

The sur-reality of contemporary semantics

Johann van der Merwe
Faculty of Art and Design, Port Elizabeth Technikon

Abstract

This article is a response to both Bert Olivier's article *Natural Born Killers, violence and contemporary culture* (this journal, last issue) and the accompanying report by Amanda du Preez. Based mainly on two issues derived from du Preez's report, this article argues the points raised from a social structuration perspective as against the report's perceived postmodern perspective. The question of the absence of a role for narrative in the social sense is discussed, as well as the schizophrenic "normality" that can be created by the non-presence of such a normative structure. The article ends by looking at Stone's supposed criticism of violence, and questioning what is really being criticised.

Introduction

Social behaviour, or rather, the dynamics of social structuration, seems to be the focus of Bert Olivier's article *Natural Born Killers, violence and contemporary culture* (this journal, last issue). He begins the article by referring to "the avant-garde film's resistance to narrative structure" and ends by proposing the possibility that "the everyday capacity to narrate our lives to one another will be replaced by a kind of social co-existence which borders on schizophrenia." This *condition* would then be considered *normal* under the circumstances, which is what Amanda du Preez (*Keuringsverslag*, same issue), if only by default, would have to take into account, since she, as social agent in a specific social structure, quite openly chooses the postmodern condition as the social milieu from within which *Natural Born Killers* is to be judged / critiqued. This reading of her report is justified, I believe, since no person, in any real-world context, can find existence in two socially structured paradigms at the same time, except as anarchist – a choice is always made either through the agency of necessity / tradition, or because the luxury of a choice is possible to that person (cf. the luxury of a postmodern choice, below).

Furthermore, du Preez asks that a dialogue around the content be opened; I will accept this offer and address two issues raised in her report.

Is there a text in this film?

The first issue concerns the postmodern notion of multinarration, and read in the context of a non-repressive approach to story-telling within a social context this has merit. The question of non-exclusivity, not willingly excluding the possibility and hence the existence of the Other, has been well established and accepted for some considerable time now. However, we are discussing a form of fictional communication (fictional story-telling), and not simply real-life social interaction. The genre of this particular avant-garde film is an art form that uses a multinarrative approach in the spirit of Lyotardean *j'accusé*, as shall be explained (below). Du Preez finds Olivier's preference for narrative – as opposed to spectacle – in film problematical, as it would seemingly indicate a hierarchy of prejudices, effectively accusing him of making the wrong choice between multi- and metanarration since his stance would exclude or suppress the Other voices in the film in favour of the well-known narrative mode of communication. The film is by du Preez's own admission a multinarrative that does not adhere to an overarching cohesive metanarrative. This is really the postmodernistic problem. Du Preez identifies what she sees as Olivier's logocentric attempts to reinstate the discredited notion of metanarration, a notion that privileges the concept of coherence and rationality. In other words she identifies Olivier as part of the discredited logocentric tradition that, according to the postmodernist argument, has lost the positions of power and hence the ability to privilege coherence and rationality.

Thus by referring to the film's resistance to narrative structure Olivier seemingly positions himself outside of postmodernism's use of *différance* regarding image-use and hence narrative.

This Derridean play of differences may be based on a notion of no absolute presence, but a postmodern reading of *différance* wrongly equates *no absolute presence* with *no narrative structure*, or, more correctly in this case, equates *no narrative structure* with *no metanarrative of power and domination*. To simplistically equate a natural human and social tendency towards narrative structure with prejudice and discredited concepts of logocentric domination is to willfully misinterpret Derrida himself. More people should take heed of Derrida's own words: context is not something that should be exploded *per se*, but is instead a "certain relationship ... a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*" (Derrida 1993: 919). Without some form of coherent and signifying *narrative* structure that makes sense of that which the viewer is confronted with, any form of literal, figurative, social or fictional communication would descend into mere spectacle, or entertainment for the senses. In this respect Arnheim (1967: 12) accuses modern life of not being symbolic, in that society does not take cognizance of reality by *interpreting* the symbolic forms of everyday reality, the objects surrounding people, and the products they consume. In losing transparency from the world, Arnheim says, society will take things at their apparent face value; objects, shapes, colours, sounds will be nothing but; worse, they will only be an image of the real. In losing transparency objects (and events) lose symbolic meaning, and society loses sight of what these really mean, stand for, imply. In short, insight and the ability to interpret will be lost, "and art becomes a technique for entertaining the senses" (Arnheim 1967: 12).

Transparency here means the ability to either see through the proffered (mediated) image to the original

reference, or, lacking this referential function, the ability to transpose the mediated image into its intended message. Whichever route is taken, the cognizance taken of reality refers to a specific social reality, which is why both du Preez and Olivier identify themselves as being on opposite sides of the social reality fence. On what would seem to be du Preez's postmodern side it has been popularly accepted that the logocentric tradition can be regarded as not only outmoded but vanquished. Why else would anyone confidently pronounce that spectacle (this is implicitly not denied) and multinarrative – against a background of admitted incoherence and irrationality – should stand in relevant opposition to Olivier's discredited yearning for a lost coherent narrative? The deciding factor, for me, in this report is du Preez's assertion that Olivier's one-sided approach to the concept of violence is wrong. This not only affirms her postmodern stance but places her in opposition to the not-postmodern social structure (that still exists despite philosophical and cultural labels) from within which Olivier views these scenes of violence. To suggest to a social agent such as Olivier that a "true" idea (meaning truthful / accurate, and I suspect "objective" – as well), that a legitimately acceptable concept of violence cannot exist is to calculatedly place yourself outside the boundaries of the social system from within which a social agent such as Olivier has to operate. What du Preez is suggesting is that any idea of violence must only be discussed within the genre of the film itself, and that means unequivocally that Olivier must leave his own paradigm of social structuration, leave the normative elements behind that any social system affords its members, and enter into a dialogue with the "other" paradigm of the film (dare one speak here of the *content* of the film, seeing that there is no narrative but only a collection of *little stories*? For this last reference cf. Lyotard's version of multinarratives, below). This new and supposedly fictive world also includes the particular social structuration of both Tarantino and

Stone, and is often presented as more documentary-style *cinéma vérité* than straightforward fiction.

The satirical exchange of catharsis

I can, of course, state that du Preez is suggesting this singular approach since she herself has suggested to Olivier that his social paradigm (and its views on narrative, violence and social cohesion) has been discredited. I can, furthermore, state that what is really being discussed is not so much a discourse in good faith or the pros and cons of arguments in opposition but a structure of exchange using a form of postmodern materialist language. My argument is that this *exchange* is the part played by so-called postmodern storytelling while instituting an ideologically based social dialogue that acts as a realized signifying system with its own metanarrative of power, for "aesthetics now enters the realm of political ideal utopianism, veiled by [Walter] Benjamin as dialectical materialism" (Weiss 1990: 159). When Lyotard (1989: 275) speaks of the acceptance of a discourse of good faith in connection with Levinas asking "that the absolute other be made welcome," this seems to be similar to imagination without knowledge. Submitting to the text outside of contextuality leaves Barthes free to decompose the social self, in the sense that the intellectual's / writer's function is the decomposition of bourgeois consciousness. Barthes apparently does this while pretending to remain within the bourgeois consciousness, by acting as if the postmodern text is the logocentric text, extra-textual and referential; this camouflaged text then dismantles the bourgeois consciousness and weakens it (Leitch 1983: 110).

Submitting to the text (*little stories*) of *Natural Born Killers* outside of a specific social contextuality leaves this avant-garde film free to decompose the social self known as Olivier. Lyotard's discourse of good faith then means "do before understanding" (Lyotard 1989: 276), and submitting to the text outside of contextuality allows Lyotard to bestow justice on alterity, to gain justice for the

Other, exactly the formula followed by Stone (below). Calling this discourse of good faith a "discourse of persecution" that parodies the persecuted, Lyotard (1989: 276) says, "What seems to authorize the parody and the persecution is the principle that justice consists in alterity." In the light of this revelation perhaps Olivier is right in asserting that the film has no true satirical content, for the satire seems to be kept for the viewer, and the parody of the social structure is then one of the intended meanings of such films of violence.

Walter Benjamin foresaw the political use of the changed or mediated image, and the role that catharsis could play in what amounts to an exchange programme, not as a "personalist psychological model" but as a "political, revolutionary model" (Weiss 1990: 159). Benjamin spoke about the "social significance" of film and for him film was "inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (Weiss 1990: 159), hence the comment about parodying the social structure (above). The so-called *cathartic* aspect of *Natural Born Killers* can thus be seen as not aimed at individuals but at a whole social class, all that uphold a certain social structuration in opposition to the "killers" in the film. "Cops, wardens, prisons, reporters... they must all sense they have become part of a vast and bizarre web of totalitarian punishment," wrote Oliver Stone in connection with *Natural Born Killers* (quoted in Morris 1994: 17). "I don't know why people think a killer is any different from what they are" Stone said in another interview (Carr, 1994: 6). These viewpoints follow Foucault (1974: 9) who regarded the *bourgeois norm* as the essential enemy. In the same vein as Stone's inclusion of the killer (the Other) as a normal part of society, and just as du Preez judges Olivier's judgment on violence as discredited, so Lyotard deemed that all claims to privileged positions are discredited, for no "intellectual tribunal" has the right to claim access to knowledge and power,

which includes such notions as truth and justice. Foucault viewed the radical capabilities of the individual (and this *must* include Stone's Killer / Other) as the true source of "truth and freedom" since the latter cannot be achieved within the social structure.

Likewise, Lyotard, who views knowledge as contingent upon a decentred and pluralistic discourse proliferation (multinarratives or *little stories*), disclaims the mythical discourse of social structuration, with its emphasis on particular contexts and contents. The new discourses are to be contained within like-minded groups disdainful of socially privileged approval for their legitimation, while they form their own rules / norms, and thus principles of conduct, that inform their inquiries (Farganis 1993: 19). Foucault dismisses the privileged notion of social reality, normally reached through individual action and interaction, as *cause and effect*; he questions the "ready-made syntheses" of an accepted social reality which, through a "single horizon of objectivity," constitutes objects via the interplay of the rules of formation that discriminates, represses, and differentiates objects in social practice: "... we must oust those forms and obscure forces by which we usually link the discourse of one man with that of another; they must be driven out from the darkness in which they reign" (Foucault 1977: 22, 32-33), thus echoing Benjamin's liquidation of a cultural heritage (above).

By variously liquidating, discrediting and dismissing the cultural heritage as a system of legitimation, Benjamin, Foucault, Tarantino and Stone make use of a postmodern structure of exchange through a cosmopolitan own *social practice* that is resolutely opposed to a normal social structuration. This opposition is either overtly *outside* the social paradigm it critiques (Foucault) or it offers an image of otherness supposedly *inside* the social structure, along the lines of Barthes acting as if the postmodern text *is* the logocentric text (above), and Stone asking why a killer should be seen as different to (*outside* of)

the rest of that social system the killer was presumed to be a part of. Stone's *killer text* is placed firmly within the *bourgeois text* to effectuate this structure (or moment) of exchange. However one may want to read du Preez's report, the result of her argument is to displace Olivier's discredited social yearning for narrative, cohesion and rationality with the *little stories* of the two killers. The narrative of social structuration that requires cohesion and rationality is shattered by the irrationality and decided incoherency of cold-blooded murder: today this translates to theft, car-jacking and burglary with an almost obligatory murder of the original social agent who happens to own the property now being taken by violence. There is no difference, there should be no intrinsic and propositional difference, between the occurrence of real-world violence and the portrayal of so-called fictive violence. Both kinds, in being perpetrated, should position the killers firmly outside the social system they shatter.

The nature of a fictively contrived reality

Unless the aim *is* to shatter the social system. As Christian Metz (1974: 249) might say, *Natural Born Killers*, in offering a discourse of good faith, offers an image of otherness resolutely *inside* the social structure. "The plausible work ... lives out its conventions ... in bad conscience (but, as we know, in good faith): It attempts to persuade itself, and to persuade the public" that what they observe in the film, what they become aware of, is not a fictive contrivance but "is in reality the effect of the nature of things and derives from the intrinsic character of the subject represented," that it offers mediated images in the manner of *cinéma vérité*. "The plausible work believes itself to be, and wants us to believe it to be, directly translatable into terms of reality" (Metz 1974: 249). Any member of society, that is, those who identify themselves as members of a definitive social structure, would be confronted by a great deal of ambiguity

in this type of avant-garde film. Being anxious not to exclude a possible "Other" interpretation, these social agents will have to accommodate the possibility of, at least for the duration of the film, the suspension of established beliefs. "Semiotically speaking ambiguity must be defined as a mode of violating the code ... the text becomes self-focusing: it directs the attention of the addressee primarily to *its own shape*" (Eco 1976: 263-264). The film violates, as it were, the rules of the social code, now suspended, and instead directs the attention of the viewer to the shape of its good faith discourse that evokes the empathy of Stone *for* the killers, and, being *for* these, his empathy, and implicitly and plausibly our empathy, has to be *against* the socially restrictive norms, now suspended, that necessitated this violence. "The relation which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of *deformation ... myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes 1972: 121-122) - its function is to *make real*.

I began this article with reference to Olivier's statement that "the avant-garde film's resistance to the narrative structure" is important. This resistance to the narrative of social structuration comes about because poststructuralist and postmodern defenders of this *moment of exchange* in the free area of the marketplace of ideas focus on the significance of this exchange of a new production of meaning for the old production of meaning, and thus ignore the wider social contexts within which this moment of consumer sovereignty occurs. As Foucault and Stone might say, this moment is seen as a popular resistance to the production of meaning in the dominant sign system and its ideology, with bottom-up power opposing top-down power, and disorder (disruption) opposing social discipline. Golding & Murdock (1991: 17) propose that one looks at the ideology of this subversive consumption not "for the components of a product but for the conditions of a practice." It is argued here that these *conditions of a practice* are at the heart of

this avant-garde film's language use, and as such are contrary to both Derrida's strategy of reading and critical postmodernism itself. "We must be on guard indefinitely against the 'reappropriation' of the value 'practice'" urges Derrida (1981: 90), and paradoxically allowing for the return of newly-formed intellectual positions among the new avant-garde (that may rival the social positions previously deconstructed) has the effect of working against "critical postmodernism" (Harrison & Wood 1993: 247). The "plausible" in film, according to Merz (1974: 249), "is therefore that suspicious arsenal of devices and 'tricks' whose purpose is to naturalize discourse and to hide control."

These conditions of a practice include Seidman's (1994: 228) "anarchistic social ideal" in the disruption of social control mechanisms through, for instance, Lyotard's like-minded groups forming their own rules and principles of conduct (cf. above). The argument here is, apparently, that the ideology of the dominant sign system is countered by an ideology of the subversive consumer, broadly defined as the several, combined, ideologies of *local struggles* (Lyotard's [1989: 132] multinarrative *little stories*) united in their practice of disruption. The encounter between dominant and subversive sign systems (different uses to which a single system of signification, operating through a single language system, may be put) occurs not on some idealistic plane, but during social interaction that includes not only ideas, as concepts, but practical matters such as economic necessity and political subordination. Thus these conditions of a practice of a particular ideology of disruption (it may be seen as an ideology in the sense that it follows the idea [Rosen 1996: 51] that an "ideological consciousness *reflects, echoes* or is in some other way *expressive* of a particular society or aspect of society"), via the poststructuralist and postmodern modes of thought of Fiske's *cultural elite* (below), may be seen as a form of false

consciousness, in that the use that is made of this subversive consumer thought pattern divorces the moment or exchange from the multiple interconnections of the semantic universe, that sphere of real-life world experience that forms the basis for any individual's perception of culture and social reality.

A Danish soliloquy

This leads to Olivier's notion that "the everyday capacity to narrate our lives to one another will be replaced by a kind of co-existence which borders on schizophrenia." The type of dialogue in this film is not a true dialogue but a form of postmodern monologue, since the social structure that could offer an opposition has been discredited and nullified. This amounts to what Fowler (1994: 16) calls "disabling exclusions," context and "real-life inference-guided communication" being among the casualties. The language of this avant-garde film uses its own text not so much for insight as for assertion, and as Norris and Benjamin (1988: 30) put it, this becomes an "outlook that annuls the very project of critical thought." This postmodern condition, according to Lyotard (Rajchman 1985: 113) dramatizes the fact that "one could not 'participate' in this theatre because one was already a part of it." Immersing the social agent (viewer) in a sea of *little stories* in the "'heterotopia' of the babbling of languages rather than a utopia of a single word for a single people" (Rajchman 1985: 117) most definitely acts as disabling exclusions as far as social structuration is concerned. This situation is the direct result of postmodernism denying the referent any position in a discourse analysis, and denying any prediscursive element that could lead to meaning in social reality. Ostensibly in a deconstructive mode, this film claims legitimacy for its own free play of discourse that opposes all established authority in *the freedom of the sign*.

In opposition to this postmodern freedom of choice, we have to make sense of the world we live in, to order it, to familiarize the unknown, and we do so

by the (socially) conventional use of language and its instruments. Especially in this Information Age, whenever we are bombarded by information and knowledge, we may find life chaotic, and because "life is in time, we experience it as being in a perpetual state of flux" (Roelofse 1987: 11). The *normal* course of action is to bring order to this state, to our lives. So we master this state "by ordering the chaos confronting us. Communication is therefore always, viewed from this perspective, a process of problem-solving, or ordering the world" (Roelofse 1987: 11). An objection to this ordering of the world is a reductionist construct evasive of individual identity and conducive to creating a feeling of schizophrenia, as Olivier indicates could happen. This becomes very plausible given that Rajchman (1985: 115) speaks of the "art melancholic" that finds no intellectual challenge in "advanced art" anymore, and in consequence "theory becomes a space of mourning for this loss." The postmodernist uses this melancholic space to inculcate, in us, the 'knowledge' of our so-called postmodern condition, while plunging us deeper into a melancholia with an art show like *Les Immatériaux* (curated / produced by Lyotard), "that was itself manic-depressive" (Rajchman 1985: 115).

In the fourth of his lectures of *The Persistence of Faith*, Jonathan Sacks (1990: 16) comes close to defining this "space of mourning." Apropos of Lyotard's heterotopia in the techno-science of the babbling of languages, he mentions Rushdie's "privileged arena" in literature, a space in which the babbling of voices defines the function of the novel. Rushdie has used the example of being imprisoned in a large house with many rooms, "full of strangers and friends." You realize that the house is a prison, but find solace in a room full of voices – the babbling of languages that talk about your world (the house) and everything in it. The voices are your redemption, without which "you would go mad." Challenging

this "provocative definition" Sacks (1990: 16) replied,

listening to voices talking about everything in every possible way is not sanity but the quickest route to madness, and that is precisely the condition not just of high literature but the whole of our fragmented culture. *For sanity, the inhabitants of Rushdie's house might well gather together, first just a few then growing numbers, to listen to someone who could tell them the story of the house, and why they came to be there, and what lies outside, though no one has ever returned.* (Sacks)

In this way the modern manifestations of "human inadequacy, self-deception, role-playing, the confusion and substitution of individuals in temporary relationships, and even the lying paradox of the communication of the fact of non-communication" (Williams 1986: 141) have become canonical narratives in their own right; instead of remaining symptoms of something being wrong, and acting as signs indicating the cause of this wrong, their inevitability as a natural part of the human condition is touted as the ultimate in consumer products. The global village and its aftershocks had at first produced art that portrayed the *reaction* to this new acceleration of culture. These reactions were transformed, by the cosmopolitan elite uniting with consumer capitalism, into a newly displayed *normality*, underscoring Olivier's statement that this new social co-existence bordering on schizophrenia could become a condition that would be considered as normal under the circumstances.

Postmodernism operates within the system of late-capitalism, but would apparently operate without the constraints of that system. This, in practice, is mostly possible only for the few individuals with the means to do so, and these are the "cultural elite – members of the 'creative' professions, including academics" (Fiske 1991: 64), or William's (1986: 143) "elite metropolitan intellectuals." That a postmodern celebration of individual creativity and freedom is a "highly

political depoliticization of culture," is attested to by the fact that the very people to be supposedly freed by postmodern and poststructuralist strategies – those of the majority that live a life of economic necessity (and / or deprivation) and general political subordination – show little sign of living a "postmodern lifestyle with a postmodern consciousness" (Fiske 1991: 64-65). The people who *are* freed by postmodern strategies are Stone's killers and the postmodern artists themselves. These have the luxury of making this choice to follow a postmodern consciousness, which the rest of us (re Stone's "me-them") do not have. It is easy to say, as Stone does, that "we" have to stop saying "me-them," it is easy to say that a killer is just the same as the rest of us (semantic word play: of course a killer is just the same as "the rest of us," being another member of society, but his deeds are most decidedly not the same as the rest of us, and his own deeds displace him as a member of that society). It is easy to ask (rhetorically) whether "you kill killers or seek redemption" (Carr 1994: 6). It becomes a fact that directors such as Stone, Tarantino and Lynch can go home to their very expensive and very safe houses without being confronted by the violence that they say are only being copied in their hyperreal films (Claasen 1994: 8).

A fictional apocalyptic warning?

It is said that the postmodernist does not provide answers, only questions. Yet this is never a very satisfactory situation, and even du Preez makes Stone provide some form of answer to the contextual propositions of the film. This concerns the second issue I mentioned (cf. p.1, above), and deals with du Preez's assertion that *Natural Born Killers* is a successful apocalyptic warning that would make a difference through the creation of hyper-images of violence. Wrong. The time has passed for postmodern critics to claim a better understanding of artistic production than the author / artist. Stone (Carr 1994: 6) effectively

repudiates du Preez's reading by stating that he has no interest in the reality of murder, but decidedly an interest in the hyperreality of the contexts within which these murders take place. Far from this proving du Preez's hypothesis correct, Stone's intention was not to use the film as an apocalyptic warning re the effects of violence, killers against society – on the contrary. Despite declaring "I did not seek to dwell in or glorify their violence, although I will be accused as such [*sic*]" (Morris 1994: 17), Stone would have a very difficult time explaining his penchant for scenes such as a body being torn "limb from limb. There were shoes coming out there, pants. Finally I wound up with his head on a stick." In this interview (Carr 1994: 6) Stone admits people will accuse him of "inciting violence, glorifying it, doing the same thing I'm criticizing. You do get prejudged." Du Preez agrees that Stone criticizes violence, but then, in describing the film as being, as it were, "really about the thrill of it [murder], the joy ride from their [the two killers] point of view," how does this correlate with criticizing violence? Stone admits that the killers evoke his empathy, and thrilling to a scene of 2000 prisoners charging down a prison corridor. He propositions *Natural Born Killers* as a morality play in which the killers are redeemed (Carr 1994: 6).

Stone does not criticize violence against society per se, but, following Foucault and in the spirit of Lyotardean *j'accusé*, criticizes violence against the perpetrators of violence against society. Stone's sociopolitical comment finds, as did Foucault, the structures and systems of law enforcement guilty of violence. "I mean we're really into the concept of somebody else's pain, somebody else's suffering, and participating in it," Stone says, apropos of the media, and then promptly proceeds to reverse "the flow, with the Establishment at risk," proving that he does indeed do the same thing that he is supposed to criticize. In this anti-establishment morality play Stone cannot criticize the culture of violence we live with, as du Preez suggests, unless the violence being criticized is that perpetuated by society itself, unless the

idea is to shatter the discredited social system itself (cf. above), as Foucault and Lyotard have urged on numerous occasions. If Lyotard discredits social reality through stating that no *intellectual tribunal* has privileged access to truth and justice, how is one to understand his statement that "... you and your people will have to say to me: that is just" (Lyotard 1989: 276). Who is he referring to with the term "me" and what (newly privileged) access does this person or group have to truth and justice? In a similar vein, what makes the rules and principles of Lyotard's like-minded groups essentially different to those of the social groups they apparently oppose, and is this poststructuralist group-forming structurally different to the social nature of existence?

Poststructuralism has been described as contributing to fresh perspectives that challenge accepted social histories, and as offering insights into contemporary culture that are of value; postmodernism as a mode of thought should be judged not on its own merits alone, but in context; it should be judged according to the use that positioned social agents make of its insights and challenges (Seidman 1994; Fiske 1991). It is in this respect that I challenge poststructuralist thought by comparing it to social structuration; I do not challenge postmodernism in *toto*, but challenge specific aspects that are the result not of modes of thought, but the use to which there are put. Fiske (1991: 66) makes this point clear by stating that "we should reject any use made of it which divorces those insights from politicized accounts of the ways in which everyday life is lived" This recalls Best & Kellner's reasons for finding postmodern theory lacking in multiperspectival and multidimensional approaches, as well as highlighting the tendency of postmodern theory to "reject social theory altogether," which they find counter-productive (Best & Kellner 1991: 262). In rejecting social theory or the social structure that it opposes, *Natural Born Killers* displays intolerance towards real-life multinarration in a social sense.

It is therefore not surprising that Seidman (1994: 228) remains critical of poststructuralism's failure to provide, alongside its social critique, a "positive programme of social reconstruction," since its critique, however vaguely democratic the liberationist ideals it espouses, remains rooted in an opposition to social domination and regulation, and, almost as a consequence, retains as its social vision an "anarchistic social ideal, which I find socially naïve."

The social construction model, while emphasizing both the constraining and enabling modes of structuration, and allowing for criticism of, and a break with, the tradition in which it is put into practice, nevertheless posits the unimaginability of social reality exclusive of rules / norms, stable identities, and above all, systems of social control. In this respect, poststructuralism's view of a moral, if anarchistic, social ideal seems simplistically opposed to the totality of everyday reality as supposedly embodied in social institutions of control, by disrupting those control mechanisms through its strategy of fragmented and local (thus decentred) struggles for legitimation and justification – Lyotard's like-minded group-forming (above) through the action of role-taking. However, as stated above, a practical and positive programme for this action of the role-taking of the Other of social structuration seems wanting. "Neither Baudrillard, Lyotard, nor Foucault are very clear about the moral and political standpoint from which they criticize Western societies. I am troubled by their refusal to spell out their ideas of a good society" (Seidman 1994: 231), and so should we be troubled by Stone's refusal to adequately spell out his vision of a better society. While it has to be acknowledged that manipulation and a tendency towards absolute control exists in the system of structuration itself (*because* of that system being produced and reproduced by individual action, *as well*), this very tendency is restricted by Gadamer's corrective principle, i.e. the constraints and enabling factors through which structuration operates, "imposing

limits as well as effecting opportunities" (Golding & Murdock 1991: 19). To create a social ideal in the *freedom of the sign* that escapes social constraint (residing in content and meaning, social and political ideology, and systems of social control, that includes the notion of discipline), and to do so as a celebration of especially Foucault's radical and individually sourced truth, freedom, and creativity, is to ignore the most basic of life-world constraints that operate within the system of which it is still a practical, and practicing, part (Farganis 1993; Fiske 1991).

To achieve the new social freedom, the constraints the individual finds in real-life economic necessity as well as in socio-political subordination will have to be transcended by some means or another. If one should divorce this social ideal from politicized accounts of everyday life (above), a practical, and therefore a social, economic and political distinction may be overlooked between individuals capable of transcending these constraints and those who cannot (Fiske 1991). Some people, as is usually the case, would simply be more equal than others, because they can afford to be thus. As Claasen (1994: 8) indicated, Stone can afford to be safely thus, and we could deduce that, through a postmodern multinarration via an apocalyptic warning to the society opposed to his vision of an alternative polis, Stone celebrates the radical freedom of his *Natural Born Killers*. To conclude this three-way dialogue, might one ask of this postmodern artistic *vérité* why all the sound and fury? Perhaps our poet of previous protest could provide an answer: "Foei tog, dit gaan om die eie-lekkerte van opstand teen pa en God en baas, dit gaan om die steriele knippie vreugde van politieke korrekte *newspeak*. Van hulle dink ook nog kop-pornografie is bevryding!" (Breytenbach 1994: 7).

References

Arnheim, R. 1967. *Toward a psychology of art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Barthes, R. 1972. *Mythologies*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Best, S. & Kellner, D. 1991. *Postmodern theory*. London: MacMillan.
- Breytenbach, B. 1994. Hoe suiwer 'n mens 'n sin uit wêreld se deurmekaarspul? *Die Burger* 31 Desember: 7.
- Carr, J. 1994. Firestorm for Stone? *Weekend Argus Supplement* September 24: 6.
- Claasen, G. 1994. Amerikaners vra aksie teen al die gewelddiefters. *Die Burger* 31 Desember: 8.
- Curran, J. & Gurevitch, M. (eds) 1991. *Mass media and society*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Derrida, J. 1981. *Positions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. 1993. "Of grammatology," in: C. Harrison & P. Wood (eds) 1993. *Art of theory 1900 – 1990*.
- Eco, U. 1976. *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Farganis, J. 1993. *Readings in social theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Fiske, J. 1991. "Postmodernism and television," in: J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (eds) 1991. *Mass media and society*.
- Foucault, M. 1974. *The archeology of knowledge* (trl.) A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Travistock Publications.
- Fowler, A. 1994. Meaning versus describing. *Times Literary Supplement* March 4: 16.
- Golding, P & Murdock, G. 1991. "Culture, communications, and political economy," in: J. Curran & M. Gurevitch. (eds) 1991. *Mass media and society*.
- Harrison C. & Wood P. (eds) 1993. *Art of theory 1900 – 1990*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harrison, C & Wood, P. 1993. "Modernity and modernism reconsidered," in: P. Wood, F. Frascina, J. Harris & C. Harrison (eds) 1993. *Modernism in dispute*.
- Leitch, V. B. 1983. *Deconstructive criticism*. London: Hutchinson.
- Liotard, J-F. 1989. *The Lyotard reader*. A. Benjamin (ed.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Metz, C. 1974. *Film language: A semiotics of the cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morris, R. C. 1994. Psychos and holy fools. *Times Literary Supplement* September 16: 17.
- Norris, C. & Benjamin, A. 1988. *What is deconstruction?* London: Academy Editions.
- Olivier, G. 1999. *Natural Born Killers, Violence and Contemporary Culture* in: S.A. Journal of Art History. Vol. 14: 48-54.
- Rajchman, J. 1985. The postmodern museum. *Art in America* October: 110 – 117.
- Roelofse, J. J. 1987. *Signs and Significance*. Johannesburg: Lexicon.
- Rosen, M. 1996. *On voluntary servitude: False consciousness and the theory of ideology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sacks, J. 1990. Paradoxes of pluralism. *The Listener*. December 6: 16–18.
- Seidman, S. 1994. *Contested knowledge: Social theory in the postmodern era*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Silverman, H.J. (ed.) 1990. *Postmodernism: Philosophy and the arts*. New York: Routledge.
- Weiss, A. J. 1990. "Lucid intervals: Postmodernism and photography," in: H. J. Silverman (ed.) 1990. *Postmodernism: Philosophy and the arts*.
- Williams, R. 1986. *Culture*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- Wood, P., Frascina, F., Harris, J. & Harrison, C. (eds) 1993. *Modernism in dispute*. New Haven: Yale University Press.