MURKY WATERS

"You ain't seen nothing yet!" Media, violence and gender

In December 1994 the British Board of Film Classification finally granted a cinema release in Britain to one of the most 'controversial' films of recent years, *Natural Born Killers*. The film has been surrounded by a moral panic about the alleged effects of the violence it portrays, which averages out at one murder every 2.24 minutes (a body count of 53). Given the prevalence of violence in films, why has this particular one created such a furore? Schwarzenegger and Rambo, amongst others have been happily blasting their way through similar body counts in many movies without attracting such attention. Those academics who have engaged with the debate about media effects are often drawn into such moral panics, but to what extent should we be concerned about the portrayal of violence in the media?

In order to examine this area, I want to raise the question of the significance of media sociology to criminology. In such movies the protagonists are usually committing crimes of violence, and the concerns expressed within ensuing media debates are not simply about the portrayal of aggressive behaviour, but a particularly destructive form of it. Increasingly criminologists are recognising the importance of media coverage of crime and criminal behaviour (Soothill and Walby 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). In what ways can the two fields of media studies and criminology inform each other and what key questions for criminology are raised by media work on crime? I wish to suggest that the key factor of gender is too often left out of the equation when analysing media effects and portrayal of crime by focusing on the specific issue of crimes of sexual violence.

Violence against women

Although crimes of violence against women are widespread (according to both official statistics and self report studies) traditional criminology has not tackled this area. Feminist researchers have presented a substantial body of work on rape, sexual murder, child sexual abuse, 'domestic' violence and sexual assault which has both documented the reality of women's lives threatened by sexual and physical violence and raised issues of prevalence and incidence. Such work is not only a critique of traditional studies of male violence, which ignored the signifi-

cance of gender, but seeks to locate an analysis of individual behaviour within economic, political, social and cultural structures. How does this theorising on violence against women, which arose out of feminist direct work within Rape Crisis and Women's Aid networks, relate to the media coverage of crime?

Steven Box (1983) is helpful here when he highlights the 'techniques of neutralisation' that an assailant uses to reframe sexual assault as 'conventional', and therefore define the woman as a non-victim within criminal cases. Box suggests that cultural definitions of gender and sexuality provide these particular 'actors' in court cases, with a 'library of excuses' based around the consent/provocation axis. Thus, the operation of a legal defence for an accused man in a rape case seek to prove that a woman **consented** to sexual activity, she was not forced, and often suggests she **provoked** the man through her appearance, behaviour or 'loose' morality.

Box and others, have previously suggested that the media, particularly news reporting of sexual violence, significantly contributes to the construction of a 'common-sense paradigm' that prompts neutralisation and with which all those within the criminal justice system connect. Box specifically suggests that the 'dramatisation' of rape cases, particularly

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by the press, is part of the 'cultural repertoire' already mentioned.

By the 1990s such work has amounted to a serious challenge to traditional criminological approaches and the 'myths' which underpin them. Overall what has been raised has been the double standard of morality being operated within the criminal justice system around crimes of sexual violence (see for example, Burnham et al 1993). What such studies raise, I would argue, is the centrality of constructions of male and female sexuality to the issue of violence against women, most significantly reflected in Kelly's 'continuum' of sexual violence (Kelly 1988).

Other work has also raised questions about sex, violence and the media. Segal (1990) for instance suggests the importance of identifying how cultural

representations may 'produce' or 'influence' violent behaviour. Theorisation from within 'men's studies' and feminism has covered this terrain. However, unanswered questions remain here, about the relation between cultural products, fantasy and the acting out (or not) of violence. Is masculinity implicitly connected to violence? In what ways do representations of sex and violence relate to the definitions of what comprises violence, particularly against women, in our society?

To answer such questions means entering the domain of media research, particularly in a crime context. The impact of media on audience understandings is very under-researched in the British context. Work such as Chibnall (1977) on crime news and Soothill and Walby (1991) on sex crimes in the news produced important findings from content analysis but did not explore audience beliefs about such media messages. So Soothill and Walby conclude: "... the nature of the reporting obscures the real nature of sexual violence; it underestimates the extent of these crimes and reports on unusual cases" (p157). This however, does not enable us to tell the potential impact of such distortion in relation to individual beliefs about sex crimes, and more importantly subsequent action or change in behaviour.

"Sex and violence" in the media has long been an issue of public debate and academic concern. However, one major omission in this history has been the lack of attention to the specifics of violent sexual representation, or violent elements within the representation of 'normal' heterosexual sex acts. In other words, past research has neglected what I believe should be a threefold distinction between violence, sex and 'sexualised violence' (Caputi 1987).

Viewing violence

Similarly, despite regular moral panics, research into the possible effects of representations of 'sex' and 'violence' on audiences is ambiguous and inconclusive. No one has yet produced a definitive piece of research on this topic to prove a connection between media representations and subsequent behaviour. The study by Schlesinger et al (1992) on women viewing violence, indicated the importance of distinguishing between different viewers in the 'audience' as a whole and the role of personal experience in responding to media portrayals (such as having suffered a violent and/or sexual attack). Overall, media research on sexual

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crime is scant and often methodologically weak. However, there is work being developed within critical media research from which we should take heed.

It is now being recognised that in order to substantially address the question of the significance of the media it is necessary to examine the production, content and effect of media messages. That is, to research; how different types of media are produced (what do journalists/script writers do? where do they get their information from?); what emphasis and omissions does this produce in media outputs? (from news bulletins to soap operas); and do these related areas have a particular impact on the audience (viewers, readers, listeners) in any significantly structured way (according to gender, class, ethnicity, age etc)? For instance, recent research on child sexual abuse and the media reveals, amongst other things, a lack of understanding by audiences about the possible causes of such abuse, particularly in relation to the motivation of offenders. Equally there is a wide gulf between policy and practitioners' knowledge about sexual crimes against children and the 'general public's' and very little pro-active work through the media is done about how to prevent child sexual abuse (see Kitzinger and Skidmore 1994). However, if we come full circle, the research has also identified some of the key aspects of the 'cultural repertoire' around sex crime, mentioned previously (see Skidmore 1995).

Hidden morals

In media research Schudson (1989) has pointed to the importance of identifying the 'cultural air we breathe' and how this informs news media production - the 'unquestioned and generally unnoticed background assumptions' of news gathering and production. Soloski (1989:215) states: "Like fables, news stories contain hidden morals", I would argue strongly that it is time to research what the central elements of such moralising are as they relate to gender, in terms of the production, content and effect of media coverage of sex crimes and sexualised violence. It is only by exploring this that we can start to identify

the specific types of effects (harmless enjoyment or harmful actions against others?) that specific types of content (contextual or gratuitous violence?) produce with specific groups of people (men or women?).

Oliver Stone, the director of *Natural Born Killers* has defended his film as, not just a 'violent movie' but a film about violence and what the media does with it. Mickey and Mallory, the serial killing couple at the centre of the film become national celebrities through US media hype. Juliette Lewis, who plays Mallory, has stated in interview that the film is
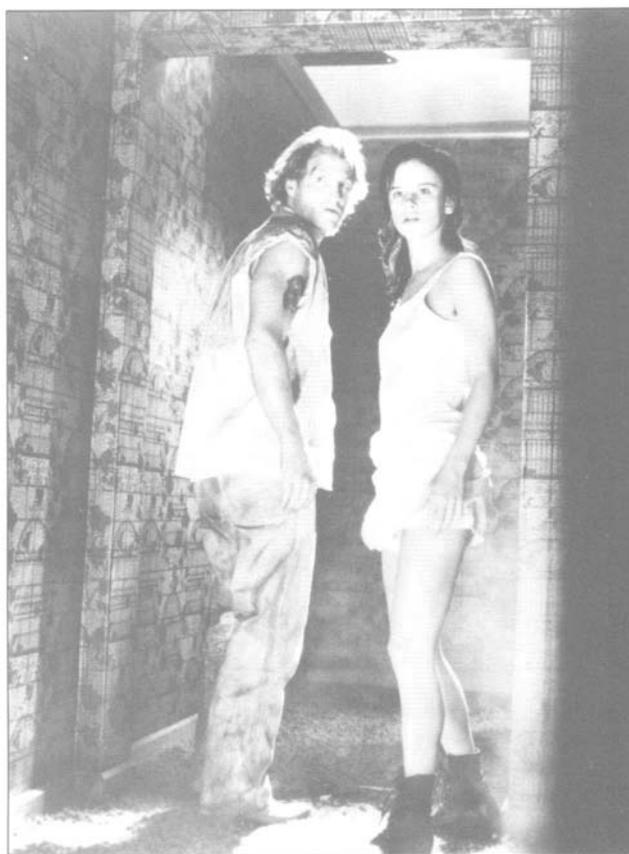
Juliette Lewis and Woody Harrelson in Oliver Stone's satire on violence in the American media, 'Natural Born Killers', a Warner Bros release.

"taking the mickey out of the fact that we all like to watch violence at the movies". Stone however claims his satire is more than this: "No one is innocent. The line between thinking murder and doing murder isn't that major. Isn't that the point of *NBK*?"

Stone as director has tried hard to make a film which addresses the issue of

the media's obsession, and ours, with violence. Inevitably perhaps he has entered the murky waters of media effects and been accused of making a film which celebrates violence to such an extent that people have gone out and 'done a Mickey and Mallory'. But crossing that line between thinking and doing any criminal act is more complex than that. As criminologists and media sociologists we should become far more concerned about researching this territory, otherwise I fear that, as Mickey says to camera after his arrest in *NBK*, "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

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