

Violent Films and the Werther Effect in U.S. Cinema

By

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February 3, 2004 began like any other day for 14-year old honor student Jamie Gough. He woke up and went to school, the affluent Southwood Middle School for gifted artistic children in Palmetto, Florida. It was at here where Gough and another boy entered a second-floor bathroom with Gough's best friend, fellow 14-year old Michael Hernandez. In a place commonly known for middle school hijinks, Hernandez tried to lure the other boy into the stall but he was not interested. Gough, however, was curious about what Hernandez had to show him and did enter the stall. The choice proved to be fatal, as Hernandez pulled out a knife and fatally stabbed his best friend more than forty times. Investigators found a personal journal belonging to Hernandez that included plans to kill his older sister, Gough, and another friend, along with the intention of becoming a serial killer (Ramsland). The barbarous crime left the community with a monstrous question. What would prompt a 14-year old boy described as nice and respectful to brutally kill his best friend and plan to kill a family member?

During the investigation psychologists surmised that Hernandez identified with the serial killers in movies that included *American Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, going as far as to "adopt some of their behaviors as his own" (Neil). The Hernandez case is not an isolated incident in the U.S. but rather one of many involving young males committing crimes inspired in some way by violent films. Though a causal link between violence in the media and violent crimes has

not been found, violent acts known as copycat crimes show an alarming connection between the two, specifically among young males.

Author and researcher Loren Coleman calls the act of imitating a violent act seen in mass communication and culture the “copycat effect” or “contagion effect” (1). Studies into the copycat effect are still relatively new. Researchers first studied the phenomenon in 1974 when University of California sociologist David P. Phillips coined the term “Werther effect” to describe the copycat phenomenon. He named the term after the 1774 novel “The Sorrows of Young Wether” by Johann Wolfgang. In the novel a young, love-struck character named Werther dresses in boots, a blue coat and yellow vest and shoots himself at his writer’s table. In successive years, men across Europe committed suicide in the same specific fashion, prompting a ban on the book in Italy, Germany and Denmark (Coleman 2).

This effect is particularly troubling when factoring in recent studies which describe the link between exposure to media violence and violent behavior as being on par with the correlation of second hand smoke and the risk of lung cancer (Pozios, Kambam and Bender). In 2013 the New York Times cited a meta-analysis of 217 studies on violence in the media published between 1957 and 1990. In the analysis psychologists George Comstock and Haejung Paik found, “the short term exposure to media violence on actual physical violence against a person was moderate to large in strength.” Authors Pozios, Kambam and Bender conclude that while exposure to violence in the media does not explicitly cause violent behavior, it is a risk factor. They also point to a recent study published by the journal Pediatrics which causally associates watching more than two hours per weekday of violent television as a child or adolescent with antisocial behavior in early adulthood.

The most recent study examined in Comstock and Paik's meta-analysis was conducted in 1990. Since then American cinema has seen a new wave of violence. In the article "A Studio With Violence in Its Bones" New York Times reporter Michael Cieply explains that in keeping up with other studios, Warner Bros. "doubled down" on violent genre films that, one after another, appeared to cross new thresholds." He cites a number of Steven Seagal films beginning with 1988's *Above the Law*, Quentin Tarantino's emergence in cinema with a "whimsical" style of violence, and *Natural Born Killers*, written by Tarantino and directed by Oliver Stone. Cieply describes how the violence became darker and more complex with series such as *The Matrix* and *Batman*. Many of these violent films produced since the abandonment of the production code in 1968 have inspired copycat crimes ala the Werther effect where criminals were admittedly motivated by or attempted to emulate the violent actions committed by characters in violent films.

One of the most high profile copycat crimes in U.S. history is the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan. On March 30, 1981 25-year old John Hinkley, Jr. fired six shots at near point-blank range at Reagan, hitting the President in the lung. Hinkley also wounded Press Secretary James Brady, Secret Service agent Timothy McCarthy and police officer Thomas Delahanty (CNN). The attempted assassination by Hinkley is a complex narrative where art imitated life and ultimately inspired a crime. In Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, despondent protagonist Travis Bickle plans an assassination attempt on a presidential candidate after obsessing over a campaign worker. Bickle's character was loosely based on Arthur Bremer and his 1972 assassination attempt of Alabama Governor George Wallace. After watching *Taxi Driver*, Hinkley became obsessed with actress Jodi Foster, who played a teenage prostitute in the film. He sent her unsolicited letters and poems and attempted to enroll at Yale University while

Foster was there (Walsh). Foster spurned Hinkley's advances, leaving him with the mindset that doing something grandiose to garner media attention would make her change her mind. Hinkley initially targeted President Jimmy Carter, but set his sights on the newly elected President when Reagan defeated Carter in the 1980 election. After the Reagan shooting, Hinkley directly referenced Bickle's inspiration in telling authorities he did not want to "do a Bremer" by assassinating a lesser-target (Walsh).

Hinkley was a well-adjusted teenager from a traditional family. He played several sports in school and was elected class president twice. After high school, however, he became withdrawn and began to obsess over public figures that included John Lennon. It was at this time that he was prescribed antidepressants. When *Taxi Driver* was released, he saw the film at least fifteen times (PBS). In 1982 Hinkley was found not guilty by reason of insanity and sent to the St. Elizabeth psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C.

Two teenagers who committed crimes inspired by the 1996 Wes Craven horror film *Scream* and its sequel will spend much of their lives in prison. The *Scream* series is a wink-and-a-nod tribute to past horror tropes where a masked killer named "Ghostface" stabs and murders innocent victims. Despite a somewhat satirical tone in the material, "a disgusting abundance of murder, bloodshed, and sexual activity saturates each movie" (Chalmers 58). In 1998 17-year old Mario Padilla stabbed his mother, 37-year old Gina Castillo, 45 times while his 16-year old cousin Samuel Ramirez held her down. The pair confessed to police that they got the idea to kill after obsessing over the films *Scream* and *Scream 2* (L.A. Times). Their plan was to rob Castillo to get money to buy grim reaper costumes and voice distorters similar to those in the *Scream* films and kill several of their classmates (Chalmers). In 1999 Padilla was sentenced to life in prison and Ramirez was sentenced to 25 years to life. Before his sentencing Padilla stated that

exposure to horror films caused him to “fantasize about how to do things I could not do” (Los Angeles Times).

In 2006 church daycare worker Jennifer Benedict returned to her DeLand, Florida home to find 19-year old Andrew Scott Brewer in her house. He was armed with a stun gun and pistol and was wearing the mask worn by “Ghostface” in the *Scream* series (Ailworth and Reed). When Benedict tried to run Brewer shocked her with the stun gun and shot her in the chest, side and back. She collapsed and died on her front lawn attempting to escape. Unlike Padilla, Brewer did not explicitly blame *Scream* for the killing, though in his case he was wearing the *Scream* “Ghostface” mask while committing the crime. Investigators labeled Brewer a budding serial killer after finding a book on serial killers, ammunition, gun magazines and violent movies in his bedroom. In 2007 Brewer was sentenced to life in prison.

Oliver Stone’s 1994 movie *Natural Born Killers* is a polarizing film that is both revered and vilified reviled at the same time. Noted film critic Roger Ebert described the film as a “cinematic bazaar” with Stone’s experimental style that uses color and black and white, a combination of different film stocks and video, and blending film narrative with sitcom style and animation (Ebert). He also notes that the MPAA review panel only agreed to change the film’s rating from NC17 to R after five appeals and several edits. Crime Library’s Dean Shapiro argues that among films dating back to D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, no film is linked to more acts of violence than *Natural Born Killers*. He adds that the fact that the film’s protagonists get away with killing more than 100 people makes their imitation even more appealing to copycats.

Stone defends the violence in *Natural Born Killers*, saying the film actually condemns the mass media’s coverage of violence. In reflecting on the film, Stone said, “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" (Coleman 225). The media in *Natural Born Killers* plays a sizable role in turning Mickey and Mallory Knox into international celebrities. The sensationalized coverage of their crime spree includes man-on-the-street testimonies with people declaring their love and admiration for the couple. Stone utilizes clips from the fictional television program *American Maniacs* to help advance the narrative, keeping a body count of Mickey and Mallory's killing spree in hyperbolic fashion with rapid edits and set to a heavily synthesized soundtrack. *American Maniacs* host and producer Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr.) is more interested in fame than journalism and uses Mickey and Mallory as a device to attract higher ratings and further his career. The detective tasked with hunting down Mickey and Mallory, Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore), is a celebrity in his own right. His successful track record in high profile criminal cases leads to minor fame and a pretentiously titled book, *Scagnetti on Scagnetti*, which he gladly signs when asked.

Despite Stone's claim, author Jake Horsley believes that *Natural Born Killers* celebrates violence as a fact of nature as much as it indicts it (331). Others claim the film naturalizes the act of murder, as noted by Jeremy Withers in the article "The Social Construction of Nature and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*." Withers points to Mickey Knox's blatant connection during an interview with Wayne Gayle (Robert Downey, Jr.) where he compares his own identity as a mass murderer to nonhuman predators such as wolves.

Stone's intent very well may be to critique the mass media coverage of violence and violent criminals, but the film's complex narrative and stylistic approach to violence too often masks the intended media criticism while turning Mickey and Mallory Knox into revered anti-heroes. Rather than face punishment for the profuse amount of violence and murder, the

protagonists are ultimately rewarded with opportunities to commit additional crimes, adding to their growing reputations and fame. It is quite conceivable for Stone's adult-themed intent to be severely skewed when viewed through the lens of a less media savvy and highly impressionable adolescent viewer.

The exposition of *Natural Born Killers* features a flashback sequence from when Mickey and Mallory meet. In the sequence Mickey comes off somewhat justified in saving Mallory from her verbally, physically and sexually abusive father and passive mother. The horrific events are sanitized with the comic presentation of a television sitcom, replete with laugh tracks and ironic jingles. After a brief stint in prison which Mickey easily escapes from, he returns to help Mallory drown her father and burn her mother alive. The scene features a soundtrack more apropos for an action/adventure chase scene than a brutal killing, adding an implicit layer of thrill and excitement to an otherwise grisly scene. As the two flee from the burning house after the murders, audience applause is heard, further condoning the pair's actions. The trend continues throughout the film as the pair always resorts to violence as a successful means to escape capture and imprisonment. Their actions are justified in the film's closing credits that feature Mickey and Mallory raising a family while on the run, living a twisted version of the American Dream after escaping any type of punishment for the multitude of killing done in the film.

As the narrative moves forward Mickey and Mallory rise to a place of reverence where even the law enforcers tabbed with catching and housing them speak of them with a twisted sense of adoration. Detective Scagnetti, who has his own violent psychopathic tendencies, says of Mallory, "Ah, that's my type of girl. I like her" while hunting she and Mickey. The warden of the prison that houses the pair introduces Mallory to Scagnetti by saying, "You know her, you love her, you cannot fucking live without her...Mallory Knox."

Throughout the film Mickey and Mallory are intermittently portrayed through illustration as animated comic book heroes. This often occurs during intense action sequences such as Mickey's first escape from prison to "rescue" Mallory from her parents and Mickey and Mallory's grand escape during a prison riot during the film's climax. The sequences are brief but further paint the couple as youthful, heroic and exciting, all traits that our mass media promote as appealing to the adolescent male.

The most notable *Natural Born Killers* copycat crime resulted in a First Amendment court case that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Shapiro details the accounts of their crime spree in the article "Natural Born Killers." On March 5, 1995, 18-year old Ben Darras and his girlfriend, 18-year old Sarah Edmonson, watched *Natural Born Killers* numerous times while tripping on LSD. The following day the pair traveled to Hernando, Mississippi to attend a Grateful Dead concert. During the trip, Darras began talking about finding an isolated farmhouse where he intended to rob and kill its residents, but later settled on a cotton mill just off Interstate 55. Two days after binging on *Natural Born Killers* and LSD, Darras and Edmonson entered the office of plant manager William Savage. Darras shot and killed Savage and took his wallet. From there the pair drove 400 miles south to Pontchatoula, Louisiana, where Edmonson shot 35-year old convenience store clerk Patsy Byers in the throat, severing her spinal cord and leaving her paralyzed. Edmonson would later claim she saw a demon rather than Byers when she pulled the trigger, a recurring theme in *Natural Born Killers*.

The two killers had contrasting childhoods with one link: Mental illness. Darras was a high school dropout with a history of drug abuse and psychiatric treatment. Edmonson graduated high school with honors, doing so with a history of drug abuse and psychiatric problems since

her early teens (Shapiro). Edmonson received 35 years in prison for her crimes while Darras was sentenced to life in prison.

The legal issues surrounding the crimes received national attention for two reasons. In 1996 Patsy Byers filed a lawsuit against Oliver Stone and 13 other defendants that included Warner Bros. studios and other Time Warner subsidiaries (Shapiro). The lawsuit sought to recover damages for medical expenses, loss of wages and pain and suffering. The case also drew the ire of author John Grisham. He had been friends with William Savage dating back to his days of practicing law in Mississippi. Grisham penned a scathing article that appeared in the Oxford American literary magazine that supported Byers' lawsuit against Stone, calling *Natural Born Killers* "a horrific movie that glamorized casual mayhem and bloodlust. A movie made with the intent of glorifying random murder." His proposed solution was to define a movie as a product, subjecting it to product liability laws. Grisham theorized that one large verdict against Stone and his co-defendants would set a precedent and cause Hollywood to "rein itself in" (Shapiro).

The precedent would not be set. In 2001 a 21st Judicial District judge ruled that Stone and his co-defendants could not be held liable and is protected under the First Amendment. By this point more than a dozen copycat crimes related to *Natural Born Killers* had been documented (Shapiro).

The Werther effect is so strong with some films that it becomes labeled as a defense. Such is the case with the Wachowski Brothers series *The Matrix*. In the film series, people live in a dream world controlled by computers where violence is suggested as the only way out. According to University of Cincinnati's Institute of Law and Psychiatry John Kennedy, the film is particularly dangerous to the mentally ill. "They're people whose lives are so fractured or

without meaning that *The Matrix* is a way to explain that without saying, 'I'm sick,' or, 'I'm different.' It's a much more soothing explanation than admitting you've got a problem" (Schone).

The most notorious criminal to use this defense is 18-year old Lee Boyd Malvo, better known as the D.C. Sniper. Malvo was 17 when he and John Allen Muhammad gunned down 13 people at random in Washington D.C., Maryland and Virginia. Ten of the victims died in what was dubbed the Beltway sniper attacks. While on trial more than 100 drawings and notes related to the films were found and Malvo told detectives they should watch the films to understand his motive (Kiehl). Though the "Matrix defense" worked twice in the U.S. prior to Malvo's case, his insanity plea that involved his obsession with the films was not successful. He was sentenced to life without parole in both Maryland and Virginia.

The defense also failed in a disturbing 2003 Virginia case. In February of that year 19-year old Josh Cooke admitted, "I just kinda looked over at my *Matrix* poster and then I looked over at my gun" before donning combat boots and a black jacket similar to the one worn by the series protagonist Neo and killing his parents. During his trial it was discovered that Cooke's biological parents had both been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, a hereditary illness. Cooke confessed to being friendless and bullied and claimed he watched *The Matrix* videotape so often he wore it out and had to buy a second copy. He eventually pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 40 years in prison (Schone).

In 1981 John Hinkley, Jr. told Newsweek, "The line dividing life and art can be invisible. After seeing enough hypnotizing movies and reading enough magical books, a fantasy life develops which can either be harmless or quite dangerous" (PBS). Caught up in his own Werther effect, Hinkley's summation is one that many researchers agree with. There is a complex

equation that can result in the deadly Werther effect in American cinema. The conclusions of Pozios, Kambam and Bender that exposure to media violence is a risk factor for violent behavior appears to be greatly exacerbated when factoring in gender, age, repeated viewings of a film and prior mental illness.

Renowned Swedish auteur Ingmar Bergman said, “Film as dream, film as music. No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul” (Bergman). Filmmakers purposely create a world that invites viewers to lose themselves in a fictional landscape. The majority of viewers that enter this landscape return with no residual effects. A few, however, seem to linger. The elimination of the production code in 1968 brought with it an increase of violence in films, and since then a disturbing pattern has emerged. While research has yet to prove that violent films directly cause violent behavior, evidence shows that adolescent males with pre-existing psychological trauma are influenced by violent films. This often manifests itself as the Werther effect where a small fraction of audiences are motivated to commit violent acts inspired by the violence that occurs in U.S. cinema.

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