



rising body count



 "NATURAL BORN KILLERS"

HAS A GRISLY LEGACY

THAT CONTINUES TO GROW.

BY DOMINIC PATTEN | **last**
 month, William Sodders, 21, of
 Rock Point, N.Y., was turned in
 to the police by his own father

for killing a local firefighter. It was an obsession with Oliver Stone's "Natural Born Killers," said his father, that prompted the young man to shoot the firefighter with a stolen 9mm gun for the "thrill of it." The father claimed his son had threatened similar action against his own family. "He's been acting out the part of psychotic killers," the elder Sodders said.

So, it seems, have other people. Since the movie's release in the summer of 1994, at least 15 murders, from Nebraska to Paris, have been laid at its door. **Stone says** he intended the movie to be a wake-up call about a culture gone media-mad and saturated with violence. Instead, "Natural Born Killers" has become a beast of its own, a movie with a real-life body count.

Normally one would dismiss such a statement as the kind of harping we've heard from countless politicians and self-styled moralists in recent years. Most of the American copycat murders have been committed or instigated by individuals who have spent time on psychiatric wards; so it wasn't just the movie that made them do it. Nevertheless, the extent to which the perpetrators have openly bragged about how they emulated the film is very disturbing.

- A 14-year-old boy in Dallas who decapitated a 13-year-old girl soon after the movie was released told police he wanted to be famous "like the natural born killers."

- In Salt Lake City, Nathan Martinez shaved his head and started wearing round tinted sunglasses similar to the Mickey Knox character portrayed in the film by Woody Harrelson. He then shot his stepmother and his 10-year-old sister. In statements made at the time of his arrest, Martinez repeatedly emphasized how much he "loved" "Natural Born Killers."
- In Paris, in early 1995, Florence Ray and her boyfriend, after stealing guns from some French police, hijacked a taxi, put a gun to the driver's head and went joy riding until the taxi driver intentionally crashed into a police car to alert them to his situation. Florence and her boyfriend, who both look like fashion models, then started shooting, killing the taxi driver and two policemen, while reportedly screaming out lines from "Natural Born Killers" to each other. They escaped, killing another policeman who was giving chase on a motorcycle. Another shootout with police ensued, in which the boyfriend was fatally shot in the stomach. Florence was captured and imprisoned.

John Grisham, no stranger to crime fiction, Hollywood or the media, tried to take Stone to court, claiming that the film inspired the murder of a friend's child in Mississippi. The suit didn't go anywhere -- the court saw too many yawning leaps of faith in Grisham's portrait of the murderers' supposed state of mind during their killing spree. But the evidence showed no doubt that the teenage killers -- she was middle class, he was blue collar -- were very familiar with "Natural Born Killers."

Stone's movie is not the first or only movie that could be said to provide twisted inspiration to a sick, violent mind. The vigilante justice practiced by Charles Bronson in the "Death Wish" pictures in the 1970s and '80s offers an introductory course in random killing and pleasurable violence. Since Arthur Penn's "Bonnie and Clyde" (1967) and Stanley Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange" (1971), unfettered brutality and graphic violence have become part of the Hollywood lexicon. More recently, movies like "Pulp Fiction," directed by the original "Natural Born Killers" scriptwriter, Quentin Tarantino, have pushed the boundaries even further.

But the violence in "Natural Born Killers" seeps deeper into the soul somehow. Some viewers are literally sickened by it. Others are stunned. For some, it sank so deep that it has become a mantra. The question remains: How has this happened?

"NBK" is not a conventional film by a normal stretch of the imagination. Besides the big-name stars like Harrelson, Tommy

Lee Jones and Juliette Lewis, there is little of the standard Hollywood high-gloss about it. Stone uses animation, back projection, High 8, 16mm and 35mm cameras. The edits are rapid-fire; there are a phenomenal 2,500 to 3,000 separate shots in the finished film (films have, on average, 1,000 separate shots).

Even to a generation raised on MTV and Sega games, this is the cinematic equivalent of staring into a strobe light for two hours. Brainwashing experiments practiced by our own government and others have suggested that such overstimulation can have a powerful effect upon the human psyche. Couple this with a screenplay dedicated to establishing a personalized level of excitement -- almost sexual in its tangibility -- around violence, mix in a weak sense of personal identity, and the effect is potentially disastrous.

To paraphrase Bob Dylan, who appears on the "Natural Born Killers" soundtrack, something's happening in your film, Mr. Stone. And, as last month's murder in Rock Point displays yet again, you don't know what it is. Maybe it's time to find out.
Sept. 16, 1997

Dominic Patten is working on a screenplay based on the life of William Randolph Hearst's longtime mistress, Marion Davies. He last wrote for Salon about the self-promoting activities of British author [Will Self](#).

Read [Oliver Stone's interview](#) in Salon about "Natural Born Killers" and violence in movies.