don't film these assholes [the prison warden and four armed guards]. I don't want to see them on film ever' (Tarantino 1995:82). Furthermore, we see how little the reality of the information being disseminated matters to the disseminators. Gayle concentrates intently on Mickey as he asks sensationalist questions hoping for a like response:

Wayne: Are you done? Let's cut the B.S. and *get real* [my emphasis]. Why this purity you feel about killing. WHY FOR CHRIST'S SAKE? WHY? DON'T LIE TO ME!

Mickey: I guess Wayne, you got to hold that old shot gun in your hand/ and it becomes clear like it did for me the first time. I realised my one true calling in life.

Wayne: What's that?

Mickey: Shit man, I'm a natural born killer.

Suddenly a bell sounds, the cameras stop and we see exhilaration on Wayne's face. The meaning of what has just been said is irrelevant. The line between credible news and

2 That is, that art has an obligation to teach you a better way to behave.

3 Durkheim's argument suggests that rule-breakers allow law-abiders to feel bonded together, secure in the conscience collective. Young would prefer to refer to the law-breaker as an 'textual outlaw', for in her theorising, the rule-breaker is necessarily expelled from the community.

entertainment, violence and *faux* violence has been obliterated. Mickey has just provided a sensationalist wrap-up that will boost ratings exponentially.

The same duplicitous role played by the media in the realm of news, both as entertainer and image maker, permeates into other television mediums. The sitcom is another example of the media's convolution of semblance and substance. The mini sitcom sequence entitled 'I love Mallory' depicts Mallory's home life and her first encounter with Mickey. In this scene, an extremely abusive dialogue between Mallory and her family is couched in the context of a sitcom. The music and laugh tracks distort the content of the exchange and the shocking scenes of incestuous abuse become trivialised. The sitcom setting numbs the audience to the grim reality of the situation.

Rodney Dangerfield's depiction of the sitcom father is the opposite to everything the viewer expects. It is exactly this conflict between expectation and reality that the director has hoped to convey. Although this scene is grossly inappropriate to a television constructed sitcom family, it is unfortunately reflective of many families in the real world. Despite the sitcoms' attempt to endow themselves with a carapace of verisimilitude (such as the gay friend, the single mother, and so on), they are fantasy. The models, or what Baudrillard calls 'simulacra', have no referent or grounds in any reality except their own (Baudrillard 1988:166-181). The simulation presented is different from a fiction or a lie in that it not only presents an absence as a presence, the imagery as the real, it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself. There is the TV ad which never completely erases the commodity it solicits, the TV newscast which creates the news if only to be able to narrate it, and the soap opera whose daily events are both referent and reality for many viewers (Baudrillard 1988). In the case of the sitcom, although the form may be reflective of *some* families (mum, dad, and kids), the substance of the interaction departs markedly from reality (for instance, unlike Rosanne and Dan Connor, most families do not walk around snapping off witty one-liners like fire from an automatic weapon). In the anti-sitcom, Mallory transcends the confines of the sitcom daughter; a product of very real abuse. She finds that morality has no meaning in her world and, at the end of the half-hour segment, there is no neatly wrapped didactic lesson she can take away (in much the same way, the entire film ends on an unsatisfying note with Mickey and Mallory driving into the sunset accompanied by their new family). At the completion of the episode, when Mallory kills her parents, she casts off the virtual reality of this self-referential system and proclaims to her victimised brother, 'You're free Kevin'. Similarly, Stone cuts away the fetters of illusionary sitcom representations, brings us to the realisation that we live in and through the technology of the image, and allows us, like Kevin, to break free from social relations without content, fixed meaning or substance.

The media's propensity to coalesce and confuse the concepts of sex and violence is also dealt with by the auteur. In his view, media has perverted sexual desire by confusing the categories of sex and violence. Mickey and Mallory's arrest illustrates how the media encourages the synergy of sex and violence by the erotic language the Japanese news reporter uses to describe the scene. This violent confrontation is described as if a session of love making: 'quite virile', 'big gun', and 'rendered impotent' are all phrases used. In this way love, which is commonly associated with sex, becomes hopelessly confused with hate and violence in both the minds of the media, and ultimately the consumer. At the trial, the 'demonic couple' are greeted by adoring fans adorned in Mickey and Mallory paraphernalia, such as 'I Love Mickey' or 'Shoot Me Mickey' T-shirts and banners. Interviews conducted with foreigners, illustrate their international appeal (or rather the international appeal of the global media image). One youth claims that although he respects the sanctity of human life, if he were a serial killer, he would 'be like Mickey' (Tarantino 1995:38). Such a scenario would seem ludicrous fiction did it not find such credible evidence of its

existence in real life. For example, groups of American men congregating at their local bar to urge on images of OJ Simpson as he holds a gun to his head in a Ford Bronco or the trend to elevate such homicidal figures as Charles (Charlie) Manson to virtual cult status (Mickey says on finding out he has been beaten by Manson in the ratings: 'It's pretty hard to beat the king') (Tarantino 1995:20). The montage sequence at the end of NBK, involving such infamous media darlings as the Menendez brothers and Tonya Harding, demonstrates that this media capitalisation on evil is more fact than cinematic hyperbole.

Baudrillard would explain the public fascination with these macabre images by showing how our cultural indices, our cultural signposts, are signs which point to other signs rather than to any certain reality. The old maxim, 'reality is stranger than fiction' has been surpassed. According to Baudrillard, it would be more correct to now say that the fiction we believe to be reality is strangest of all. He says, 'There is no longer a fiction that life can confront, even in order to surpass it' (Baudrillard 1988:146). Likewise, EL Doctorow claimed, 'There is no longer such a thing as fiction or nonfiction, there is only narrative' (Fishkin 1985:207). That is, we live in a system of the hyperreality of self-referential systems, 'a vast sea of media messages, significations, referential objects pointing to reference points of their own making' (Morrison 1995:314). For Baudrillard, in this late-modern consumer society, objects are not marketed on the grounds of their function or use, but rather in terms of their sign value. Consumption of a product is consumption of the image to receive its illusion: perfume represents allure, toothpaste allows self-confidence, a car symbolises sex drive, the polar bear in the Coke ad (as seen throughout NBK) stands for endearment (regardless of the actual fact that it is the deadliest of all bears), and the list goes on *ad nauseam*. Signs have become completely separated from their referents, resulting in a structure that resembles the signal (Baudrillard 1988:4). In the case of mass murderers, the media has dislocated the personas from their actions, in a sense, glorifying them as celebrities, while at the same time severing them from their heinous crimes. People only care that they are celebrities, not why they are celebrities *ab initio*. Stone is trying to provoke us to ask such probing questions, rather than absorbing the information on a *prima facie* level — veritable TV zombies. Whether television as a form can reunite substance with semblance seems unlikely, but like most postmodern writers, Stone is providing a critique of the system without necessarily offering any other viable alternative⁴ except possibly for some form of high-tech catharsis whereby the logic of the subject is replaced with that of the object through the 'ascent to extremes' — what Baudrillard terms his 'fatal strategy'. This is unlikely to happen, however, considering the immense energies society, both the media and the masses, exert in maintaining the construct of hyperreality. In so doing, they avoid the brutal dissimulation that would occur should the radical loss of meaning become too evident. Moreover, in high-tech capitalism, critical theory faces the formidable task of unveiling structures of domination when no one is dominating, nothing is being dominated and no grounds exist for a principle of liberation from domination (Baudrillard 1988:6).

The fact that the courthouse girls find Mickey sexually attractive ('PAGE: We sit in the courtroom all day and try to catch Mickey's eye') (Tarantino 1995:38), or that the garage assistant finds Mallory more appealing on discovering her identity, has more to do with the image instigated by the media, than any real measuring stick such as physical beauty or natural charisma. Baudrillard (1990c:5) says:

4 A Foucauldian 'non-theory theory'.

When desire is entirely on the side of demand; when it is operationalised without restrictions, it loses its imagery and, therefore, its reality; it appears everywhere, but in generalised simulation. It is the ghost of desire that haunts the defunct reality of sex. Sex is everywhere, except in sexuality.

The truth of this last sentence is nowhere more evident than in the cheap hotel vignette, as Mickey is kissing Mallory's thigh. She attempts to get turned on by watching violent images on television, while he can only get excited by keeping his eyes on the 'hostage'. It seems that their physical passion is confused with or identical to feelings of aggression such that they can not feel desire without also feeling emotions associated with violence. Not only does the media use sex to sell Mickey and Mallory as commodities for consumption, but the two themselves are victims of the advanced industrial disassociation of form from substance: sex without love, violence without hate, and finally, through Ramboesque portrayals of violence-perpetrated-by-sex-symbol, no sex without violence. While watching violent images on TV, Mickey asks the rhetorical question, 'I've been thinking about why they're always making these stupid fuckin' movies — Doesn't anyone believe in kissing anymore?'⁵ In this way, the 'hypersexual is the contemporary of the hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1988:188).

The public is not alone in acquiescing to the sexual appeal of murder. Super-cop, Jack Scagnetti, develops a sexual obsession with Mallory, even though he knows her to be a cold-blooded killer. In the true postmodern vein, the authority figure is just as brutal and ruthless as the two protagonists. Here, the director, as iconoclast, has undertaken the post-modern project to 'disrupt smooth regimes of truth'. The binary oppositions established by modernity — right/wrong, male/female, insider/outsider, white/black, sane/insane, cop/robber are collapsed. All these previously contrasted concepts have become interchangeable in the era of reproduction and simulation.

In the uncut version of NBK,⁶ Scagnetti repeats to the prostitute Pinki as he strangles her: 'I'm just kidding, I'm just kidding', betraying his inability to distinguish reality from fantasy. Stone essentially deconstructs the split between cop and criminal, while associating the categories of cop and media. Not only has he lost the ability to distinguish between fact and fantasy, but like Wayne Gayle, who directs, hosts, produces and writes his own show, Scagnetti, too, is a shameless self-promoter, who has just released a book entitled 'Scagnetti on Scagnetti'. His personal motivation for hunting down the Knoxes is to gain more notoriety and hopefully have sex with Mallory, not to see that justice is served. In Stone's view, the aim of the justice system, like that of the media, is not to protect the public, but to promote itself. McClusky, the warden of the prison where Mickey and Mallory are incarcerated, is initially accommodating to Gayle because he expects the media coverage to improve his image. When the riot breaks out, McClusky is far more concerned with the fact that the event is being taped live than the fact that many of his guards are being tortured and killed. Image, not reality, is the primary concern of the justice system and the media.

5 The violent images Stone uses are taken from films he himself scripted. There is the 'Mack Sennet chain-saw sequence from *Scarface* and the scene from *Midnight Express* where Billy Hayes *tears* another prisoner's tongue out with his teeth. Stone, as the postmodern iconoclast, holds even his own image as worthy of vitriol. Nothing is sacred.

6 Refused release in Australia by the authorities.

Reactionary backlash

After the tragic slaughter of school children at Dunblane in Scotland, in fact just a few hours after the slaughter, violence in films and videos was held partly responsible (French 1996:4). Even though there was no evidence that movies had played any part whatsoever, Warner Brothers announced that the video release of Oliver Stone's *NBK* would be delayed indefinitely. Perhaps the film company was pre-empting the authorities and limiting any adverse publicity. In the same way, after the murder of the infant Jamie Bulger by two young boys in Liverpool in 1993, there was an attempt by numerous commentators (most notably the trial judge, Mr Justice Morland) to blame the crime on an irrelevant, pseudo-farcical horror called *Child's Play III*. In the atmosphere of moral panic that followed the tragedy, politicians, journalists, moralists, and censors needed to appear as if they were doing something to rectify the *status quo*, and this need provided the necessary stimulus to set the anti-video moral crusade in process. It did not matter that the police, on checking the video hiring and viewing patterns of the defendants' families, never found a shred of corroborative evidence to buttress the judge's speculative attribution (French 1996:93). Nevertheless, even though what was found was most definitely circumstantial, it was sufficient to 'fall like a spark in the powder barrel of public morality' (French 1996:93).

In response to the events of the killing, society attempted to own their sense of horror, to make themselves into versions of the oppositions that structured the event: mothers or fathers, victims not criminals. As Young (1996:133) says, 'We are our images'. *The Times* sanctimoniously begs the question, 'What kind of urban culture allowed such material to circulate freely in the homes of young children?'⁷ A psychiatrist claims, 'There is simply no way children can repeatedly watch such videos without having been desensitised ... I think children are being abused by having these images so easily accessible'.⁸ And the images of the Bulger murder, which force society to confront the limits of the image (and thus the limits of humanity, if we live through our images), are technologised in order to be incorporated into modernity, 'to be owned as our selves' (1996:137). As noted by Young, however, in all the reproduction of the images, the event itself is absent. While all the events that preceded and followed the crime were painstakingly recounted, the visibility of the crime ends as the three boys climb the embankment to the railway line. This is one image society does not want to own, therefore, it is here that limits of vision are constructed. Young (1996:138) says:

We allow the image to fade as the boys climb the railway bank, We 'realise' that it is dark, and that we cannot 'see' what is happening. And the darkness obliterates the image of the crime and our imagination of the image.

NBK challenges these constructed parameters. According to Baudrillard (1982:273), if Auschwitz is the sign of total tyranny as the production of death, the world of hyperreality bypasses the distinction between death and life. *NBK*, on the other hand, shows the societal

7 22 January 1994.

8 *Observer*, 8 November 1993. Note that Stone depicts the psychiatrist in *NBK* to be out of touch with reality. During the interview with the psychiatrist, he dismisses Mickey and Mallory's family histories as insignificant, when he speculates that they were probably never the victims of sexual abuse. When asked how he feels about the fact that Mallory wants to kill him, he replies that he never believes what women say. The psychiatrist repudiates Mallory's threat because she is a woman. Ironically, it is precisely her anger at being dismissed as merely a sexual object that motivates her to kill (eg, the cafe scene at the beginning of the film — 'I call her pussy', the minisiccom, and so on).

dirt and the scum; the unsavoury images of actual incestuous behaviour, what it looks like when a man's thumb is severed and falls to the floor, how prison guards are tied up and tortured during riots, what a bullet riddled corpse looks like. Stone speaks to us across the distance between semblance and substance, demanding our response to his realistic, and certainly graphic, imagery. By actually showing the real blood and carnage that Mickey and Mallory instigate, Stone is saying to those kids outside the courtroom, who praise the media image of the couple, this is what it is all about, not sex or charisma. Stone, in his rebuttal of Grisham's attack, critiques the media's inability to convey the true meaning of violence. He cites a recent survey which showed:

The average teenager spends 15,000 hours a year watching television. According to the study, most programmes contain violence and half of these violent acts do not depict the victim's injuries or pain. Astonishingly, only 16 per cent of all programmes show the long-term effects of violence while, for three-quarters of the time, the perpetrators of violence on television go unpunished (Stone 1996:32).

Cartoons are perhaps the form of media most guilty of trivialising violence in this way, especially in the eyes of impressionable young children. When Mickey bursts into Mallory's house and murders her father, the cartoon sound effects after each blow give an unreal effect to an otherwise harrowing scene (note, that when the same effects are applied to real life accidents on *Australia's Funniest Home Videos*, it evokes laughter from the audience). The murder of Mallory's father is made to seem no more significant than Tweety Bird blowing up Sylvester with a stick of dynamite, or a rock'n'roll wrestler hitting his opponent over the head with a chair. As a result, through sheer repetition, violent events become trivialised and lose their real impact and meaning. Stone is trying to break this cycle by presenting both a parody of TV violence, as with the cartoonesque beating, and actual, demystified gore.

The breakdown of narrative into the film itself, the film the director-within-the-film wishes to make, the film the protagonists wish to make, and a number of film-of-the-film-within-the-film asides that the auteur feels it is incumbent on him to make, all serve to produce a provocative, ontological confusion. The catharsis effected by Stone's filmic depictions of violence that attempt to place the viewer in the driving seat, giving us the perspective of victim and/or victimiser, is both manifold and disturbing. Grisham (1996:5) is right when he described NBK as a 'relentlessly bloody story designed to shock us'. This kind of candour, however, is highly conducive to the frame of mind necessary for brutal action, since it introduces critical thought into the equation, what Masters (1996:209) calls a 'thoughtquake', and is most resented by those who want to stir the pot of fanaticism for idealistic purposes.

For Baudrillard, it is clear that social diversity does not aim for equilibrium, but is 'devoted to a radical antagonism, and not to reconciliation or synthesis' (Baudrillard 1988:185). Therefore, adhering to the Marquis de Sade's *modus operandi*, the only way to bring about change is to move to extremes in order to counteract the system's equilibrium; what he calls his 'fatal strategy'.⁹ In other words, it is best to fight obscenity and illusion not in terms of a dialectical opposition, but by taking it on in its own terms in search of limits (to offer films which are only crimes, only full of the symbolism of violence 'so that

9 This is not a new strategy. In 1720, Jonathan Swift, renowned for his dark satire, contended that indigent Irish families could better afford food and clothing if they began to sell their children (usually six or more). Moreover, in the long term, this solution would lead to a reduction in crime. See Swift, Jonathan, *Irish Tracts ... A Modest Proposal* (1955) Mowbray & Co, London.

we may be cleansed of violence in our passive selves' (Morrison 1995:310). Baudrillard explains this tactic as follows:

This victory operates by subtle forms of radicalising hidden qualities, and by combating obscenity with its own weapons. To the more true than true we will oppose the more false than false. We will not oppose the beautiful and the ugly; we will seek what is more ugly than the ugly: the monstrous. We will not oppose the visible to the hidden; we will seek what is more hidden than the hidden: the secret (Baudrillard 1988:185).

In NBK, Stone is challenging the 'aesthetic hallucination of reality' by constructing an ultra-extreme hyperreality (Baudrillard 1988:146). During Mickey's interview, his imaginary childhood nemesis, Mr Rabbit, is discussed. Mr Rabbit, with his bloody fangs and Christmas hat, is an unsavoury image, much like the art of Stone, but Mickey says, 'This is just illusion. Mr Rabbit says a moment of realisation is worth a thousand prayers'. In other words, the necessary evil of NBK (a form analogous to that of Mr Rabbit) is worth a thousand sermons, chaste words from supposedly 'good people' pontificating from on high. Nietzsche (1990:142) appreciated the importance of iconoclastic influences when he wrote:

It is the strongest and most evil spirits who have up till now advanced mankind the most ... they have awoken again and again the sense of joy in the new, daring, untried, they have compelled men to set opinion against opinion, model against model. Most of all by weapons, by overturning boundary stones, by wounding piety.

Stone's own fatal strategy is designed to shatter the 'aesthetic good conscience' of the general public, those depicted throughout NBK in an anachronistic black and white TV room setting, their eyes mesmerised by the screen, and bring about a deconstruction between what is real and what is image.

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