March 17, 1999

Media-Initiated Killers?

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Posted By Judith Reisman On 03/17/1999 @ 1:00 am

Entertain: To keep, hold or maintain in the mind with favor; to reserve in the mind; to harbor; to cherish (Webster, 1828)

After decades of profitably squeezing visual violence and pornographic images into the “Free Speech” envelope, on March 8 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “the family of a shooting victim in a crime, allegedly inspired by the film “Natural Born Killers” can sue distributors, Warner Bros., Time Warner, Inc. and director Oliver Stone for “negligence.” The family charges that the conglomerate should have known “Natural Born Killers” would inspire “copycat” crimes.

Gearing up for the court of public opinion and the courtroom, Entertainment News quoted irate entertainment lawyers who swore to defend the right of “artists and directors to express their creative ideas without fear of liability.” The entertainment media is worried.

So, what “creative ideas” motivated Stone in “Natural Born Killers,” his 1994 vision of “Romeo and Juliet”? One theme dominates Stone’s film — the idea that some are born to kill and some to be killed. This idea animates Stone’s anti-heroine and her lover as they ruthlessly murder and maim.

To gain support for his “creative idea,” Stone manipulates viewers into rooting for his “Natural Born Killers” by casting many of their victims as more callous than the young killer-lovers. So, while director Stone both trivializes and sneers at his anti-heroine’s incest, we find ourselves rooting for the couple as they murder her barbaric father, after which the two torch mom and gaily shoot at passers by.

Cynically inter-cutting color with black/white footage, Stone sets his bloody mayhem to screams of horror, pain, lust, and joy, drenched in “F” and “B” words. His “creative idea” is to have no consequences for his “Natural Born Killers.” They drive off like Garland and Rooney, toddlers in tow, to live happily-ever.

In copycat crimes, life imitates art. Imprinted with the artful images of Stone’s teen anti-heroine, 18-year-old Sarah Edmondson and boyfriend, Benjamin Darrus, took drugs, repeatedly watched “Natural Born Killers” and, Edmondson said, then went on a killing spree, shooting and paralyzing sales clerk, Patsy Ann Byers.
Stone’s “Natural Born Killers” indoctrination techniques are simple, manipulative, and unoriginal. War violence experts Dave Grossman and James Gibson document media violence and sadosexual films as psychological warfare, often used as initiation ceremonies to condition soldiers to kill the enemy.

An early master media director, Adolph Hitler said; “Propaganda must be addressed to the emotions and not to the intelligence; and it must concentrate on a few simple themes, presented in black and white... with lurid photographs of the... sexual and physical.”

Neuroscientist, Dr. Gary Lynch clarifies some of the copycat process: “An event which lasts half a second within five to ten minutes has produced a structural change” in the human brain. No brain change is “fantasy,” as film “events” are chemically wired into one’s mental reality. Science writer, Jeremy Campbell adds, “The brain is... a knowledge medium in which... information (mostly unconscious) can be brought to bear on a... decision... memory and perception.”

But what about motive?

Did Stone and Warner know their creative product, “Natural Born Killers,” was toxic waste? Listen to how the “Natural Born Killers” ad copy says the film structurally changes viewers’ brains. “Natural Born Killers” is described as “delirious” [i.e., a mental disturbance...a toxic state], “visually dazzling” [i.e., overpowering by a strong light], “explosive” [a violent outbreak, as of emotion, the discharge of a neural cell], etc. The Warner ads confirm that (as Adolph said) Stone’s visual stimuli target the viewers’ right hemisphere (emotion), subverting the left-hemisphere (speech and cognition).

On the scientific evidence, the argument can be made that Edmondson and Darrus’ neurochemical pathways were structurally reprogrammed by Stone’s lurid images. If so, these two young people were not “natural” born killers, but manipulated “copycat” killers.

Yes, such “copycats” are responsible for their crimes.

But, are those who visualized, produced and distributed these “simple themes” in the form of neurochemical stimuli, also responsible for resulting copycat crimes? Stone and Warner say no. Florida attorney, Jack Thompson notes that Stone allegedly once bragged that his film makes you want to go out and shoot someone. Really?
Collapsing under the weight of television, the Internet and “virtual reality,” and enlightened by new knowledge of the human brain, law needs to re-evaluate the “free speech” protections given to the anti-speech alchemy of images.

Polluters are held accountable for dumping toxic waste into the environment. American tobacco companies are liable for smoker deaths. Shall image-makers and distributors eventually be accountable for dumping their visual toxic waste into our mental environment? Is it possible that mass media barons like Stone and Warner may also be accountable for the memories and perceptions, conscious and unconscious ideas, even death and destruction, which their products reap?

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URL to article: http://www.wnd.com/1999/03/2712/

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