

FAST CAPITALISM

Special Issue on Virginia Tech



An Interdisciplinary
Journal

Volume 3 • Issue 1

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Fast Capitalism is an academic journal with a political intent. We publish reviewed scholarship and essays about the impact of rapid information and communication technologies on self, society and culture in the 21st century. We do not pretend an absolute objectivity; the work we publish is written from the vantages of viewpoint. Our authors examine how heretofore distinct social institutions, such as work and family, education and entertainment, have blurred to the point of near identity in an accelerated, post-Fordist stage of capitalism. This makes it difficult for people to shield themselves from subordination and surveillance. The working day has expanded; there is little down time anymore. People can ‘office’ anywhere, using laptops and cells to stay in touch. But these invasive technologies that tether us to capital and control can also help us resist these tendencies. People use the Internet as a public sphere in which they express and enlighten themselves and organize others; women, especially, manage their families and nurture children from the job site and on the road, perhaps even ‘familizing’ traditionally patriarchal and bureaucratic work relations; information technologies afford connection, mitigate isolation, and even make way for social movements. We are convinced that the best way to study an accelerated media culture and its various political economies and existential meanings is dialectically, with nuance, avoiding sheer condemnation and ebullient celebration. We seek to shape these new technologies and social structures in democratic ways.

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Fast Capitalism

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* We invite contributions on these and related issues. Some papers will stick close to the ground of daily life and politics; others will ascend the heights of theory in order to get the big picture. The work we publish is both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, bridging the social sciences and humanities. Culture and capital are keywords. We are also interested in cities, the built environment and nature, and we encourage people who theorize space to submit their work.

About the Authors

Ben Agger

Ben Agger is Professor of Sociology and Humanities at University of Arlington and Director of the Center for Theory there. Among his recent books are *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism* and *Fast Families, Virtual Children* (with Beth Anne Shelton). He is working on *The Sixties at 40: Radicals Remember and Look Forward*. He can be contacted at <mailto:agger@uta.edu>.

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Steve Kroll-Smith is professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro and Editor of *Sociological Inquiry*. His latest book with Valerie Gunter, *Volatile Places* was published in 2007. His research interests range from the sociology of sleep to the sociology of disasters, with several areas in between. He is currently working on a comparative study of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire and the 2005 flooding of New Orleans. He does not own a nug.

Charles Lemert

Charles Lemert is the John C. Andrus Professor of Sociology at Wesleyan University. He is the author, most recently, of *Thinking the Unthinkable* (Paradigm, 2007) and *Durkheim's Ghosts* (Cambridge, 2006) and, with Anthony Elliott, *The New Individualism* (Routledge, 2006).

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Stephen Pfohl is a Professor of Sociology at Boston College where he teaches courses on social theory; postmodern culture; crime, deviance and social control; images and power; and sociology and psychoanalysis.

Stephen is the author of numerous books and articles including *Left Behind: Religion, Technology and Flight from the Flesh* (2007); *Death at the Parasite CafŽ*; *Images of Deviance and Social Control*; *Predicting Dangerousness* , and the forthcoming volumes *Venus in Video* and *Magic and the Machine*. A past-President of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and a founding member of Sit-Com International, a Boston-area collective of activists and artists, Pfohl is also co-editor of the 2006 book *Culture, Power, and History: Studies in Critical Sociology*.

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Tom Wells

Tom Wells is author of *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* and *Wild Man: The Life and Times of Daniel Ellsberg*. He is currently writing a book with Richard Leo on a multiple-false-confession murder case. He is a visiting scholar at the University of Colorado and a freelance editor and indexer.

April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech— To: Multiple Recipients: ‘There is a Gunman on Campus

Timothy W. Luke

Monday, April 16, 2007 dawned coldly in Blacksburg, Virginia. This reflection about that terrible day for Virginia Tech is difficult to write, but something must be written. Universities work best when they are free, open, and untrammelled sites for intellectual growth, constant learning, and scholarly inquiry. This has been true at this university, and it remains the case in many places around the world. Because of April 16, there will be repeated, strong and understandable calls to abridge, if not, constrain these conditions, through expanded policing and constant surveillance.

To admit they are understandable, however, is not to agree that they are acceptable. Indeed, they could lead to overcompensating police measures that no outstanding university should tolerate as well as create a far more restrictive academic setting for teaching and learning that I would not wish to experience. Careful consideration of the violent events of that day, therefore, must defend, fully and forthrightly, the place of every university to serve as a free and open site for scholarship and study. Here is my effort to meet that task. While I have had many people at the university read through this account, my observations about April 16, and this analysis of what occurred here on that day, as well as many of the days since that event, represent only my personal perspective on many of the contradictory issues involved rather than an official statement of any sort. Many official statements already have been issued from the President of the United States to the Governor of the Commonwealth to the President, Board of Visitors, and various faculty, staff, and student organizations here at the university. More official findings and statements will be forthcoming in the months to come; so this is just one study of the April 16 events and their aftermath during the last sixty days.

I. The April 16 Events

After a night of intense blustery winds, the weather outlook from Roanoke TV stations promised light snow and more gusts of high wind in Blacksburg. As usual, I drove into the office before 6:30 A.M., crossing Washington Street (about a quarter mile east of where the West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall sits) on my way to campus. Once there, I parked on Drillfield Drive 120 yards or so down from Norris Hall. I had several sessions with graduate students, and a long executive committee meeting for the School of Public and International Affairs down on my calendar for this date. It was to be a long hard day, but I did not know how long and hard it would be until after my first advising session about how to ready an M.A. thesis for its oral defense ended just at 9:30 A.M.

Checking through my e-mail, which had been stacking up as my co-workers and students got to campus after 8:00 A.M., this message popped up:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 09:26:24 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu

Subject: Shooting on campus.
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

A shooting incident occurred at West Amber Johnston earlier this morning. Police are on the scene and are investigating.

The university community is urged to be cautious and are asked to contact Virginia Tech Police if you observe anything suspicious or with information on the case. Contact Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411

Stay attuned to the www.vt.edu. We will post as soon as we have more information.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

This news was troubling. The bad grammar and misspellings all signaled haste, worry, even panic.

This now triggered memories of another bad morning months earlier. The first day of school in the 2006 Fall semester was disrupted terribly by a police man hunt; and, much of that effort came in an area of campus very close to West Ambler (not Amber) Johnston. Still, this area was over half-a-mile away, so I just waited for more news and e-mail alerts. Then many wailing sets of sirens—police cars, SWAT vans, EMS trucks—began converging outside my office as scores of officers ran up Old Turner Street, a dead-end, short side-street, across from my building on Stanger Street. Another far more disturbing e-mail popped up on the screen:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 09:50:07 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu
Subject: PLease stay put
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

More strongly, this text soon became a voice message broadcast over the emergency alert system; the terse warning echoed off buildings in the wind for many minutes. Of course, then, many people went to the windows, looking for the gunman. Others, who were eager to observe the flurry of police activity, or, who were hardy enough to brave the winds, then bundled up and left their offices to go see up close what was happening across Stanger Street. Within minutes, a more daunting e-mail came up in my in-box:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 10:16:40 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu
Subject: All Classes Canceled; Stay where you are
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

Virginia Tech has canceled all classes. Those on campus are asked to remain where they are, lock their doors and stay away from windows. Persons off campus are asked not to come to campus. <http://april16archive.org/object/62>.

This message was quite ominous. Classes are rarely cancelled in Blacksburg, even on days with much rougher weather than April 16's. The note suggested a lockdown, quarantine, or hunkering down before some major lethal threat. Within the hour, we learned why that warning came as an e-mail relayed this news:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 10:52:45 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu
Subject: Second Shooting Reported; Police have one gunman in custody
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

In addition to an earlier shooting today in West Ambler Johnston, there has been a multiple shooting with multiple victims in Norris Hall.

Police and EMS are on the scene.

Police have one shooter in custody and as part of routine police procedure, they continue to search for a second shooter.

All people in university buildings are required to stay inside until further notice.

All entrances to campus are closed.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

Again, the poor diction, redundancies, and a terse tone were all fearsome. More ambulances, more police, more reporters kept arriving (<http://april16archive.org/object/279>). Then a single sentence came right during lunch:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 12:15:57 -0400
 From: Unirel@vt.edu
 Subject: Counseling support available
 To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

Counseling is available in the Bowman Room in the Merriman Center (part of the athletic complex) for employees who seek assistance following today's events.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

Coupled with fragmentary on-the-scene stand-ups being generated by local TV stations from Roanoke, this announcement suggested an extremely severe incident was unfolding. Within a half hour, a brief statement was sent out by the University's President:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 12:41:44 -0400
 From: Unirel@vt.edu
 Subject: Statement by President Charles W. Steger
 To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

Shooting at Virginia Tech / Statement by President Charles W. Steger

The university was struck today with a tragedy of monumental proportions. There were two shootings on campus. In each case, there were fatalities. The university is shocked and horrified that this would befall our campus. I want to extend my deepest, sincerest and most profound sympathies to the families of these victims which include students. There are 22 confirmed deaths.

We currently are in the process of notifying families of victims. The Virginia Tech Police are being assisted by numerous other jurisdictions. Crime scenes are being investigated by the FBI, University Police, and State Police. We continue to work to identify the victims impacted by this tragedy. I cannot begin to convey my own personal sense of loss over this senselessness of such an incomprehensible and heinous act. The university will immediately set up counseling centers. So far centers have been identified in Ambler Johnson and the Cook Counseling Center to work with our campus community and families.

Here are some of the facts we know:

At about 7:15 A.M. this morning a 911 call came to the University Police Department concerning an event in West Amber Johnston Hall. There were multiple shooting victims. While in the process of investigating, about two hours later the university received reports of a shooting in Norris Hall. The police immediately responded. Victims have been transported to various hospitals in the immediate area in the region to receive emergency treatment.

We will proceed to contact the families of victims as identities are available.

All classes are cancelled and the university is closed for the remainder for today. The university will open tomorrow at 8 A.M. but classes will be cancelled on Tuesday. The police are currently staging the release of people from campus buildings.

Families wishing to reunite with the students are suggested to meet at the Inn at Virginia Tech. We are making plans for a convocation tomorrow (Tuesday) at noon at Cassell Coliseum for the university community to come together to begin to deal with the tragedy.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

So within barely six hours of getting to work on April 16, we now knew this event was horrendous. I also feared its horrors would increase. They did.

As sharp bursts of high winds up to 50 mph, and spinning flurries of snow with temperatures in the 30s skittered around our building, this April 16 morning was the sort of day that has earned Blacksburg one of its most common nicknames, "Bleaksburg." It rapidly became, however, its bleakest day after a silent solitary shooter—

Seung-Hui Cho—allegedly slipped into West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall just past 7:00 A.M., and apparently shot a female student, Emily Hilscher, and Ryan Clark, a resident advisor in the dormitory. Running back to his room in nearby Harper Hall, he gathered up an overnight mail package that he sent to NBC News in New York from the downtown U.S. Post Office.

Then he made his way over to Norris Hall (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/333>) on the north side of campus (where he was taking a sociology class, “Deviant Behavior,” this Spring term). Once there, he chained the main exits closed, killed 30 more people, wounded dozens more, and then shot himself in the head as a police SWAT team closed their pursuit on him. Those who could ran outside, EMS units evacuated the wounded to three nearby hospital trauma centers, and swarms of police closed off and locked down all of Norris Hall as a crime scene (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/419>). For the rest of the day, and into the night, almost all of the 30 fallen lay where they were shot all around the building, awaiting identification and removal. Undoubtedly, those officers on the scene, who were unable to touch the bodies (pending the visit by medical examiners), it was excruciating, since they had to listen helplessly as the cell phones of the dead rang incessantly as terrified relatives called their loved ones (Gangloff 2007:V1, 4). As many media reports noted, little could be bleaker than that frantic soundtrack floating over this scene of slaughter.

II. Violence, the Media, and America

On one level, events like the April 16 shootings no longer are a surprise (Newsweek 2007; Time, 2007). Rampage shootings in America, whether they happen at a post office, cafeteria, office park, playground, high school, factory, college campus, stoplight or commuter train, fascinate TV audiences (Newman 2004). The fast capitalist media apparatus of 24x7 news, weather, sports, and other information has implicitly scripted attacks like these on its many screens of power for nearly four decades (Agger 1989; Luke 1989). The shock and horror of August 1, 1966 when Charles Whitman shot and killed 16 and wounded 31 from the clock tower at the University of Texas set out the basic plot in black-and-white film at eleven for April 16, 2007 when Sueng-Hui Cho shot his way through West AJ Residence and Norris Halls at Virginia Tech in almost real-time cell phone video with CNN’s high-definition color and stereo—only minor variations in the basic story-line occurred—not unlike stylized police dramas, sitcoms, game shows, and the news itself.

An English major, Cho first came to the university’s attention in 2005 after a professor and students complained about him causing disturbances in a writing class. He was given special tutoring in the department, and then later he was referred to mental health professionals for treatment under a court order (Time, April 30, 2007:40-42). He had trouble with other professors and students in 2006, but he did not obtain his two handguns until February 9 and March 13, 2007 (Newsweek, April 30, 2007:27-29). After what was apparently a month of disciplined preparation and focused intention, he launched into his rampage on Monday, April 16. For the media, differences in the props (weapons, dress, vehicles, etc.), settings (K-12 schools, universities, professional academies, etc.), and criminals (troubled veteran, alienated teen-ager, angry immigrant, etc.) keep the viewers fascinated, the newscasters fixated, and the prior incidents freshened with each new example of such “programming.”

While all of these themes and tropes turned as they do through the corporate media, it was interesting to see how many Blacksburg residents, university staff, and Virginia Tech students turned to non-print, nonbroadcast, and noncorporate media in the hours after the attack. Beyond conventional radio or TV programming, cell phone videos, pictures, and calls often delivered the fastest breaking words and images of the event itself. To touch base with friends and families or colleagues and neighbors, many turned to the Internet, scanning blogs, official websites, Facebook, YouTube or university news posts to capture the nature of the incident as it unfolded moment by moment. Virginia Tech and Blacksburg itself are heavily wired and wireless environments, so as Ralph Brauer notes on this point (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/455>), Cho’s rampage quickly became an immense web of endless hypertexts, web scans, and video posts for millions on campus and off, especially during the first 72 hours of the shootings and their aftermath.

Still, for the corporate established media, school shootings in fast capitalist conditions of production have become a very valuable commodity to be delivered in a time-urgent “live” and “on-the-scene” manner; hence, they are hot sellers with long legs for the ratings regime. Any mention of Columbine school shootings still draws immediate attention eight years later, so it was no accident that ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN as well as numerous other

foreign TV networks and American local TV stations sent their anchors to Blacksburg for their joint roll-out of a new raw reality show: “the Virginia Tech Massacre” (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/248>). As former all-pro New York Giants running back, University of Virginia football star, one-time Montgomery County, Virginia resident, and now “Today” Show TV personality with NBC, Tiki Barber observed about his few days in Blacksburg, the April 16 shootings media coverage was frenzied: “Anybody who was anybody in the industry was here, and for the most part I got to watch. I talked to the camera men and the people who run those big trucks, and they said they’d never seen a staging ground like that” (Doughty 2007:A6).

On another hand, the events of April 16 in Blacksburg are quite a surprise. While it is not unknown, one cannot say Virginia Tech is well-known. The largest university in the Commonwealth, Virginia Tech has 153 major buildings on 2,600 acres of land with 19 miles of roads and many more miles of paved bike paths and sidewalks (<http://www.vt.edu/about/vtsnaps/aerials/2.html#Anchor-604709-46919>). Up to 35,000 people are on campus everyday, so it is very much like a small city in its own right. The university once was a small military engineering school, founded in 1872 (paired with Virginia Military Institute right after the War Between the States, in part perhaps, for when the South might need to rise again). Its mission was to teach “the agricultural, mechanical, and other useful arts” in accord with the Civil War-era Morrill Act, but for only white students rather than blacks whom, in turn, attended Hampton Institute or Virginia State University. Like many Southern colleges and universities, Virginia Tech did not admit its first African-American students until the late 1950s. The university more than quintupled in student enrollment from the mid-1960s to mid-2000s in response to the Baby Boom and Baby Boomer Echo generations, and it has a respectable portfolio of academic strengths in many areas of study in addition to being a Big East, and more recently an ACC, college football powerhouse. Consequently, as an academic center, Virginia Tech tends to float uncomfortably in a gray zone between the Commonwealth’s much lesser-known quick and dirty academic building projects from the frantic flurry of 1960s, like Old Dominion University in Norfolk, George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond or James Madison University in Harrisonburg, and more venerable academic establishments in the state like the College of William and Mary or the University of Virginia. Unlike the crime-ridden areas of Norfolk, Northern Virginia, or Richmond, however, Blacksburg is a relatively small, out-of-the-way settlement with few big city social ills, a low crime rate, and many small town qualities (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/303>). Violent criminal acts do happen on and around the Virginia Tech campus, but they tend to occur once a decade, rather than as daily events.

Seung-Hui Cho’s murderous rampage on April 16, 2007 therefore seemed more hideous, because it took place in this basically peaceful, rural college town with very little crime, few murders, and no sense of everyday violence (http://www.ee.unirel.vt.edu/index.php/vt/flip_book/C11/P5/). Yet, the larger expanse of Montgomery County and the New River Valley, which surrounds Blacksburg and Virginia Tech, does have a higher crime rate—much of it tied to oxycodone and other illicit drug infractions all across Southwest Virginia. In fact, during 2006, there were two very high-profile shootings—now known as “the Morva incident”—that also affected the University after an escaped county jail prisoner shot and killed a security guard at the near-by Montgomery County Regional Hospital and then fled on foot into the woods.

K-9 units, SWAT teams, and helicopter patrols were called out through the night and into the next day when the suspect—allegedly armed and dangerous—was supposedly spotted on campus after shooting a county sheriff who had been searching for this escapee on a popular bicycle path near campus for the suspect. At the university, there were rumors of a hostage-taking in Squires Student Center. In the confusion, some buildings closed, students stampeded; but, in the end, the criminal was caught some distance away from the central campus out in a patch of high brambles and thick weeds. Coming on the first day of class during Virginia Tech’s Fall 2006 semester, this odd event startled many among the student body, faculty, and community into rethinking their sense of security, but it did not lead to many pleas for more policing.

To spurn greater policing on campus after the Morva incident might appear odd, especially to those who remembered one of Blacksburg’s more infamous criminal distinctions, which its quiet, small college town atmosphere usually occludes, namely, the “local boy goes very bad” story of Henry Lee Lucas, one of America’s most wanted and vicious serial killers. Born in 1936 in sorry circumstances outside of Blacksburg, Lucas allegedly was subjected to considerable mental and physical abuse. His first murder was committed in 1953 during a rape, and his second murder was his own mother. A professed practitioner of bestiality and necrophilia, he claimed credit for killing over 3,000 people with accomplices or by himself, but many now believe these confessions are fabrications. Some attribute only around five murders to him, but a Texas-based investigative team ultimately credited him with only around 350

murders—using different weapons and methods—from 1953 to 1985 when he was taken into custody by Texan law enforcement authorities (for some on-line documentation of varying utility about Lucas, one can begin with: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Lee_Lucas).

Convicted of murder, and sentenced to death, his execution order was commuted, ironically, by then Texas Governor, George W. Bush, during 1998 after the evidence behind one of his confessed crimes was thrown into doubt. He died in prison in March 2001, but he remains one of the 20th century's most notorious serial killers. Since the long vicious crime sprees of Henry Lee Lucas mostly took place outside of Blacksburg, the intense murder frenzy of Seung-Hui Cho clearly will probably eclipse those of Lucas for their intensity and publicity forever. The major media spin placed on “the bucolic Blacksburg environs” must not be believed in toto. It is true, in some part, as much as it is just as false in another part.

Like the Columbine High School massacre, in which Dylan Klebold used a Tec-9 semi-automatic 9mm weapon, the Virginia Tech April 16 massacre featured a 9mm handgun—a Glock 19 semi-automatic—in many of the murders committed by Seung-Hui Cho. Indeed, he also used a Walther .22 semi-automatic pistol, and he apparently was also found with several combat-style knives on his body. Cho could have killed this many people, or even more, with some other weapons, but it was his 9mm pistol that has become a pretext for pushing the popular technofix of additional gun control measures (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/315>). This rhetorical ball and bat—tied to “the ideology of gunism”—was swung and swatted around yet again all week in the five-ring media circus staged for the April 16 events (Lifton 2007:B 11).

Here, again, things are not clear as the Newsweek issue about the massacre strangely documented in its own coverage (April 30, 2007:22-47). Among industrial countries, the U.S.A. does have the highest level of gun ownership with 270,000,000 for over 300 million people (90 per 100 persons) vs. 2,900,000 guns in Finland (56 per 100 persons), 3,400,000 guns in Switzerland (46 per 100 persons), 19,000,000 in France (32 per 100 persons) or 25,000,000 (30 per 100 persons) in Germany. The U.S.A. also has 10.08 gun deaths per 100,000 people, while Switzerland has 6.40, France 4.93, Finland 4.51, and Germany much less than 1.00 (Newsweek, April 30, 2007: 44-45). Of course, the media pundits who sat around town for weeks failed to focus on the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets, whose ranks now number several hundred. VTCC cadets are frequently seen on campus carrying drill rifles, sabers, and assault weapons as part of their military training and/or tradition. Except for perhaps Texas A&M University, the Citadel in South Carolina, Virginia Military Institute or the U.S. National Military Academies, Virginia Tech probably has more guns on campus out in the open everyday than any other American university, because it also is a national senior military academy. Most of these weapons are just training pieces, but a few others are not. However, such guns and swords are always handled responsibly, and few object very strenuously on campus to seeing them.

Despite the uproar over high gun ownership and high gun deaths in the U.S.A. (about 10 deaths per 100,000 people) after April 16, other countries, like Brazil, Algeria, Russia, Jamaica, South Africa, Nepal, Venezuela, Kenya, and Ecuador (all more than 11 deaths per 100,000 people), have considerably higher rates of gun-related violence and death. There was little talk of their “gun culture” after April 16, 2007, or the fact that places like Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Estonia, Thailand, or Croatia equal America's firearm death rates per 100,000 people with far fewer guns per person in these countries (Newsweek, April 30, 2007:44-45). Perhaps TV or video games are as much to blame in these other nations as the U.S.A., but it seems quite unlikely. Still, as one might expect, the evergreen gun control debate plainly has been revitalized by the April 16 shootings. The debate blossoms a bit each time high-profile murders occur, but it is clear that clever killers, like Cho, always have been able to conform to, or successfully defy, existing gun control laws in the U.S.A. (Newman 2007:B 20). Gun violence, however, is an exciting lead for the global news media. In a global marketplace where the various “Law and Order” and “CSI” TV franchises run all day in many cities, ugly shootings have very rich forward and backward product links to titillating crime dramas on all the world's TV networks and cable systems. So an event of this magnitude quickly can be mobilized to fuel a fresh feeding frenzy among print, radio, television, and Internet journalists as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Even though these violent events took place on campus, and the Norris Hall attack happened nearby, the ensuing police swarm and campus lockdown rendered most individuals' understanding, including my own, of this criminal attack into a layered media event, which was experienced mostly on TV, radio, and/or the Internet. While yards away, most of what I knew came from the local TV broadcasts, phone calls, Internet updates, or campus e-mail. On the first day, local TV reporters keep talking about what they saw some yards away from Norris Hall or repeating official news pool hand-outs from University Relations. Within hours, the murder scenes were marked with police tape and blockaded under a close 24-hour guard, sealing them off from all but a few crime investigators. As national

anchors arrived the next day, most TV coverage was staged at a comfortable on-campus hotel where the scores of satellite trucks could park, anchors could do picturesque stand-ups and comfortable interviews, and the crowded news conferences in the adjoining Alumni Center could be rapidly organized. As this international media cavalcade trailed into town, the entire event acquired an even more a layered juxtaposition of lived experience as seen on TV, as print documents ripped from today's headlines, and as a huge blog fest on the Web, which all were interwoven into one's daily routine on campus. I did not personally know any of the killed or wounded, although the highest number of dead and injured undergraduate students, or 9 killed and 5 wounded, was racked up in my department's two major academic areas of study—International Studies and Political Science—which together now number more than 1,000 students. Their identities for me are now almost totally print, broadcast, and televisual artifacts, but these young people also had walked our hallways, dealt with some of my colleagues, talked to all of our administrative support staff, and sat outside many of our offices. And, I have personally witnessed their families and friends on May 12, 2007 accept posthumous degrees and other academic recognitions for these students—it is obvious that those surviving loved ones share a pain as profound as these lost students' promise was vast.

It is difficult to write about any event as extraordinary and horrendous as April 16, because I know that the atrocity itself could make any one reading of these written words easy to overinterpret, take wrongly or see negatively when neither insult nor injury were meant by the analysis. Still, in this atrocious moment, and despite an inherent bias toward privileging a “readerly” over the “writerly” text, it must be noted that “extraordinary” does not mean unprecedented and “horrendous” cannot suggest unfamiliar when it comes to tragic violence. Indeed, Nikki Giovanni made clear mention of how endemic institutionalized violence is all across the world during her convocation address of April 17, 2007 (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/19>).

Americans today live with violence on this scale everyday as news from Iraq, for example, recounts tales of tens, dozens or hundreds dying daily, but those losses also are highly mediated through electronic communication over a considerable distance in space, time, and social situation. Happening on the Monday of the week bringing on its Friday, the eighth anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre, and standing out only for being the most recent, and most deadly, incident of school related violence, even this ugly crime was not purely a bolt from the blue. As Goss notes, a U.S. Secret Service analysis has found 37 incidents of violence at American schools with 41 shooters from 1979 to 2000 (2007:B10). Whether it is the Columbine incident in 1999, the August 1, 1966 shootings at the University of Texas, or even that very strange, and now almost forgotten, May 18, 1927 dynamite bombing of the Consolidated School in Bath, Michigan four decades earlier by a custodian who killed his wife, himself, 38 students, and 7 teachers, while wounding 61 people (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/us/17virginia.html>), April 16 should not come as a surprise, even if it was quite clearly a shock.

In a much longer view at the same time, April 16, 2007 strangely enough was not the first “historic massacre” or “brutal event” in Blacksburg. An earlier settlement, called Draper's Meadow, once lay on what are now the grounds of Blacksburg and Virginia Tech. Indeed, much of it is believed to have sat on land, quite ironically, in the background behind where Wolf Blitzer, Katie Couric, Matt Lauer, and Bryan Williams did their first national broadcasts from Blacksburg each day (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/384>). This tiny frontier outpost experienced a vicious assault by Shawnee warriors on a small group of settlers in which four Europeans were killed, five were abducted, and an unknown number of Indians perished in July 1755. This incident was one of many leading up to the French and Indian Wars, but it is regarded as one of the defining moments in the history of the town, the region, and the Commonwealth.

As a base for other brutal events, the lands around Draper's Meadow were resettled in 1772 by Colonel William B. Preston as the seat of Smithfield Plantation, which was one of the western-most slave-holding estates in the Commonwealth for many years. Built in part as a fort, the oldest surviving section of the still standing plantation house was erected in 1790. Again, quite ironically, some its fields and woods also were out in the background as the media filmed their accounts of the April 16 shootings from their own little media outposts on the Drillfield or from the Inn at Virginia Tech. Many Blacksburg natives see their small town, first founded in 1798, as an exceptional place far removed from the antebellum slave-based latifundia of the Shenandoah Valley, Piedmont, and Tidewater areas, and, in some sense, it is. Still, close studies of slave-holding in Blacksburg up into the 1850s show that enslaved and freed African-Americans had made up much of the town's population prior to the Civil War.

An unnerving racial undertone in April 16 also must not be overlooked. The initial characterization of the shooter, first, as an “Asian male,” and, then, as “a Korean” was, on one level, factually correct. On a second level, however, the label of “Korean,” which many fixed to Cho until his name was lost, and only the label “disturbed

Asian and/or Korean student” remained hovering dangerously in the air for days. It challenged many of the psycho-babbling TV experts’ stereotypes about the Columbine shooters, but it also sparked considerable anxiety among Virginia Tech Asian students after April 16. For some citizens, this racialized description of the shooter enabled them to explain away Cho’s behavior as a case of difficult assimilation, failed acculturation or personal anomie. Ironically, a few of Cho’s own family members in reaction to his martyr video from April eased the possibility for making this interpretation when they reported that he talked more on camera than they ever heard him speak in real life at face-to-face family gatherings or occasional personal visits. For others, however, it has also effected the degrees of “whiteness” attached to prior cases of angry, anomic or alienated white middle class kids who became school shooters, allowing police profilers more leeway to multiculturalize any next potential case of a likely school shooter. Either way, there is now a new “race factor” in the policing protocols for such crimes in the future.

Meanwhile, during the first few days following April 16 in Blacksburg, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, and Indian students reported random incidents of name-calling, threat-making, and even occasional fist-throwing against them; but, to their credit, the students and administrators, who were guiding the Hokie United memorialization campaign, moved the collective narrative about April 16 past this easily-circulated “cop perp talk” about “an Asian male” and into a more complex register of communal grief over the loss of so many individuals of different races, nationalities, classes, and majors in an extraordinary act of unforeseeable violence. The racial dimensions, like many affairs in Virginia, will never disappear, but it is no longer as intensely front and center as it was the first week.

None of this darker side in the area’s history is hidden or secret. One easily can begin tracking it down from the VT “Where We Are” web pages (http://www.vt.edu/where_we_are/blacksburg/area.php). One of the older established neighborhoods next to the University, where I have lived for almost twenty years, is called Draper-Preston; every local grade-schooler learns of Mary Draper Ingles’ abduction in the Draper’s Meadow massacre along with her captivity and return on her “long way home;” and, Smithfield Plantation now operates as a historic trust on the Virginia Tech campus surrounded by university property. In this regard, Blacksburg is no different from any American town: they all rest uneasily upon once contested, and then conquered, ground taken by force or guile from their original Native American occupants. And, like many southern towns, and almost any Virginia town, Blacksburg has a sorry past linked, in part, to the Commonwealth’s practices of slavery legally-sanctioned from 1667 until after Appomattox. Violence and brutality are as American as apple pie, and Blacksburg has been as much one of their bakeries as any place in the country.

Consequently, the media circus ringmasters’ barking about “the Massacre at Virginia Tech” or “the Virginia Tech Tragedy” must be taken cautiously as cynical hyperbole meant to hook viewers into staying with their networks’ coverage. Yes, in one register, April 16, 2007 was the single worst instance of gun violence of a certain type in American history. Yet, there are many different types of “gun violence” in the U.S.A., and those other types were ignored completely by the April 16 coverage. Numerous massacres committed by people of many races against other races mar Virginia’s history back into the 17th century’s first conquests, and then since that time in wars, race riots, nativist panics, and labor revolts all across America. There were more trigger men, more victims, more resistant acts, and more witnesses in those violent incidents, so the mass media blather about April 16 tends to ignore these other types of gun violence. Still, this media coverage cannot be taken too seriously, as April 16 was not even as the single worst day of school related violence. That distinction goes, once again, to the Bath, Michigan school dynamiting and murder rampage in 1927—eight decades ago.

Still, Kristin A. Goss repeats this gun-fixated myth-making about “mass shootings” over two weeks later in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as the opening line of an editorial calling for better gun control policies in the U.S.A., when she asserts “when news broke April 16 of the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, the question many horrified Americans most wanted to answer was, ‘Who was the shooter?’” (Goss 2007:B10). Her sense of the situation, however, begs too many questions. What a mass shooting actually is, that one must always assume there is only one, or a few, shooters(s), how the record of what counts as the worst is counted up, and who is given the task of making that measure are complex questions that are totally oversimplified by the very narrative itself. The Goss storyline about contemporary rampage shootings is already set: it always ends up being about deranged individuals who should be prevented, through better public policy, from getting access to guns. While she calls for collective policy solutions, she sees the individual shooter narrative is what audiences expect, and the media deliver it.

If one bites on such leading analytical questions, then “mass shootings” can only be these more recently observed pathological acts, like the murder rampage with 32 victims at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. However, is it that simple when it comes to “mass shootings”? There have been so many other massacres on a larger scale,

which also can be tied together through “the guns,” but few Americans wish to ask or remember, “who were those shooters?” Often a rampage also would be involved, but it typically is recategorized by exculpatory histories as a civic response, military battle, police action, or state-sanctioned strike that lets too many American citizens excuse, accept, or just forget those mass shootings and the massed shooters. Hence, Goss perpetuates such myth-making with a self-fulfilling prophecy in which she asserts, “if history is any guide, the nation is about to embark on a collective search for a narrative to explain what happened at Virginia Tech. And if history is any guide, those narratives will revolve around the private story of the killer, Seung-Hui Cho; his mental health status; his parents; and his upbringing” (Goss 2007:B10). Here, Goss is correct inasmuch as this guidance from history has shaped the current federal government’s anodyne administrative analysis of the Virginia Tech shootings, which calls for more vigilant gun control and mental health interventions everywhere in the future as its main “official” response from Washington (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/523>).

Other messy narratives about nonsolitary shooters, more victims, and organized rampages, then, do not fit into either Goss’ tidy moralizing fables about gun control or America’s most wanted scripts about psycho-killers on the loose. Whether it is Wounded Knee, Sand Creek, Bear River, or Gnadenhutten, or it is Haymarket, Ludlow, Watts, or Kent State, April 16 effectively screens off other “mass shooting” atrocities by serving as a polemically correct form of “hideous murder” that mass media audiences now wish to watch in the U.S.A. Cho’s ugly martyr video came to light on April 18, 2007, but that day also saw five carefully planned car and suicide bombing missions in Baghdad, which targeted Shi’ite gatherings, killed 171 people and wounded scores of others (Semple 2007:A1, 10). Seung-Hui Cho and his bizarre information bomb from Blacksburg, delivered through the U.S. Post Office to NBC News, overshadowed this massive cluster of killings in Baghdad completely in the U.S.A. Page one of *The New York Times* on Thursday, April 19, 2007 visually depicted this imbalance of attention with a still frame color photo of Cho brandishing his two hand guns in his camo ammo vest and backward baseball cap at the layout’s top left column with two stories about his troubled mental state and the inability of colleges to do much in response, while the Baghdad bombing butchery sat on and below the front page fold.

III. Strategies of Response to April 16

The Old Dominion, as its 400th anniversary celebration of Jamestown this year shows quite clearly for all to see, prides itself on “being first.” So “Virginia Leading the Way” (<http://www.governor.virginia.gov/initiatives/caleads/index.cfm>) has been advanced as the motto of the Kaine Administration in Richmond to bring distinction to Virginia: a place and people “constantly striving to surpass previous achievements.” Governor Kaine clearly did not mean to include occurrences like the April 16 shootings at Virginia Tech when making this claim. Nonetheless, neither he nor the Commonwealth can deny the sinister effectiveness of Seung-Hui Cho in his spectacular strike to surpass the horrors of the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 has, in a sad sense, now “led the way” in setting a new benchmark for brutality. This attack must be set into the market-driven context of such fast capitalist-celebrating accolades by which the Commonwealth now judges its “national leadership”: in August 2006, *Forbes.com* put Virginia first of all 50 states in a ranking of “Best States for Business”; in March 2006, corporate relocators Pollina Real Estate, Inc., ranked Virginia as the second friendliest state in the nation to business; in May 2006, *Forbes* magazine ranked Northern Virginia as no. 17 among the nation’s top 165 “Best Places for Business” among metropolitan areas and Blacksburg was ranked no. 65 out of 105 “Best Small Places for Business”; and, in August 2006 *Entrepreneur.com* ranked Virginia as the second best state for entrepreneurs and Fairfax County as the second friendliest county for entrepreneurial activity.

Likewise, *Newsweek* ranked 18 Virginia High Schools, including Cho’s Westfield High School in Chantilly, VA at 46th in 2002 among the 150 best in the country; Virginia Tech was ranked 77th out over 300 Best National Universities and 34th out the top 50 public universities by *U.S. News and World Report*; and, *Education Week* in 2007 reported that the typical Virginia K-12 student “enjoys higher achievement and is more likely to finish high school and continue on to college than in other states” (<http://www.governor.virginia.gov/initiatives/valeads/index.cfm>). Amidst this ranking-crazed corporate consciousness for defining and then gaining “the No. 1 Spot,” and in this business-friendly environment, Cho Seung-Hui and his family settled in the Northern Virginia suburbs as his parents set up shop in the dry cleaning business in 1992.

Cho did attend success-obsessed Westfield High School in Chantilly, VA and then matriculated at Virginia

Tech—a big state university eagerly restructuring itself after 2001 in an effort to rise as rapidly as it can on key national academic ranking scales. He was 15 years old in 1999 when Columbine happened, 17 years old when Al Qaeda terrorists flew an airliner into the Pentagon not far from his home, 19 years old when President Bush invaded Iraq, he died his last semester in college by his own hand at 23. Nonetheless, Seung-Hui Cho in many ways, was a cipher. His web page presented him in these terms as he superimposed a “?” over his face, anticipating his final act of suicide in which the gunshots blew away his visage. The Virginia Tech 2006-2007 University Directory on page 43 “Virginia Tech Student Listings” just records “Cho, Seung-Hui (ENGL)” —no phone number, no campus address, no home address, no home telephone—very unlike most other student entries. He was “Mr. Question Mark.” (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/230>.)

A senior who was to graduate in May 2007, Cho had no friends, refused conversation with his dormitory suite mates, and worked at maintaining this near invisibility. Unable or unwilling to participate in the contrived communities of today’s collegiate living, he idolized the Columbine killers, frightened his teachers and classmates in the English department, endured psychiatric observation by local mental health professionals, and then went ballistic on April 16, 2007. Of course, becoming first a Hokie fan, perhaps then a Virginia Tech student, and maybe then a university graduate is, in large part, a continually unfolding consumer relationship—rooted most deeply in big-name college athletics as it is at many other major American universities. One buys maroon-and-orange VT flags, sports VT baseball caps, finishes VT classes, writes VT tuition checks, and then supports the VT Alumni Association. Contriving such community from this mode of sports-driven consumption under fast capitalism appears to work for many individuals, but Cho did, or could, not buy it.

While many accept the embrace of “Hokie Nationhood,” a few others cannot find a place within its community. Despite years of “orange and/or maroon effect” days, as the Hokies won football games and garnered post-season bowl bids, Seung-Hui Cho never seemed to connect to his classmates, academic major, or university life. Instead he believed, rightly or wrongly, that the Virginia Tech community had its own darkside as he excoriated his school mates for allegedly being alcoholic hedonists, rich kids, and arrogant proto-professionals. In the pressure cooker of persecution he seemed to experience, in fantasy or reality, Cho declared to the Hokie Nation and America at large in his own martyr video: “You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscience,” and so, “Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people” (cited in Dewan and Santora 2007:A1).

April 16, 2007 strangely now has vaulted Virginia Tech to the heights of some ignominious first-place rankings for Virginia: site of the worst single incident of gun violence by one shooter in the U.S.A. history, site of the highest number of on-campus deaths and woundings at an academic institution, and site of the worst single murder of students and faculty by a student. Knowing how the university is very keen to jump into the ranks of Top 30 in the NSF rankings of research expenditures, a few enterprising University faculty members recognized within 24 to 36 hours that they had gained a remarkable place of comparative advantage for their research. Of course, no one sought this position, but some now do hope to now leverage this cluster of number one records in collegiate murder and mayhem for their varied research programs. In this vein, the Virginia Tech faculty received a fascinating e-mail (redacted below) on May 10, 2007 from the University’s Provost, because April 16, 2007 is now a major new “external funding” and “research initiative” opportunity:

Date: Thu, 10 May 2007 09:38:31 -0400
 From: “McNamee, Mark” <mmcnamee@vt.edu>
 Subject: Committee Formation Announced
 To: Deans, Department Heads, and University Center Directors
 From: Mark McNamee (mmcnamee@vt.edu), University Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

(PLEASE SHARE)

Dear Colleagues:

As we move forward from the events of April 16, our university community is flooded with offers of assistance and support. We are getting requests from multiple faculty members and groups about research and response initiatives for which external funding may be available. Many of these projects require IRB approval and most will involve working closely with the Office of Sponsored Programs.

We run the risk of overloading our students, faculty, and staff with surveys, interviews, and other forms of data collection. It is important that we be strategic in managing processes related to conducting research and assessment in which our community is asked to be involved. Our own faculty members would like to be key players and it is important for us to be

coordinated in our efforts.

I am appointing a small committee reporting to the Research Division to provide me and other senior administrators with high-level advice on projects and strategy. The added review is in addition to requests to the IRB for technical review and approval. The purpose of this committee is to ensure coordination with faculty members and university units in order to be responsive to the needs of the university community.

Thank you for your support of this important work. Anyone planning to submit a research proposal related to the April 16th events should contact Robert Walters at rwalters@vt.edu.

Mark

Intent mostly upon protecting wounded psyches from rapid bombardment by waves of upsetting questionnaires, this Provost also now has a gate-keeping body to monitor the players pursuing any externally funded research on April 16. The Provost's immediate goal is to protect and preserve everyone's emotional state; yet, this intervention also organizes the rush for research dollars as well as controls access to the populations to be surveyed. Both goals necessitate being "strategic" about managing the collective processes of research and assessment. Having become number one nationally in campus violence, if only for a moment before a worse incident yet to occur in the future, Virginia Tech is now intent upon being number one in studying how it happened, coping with its aftermath, and managing its assessment. Under fast capitalist conditions of knowledge production and consumption, any study of mass murder—as it transpired both on and off the screens of power—is a very fundable research undertaking (Luke 2005:13-32).

Since that day, like 9.11.01 with its diverse global contingent of victims, the 33 dead individuals from 4.16.07 also have been since transformed into lost "Americans" posthumously, even if they were perhaps Korean, Canadian, Israeli/Romanian, Peruvian, Indian, Egyptian, or Indonesian beforehand (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/343>). Another memorial on Main Street on the grounds of a local Baptist church has the other nation's flags flying amidst an array of American flags along with the Puerto Rican and Lebanese flags to underscore the murders' transnational impact, but the effect is still one of "the red, white, and blue" (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/43/>). Violent death on Virginia as well as American soil, coupled with 24x7 media coverage for almost ten days across the globe on so many screens of power, earned each victim (and the alleged murderer, too) an American flag billowing by their individual Hokie Stone markers for the campus' makeshift memorials within two weeks, although Cho's stone tends to disappear a lot. Here, in its cultural practices of coping with violence, prejudice or injustice, Virginia, again, strangely leads the way, and often in a uniquely unanticipated fashion. While it legalized slavery in 1667, and kept it in force for nearly two centuries, Virginia also elected the nation's first African-American governor in 1989 as well as expressed the nation's first "deep regret" for slavery by official legislative action in 2006. Similarly, in 1958, Charlie L. Yates graduated from Virginia Tech with an honors mechanical engineering degree as the university's first black graduate. This landmark event preceded the graduation of any other African-American from any state university as well as all other white land-grant schools in the eleven former break-away Confederate states. On the one hand, it was this strange culture that seemed to enrage Cho to commit mass murder; but, on the other hand, the culture also carries a strong enough sense of care to accept a 33rd Hokie Stone for Cho at the memorial semi-circle of 32 markers for the fallen (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/551>).

Regardless of their national origin, cultural background, current passports or ethnic diversity, the dead now all are "American" characters set into several long-running scripts of national shame and pride, economic division and unity, political cohesion and fragmentation. Thanks to the memorializing efforts of Virginia Tech students, and coupled with the mythos of Virginia Tech's Hokie Nationhood for all of its intense fusion of athletic boosterism and academic community, the fallen students and faculty now serve as a rallying point to further advance the maroon and orange consciousness of this single university within the universal state of emergency hovering over the U.S.A. in general. Not everyone left dead on April 16 was "all-American" or "all-Hokie," but this gradual naturalization ritual has transformed each of them into individuals worthy of the stars-and-stripes. And, in an act of memorialization by the university, the students, regardless of prior progress toward completion of their degrees prior to April 16, became posthumous degree winners on May 11 and 12, 2007 to comfort friends, family, and the community.

Memorials, like these stone markers, as they have risen after April 16 also have become a strange exercise of healing in which the University community is intent upon finding proof its new "We Will Prevail" slogan, which was put forth in the poem by Nikki Giovanni on April 17, 2007 at a memorial service with President Bush, Governor

Kaine, the Virginia Congressional delegation, and thousands of students, faculty and townspeople in Blacksburg actually has meaning (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/416>). From one perspective, it has worked with candlelight vigils, vernacular memorials, and mass rallies (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/390>). The imagined community of the Hokie Nation is proving to be a tangibly active society. Its maroon and orange wearing fans, alumni, graduates, and faculty whose fascination with both the dead and wounded students are all walking and talking more and more each day toward their reconciliation with the April 16 events. Undeniably, their passions are frequently quite moving. However tenuous, there is a tangible *Gemeinschaft* of sorts here that one cannot simply reduce to ACC football, frat parties, engineering culture, Southern traditions, or rural Appalachia. Hence, the university has now planned to semi-finalize this shrine by turning its vernacular origins into an “intermediate official memorial” (<http://www.vtnews.vt.edu/story.php?relyear=2007&itemno=333>). With 32 permanent new stone markers, a paved arcing pathway, and an evergreen hedge to the site, construction on it has already begun. And, it is meant to maintain many of the meaningful traces of what the community first created so spontaneously during that first week (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/546>). A permanent memorial will be built elsewhere on campus—further away from Norris Hall and West AJ—but still on the Drillfield closer to more visitor parking and better road access.

With regard to student life at Virginia Tech, the media spotlight on the mass murder in Blacksburg seems to have proven, once again, that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Each articulate student, engaged townspeople, and every faculty member interviewed on TV seemed to project something to the outside world that appears serious, solid, and supportive. There is no student exodus out of Blacksburg. Freshmen enrollment with paid deposits at Virginia Tech for Fall 2007 is 5,215 up from 5,185 in 2006; average SAT score for this new 2011 class is 1,205, up from 1,201 for 2010; and, the average GPA for the 2007 entering freshman class is 3.77, up from 3.74 in 2006. Application levels for 2008 entry will not be known until December 2007, but all indications are that interest in Virginia Tech remains very strong and will increase. Indeed, there were 1,441 students on the 2007 admissions waiting list who have been told there is no space for them, and only seven students offered admission turned the offer down because of the shooting (Esposito 2007b:8A).

College years are now such a part of so many individuals’ personalities, and the life of any large university anchors the economy and society of quite a few localities. The atrocity that rose out of restless anomie in both the D.C. suburbs and dorm life in Blacksburg poses uncomfortable questions; and, the strange solidarity that athletics and academics co-generate pulls many admixtures of mixed meaning in America from many dark recesses of today’s global economy, transnational society, and world culture. Cho may have been deeply disturbed when he arrived at Virginia Tech, but his painful isolation never eased while he was in residence on campus. Not all loners are mass murders, but the multitude has before, is now, and will again in the future bring others here and elsewhere who need better, bigger, and broader community than that given by gridiron *Gemeinschaft*. These kinds of mass shootings have happened in many places, from Scotland to Tasmania, Canada to Japan, California to Virginia. Empire brings forth multitudes (Hardt and Negri 2000; and, 2004), but too many members of the multitude are angry, isolated, and powerless in this age of endless war and fitful democracy, which the ethos of endless emergency is only aggravating post-9.11.01.

Access to camcorders and guns, in turn, enables a few to shoot, and reshoot, their way into infamy, which works well for Empire’s televisual economy of celebrity even for those who were ciphers in life and criminals in death. While many were aware of Virginia Tech on April 15, 2007, few will forget April 16, 2007 at this university for decades. April 16 is already on its way to serving as a salient teletradition as the media networks carry the endless replays of images from the attacks of that Monday, and then replay the bizarrely banal death manifesto from Cho released on video that Wednesday, April 18, 2007. These pixels will be played, printed, and pounded on the screens of power innumerable times all around the planet again and again in the years to come. Likewise, this day’s events in and around the “Blacksburg Electronic Village” will spin up through blogs, Facebook, YouTube and their successor media for just as long.

In this violence-soaked media environment, however, one must avoid greater policing, additional security, and more intrusive surveillance. Already the Commonwealth has launched a special investigative commission to examine the events of April 16, which is headed by former State Police Superintendent Col. Gerald Massengill; and, part of its charge is how to improve campus safety (<http://www.vtreviewpanel.org/index.html>). Universities are open, free, and unfettered sites by their very nature, and reacting to the violent act of a disturbed individual by abridging these freedoms is a serious mistake. Of course, everyone at Virginia Tech will be more vigilant and cautious in the future, and they need to be. Nevertheless, “a gunman on campus” can be a gunman in the mall, at the stadium, on the beach, at the race, in the factory or on the plaza.

Living is risky, and having freedoms is riskier, but those benefits are well worth running the risks. The costs of reducing risk, especially at a university, are far greater than their potential benefits, particularly if the campus is made—through densely embedded security measures—more like a prison, a command center, a casino, a major airport, or a bank with metal detectors, swipe card locks, biometric scans or ubiquitous video sweeps. After all, Cho killed his first two victims on April 16 after getting past a swipe card door locking system on a dormitory that he was actually cleared to enter for mail service. None of these other allegedly more “high security” sites prevent all acts of violence, and turning college campuses into such restrictive zones of control and surveillance will surely ruin the university’s bigger, greater, and deeper purposes.

Norris Hall is being quickly renovated and redecorated to keep it in service for the College of Engineering; but, after being brought back into service during June 2007, it will be used only as a laboratory and office building (Esposito 2007a:A1, 6). Even though it once provided about five percent of all classroom space on campus, no classes will ever be taught there again. Moreover, access for all will be very highly controlled through a single guarded entry point by security guards. While understandable, this new practice sets a dangerous precedent for future policing of the campus’ academic and nonacademic space everywhere else.

Because one disturbed individual committed heinous acts of murder, it makes little sense to spend millions disturbing the everyday routines and basic freedoms of thousands at the university with videocams everywhere, building access restrictions anywhere, and routine body scans somewhere on campus until the end of time. Further reflections on those contradictory realities—when some new mass murderer, lone gunman, or twisted gang tries to best the toll at Virginia Tech or Columbine at some newly hardened site or still soft target—must wait for another day. I hope, of course, that such violence will not occur again, but we should fully expect at the same time that it will. Responding to those incidents to come with additional thoughts shall be an assignment that we could accept at that time; however, we can consider that task only when they come, since they undoubtedly will. By the same token, anticipating such acts of violence on America’s college campuses inevitably will direct some of our attention to personal safety in the present and collective protection in the future. Meanwhile, these security measures must neither determine everything we in the university community always have resolved to be nor define anything less than what we already as scholars hope to become.

— June 16, 2007

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Mediated Ritual on Academic Ground

Neal King

Invasion of Sacred Space

In the days following a gunman's rampage in April, 2007, departments at Virginia Tech convened to discuss the losses of students and colleagues, the upcoming resumption of school, and requests from journalists to bring cameras to class. This last choice evoked a ceremonial language among faculty who usually discuss their work in more instrumental terms. Some dismissed journalists as parasitic intruders and demanded that classrooms be treated as "healing," "sacred space" free of their taint. This short essay ponders the souring of a collegial relationship among storytelling professions in the aftermath of an event that drew wide coverage.

The eruption of violence left university members scrambling for news, first about the nature of the incident, and then about the fates of people they knew. Broadcast, cable, and internet outlets assumed more central places in our lives than they usually enjoy. Though the campus newspaper provided a clearinghouse for announcements, its server crashed under the pressure of global demand, leaving private news companies, with their greater resources, to supply news even to those who worked where shots were fired. The speed at which commercial reporting conveys images and relays statements made it useful to locals as events unfolded. The incident was mass mediated for those nearby because fast capitalism trumped state channels and friendship networks.

But the reporters who respond to these demands compete for advertisers' dollars, which dangle before them in such huge numbers that journalists approach survivors en masse. Virginia Tech sprouted forests of satellite dishes; cameras surrounded survivors; and reporters inundated relatives with requests for their time. Many locals developed a siege frame of mind; so that by the time national politicians gathered for a local memorial, ambivalence about exposure had begun to rise. Handwritten signs told camera crews to leave ("Hokie Nation needs to heal. Media stay away," said one version); and the administration followed suit with requests that reporters stay out of campus buildings.

Though the ceremonial language of "sacred space" inspires speculation at the end of the essay, much of the offense taken by educators to journalists seems easy to explain. In the aftermath of group death, professional norms require reporters to swarm the living and shoot footage of anyone choked with emotion. The rapid progress of events impels them to gain access quickly, via entreaty and intrusion. Famed anchors left phone mail for grieving kin and sent flowers (and lackeys) to homes at all hours. Many locals spoke in grim humor of the cameras and boom mikes that hovered when mourners neared tears. Reporters grew aware of this reaction to their work and made enquiries in the hushed tones of undertakers.[1] In search of footage not facts, would-be interviewers were easily dismissed by agreements to talk off camera; but the courting of kin of the fallen was harder to avoid. Some surviving families had friends run interference, standing watch over houses to intercept callers. Others abandoned their homes.

Such coverage of disaster can outrage those who feel their grief made spectacle for distant masses, even if they value the more caring attention that the exposure makes possible. During the reporters' visit to campus, group boundaries clarified and many faculty began to express an oppositional logic:

Education	Journalism
Enculturation	Exploitation
Sacredness	Profanity
Belonging	Intrusion

With these polarities, teachers could scorn the journalists whose profit-seeking work threatened to prolong the trauma. We who had seen our students and teachers victimized at the start of the week could at least rise against this new imposition. Nevertheless, faculty and journalists came to share at least a few goals in this aftermath, in that reporters not only spread news and provide attention but also mediate civil religion. I next discuss the ways in which professional norms combined with communal impulses to shift faculty responses to journalists from reliance and solidarity to outrage within days.

Civil Religion through Mass Media

Shortly after the shooting, faculty were drawn to civic rituals—the public gatherings in which crowds focus on objects of totemic significance (mass death and killers prominent among them) and engage in activities that communicate emotion.[2] By such ritual means they generated solidarity; and media broadcast allowed for people far away to share in the contagious mood. Those people in turn expressed support back to those at the ritual center. Because faculty at Virginia Tech took comfort at having been contacted in this way by people around the world, and because journalists on the scene could share in the infectious mood, members of these professions found themselves aligned in their activities and goals for a short time, despite the disparities in their professional and communal needs.

Marvin (2002) notes that rituals of civil religion tell stories that celebrate the sacred and untouchable, and thus constitute the totems that symbolize groups (pp. 204-05). The most potent rituals include stories that celebrate sacrifices made for those groups, featuring such figures as the innocent young (whose deaths states avenge if they can), the confessed guilty who suffer punishment, and the willing soldiers sent to battle. Virginia Tech's violence produced some of these elements—blameless victims and fallen heroes—though no criminal left alive to punish. Thus, university officials and journalists worked together to foster civic bonding.

Marvin (2002) outlines the criteria of successful rituals, most of which reporters met by their framing of the violence at Virginia Tech (p. 207). By approaching the story from these angles, journalists aligned themselves with locals in their veneration of the slain.

1. Sacrifices must declare themselves willing. Reporters focused upon stories of engineering faculty who waded into danger and died protecting students, but paid less attention to the nearby class that barred its door and escaped unscathed.
2. Group members must agree on the propriety of the sacrifice. The killer at Virginia Tech took his own life, usurping the right of the state to do it for him. He failed to affirm state killing power and thus sapped the strength of this media event as civil ritual. Still, the appropriateness of that death went unquestioned in public; and pundits' commentary on the killer's background and apparent mind-state suggested that he ought to have been punished with incarceration before.[3]
3. The outcome of the ritual must be genuinely uncertain. Though the violence was over before the public knew of it, audiences waited days to learn the names of the deceased, the motive of the killer, and whether an accomplice remained—delays that drew rapt attention and maintained uncertainty.
4. The ritual must have a definite end and beginning. The announcements of answers to questions mentioned above, and the resumption of classes the following week, marked the end of most coverage. Final ceremonies took place with assurance that the event was drawing to a close. Those rituals were reprised briefly during graduation the next month, after which the university cleared most memorial sites and reopened parts of Norris Hall.
5. The sacrifice must be valuable. Most rituals named the deceased; and the displays and reportage reproduced their smiling photos, recounted their personal attributes, and listed contributions that they had or would have made.

Because news companies benefit from coverage of drama, they tend to frame events in a manner that fosters ritual. Reporters found many ways to emphasize such aspects of the event; and though the attention paid to Virginia Tech did not make for the fullest ritual veneration of civil sacrifice, it came close enough to have generated regional solidarity. People donned school colors, cheered politicians, and planted U.S. flags at memorial spots—pairing the red stripes that recall the blood of fallen soldiers with the turkeys that stand for the university. In these ways, the rituals magnified by the media attention helped to boost solidarity on campus. As a result of that attention, faculty found themselves, improbably, central to a national event. At their most comic, tales of this bright spot in a sickening week blurred lines between gratitude and pride. (Hallway chatter: I heard from people I haven't seen in years. Well, I have email from colleagues in Europe. Why, I got a note from Hong Kong!)

I do not mean that faculty acted as one. Reportage of large gatherings can suggest greater attendance than occurs. Many faculty likely restricted their roles in mediated events to leaving the TV news on longer or checking internet outlets more often than they otherwise might. Indeed, university faculty tend to remain aloof from national ceremony and display, distancing themselves from the more passionate (and trusting) mass at times of national crisis (Collins 2004:63-4). But Hokie spirit (no easy sell to status conscious professionals at most times, with its folksy name, garish colors, and musclebound fowl as mascot) suffused this group that week, mixing with grief. The killer had made it easy to assemble under the rubric by restricting his attacks to school buildings; but Virginia Tech also controls the best resources for local assembly: public spaces, established symbols, and e-mail networks that form the infrastructure of regional identity. The principal ceremony (a day after the shootings) that gathered national politicians in a basketball stadium drew tens of thousands, both from the surrounding community and from ranks of parents come to pick kids up from school. The larger point is that faculty were both given valuable information, and drawn into rituals of campus solidarity, in ways that corporate journalists augmented with the resources at their disposal.

With the encouragement of officials, faculty did much storytelling of our own, in op-ed pieces, interviews with reporters, and in classrooms the week after the shooting. Instructors across the nation were keen to use the event as “teaching moment,” in order that students might learn from the compelling event. Substantive discussions included analyses of the killer’s motives and the school’s response. University-sponsored guidelines for Tech faculty encouraged a counseling orientation once classes resumed, including validations of students’ feelings and referrals to the health center. For the sake of encounters with reporters at graduation, officials made available such talking points as the following: “A terrible tragedy happened here of horrific proportions, and while we must live with this memory and knowledge, we will persevere,” and “Hokie Spirit will enable us to prevail in the face of tragedy and grow stronger as we move forward together.” Thus, like reporters, did faculty and university officials order events into narratives that served institutional purposes, including those of the rituals that foster solidarity.

For all of those means of alignment, though, faculty and journalists differed in their institutional loyalties, which led to the conflict deeper than that caused by camera crews alone.

Institutional Conflict

The most serious threats to faculty solidarity came from stories that emphasized loony bloodshed and police failure over and above noble sacrifice. On these points, journalists’ and teachers’ interests diverged. As workers for profit-seeking companies, journalists not only augment solidarity in times of crisis but also violate the ethics of community and security as they craft dramas that promote their enterprise.

The publication and broadcast of images of grief place reporters at the center of rituals and storytelling, as mediators of information, as interpreters of events, and as teachers of the rules of mourning (Walter, Littlewood, and Pickering 1995:585; Cottle 2006:427; Sumiala-Seppanen and Stocchetti 2007:340). During such media events, for instance, viewers observe how others handle grief; and the implicit moral instruction becomes part of a larger “invigilation” of emotion (Walter, et al. 1995), in which bystanders learn to “deploy the appropriate attitude, the right mindset, even the right emotions” (Sumiala-Seppanen and Stocchetti 2007). Disaster coverage tends to activate and shape proprietary feelings about how to handle grief in public. Thus can journalists assume teaching roles.

The role that reporters play in such interpretation and invigilation can draw fire from academics who might regard themselves as the more proper instructors. For example, Liebes (1998) argues that

the shared collective space created by disaster time-out, zooming in on victims and their families, is the basis not for dignity and restraint but for the chaotic exploitation of the pain of participants on screen, and for the opportunistic fanning of establishment mismanagement, neglect, corruption, and so on (pp. 75-6).

Thus did many faculty come to feel in the aftermath of the violence at Virginia Tech, as journalists first dramatized the possibility of neglect by the administration of security, and then broadcast aggrandizing images from the killer’s press kit that could provide fodder for copycats. “The Virginia Tech Massacre” became a tagline on television, threatening to “brand” the university with the most stigmatized terms, at just the moment that coverage of the aftermath was teaching audiences to identify with endangered students.

In his analysis of disaster marathon, Liebes (1998) notes that professional norms lead journalists to feature

opposition views rather than rally around national leaders as they do during most media events (p. 73). The rush of concern and demand for details sends reporters in hasty search, which precludes the careful research that can shed light on social forces (Liebes:75). Many outlets demand 24-hour coverage in competition with others, in situations in which officials take days to share the most prized knowledge (Rohlinger 2007:139). While they wait for more information about the causes of disasters, reporters not only harass survivors and focus on grief, but also seize nearby prey in their search for people to blame, beginning with the authorities most directly in view. Thus did they tar the university with epithets related to bloodshed, calling its governance into question. This search for villains can frustrate locals by fulfilling the wishes of mass murderers, who usually meant either to shame authorities or to gain infamy (Liebes 1998:75).[4]

In the case of Virginia Tech, journalists gave airtime and column inches to those who blamed police for not stopping the gunman (by “locking down” campus or profiling and jailing the unstable).[5] Indeed, Liebes summarizes this tension in disaster marathons:

Whereas the principle of broadcast ceremony is to highlight emotions and solidarity and to bracket analysis, a disaster marathon constitutes a communal public forum where tragedy is the emotional motor which sizzles with conflict, emphasizing anxiety, argument, and disagreement (Liebes:76).

In this environment, group boundaries grow clear and opposition strengthens. Handgun enthusiasts demanded repeal of laws that ban firearms from campus, valorizing handguns as symbols of self-protective manhood and goodness against evil.[6] The faculty who spoke up in public rejected these bids, demanding that classrooms remain pure of arms. Thus does a disaster marathon nurture opposition alongside the solidarity, and thus did journalists compete with and offend local storytellers.

Both journalists and scholars provide perspective and guide display of emotion. We can call those lessons enculturation or exploitation, the spread of knowledge or the sale of sensation. Though some stories are more empirically grounded than others, and may spring from all manner of loyalties (to the analysis of capitalism as the exploitation of workers, for instance, vs. service to a capitalist corporation), each of us can think of reasons to emphasize conflict, to criticize authority, and to speak to the victims of social forces. Journalists do this in profit-seeking corporations whereas Virginia Tech faculty do it in service to the state. Institutional loyalties divide us.

Haunted Rituals

Complaints about disaster marathons are easy to understand, in view of the crass intrusions of the press and the different allegiance felt by faculty. But how shall we explain the more ceremonial language with which some came to hallow our own venues as sacred and imbue them with healing power? Such a response draws a line between good and evil—a demarcation that often results from moral discomfort. For this reason, I wonder if some marathons attain intensities sufficient to haunt their viewers. Gordon (1997) describes hauntings as animated states in which people grow aware of social tensions. Societies could well feel a strain between the payoffs and the price of violence against their citizens—the solidarity that memorials provide vs. the grief at our loss. What Marvin (2002) calls the “totem secret” bubbles beneath national awareness: the hidden knowledge that the group can gain from the killing of its members because it allows for celebration of their sacrifice (p. 205). During times of contested warfare, opposition parties proclaim that secret, as an accusation against the state of sending its young to die and then spending the political capital. After cases of unauthorized murder, the secret is better kept; most of those who benefit by memorial veneration can do so with a sense of innocence. (After all, they didn’t elect the killers, even if they can enjoy the communal warmth that follows.) Still, the tension remains and perhaps appears when rituals grow most intense.

I suggest that the intrusions and focus on conflict that allow journalists to do their work risk unearthing citizens’ investments in the rituals that follow disaster. Our discomfort under the cameras’ glare may have tarnished the memorials by association. There is nothing terribly rational about hallowing classrooms as healing space or shunning journalists as the unwashed. Perhaps such thoughts occurred as part of local citizens’ attempts to exorcise what haunts us. We want our fallen friends restored, and an end brought to our grief, yet basked in the glow of the rituals that honored their memories. We would trade those rites for a chance to bring back the dead, but could not and thus remained haunted as we joined in school cheers. The ghoulish solidarity might offend when viewed from the right vantage. To blame crass sensation on reporters could help to banish what troubles us.

The dead animate civil religion, lifting survivors in solidarity. The role played by out-of-town, for-profit reporters in national rituals make them convenient targets of the scorn haunted by communal grief and guilt. This connection between rituals that foster solidarity, and the storytelling that enhances conflict and drama, came into focus in the days following this widely reported violence. The imperatives that drive professions differ enough that we can draw lines between us when so inspired; but where some faculty sought to resolve moral tension by posing classrooms as sacred, and repudiating journalists as infidels, I suggest a more dialectical relation of public education to private journalism.

Endnotes

1. Tactful reticence about their professional goals produced odd locutions among journalists. During a walk through the memorials on campus, my spouse and I were asked by a camera crew whether we were parents. After a pause, a reporter specified, “parents of children.” As I wondered what other creatures we might have raised, it became clear that “children” had become code for those who had been shot, or at least for students at the university.

2. This focus on ritual may strike as odd those who either avoid language associated with sociological functionalists or share Benjamin’s (1968) distrust of electronic reproduction. However, one need neither ignore social conflict nor be naïve about the force of media technology to note that groups employ rituals to mark their boundaries, affirm their rules, and generate solidarity (Collins 2004:12; Marshall 2002)—even in a late capitalist era, and in ways that can challenge ruling blocs (Cottle 2006; Liebes 1998).

3. As this article goes to press, a governor-appointed panel is revisiting commonwealth mental-health policies in light of this news.

4. Rohlinger (1998:139-40) also finds a journalistic taste for conflict in her study of abortion-debate coverage: the increased focus on profitable, rather than important,

news has turned political and social coverage away from the deepest contexts toward the sharpest conflicts.

5. Spree killings might be reduced in frequency if news media deemphasized the glamour of those that occur. In order for this to work, reporters would mostly ignore such killings (as with television editors’ decisions to cease broadcasting news of local teen suicides decades ago after a series of copycat waves followed such reporting). But journalists exercise no such restraint once incidents gain national attention. Spree killings are most often prevented when those who observe the anti-social behaviors of would-be killers share information and intercede. Such peers and teachers must trust law enforcement in order for this to work, which is why draconian lock-downs and zero-tolerance policies fail. Lock-downs don’t separate killers from their intended victims. And zero-tolerance policies alienate trivial offenders from law enforcement, reducing the rate of tips that could alert authorities to serious threats. Finally, profiling cannot distinguish between young men who are just creepy and those who are planning sprees. In short, the most popular responses to spree killings do little to solve the problem.

6. One such legal motion to loosen handgun restrictions was denied in North Carolina as this article went to press.

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A Hokies' Lament: American Social Psychosis and the Virginia Tech Killings

Stephen Pfohl

“We are all Hokies!” read the freshly painted sign on the outfield wall of the Boston College baseball stadium, echoing a declaration of mourning made at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University following the terrible murders that took place there on April 16, 2007. I teach at Boston College. Like Virginia Tech, Boston College is a member of the Atlantic Coast Conference. And shortly after the Hokies’ campus was drenched in blood, its baseball team journeyed north to play our school in a game charged with good will and far less tragedy than the violent game of life and death enacted in Blacksburg a few weeks previously. During the baseball game, in a prayerful memorial service, and on the pages of our university’s newspaper, the phrase “We are all Hokies!” rippled across our campus for a time this spring.

A similar embrace of Hokie identity took place at other colleges and universities across the United States. And, like them, Boston College not only allied itself symbolically with the 32 students and faculty members gunned down in Blacksburg, it also took practical measures to guard against the possibility of a violent massacre taking place on its own campus in the future. Within weeks, the BC administration announced that it had invested in new technology, enabling campus police to instant message students within seconds, should it be learned that a killer is on the loose at our own school. Aside from this fearful contingency plan, what other lessons are to be learned from the terrible events that took place at Virginia Tech?

There is, of course, something moving about public identification with the victims of the Virginia Tech massacre and by widespread expressions of compassion for the families and loved ones, classmates and fellow faculty members, of those slain or wounded. In addition, in the weeks following the shootings both mainstream and new media outlets have taught their respective publics a great deal about the mixture of psychological, neurological, and environmental factors that leading experts view as contributing to the deadly actions of mass killers such as Cho Seung-Hui, the troubled Virginia Tech student and shooter. Time, for instance, quotes forensic psychologist Stanton Samenow, who notes, “They seem to have an unfathomable ability to shut off knowledge of the consequences, of the difference between right and wrong. It’s critical for us to try to understand that worldview and its mental makeup.”[1]

After concluding that mass violence typically combines “the dark hand of biology, life experiences, and the surrounding culture—plus the will to take lives in cold blood,” Newsweek observes, “mass killers tend to be aggrieved, hurt, clinically depressed, socially isolated and, above all, paranoid. It is a specific kind of paranoia: a tendency to blame everyone but themselves for their troubles, to believe the world is against them and unfair.”[2] This, of course, fits the profile constructed by the media of Cho Seung-Hui, the isolated, angry, and depressed killer. In the digital video manifesto sent to NBC News, Cho declared, “You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off.”[3]

Many media stories about the Virginia Tech massacre have provided information about the so-called “mind of a killer.” Other than teaching educational institutions about how to better to look for warning signs, while bolstering technological defenses against sudden outbursts of psychotic violence—what societal lessons might we take from the killings in Blacksburg? Of immediate importance is increased public awareness of the need for tighter interstate regulation of firearms and the banishment for private purchase of such weapons as the Glock 19 semi-automatic handgun and the hollow point bullets Cho easily obtained from local gun stores and on the web. These are weapons

of violence, not instruments of sport. But public awareness of the need for more effective gun control rises periodically, and then dissipates, following violent episodes such as that which took place at Virginia Tech. A spike in awareness and public outcry also occurred after the massacre at Columbine, but effective gun control remains legislatively derailed by powerful market forces and the corporately backed gun lobby. In addition, serious efforts to limit the availability of rapid-fire killing machines are hindered by populist social phantasms about the protection that deadly handguns and assault weapons can bring to law-abiding citizens. In the days following the shootings, conservative radio talk shows across America were replete with laments that more Virginia Tech students weren't carrying weapons. If they were, suggested fiery gun advocates, the killer would never have taken as many lives. Some other student would surely have taken Cho out before the killer completed his nightmarish rampage.

More complex questions about the wider social context of the killings arose in two lengthy discussions of the Virginia Tech murders in my undergraduate class on Deviance and Social Control. Prompted, in part, by a compelling mixed-media presentation by Mike Cermak, one of my graduate teaching assistants, on the effects of consumer electronics in everyday life, some students wondered whether the same technologies that so quickly place us in communication with others might also estrange or alienate us from each other. Does the quick communicative fix provided by contemporary consumer electronics serve only to deepen our connections to one another? Or do these new technologies also carry the danger of an increased instrumental objectification of others? Is it possible that the same high-speed electronic devices that put us in touch, also shorten our attention spans and make us less able to connect with people in face-to-face relations? Was the evermore-intense technological mediation of daily life a factor in the distance that Cho Seung-Hui felt from others? Were the cruel effects of the bullying that Cho had experienced in school and in church groups amplified during his college years by his relative exclusion from the omnipresent technological "friendship" networks of MySpace and Facebook?

What about the disconcerting phone calls Cho made to a frightened woman student two years before his deadly rampage, or the annoying instant messages he sent to another? What about the troubling cell phone calls he made to his roommate Andy Koch? Cho once called Andy to say that he was not himself but "Cho's brother, Question Mark." Later, over Thanksgiving break in 2005, Cho phoned to say he was vacationing with Vladimir Putin in North Carolina. "I am pretty sure that's not possible Seung," replied Andy.^[4] What, moreover, are we to make of the fact that Cho had photographed the legs of female students from underneath their desks? Was this further evidence of his objectified distance from others, distance fostered by the increasingly technological orchestration of everyday life and death? Dense streams of technological connections and disconnections were in evidence everywhere in the media-relayed story of the Virginia Tech murders. From the cell phone camera that captured chaotic images and the sound of gunfire from nearby Norris Hall to the incessant repetition of these same frightening images and sound on television, to the multiple video blogs recounting students' terror, and, of course, the digital media show produced for our consumption by the killer himself, technology and the trail of violence went hand in hand at Virginia Tech.

Sparked by a provocative lecture given by Jared Del Rosso, another of my teaching assistants, students in my class also pursued questions about whether societal reactions to some of Cho's previous behaviors may have prompted him to identify with, or even respond in a perversely affirmative manner, to the fear expressed by others that he fit the stereotype of someone likely to be a school shooter. Did Cho feel hemmed in or, perhaps, even brazenly emboldened by the reactions of others to his often strange demeanor, menacing silence, and violent classroom writings? Were the worrisome labels applied to Cho by teachers, school administrators, mental health officials, and his fellow students "contributing factors" that hastened his precipitous slide into unimaginable violence? Was Cho acting out a terrible—but socially ordained—drama, scripted ahead of time by the way that others had pigeonholed him in the past?

Sociologists and anthropologists have long observed that dramatic acts of deviance can be occasioned—even called into being—by the collective anxieties of the society in which they occur. Such anxieties may be so vexing and unspeakable that they bear no proper name; at least not until a label connoting deviance is burnt into the identity of a condemned wrongdoer. In intensely unequal societies, such as our own—hierarchically organized societies founded on deep-seated material and psychic injustices and the structured exploitation of some classes, or classifications, of people by others—the deviant who is called upon to functionally embody what that society most abhors is also often a perverse, or monstrously mirrored, figuration of shameful aspects of what that society itself—or, more accurately, those most blessed by power in the society—would deny or disavow. Socially figured as evil—a cold blooded, emotionless, methodic, and empty-eyed killer—Cho Seung-Hui held up a psychotic mirror of mythic judgment to the society upon which he took aim. In the video message sent to us through NBC News, Cho declares,

“You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn’t enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren’t enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn’t enough. Your vodka and cognac weren’t enough. All your debaucheries weren’t enough. Those weren’t enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything.”

Then came the crack of a 9 mm, “the weapon of choice for cops and criminals, civilians and soldiers—and a sick young man in Virginia.”[5] At first, most everyone thought it was the sound of construction, the erection of another university building, an architectural homage to global power and knowledge. Soon it was evident that this was the sound of something far worse—the sound of both a determined executioner and a symbolic message aimed at you and me. To treat Cho Seung-Hui’s actions as bearing symbolic importance is not to romanticize or dignify Cho’s violence. Cho was, after all, crazy. To explore the social symbolism of Cho’s deadly rampage is, instead, to ask that we delve beneath the conscious surface of his psychotic actions and words, seeking in them symptomatic lessons about the way American society sets its social boundaries and how our society values some lives, while discounting others.

Several students in my class raised concerns about the possible effects of Cho’s ethnic identity. As a native of South Korea, might Cho Seung-Hui’s terrible deeds spur violence against Korean Americans and other Asians residing in the United States? This concern is of particular importance when set within the landscape of contemporary racialized privilege and a continuing global “coloniality of power.”[6] Commenting on the relative ignorance of many Americans about our nation’s decidedly contradictory history of involvement with Korea, one student even wondered whether the Virginia Tech murders might exacerbate existing tensions between the United States and North Korea. Despite the significance of such concerns, it is important to remember that, while born in South Korea, Cho spent his later childhood and young adult life in the United States, surrounded by the rituals of American culture and economic life. Cho was, in a sense, “trapped in a generational warp, neither quite Korean like his parents nor American like his peers. His parents turned to the church for help within his emotional problems, but he was bullied in his Christian youth group, especially by rich kids.”[7] Other students commented on the role that gender socialization might have played in Cho’s horrific violence. Some pointed to Cho’s troubled relations with women, while others pointed to how sadistic aggression is often “naturalized” in men in our culture as a learned response to situations of emotional turmoil, vulnerability, and relative powerlessness.

At this point in our discussion, another student in the Deviance and Social Control class made a connection between Cho’s violence and recent U.S. history, speculating about mass public denial of responsibility for the horrors of the Iraq war as a haunting social context for the Virginia Tech killings. Without minimizing the tragic deaths in Blacksburg, the student reminded our class that on the same day in which NBC News reported on Cho Seung-Hui’s media manifesto, “bombs ravaged Baghdad in five horrific explosions ... killing at least 171 people in the deadliest day in the capital since the American-led security plan for the city took effect two months” earlier.[8] Nearly 230 people were killed or found dead in Iraq on that single day. Attention to the horror of these mass killings was, however, displaced by headline coverage of the Virginia Tech massacre. But more disturbing than this simple displacement may be the fact that virtually nowhere in the United States on that day, nor on any of the days following the 2003 American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, have there been mass public expressions of grief and mourning even mildly approaching those produced by the terrible events at Virginia Tech. Why?

I suppose it can be argued that it is only natural for us to mourn the deaths of those whose lives we identify most with. But why, as a nation, are we so manifestly unable to publicly identify with the lives, and mourn the deaths, of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed as a result of the preemptive warfare unleashed by our country against Iraq? As mentioned previously, when attempting to account for the psychotic violence of mass killers, *Time* magazine quotes a leading forensic expert who states, “They seem to have an unfathomable ability to shut off knowledge of the consequences, of the difference between right and wrong. It’s critical for us to try to understand that worldview and its mental makeup.” This quote strikes me as being as applicable to the collective worldview and mental makeup of the United States, as it may be to the individual mental makeup of a psychotic mass killer. Both the individual killer and the killer nation displays an ability to “shut off knowledge of the consequences” of one’s violence.

The continuing Iraq war must be understood as a primary historical context by which to make mythic symbolic sense of Cho Seung Hui’s horrific actions—the social psychosis of a nation engaged in an enormously violent, thoroughly illegal, and strategically unprovoked campaign of preemptive warfare, the formal justification of which is nothing short of paranoid. This is a war brought about—much like Cho’s preemptive attack on his teachers and classmates—not to defend against actual acts of aggression, but by the manufacture of psychotic fear of a very specific kind—a tendency to blame everyone but ourselves!

In attempting to make sense of the paranoid violence of mass killers, *Newsweek* quotes James Alan Fox,

professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University. According to Fox, “They see others as being responsible for their problems; it’s never their fault.”[9] In attempting to justify the Iraq war, officials in the Bush administration repeatedly display a related form of psychotic reasoning, blaming imagined demons for unleashing the terror of mass killings—nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, nonexistent connections between the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Saddam Hussein, nonexistent connections between Al Qaeda and the government of Iraq, and nonexistent attempts by Iraq to secure materials for nuclear weapons to carry out a supposed imminent attack the United States. Today the problem is said to be Iran. Tomorrow, perhaps, Syria or Sudan will be blamed.

Evoked as a moral guide to U.S. foreign policy and the “war against terror,” the paranoid “axis of evil” pictured by President George W. Bush is as flexible and subject to psychotic mutation as the viral vectors of fast capitalism upon which it parasites. Each exhibits ritual denial of the historical actualities of an ascendant global order of things set into motion by institutions of power and profit such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and U.S. military. It’s never our fault! It’s never our responsibility! It’s never the result of fast corporate capitalist interests! It’s never the outcome of Northwestern geopolitical designs on the oil-rich territories of the Persian Gulf! To paraphrase Cho Seng-Hui’s own paranoid self-justification for righteous violence—it was their threats, not our historical actions that forced us into a corner and gave us but only one option. The decision was theirs. As such, it is them, and not us, that have blood on their hands that will never wash off.

The analogy I am here making between pathological individual and social expressions of psychosis is rooted in Teresa Brennan’s (1993) discerning theoretical analysis of the confounding of imaginary psychic projections and the violent social history of modern capitalist/colonialist expressions of power (chap.1:9-10). Brennan traces social psychosis in the West from its psychic origins in a “foundational fantasy” that makes the ego of modern “Man” appear as if “self-contained,” and destined to exert control over the fields of living energetic matter upon which it depends economically for sustenance and survival. A projective distortion of material actuality, this fantasy gains steam and is spread across the globe by the twin forces of modern technological domination and the speedy advance of fast capitalist practices of commodification. The result is a perilous aggressive fixing and depletion of natural energetic connections with others and the world. This represents a psychotic disconnection and divorce from reality, what Patricia Williams (1991) refers to as a malaise of “social amnesia” (p. 15).

For Canadian social theorist Arthur Kroker, the social psychosis depicted by Brennan assumes a distinctive American form, steeped in anxiety and resentment and justified in religious terms by a longstanding Puritan ideology. This is because “the [dominant] American mind has always oscillated between two extremes—between the ‘war spirit’ and spirit of ‘acedia’ (Kroker 2007:23).” For Kroker, such oscillation is symptomatic of a “classically split consciousness veering between a raging ‘war spirit’ (which, as de Tocqueville noted set out to conquer the continental wilderness with a bible in one hand and an axe in the other); and panic fear (tempered by melancholy self doubt) concerning the imminent dissolution of the boundaries of the self” (Kroker 2007: 23). Social psychosis, social amnesia, and split consciousness—these are ways of describing the paranoid culture of historical denial and preemptive warfare that enveloped the psyche of Cho Seung-Hui from the outside in.

This is not to claim that Cho’s violence was simply caused by American culture. It is, however, to suggest that the nihilism of each represents a complex and disturbed mythic mirroring of the other. In his media manifesto Cho Seung-Hui both lashed out at and identified with the sacrificial religious spirit of American culture, condemning what he perceived as the hypocrisy of U.S. Christianity, while likening himself to the suffering Christ. In refusing to own up to, and make reparations for, the violence we have collectively unleashed in Iraq and elsewhere across the globe, and in refusing to reckon with the guilt-ridden realities of socially structured inequalities here at home, American society similarly lashes out with resentment at those it views as enemies. At the time, America dresses itself up in the imaginary garb of a god-like suffering servant. This is evidence of a profound social psychosis. But while leading experts on the psychology of aggression remain plagued by an inability to predict individual psychotic outbursts of violence, the same need not be true at a societal level.

The terrifying social forces that make all Americans complicit with mass killings abroad and aggressive inequality within the boundaries of our own country will not be curtailed by new technologies of control aimed at instant messaging us when killers are on the loose. We may all be Hokies. But, perhaps, we are also all Cho Seung-Hui. To shed this terrible killer side of our split collective consciousness, it is necessary to begin to disassemble the warring social order to which we contribute daily. This order is rooted in a relentless search for speedy profit and a paranoid denial of responsibility for the violence engendered by our collective actions in history. Ending the unlawful occupation of Iraq will not instantly rid our country of the nihilistic social impulses that fuel psychotic

outbursts of violence. But it may help, particularly if stopping the war is but a first step toward waging a renewed campaign of global justice and peace. But paranoid about secret killers among us, and afraid of our own historical shadows, it seems more likely that America will continue to deny the violent social psychosis that holds our entire country hostage to a culture of war. This is a tragedy that far exceeds that of the terrible Virginia Tech killings. This is a Hokies' lament.

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey Kluger, "Why They Kill," *Time*, Vol. 169, No. 18 (April 30, 2007):54.
2. Sharon Begley, with Anne Underwood and Mary Carmichael, "The Anatomy of Violence," *Newsweek*, Vol. CXLIX, No. 18 (April 30, 2007):43.
3. Excerpt from video message sent by Cho Seung-Hui's to NBC News. (<http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/18/vtech.shooting/index.html>). Retrieved May 29, 2007.
4. These and other details pertaining to the Virginia Tech murders are available in the Wikipedia entry for Seung-Hui Cho (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seung-Hui_Cho). Retrieved May 29, 2007.
5. Jerry Adler, "Story of a Gun," *Newsweek*, Vol. CXLIX, No. 18 (April 30, 2007):37.
6. The term "coloniality of power" is used by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano to suggest that no aspects of contemporary culture or economy are entirely free of the haunting shadows of colonialism and the complex ways that colonial formations of power impact upon virtually all social processes, from the social constitution of what counts as valid forms of knowledge to the meaning of such diverse matters as pleasure, pain, and subjective experience. See, for instance, Quijano (2000).
7. Evan Thomas, "Making of a Massacre," *Newsweek*, Vol. CXLIX, No. 18 (April 30, 2007):24.
8. Kirk Semple, "Bombs Rip Through Baghdad in Wave of Attacks, Killing 171," *The New York Times*, Vol. CLVI, No. 53, 919 (Thursday, April 19, 2007):1.
9. James Alan Fox, quoted in Sharon Begley, with Anne Underwood and Mary Carmichael, "The Anatomy of Violence," *Newsweek*, Vol. CXLIX, No. 18 (April 30, 2007):43.

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All the Rage: Digital Bodies and Deadly Play in the Age of the Suicide Bomber

Carolyn Guertin

Violence is Viral

“Violence is viral...” Jean Baudrillard says in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, “it operates by contagion, by chain reaction, and it gradually destroys all our immunities and our powers to resist” (94). Seung-Hui Cho succumbed to those powers at Virginia Tech, as did Kimveer Gill at Dawson College in Montreal, and Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at Columbine, and too, too many others to mention. Meanwhile, half the world away, young men and women in the grip of a spiritual agenda enact similar acts of suicidal revenge to answer their own need for salvation, a sense of entitlement, and a retaliatory yearning to set right real or imagined wrongs. As much as these killers’ acts are incomprehensible, they are simultaneously sanctioned by our own news media and entertainment industry. If these lost souls do not know where to draw the line, it is surely because our culture makes no distinction. In fact, the infamous psychedelia professor Timothy Leary, who performed his own death as a fashion statement and online signature media event in “designed dying,” said “The most important thing you can do in your life is to die.” We are immersed in visual violence of all kinds on a daily basis as entertainment. Suicide, especially murder-suicide, has become commonplace, yes, but more to the point it is now both fashionable and newsworthy. We are bombarded by popular culture forms that require ever worse—bigger and more dramatic events—to feed its massive hunger. These symbolic acts (and to say they are symbolic is not to suggest that they do not cause very real carnage) of blowing up bridges and markets in Baghdad, twin towers in Manhattan, or performing enactments of resentment against those Cho claimed had trust funds and drank cognac are happenings made real and more powerful because of their dramatization as carefully staged events for the media.



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Serial killers, mass murderers and suicide bombers appropriate the tools of the powerful (from planes to cameras to the World Wide Web) to spread terror far more effectually than their considerable death counts do, for the fear they cause is a viral weapon that spreads like a pandemic via our own addiction to networked communication. In “Packaging the Suicide Bomber,” Hal Niedzviecki notes that “the attraction of becoming a suicide bomber is not the fantasy of being rewarded with virgins in heaven, but the intense feeling of being noticed in a world where being noticed—preferably on video—has somehow become the sole crowning achievement in and of itself” (68; qtd in Murray 2005). Murder-suicide is the quickest road to celebrity, and the latest incarnation of Andy Warhol’s 15 minutes of fame.

The special, grizzly weapon that the suicide bomber has that increases his terror quotient above the others is his body. In the essay “Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life,” Stuart Murray calls this phenomenon “biopolitics” where the body of the terrorist actually becomes a weapon of destruction, where his shattered body parts become destructive projectiles, just like the ensuing broadcast images of the violent event do. Murray (2006) observes that “The attacker’s body is literally weaponized. Shards of bone become human shrapnel” (p. 207). Similarly, in “McLuhan, Rhetoric, Politics,” Murray says, the media guru Marshall:

McLuhan warns us that “every separatist group of the future will have an educated—and therefore skilled—terrorist fringe” (Globe Village 115). With uncanny premonition, he prophesied that “The satellite will distribute terrorist paranoia around the world in living color to match each accelerating disruptive event” (*ibid*) (Murray 2005).

McLuhan saw the media as extensions of our bodies. Media act in effect as networked, externalized nervous systems. This phenomenon is equal parts symptom and manifestation of McLuhan’s prophetic vision of a global village: the violent, conflict-ridden, media-saturated world that is the 21st century. Media ecologist Lance Strate observes that, as McLuhan clearly saw in *Understanding Media*, “Guns and cameras are both media of communication” with guns acting as extensions of the “fist and fingernail” and cameras as instruments of voyeuristic violence (Strate):

Guns and cameras are both methods by which people communicate, sending messages to their target, and to bystanders alike... Guns and cameras are both weapons, both used to attack and cause harm... both used to control and imprison—that is why we talk about cameras using words like shoot, snapshot, load (the film), capture (the subject, the moment), that is—this is a deep metaphor that reveals an often-unconscious understanding of the link between the two technologies.

We can therefore understand that the video and stills prepared by the Virginia Tech killer, and sent to NBC, was an assault by other means, another violent act prepared and perpetrated by a mass murderer. The intent, clearly, was not only to justify his actions, but to incite more violence by others. The model that he was imitating was not so much fiction films, as some commentators have suggested, but the video recordings made by suicide bombers coming out of the Arab world... (Strate).

We see these parallels at suicide bombers recruitment sites and in the executions of prisoners broadcast by Iraqis over the Web. The roles such images play in our culture are highly ambiguous. As terrorism spreads messages of fear, we simultaneously revel in their instantaneous global broadcast and are appalled by their content. In reality these attacks come from the inside out for they mirror Western culture’s violence as they incite and recruit us to do more harm against each other and ourselves.

Seeds of Terrorism

Jean Baudrillard argues that the seeds of terrorism were planted with the collapse of Soviet Communism, and that, previously, that balanced symmetry of two global powers had kept the forces for good and the forces for evil at a standoff. As the military might of the United States has grown ever more powerful in the interim since that collapse, there has come to be no possible military challengers, and so the only remaining forms of attack against the most powerful nation in the world (for the most powerful always must have challengers) can be symbolic attacks through guerrilla methods.

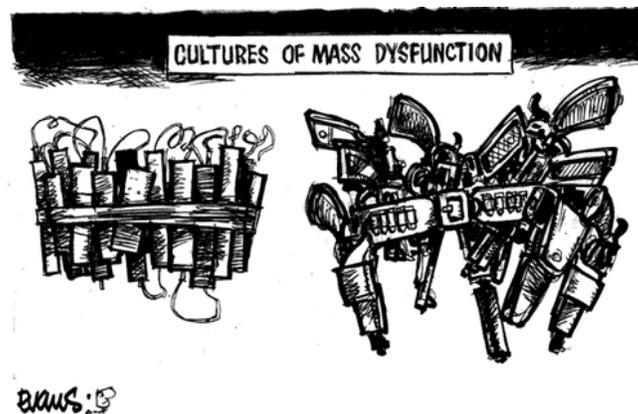
While all major religions condemn suicide, acts of violence on the enemies of Islam have come to be seen as acceptable means of performing extreme religious devotion, secular desires for revenge, and acts of cruelty. Encouraged by unscrupulous recruiters in person, in the media and at special Websites, suicide bombers aim for critical mass in human casualties and media spectacle. Campus killers similarly derive their power from delusions of grandeur and an obsession for celebrity among the ranks of this dubious genealogy. Cho aligned himself with

Christ and his suffering, and Gill saw himself as the Angel of Death. It is the media that render these brief reigns of terror as a performance to be consumed and it is us who cannot look away. Saddam Hussein was similarly and pornographically paraded before us first as a docile medical prisoner subject to dissection, (revisit the images at the BBC's site) and then as a subject of raw documentary footage, simultaneously real and unbelievable, with his final moments performed and "filtered through cellphones and YouTube, passing through Sky News and CNN and Al Jazeera" for our viewing pleasure (Burgess). (Time magazine's coverage of the event, for instance, can be seen here).

The danger of the media, Baudrillard warns in *Spirit of Terrorism*, is that the "image consumes the event," that is, absorbs it and gives it back as an object of consumption (Baudrillard 27). NBC got considerably richer by showing Cho's images, and show them he knew they would when he mailed them his terrible "multimedia manifesto" between attacks. Then, predictably, twelve hours later NBC expressed crocodile tears of remorse, saying in future they would "strictly limit" their use of these images—not, you will notice, cease using them (Mikkelsen). Initially, NBC claimed, Cho's packet was news, but "[o]nce you've seen it, its repetition is little more than pornography," one news executive claimed (ibid.) How convenient for them. How sad for us that "the fascination of the attack is primarily a fascination with the image" (Baudrillard 28). That these images are real adds another thrill: a layer of terror. Terrorism is a media event. Such acts become unforgivable and unforgettable once broadcast. But even that is illusory, for there is no good usage of the media in these cases. The media are an integral part of the event itself—and all of the Virginia Tech families' pleas to remember the dead instead of the murderer only remind us of the bizarre and vicious performances of the perpetrator. The media are a part of that terror and a part of the game. They unite the "white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism" (Baudrillard 29-30), for, as Baudrillard says, the spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle (Baudrillard 30).

Computer Game Violence

Like flies in ointment, we are stuck in this conundrum. What is the distance between a Texas Chainsaw Massacre and a brutal sniper attack at the University of Texas at Austin campus in 1966? How far removed are digital bodies executed by religious extremists, blown apart for so-called fun in *Mortal Kombat*, *Soldier of Fortune* or *Gears of War* from the images of a first person shooter gunning for Virginia Tech students and staff? Computer and video games get singled out as the culprits of these homegrown attackers by right-wing critic Jack Thompson and others (Benedetti), even though study after study has shown that these games are dangerous only to the kind of people who already have difficulties distinguishing between the fictional and the real (Majendie). Kimveer Gill was, to be sure, a serious gamer as were the Columbine killers; Cho on the other hand was not. Not a single game was found on his computer in his dorm. But what is real and what is virtual in a digital age? Does violence not cross these boundaries precisely by the way it harnesses our fears and spreads terror, just as the suicide bomber's ultimate weapon is his body? In order to explore these connections, I will take a look at three different kinds of digital games and activities that purposely trouble the boundaries between real and fictional worlds.



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Pay-Per-View-Slaughter

Early in 2005, a San Antonio rancher named John Lockwood set up a Website for hunters all over the world. With high-speed access and a fee, they could shoot deer, antelope, wild boar, and other game on his property using a Webcam and a remotely-controlled rifle. Lockwood planned to send them the head as a trophy. Before his venture got off the ground though, hunters and sportsman cried foul and Texas lawmakers moved in to declare his business illegal. It gave the animal no chance critics said, and there was no challenge for the hunter either (in fact, even during the initial demonstration the hunter only wounded the pig and Lockwood had to go and finish the job). Other states have since moved to outlaw the practice elsewhere, including it under provisions that make hunting big game in captivity illegal. Why all the hoopla? Hunting an animal with a high-powered weapon even in the flesh is hardly a fair contest in the first place. Arkansas State Senator Ruth Whitaker summed it up like this:

“The animal has no chance... There’s no challenge for you—except knowing how to use a computer and push a button. You never left your tufted sofa. What’s sportsmanlike about that?” So far a couple dozen states have blocked the practice, which the Humane Society calls “pay-per-view slaughter” (Associated Press).

Digital bodies litter the Internet. Virtual killing is a major industry. I found dozens of so-called games online in which one can torture or kill or humiliate Osama Bin Laden when I was researching this essay. Clearly this exceeds acceptable ethical boundaries. Other spaces online have no such plain demarcations.

Terrorism in Second Life

Second Life is not a game. “[I]t does not have points, scores, winners or losers, levels, an end-strategy, or most of the other characteristics of games” (Wikipedia). What it does have is the first online economy, 5 million registered accounts (as of March 2007, Wikipedia) and the promise of a social new world with user-generated content that you can shape to meet your imaginative dreams. Based on Neal Stephenson’s metaverse from the novel *Snow Crash*, Second Life is a virtual world software created by the company Linden Labs that has become something of an addiction for its most fervent users: it is a gathering space for residents with unique avatars or cartoon-like online personas to meet, converse, socialize, form alliances, trade and do business. Since residents control their own copyright on SL creations, own land and make money (in Linden dollars) within the world, there has been a strong movement to establish civil rights and freedoms. The Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards was the first politician to set up shop there, an occurrence that is now commonplace. Multinational corporations, including Reebok and American Apparel, have also opened stores within SL.

When the first multinationals arrived, and Linden Labs altered some of the basic programming within the world to accommodate them, a handful of residents became alarmed about their in-world future if they were to be subject to the whims of the parent corporation. As a result, the Second Life Liberation Army (SLLA) was formed in April 2006 with a primary goal of universal suffrage. Comprised of a very small number of people (probably less than a dozen members), the SLLA conducts military operations to win rights for their virtual selves. (See images of so-called acts of terrorism in Second Life here). Their first attack was against the clothing store, American Apparel. They shot ‘white balls’, a visual effect, which obscured areas of the screen temporarily, and interfered with people’s ability to see merchandise and to shop. Sometimes these effects actually pushed customers out of the store. This led to the SLLA being dubbed ‘terrorists’ by the outer world media when they learned of the events and the same media lighted on the phenomenon with a near-hysterical fervor. “An article published by Agence France-Presse even claimed that ‘virtual-world banes now mirror the havoc of the real one, as terrorists have launched a bombing campaign in Second Life’” (McCarthy). This is a grievous misrepresentation of these events. Even when SLLA detonated so-called atomic bombs at Reebok and American Apparel’s virtual stores, there was no damage committed. These attacks are simply visual pyrotechnics. “Some can temporarily freeze avatars, and [at their worst some] graphics-heavy attacks can crash residents’ computers or Linden Lab’s servers” (McCarthy).

In-world since the media hype happened, the SLLA themselves have been subject to attacks called ‘griefings’ (griefers are people who annoy other people in cyberspace) including having their headquarters painted with Nazi symbols and being bombarded by Super Marios. In-worlders take the issue of avatar rights seriously, especially since

Homeland Security has started a Second Life experiment. Griefings can take the form of a blitz of exploding pink pigs or an alien invasion. One anonymous griefer draped the American Apparel store with large pink penises, and in February of this year political protest took up real world issues as a group wearing Bush '08 badges attacked the John Edwards campaign office, blotting it with images of dinosaurs, obscenities and an image of Edwards sporting blackface (McCarthy).

Hacktivism

Political protest and the Internet have gone hand-in-hand for a long time. The first hacktivist, computer engineer Carmin Karasic, started out using similar methods. She uses the Internet to implement a strategy called hacktivism. The term was first coined in 1998 to describe an emerging hybrid form that unites the best attributes of peaceful social protest—activism—and tech-savvy online civil disobedience—hackerism. It should not be confused with its adolescent and illegal cousins, cracktivism—code cracking, vandalism, data blockades and the loss of digital data—or cyberterrorism—acts and agents of wanton destruction including worms and viruses.

Hacktivism as an artistic praxis was born in December 1997 when Carmin Karasic was so appalled by the events of the Acteal Massacre—45 Zapatistas were murdered at the hands of the Mexican government—that she set out to create a Web interface that would perform political protest as an aesthetic act. Her electronic civil disobedience engine (run by a collective called Electronic Disturbance Theatre) is named FloodNet; it is Karasic's brainchild in her war against injustice. Filling the browser page with the names of the dead, this activism tool “would access [for example] the page for Mexico's President Zedillo seeking bogus addresses”, so the browser would return messages like “human_rights not found on this server” (Cassell). Unlike the attacks launched by cracktivists, no damage is done by this software agent, but political points are made.

When the Electronic Disturbance Theatre would alert its online activists to launch a protest they visit the group's website and click on FloodNet's icon. Given Karasic's politics, it is no accident that FloodNet must function as a community-based performance: “It was only actualized through thousands and thousands of participants,” she remembers. “It was meaningless without the masses.” Popular support transforms a random act of vandalism into a show of presence, she argues (qtd. in Cassell). Karasic sees her collectivity interface as something more closely akin to “conceptual art” than to cyberterrorism (Harmon). No one and no data are harmed in these ‘attacks,’ but websites are effectively shut down while the protest is being transmitted. While the Second Life Liberation Army has no such clear agenda or broad-based sanctioning as yet, other kinds of social protest are growing in-world. When the ultra-right wing French nationalist group the Front National (who have been likened to the Klu Klux Klan) set up a SL headquarters for instance, the response from griefers was swift, adorning their site with Nazi insignia and endowing their leader's images with Hitler mustaches.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG!

A considerably more controversial usage of computing technology is Danny Ledonne's Super Columbine Massacre RPG! (View the trailer). Styled as a video game set at Columbine High School, Ledonne's critical perspective requires us to step into the shoes of either Eric Harris or Dylan Klebold, in order to kill students, try to blow up the school, commit suicide, and ascend to hell where we must battle more demons. Shocking in its choice of subject matter and ruthlessly documentary in its material, Ledonne said that the events at Columbine were such a wake up call for him—for he feared that he had been heading down the same road himself—that he wanted to create a forum for the disaffected to discuss their feelings. Turning to art to find a medium to express his own anger at having been ferociously bullied, he has reclaimed his life and become a film and videogame maker.

He sees his free, downloadable game as a cautionary tale, educating damaged souls against the dangers of violent behaviour. Ledonne says in his artist's statement:

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, through their furious words and malevolent actions, can be understood as the canaries in the mine—foretelling of an “apocalypse soon” for those remaining to ponder their deeds. With ‘Super Columbine Massacre RPG!’, I present to you one of the darkest days in modern history and ask, “Are we willing to look in the mirror?”

You would expect a game like this that is so carefully documentary in nature, being stitched together from Harris and Klebold's journals, writings and videotapes, to be realistic. Instead Ledonne creates a cartoony, Nintendo-like game with cheesy music that takes the horror (but not the message) out of the events. Dead students (who are scored as types—Jock Boy, Preppy Girl, Sheltered Girl) turn into red squares, which do nothing to satisfy a taste for gore, blood or destruction. Instead stepping into the killers' shoes means that you must watch clips of movies that the pair found inspirational, retrace their steps, and listen to their bombastic, twisted philosophies on the world. Reducing their victims to types, despite Harris and Klebold complaining so bitterly about being pigeonholed by others, makes their hypocrisy palpable. Harris and Klebold did not just want to be the worst school killers ever. They wanted to be the worst mass murderers ever. If their bombs had worked the way they had planned, they had hoped to kill 600 people with the first blast alone. Similarly, in this game, every killing is a choice. In order to succeed in Hell and overcome the DOOM-derived demons there, you have to kill virtually every student in the school to acquire enough power to survive the so-called next level (Thompson).

Cybercidal Games

Denounced as a “monstrosity” by many and recently dropped from the edgy and previously unapologetic Slamdance “Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition” when sponsors threatened to pull out, Super Columbine Massacre is so misunderstood precisely because it uses the conventions of games—their visual and interactive language—to deal with these very real issues. The outraged opposition to this game demonstrates how little games are understood or taken seriously, which is one reason why they get blamed as a cause in so many of these violent attacks.

Ledonne would probably argue that games are a symptom of the disease of our spectacle-loving times, not the cause. It is easy to see the links, for instance, between Kevin Klerck's suicide as media event and Timothy Leary's celebration of death as dramatic events—styled, in their own minds, as both heroic and tragic theatre. Klerck was a notorious hacker (Kevin Early was his real name) who posted a suicide note to LiveJournal, continued to chat online for a time, and then put a shotgun to his own head and fired. Timothy Leary likewise hoped to Webcast his own death (instead his death was videotaped and will only be shown in a forthcoming documentary). They are not alone. Kimveer Gill posted pictures of himself posing with guns before he made the trek to Dawson College, and, cybercides—group suicide pacts made in chatrooms and carried out collectively in RL—are an escalating phenomenon, especially in Japan, which has the highest suicide rate in the world. (91 people in 34 separate events are known to have killed themselves in Japan in 2005; McCurry).

While splatter and twitch games are certainly not harmless, these bloody images are commonplace everywhere. They saturate our media, our advertising, and our entertainment on a daily basis. It is the action-based nature of games, however, that seems to make them favored targets for criticism and censorship. It was even assumed and misreported by newspapers after the Dawson College shooting that Gill must have played Super Columbine Massacre. While Gill was a big videogame player and included among his favourite games a number of the most violent ones ever created (including Grand Theft Auto, The Punisher, and Soldier of Fortune II; see an overview of the 10 Most Violent Games of all time here), one has to wonder if events might have played out differently for him if Gill had in fact ever tried on Super Columbine Massacre for size.

Rage

This virulent sickness that is so insidious in our society is rage. Rage is very different from anger, which arrives quickly in the moment in the presence of its cause and then is gone. (See the face of rage in a widely-reported road rage incident in Toronto's Kensington Market in 2006). Rage festers and burns slowly under the skin, often fed for years by feelings of indignation, entitlement and superiority, until it explodes with brief but catastrophic force. Rage is a product of abuse and is a disease of the dysfunctional ego.

The more we live connected in virtual worlds (in our minds or online) and disconnected from the real world the greater the potential mismatch between our egos and ourselves, between who we are and who we think we are. In March, “a report by American psychologists, [called] Inflated Egos over Time, suggested that social-network

sites such as MySpace and YouTube were promoting damagingly high—and illusory—levels of self-esteem among teenagers” (Appleyard). The user-generated content revolution of Web 2.0, which includes blogging and other social network lifestyles, is in short fostering a new kind of egomania.

At their best blogs can uncover stories ignored by the mainstream media and expose deception or cover ups, but at their worst blogs are notorious for encouraging a particular kind of opinionated aggressor who will use any form of abuse to pump themselves up or to ‘win’ a point. Furthermore, since blogs mostly recycle material from one site to another, they produce a kind of shark-like feeding frenzy or emotional contagion that spreads from blog to blog. Oliver Kamm in *The London Times* thinks that bloggers are parasites that bully and poison debate (qtd in Appleyard):

In *The Guardian*, Jonathan Freedland pointed out that the abusive, vitriolic nature of many blogs had turned the blogosphere into a “claustrophobic environment, appealing chiefly to a certain kind of aggressive, point-scoring male—and utterly off-putting to everyone else.” (ibid.)

Freedland believes the defining feature in this phenomenon is the anonymity factor on the Web. People more frequently behave badly if no one knows who they are and there are no reprisals for doing so.

Freedom to Abuse

Early Internet culture was steeped in Libertarian values, and hackers lived by the motto that information wants to be free:

But simple libertarianism is a meaningless and easy creed. It takes little or no account of Isaiah Berlin’s crucial distinction between “freedom to” and “freedom from”, the latter requiring external controls of the individual. Or, as Kris Kristofferson put it, rather more resonantly, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” (Appleyard).

As the World Wide Web emerged and sprouted from that earlier infrastructure, it has incorporated all kinds of loopholes that make space for unrestricted harassing, abusive, spamming and hacking behaviour (Appleyard). And the potential for anonymity ensures that there are no reprisals. As the emotional bile builds at blog sites, it often evolves to dangerous levels allowing rage to become the reason for commenting, as blogger Kathy Sierra discovered in March 2007. The author of a popular blog, she is ranked among the top 50 technoratis on the Web. When, however, she deleted some offensive postings at her site, she was shocked at the violent responses she received (Stone). She has since been driven into police protected hiding on account of rape and death threats at her own and other blogs (Sierra).

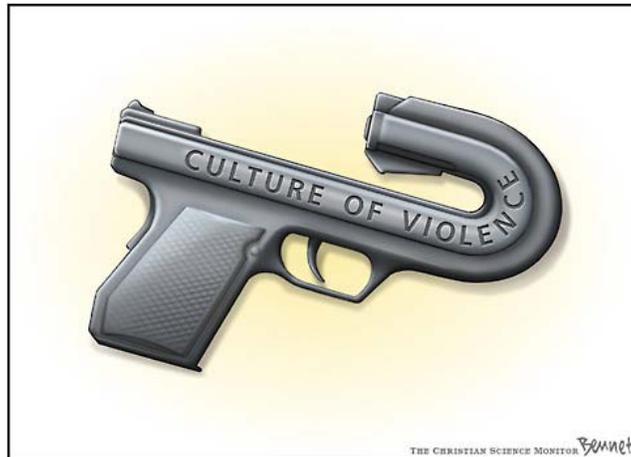
In one of the last entries at her blog site, Sierra reflects on the phenomenon of emotional contagion. “Anger and resentment are the most contagious of emotions,” according to an expert on road rage, she tells us. The anger and resentment that precedes road rage in particular is something that is easily passed from one driver to another, as one further provokes and imitates another that is near the breaking point (Sierra, “Angry/Negative”). Road rage in the flesh is accompanied by a sense of entitlement and superiority over other drivers. Like bloggers and other bullies at their worst, ragers “feel it is their duty to punish bad drivers and teach them ‘lessons’” (Kolton). Emotional contagion is the ultimate in mob mentality, and we all feel it to some extent in particular situations: when in the presence of someone who is angry, depressed or ill or happy, or of a team that is winning, we easily become infected by those extreme emotions.

The Contagion Spreads

This epidemic of deep psychopathological emotions seems to be spreading. Dave Grossman’s book *On Killing* documents how profoundly difficult it has been to train people to kill each other in the history of warfare. Examining changing technologies in conditioning from World War II until the Vietnam War, Grossman’s findings are terrifying. In World War II, even when faced with a direct attack by the enemy, no more than 15% of soldiers would fire their weapons. By the Vietnam War, 95% of soldiers were firing (qtd in Millner 65). Now, as our entertainment applies

many of these “stimulus discriminator” techniques to the population at large, Millner fears that we may be creating a generation of psychopaths (Millner 66).

While our children and our students may be the most susceptible to catching and transmitting these negative undercurrents, our society as a whole is experiencing this epidemic on a vast scale. Misogyny, homophobia and racism seem to be the most powerful catalysts for these outbursts of societal forms of road rage as witnessed recently in highly visible incidents with Mel Gibson, Michael Richards and Don Imus. In Imus’s case, hip-hop was immediately deemed by many (just like computer games in the wake of campus shootings) to be the real villain responsible for the racist and sexist language that is gaining cultural currency in the mainstream. It is telling too that in computer games, as Sherry Millner notes, the possibility for empathizing with other characters is never an option (73).



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Clearly boundaries are coming down and more raw, unrestrained, and disrespectful modes of expression are becoming commonplace, if still not officially acceptable. But, once more, this seems to be only a symptom of this sweeping disease that plagues us, with rage sending out shockwaves like tsunamis in a time when moral, cultural, economic and political values are undergoing violent change on a global scale. The more the United States engages in aggressive and bullying behavior—warranted or not—around the world, flexing its military muscles, the more we feel the backlash on the Home Front in the West (and not just in the United States). The Home Front used to be the purview of the civilian population in wartime. Now, we have lost sight of boundaries, sides and enemies. In an age of user-generated culture, we run the risk of living in a culture filled with homicidal/suicidal ‘Armies of One,’ each puffed up with a sense of his own self-importance, where everyone’s concern is only for themselves.

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Satire, Guns, and Humans: Lessons from the Nacirema

Steve Kroll-Smith, Gwen Hunnicutt

The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of thought is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life...looks a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait. (Chesterton 1909:81)

In early spring, 2007, a student at Virginia Tech University shot and killed 32 students and faculty. He wounded an, as yet, untold number. He finished his massacre by shooting himself dead. Dead students, dead faculty, and guns: it is not a new story. It is how the story is told that gives us cause for concern.

Expressed in the official White House response to this particular slaughter is the paralyzing language of the absurd, speech so incongruous, so ridiculous it must be a cruel joke: White House Conference Center Briefing Room 12:58 P.M. EDT

MS. PERINO: Good afternoon. I have several announcements and then we'll go to questions. The President was made aware of the Virginia Tech shootings. He was horrified....As far as policy, the president believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed. And certainly bringing a gun into a school dormitory and shooting ... obviously that would be against the law and something that someone should be held accountable for." (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/04/20070416-1.html>)

"And certainly bringing a gun into a school dormitory and shooting...obviously that would be against the law..." Indeed. Press Secretary Perino appears unaware of her banal statement. She does not seem to grasp how unaffected and ham-fisted she sounds. When faced with tragedy we might expect more from language: more nuance, more empathy, more reason.

Amidst a pandemic of gun violence, however, we listen numbly to a progressively superficial chain of clichés and vacant phrases, emptied of any meaningful substance. There is a kind of dance, a gavotte, between stale and clichéd language and the spectacle of gun violence; as if weary language "drained of significance" becomes an accomplice to mayhem.[1] Facile language become part of the public drama of expiation that inevitably follows a massacre, like the denouement that serves to bring the story's climax to conclusion, recreating a sense of normal. Here is how it works: first the shooting, then the catharsis expressed as

- a story of a troubled soul, "The shooter was deranged"
- solutions, "Close the gun shop loop holes," or "If we were all armed..."
- good, positivist, social science, "Rarely in social science do you ever get two variables that explain so much. Young men commit most of the violent crime in the world today" (Kimmel 2005, United Nations)
- political mantras, "the president believes that there is a right for people to bear arms."

A public language expressed in ritual cadence brings an act of aberrant carnage to a normal conclusion, resetting the stage for another shooting. Perhaps it is only when language forfeits its primeval power to bring us to the table of common sense that the mayhem of gun violence begins to appear routine.

This essay borrows the lingual coin of the jaded, to wit, satire, to create, as Nietzsche might say, a folly in service

to the truth (1960). We adopt Marcuse's counsel to "revive the desperate laughter and the cynical defiance of the fool as a means of demasking the serious ones who govern the whole" (1969:63-64). To follow is a story of humans and violence, told as if we were strangers in a strange place. It is written to be at once irreverent and provocative, a calculated disordering, recalling Rimbaud, of our readerly senses. Placed side-by-side is the contradiction of human character and the metal tubes from which projectiles are fired at unimaginable velocities.

A Swift Prelude

Born November 1667 in Dublin, Jonathan Swift would spend his life ministering to believers as a clergyman of the Church of England while writing barbed, satiric essays—the best of their kind—about the hapless human quest to be reasonable, sane, and wise. In 1704 he published "A Tale of a Tub." In telling the tale, Swift introduces a figural representation of the folly of human reason:

There is in Mankind a certain*****
 Hic multa*****desiderantur. *****
 *****And this I take to be a clear Solution of the Matter.
 (Roscoe 1850: 32)

If satire lashes at vanity, Swift carried a good size whip. But it was in the better known Gulliver's Travels (1726/1999) that he mortally wounds the human pretension that "Mankind", above all others, is capable of behaving reasonably (rationis capax). Many of us read Gulliver as children, though it was not Swift's intention to write a story for kids.

In his fourth voyage to discover the nature of humans our gullible Lemuel Gulliver comes ashore on a distant island. He is immediately set upon by several vulgar and violent creatures that both beat and shit on him. Rescued by two Houyhnhnms, Gulliver finds himself in a society of gentle creatures who appear to be living dignified, peaceable, and, above all, reasonable lives. He was troubled, however, by the nature of these creatures. The Houyhnhnms, you may recall, were not human but equine. As horses, they could not read, but they were capable of speech. As Swift listened to these beasts he heard a sensibility that he had not encountered in any of his previous journeys. A horse becomes the embodiment of reason.

As our human converses with horses he tells them of England's last war with France and the legions of men who die in battle. The horses are appalled. Unaffected, Gulliver continues, recounting the reasons humans kill one another, among them, ambitions, jealousies, vain quarrels. Without reflecting on the peaceable nature of his audience, he boasts of clever humans who invent "Cannons, Culverins, Muskets, Carbines, Pistols, Bullets (and) Powder" to make killing on so grand a scale possible. The horses don't understand Gulliver, but they forgive him. He was, after all, human.

Living along side and serving the Houyhnhnms were the loathsome and fearful Yahoos. It was a gang of Yahoos who attacked Gulliver when he came ashore. Obsessed with pretty stones, the Yahoos were ever ready to kill one another to possess them. Most troubling to Gulliver, the Yahoos looked a lot like him. If reason took the shape of a horse, senseless violence appeared in the form of a human. Gulliver quickly realized that Yahoos were in essence humans bereft of a capacity to behave in a civil, peaceable manner. As Gulliver sails from the island he concludes that the Houyhnhnm, the illiterate horses, embody the spirit of reason while the Yahoos, the humanoids, rage, fume, and storm through life.

With time, the Houyhnhnm, the wise horse, is forgotten. The Yahoo, however, appears in such diverse places as the letters of Daniel Boone, scrawls sent from David Berkowitz, the "Son of Sam," to the New York Police Department, as a contemporary caricature of a less than sensible person given to raucous, disorderly acts, and, of course, as a popular Internet search engine. Ignoring this latter use, the Merriam-Webster dictionary currently defines a yahoo as "a boorish, crass, or stupid person" (<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/yahoo>).

Swift, of course, thought there was a little Houyhnhnm and a lot of Yahoo in each of us. Indeed, he found humans capable of reason, but not likely to exercise it. At our best, we pretend to reason while the alchemy of our passions works its magic without our awareness or consent. At our worst, we are Yahoos. Freud must have read Swift.

If we are both Houyhnhnm and Yahoo, we are also at times like Gulliver himself who felt compelled to think about the nature that makes us peculiarly human. On April 16, 2007, in a spectacular display of violence, a young man at Virginia Tech University killed thirty-two students and faculty before shooting himself dead. His instruments: two pistols, a semi-automatic Glock 19 and a Walther Ps22.22 caliber. As we write this essay, the number of wounded is not being released to the public.

The magnitude of this carnage and its location at an institution of “higher learning” shatters complacency and sends many of us on a journey to make some reasonable sense of the human well-springs of violence in a society awash in guns. Like Gulliver, we are invited to ponder the nature that is inside of us. Recall his quest. To seek the nature of human nature Gulliver did not go to the library or mediate in his favorite chair; he set upon a hazardous journey. Like him we will travel—though without the guiding genius of Swift—to a queer and perplexing place. It is here, in the land of the Nacirema, that we will make some sense of the acute senselessness of guns and humans.

Gulliver Among the Nacirema: A Report from the Field

You may recall Professor Linton’s discovery of the Nacirema more than fifty years ago. Horace Miner popularized her discovery in his now famous essay, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” (1956). Though obsessed with health, the Nacirema, like the Houyhnhnm, appear to value reason and sense-making. Indeed, they have created thousands of places where natives can go and learn the art of sound, sensible thinking. We located 4,140 such places. Consider how one such place advertises itself:

Penn takes pride in being a place where students and faculty can pursue knowledge without boundaries, a place where theory and practice combine to produce a better understanding of our world and ourselves. (<http://www.upenn.edu/>).

In addition to their collective commitment to reason, the Nacirema are an information or “fun fact” rich society. Close to 90% of their households subscribe to cable television; a “watcher” has more than 500 channels from which to choose; and there are millions of “watchers” among the Nacirema. More than 14,000 radio stations beam sound waves to the nooks and crannies of their day-to-day lives. Satellite radio boasts 14 million subscribers. For the “readers” among them there are more than 19,000 magazines and, as of 2003, slightly less than 1,500 newspapers (Newspaper Association of America 2004; Thierer 2007).

Together, a commitment to reason and an abundance of easily available information might be expected to work in tandem to foster a deep and abiding mindfulness towards the pressing issues that beset the Nacirema. But if sense and reason abound in this curious place, it is difficult find. Consider these troubling patterns:

- Sixty million Nacirema live on less than 7 “sralod” (pronounced sral-lod) a day. A sralod is a unit of Nacirema “yenom.” (Like the Yahoo’s obsession with pretty stones, the Nacirema are fixated on their yenom.) In our currency a sralod has the purchasing power of \$.80. Together, 7 sralod are worth \$5.60 in our spending money. To assist with this comparison, the cost of living in the United States is proportionate to the cost of living among the Nacirema (<http://www.povertyinamerica.psu.edu/>).
- Poverty has become so desperate the Nacirema now make a distinction between the “extreme poor” and the merely “poor.” One in five Nacirema live in, what they call, “extreme poverty.” The extreme poor live, if one can call it that, on less than ½ of what the Nacirema call the “absolute poverty line.” Absolute poverty is defined, rather confusingly, as living without the necessities of life. How one does that is not at all clear (<http://www.povertyinamerica.psu.edu/>).
- In 2005, 38 million Nacirema were “food insecure,” that is they could not count on having enough yenom to purchase food (<http://www.povertyinamerica.psu.edu/>).
- Curiously, the Nacirema are less focused on making sure that everyone has enough to eat than they are in making sure that most everyone can acquire something they call a “nug.” (More than one is referred to as “snug.”) A nug is an instrument with a long tube capable of projecting metal objects at extraordinary speeds. Some Nacirema enjoy pointing these tubes and shooting the metal objects at animals, others shoot them at other Nacirema, and still others shoot themselves. Odd, by any standard, there are almost as many guns as there are Nacirema (approximately 220 million). Nacirema can boast of owning 1/3 of all non-military snug in the world. Perhaps this explains our final observation (Cukier and Sidel 2006:8).
- Both the rate and the real number of nug deaths among the Nacirema are far higher than in any other post-industrial society (<http://www.gun-control-network.org/GF01.htm>).

So, how do we make sense of this conundrum: a society with a seeming commitment to sensible, reasonable behavior, and an apparent readiness to create and sustain a perverse amount of misery and carnage? An approximate answer to this question requires more inquiry into the nature of the Nacirema and their social arrangements.

Demons, Ghosts and Spectacles

To make reasonable sense of the paradoxical temperament of these people we must, at the very least, inquire into one of their most implausible habits of mind, to wit, a lively belief in the supernatural. Accompanying that belief and intertwined with it is the Nacirema’s passion for the spectacle. We begin with their ready embrace of phenomena that fall well outside nature’s laws.

A Pervasive Belief in the Supernatural

With regularity, the “learneds” among the Nacirema will opine on how individuals acquire a readiness to work from a certain ethic embedded in the religious beliefs of their ancestors. Perhaps this is so. But along with acquiring a taste for work, the Nacirema also adopted their predecessors’ beliefs in powers that exist outside the fixed boundaries of the physical world. The mystical and numinous vies with yenom for the attention of the Nacirema. [2]

A striking 68% of them believe in what they call “the lived,” a vile-spirit that takes the shape of a cloven hoofed humanoid with a taste for fire and eternal damnation. Forty percent of Nacirema between the ages of 25 and 29 believe they are reincarnated, that they were once someone else. A whopping 84% believe in “selcarim” (pronounced as it sounds), events that are inexplicable by both the laws of nature and common sense. Over 50% of all Nacirema believe in the existence of human like creatures with no physical bodies that glide about as if blown by the breeze. Typically invisible, these shades now and again reveal themselves, at times announcing their presence with a “Boo” like sound. [3]

Caught between reason and a pervasive belief in the supernatural, it is perhaps not surprising that many Nacirema attribute magical qualities to their snug. Recently, for example, a young Nacirema told a reporter

He feels pretty safe when he goes to...University... but he takes no chances. He brings a loaded 9 mm semiautomatic every day. (See “handnug” above) “It’s not that I run around scared all day long, but if something happens to me, I do want to be prepared, said the 24-year-old business major, who has a concealed-weapons permit and takes the (handnug) everywhere but church (Deseret News:1-2).

Other than his holy place, this young Nacirema, who, we can assume, believes in “the lived,” selcarim, shades, and perhaps reincarnation, reckons he can be only truly safe in school, with his friends, indeed, perhaps on a date if he is packing a semiautomatic weapon. Magic of some kind would be required to conflate safe with snug. After all, more than 30,000 Nacirema shoot one another or themselves to death annually. (Only in Brazil, another country with a strong belief in the mystical—particularly spirit possession—are more people killed annually by snug) (http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2007/04/21/weekinreview/20070422_MARSH_GRAPHIC.html).

Miracles and Spectacles

An omnipresent belief in the supernatural coupled with an unusually high number of nug deaths works in tandem with another curious feature of Nacirema culture: its passion for the spectacle. A conscious space for the mystical and magical would seem to allow for the grandiose and exaggerated. Spectacles, it is reasonable to assume, are likely to thrive in any society where more than 8 out of 10 people believe in the magic of selcarim. To borrow from Debord (1995), for the Nacirema, society is spectacle.

One might say that the Nacirema live from spectacle to spectacle, from one combustible moment to another. Think of a spectacle as an isolated event, incident, or occasion bounded on either side by a beginning and an end. It is the separateness of the spectacle that gives it a kind of totality, one that demands all attention and all consciousness (Debord 1995:12).

Some spectacles are purposely created by the Nacirema, like their annual garish and extravagant Lowb Repus (pronounced as it sounds). A queer ceremony, the Lowb Repus takes place on a long narrow field cross-marked with white lines. On this field, 22 Nacirema dressed in an odd assortment of armor line up, 11 on one side, 11 on the other. Following an unintelligible incantation, 22 Nacirema smash headlong into one another. Most everyone falls down; everyone down gets up. The two groups of 11 re-form, often patting each others’ bottoms in a playful display of what, exactly? We have yet to inquire.

Aside these planned and commodified bursts of “collective effervescence” (Durkheim [1912] 1995) that occur at predictable times in the Nacirema calendar, there are unplanned and unforeseen spectacles. Often violent in nature, these unscheduled spectacles solidify public attention, directing consciousness to the seeming totality of the moment. As we write, a tornado wiped a small town from the face of the earth, leaving only a vague footprint to represent what was once a Nacirema community. If violent nature is the source of an increasing number of spectacles, so are the violent outbursts of the Nacirema themselves.

Even though school shootings make up only one percent of the total number of youth murdered in their

society, the school “rampage” holds a particularly strong valence for the Nacirema (Center for Disease Control 2007). “Rampage” shootings are a subset of all school shootings that include the essential elements of dramatic spectacle. The “rampage” is a targeted attack against an educational institution perpetrated by a former or current member of the school. The incursion is played out on a public stage in front of an audience. The rampage turns out multiple victims, some of whom are selected for their symbolic representations (Newman 2004).[4]

The media reconstruction of these spectacles evokes archetypes of the loner, the alienated youth, the rejected, and the mentally ill (Herda-Rapp 2003). The vilification of the shooters and the romanticization of the victims accentuates the allure of the spectacle. Further, the shooter is almost always portrayed as seeking revenge. These rampage reconstructions borrow from the familiar cultural script where ultimate vengeance is carried out by showy, public violence, with school shootings becoming a distinct “signature of terror” (Mehta 2006). For the Nacirema, the Rampage is now “normal,” assuming a life and inevitability of its own. Sixty percent of them believe that school shootings will continue regardless of preventative measures (Mason 2005).

The allure of the spectacle, linked to a robust belief in the uncanny and implausible, shapes the unusual quantity and quality of nug violence among the Nacirema. The irony of the spectacle is its capacity to direct all attention and concern to a single, horrific event; as if this occasion is the site upon which all collective concern and meaningful discussion about shooting both them selves and one another must occur. The spectacle of mayhem and bloodletting is at once brutally real and an illusion. As deception, it is a sleight of hand trick that substitutes this one-off event for the relentless, far more mundane, regularity with which the Nacirema shoot them selves and others. The spectacle paralyzes the power of ordinary perception. Expecting spectacle, knowing little else, the typical Nacirema simply does not perceive what to us, as observers, appears so brutally stark.

If we bracket the irregular spectacle of nug slaughter among the Nacirema, a sensible observer would conclude that everyday, each day, is a dramatic episode of nug carnage. Consider, for example, a normal day among the Nacirema: in one twenty-four hour period, an average of eighty-one people die and one hundred and seventy-six are wounded by nug fire. Together that is two-hundred and fifty-seven Nacirema killed or wounded by nug fire daily. That amounts to 92 Nacirema killed or wounded every hour of every day. In 2004, 29,569 Nacirema died by nug fire, another 64, 389 were wounded (http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2007/04/21/weekinreview/20070422_MARSH_GRAPHIC.html).

Why? A Hypothesis

Blessed with the faculty of reason, you must wonder aloud, dear reader, how a society can solidify its collective attention and anguish on a single, spectacular killing scene, but cannot or will not “see” the daily accumulation of carnage that occurs with brutal regularity. In mistaking the one-off part for the brutal whole, the Nacirema appear able to live surprisingly easy with the specter of nug death. There are likely many explanations for this conundrum. Perhaps the Nacirema are a species more constitutionally organized around Thanatos than Eros.

A more pedestrian explanation would point out that snug are “big yenom” for the Nacirema. Last year alone, nug sales were worth 2.1 billion sralod (<http://www.nssf.org/news/>). Knowing, as we do now, the visceral attachment of the Nacirema to their sralod, perhaps they prefer their yenom to life; it is possible. (Theorizing in this manner would give us a neo-Marxist insight into Freud, if that matters at this moment.)

But there is another reason, not incompatible with the admittedly absurd “give us yenom, we’ll live with death” argument. It is rooted in the steady attrition of anything we might call a civil society among the Nacirema coupled with their fierce defense of the self-interested individual. For decades now the Nacirema—or the more powerful among them—have been busy dismantling civil society, gutting both the programs and ideas that fostered (if never achieved) a reasonable and humane public life. A good friend of the rich and powerful among them recently summarized their success. For the Nacirema she declared

...there is no such thing as society. “There are individual men and women, and there are families....(The Nacirema) must look to themselves first” (Thatcher 1987).

Concluding that society does not exist has at least one obvious result: Citizenship among the Nacirema takes the peculiar form of a radical individualism. A famous early observer of this society, Sixela Elliveuqcot (pronounced elli-veu-q-cot), was compelled to invent the word “individualism” to hammer home his point that if the Nacirema are anything they are self-centered (de Tocqueville [1835] 2001). Simply put, with little or no expectation that something greater, more powerful, and humane than the person exists, it is left to the individual to secure his or her survival.

Returning From the Field: A Note on Species-Lag

“What a long strange trip it’s been,” to quote the late Jerry Garcia (who was quoting poet Robert Hunter). Back among our own we are struck by the similarities between ourselves and the exotic practices and beliefs of the Nacirema. We suspect that you too, dear reader, saw some similarities between the two cultures. One question strikes us as an unavoidable, like the Nacirema are we too unpredictable a species to own guns? If our “wildness lies in wait” how can we be sure it won’t appear when we have a gun in our hands?

A rhetorical question, to be sure. But it does suggest an idea. The gun, perhaps, is an example of what we might call species-lag. Recall Ogburn’s prescient idea that values typically change far slower than our capacity to make things (1964). Coining the phrase “cultural lag” he taught us that inventing stuff is often far easier than revising our heart-felt standards and ideals. Stem-cell research, for example, promises a new world of medical miracles, but faces a massive rear-guard assault by groups whose beliefs oppose any medicine that puts a microscopic spherical bag of proteins—a fertilized egg—at risk.

Species-lag takes Ogburn’s notion of pause to a more primordial level by pointing to a disjuncture between the make-up of an organism and the ways it fashions or makes the world. It is an idea that asks us to consider the possibility that a life form might create an environment, or part of one, that puts its own existence at risk. Importantly, it assumes that no matter how much a life form tries to accommodate to the altered environment it cannot overcome its own creaturely limitations and achieve a healthy adaptation. In other words, species-lag is more stridently determinant than its cognate, cultural lag. Inherent in the idea of cultural lag is the possibility that values will catch up to technology. We purposely connect species and lag with a hyphen to make the point that there is no catching up. From the vantage point of species-lag, a gun is a cultural artifact that humans cannot use without deadly consequences.

Swift used Gulliver, Houyhnhnms, and Yahoos to help us see the antinomian character of human beings. Freud used the image of the Id to convey the uncontrollable in each of us. Nietzsche scolded Socrates for assuming that the imposition of reason would save Athenian society; it didn’t. Thoreau disconnected reason from our incorrigible search for happiness: “We are made happy,” he concluded, “when reason can discover no occasion for it” (1906:41). Einstein reflecting in his later years concluded: “We all are ruled in what we do by impulses” (1950:15).

Lest you think that only ministers, philosophers, writers, and physicists reason in this fashion, consider a well-known sociologist who argued convincingly that sociology does not have the answer to the Hobbesian question of how human beings become tractable and well-mannered. For Dennis Wrong, there is a significant part of each of us that will always fall outside the watchful eye of the Panopticon (1961). And for Harold Garfinkel, reason is always little more than a trope used to explain the emotion-laden, situation—determining nature of human conduct—deployed after the fact but “conspicuous by its absence” in “everyday affairs” (Garfinkel 1967:114).

Inventing a gun was easy. And following Darwin, we may well ask “Might we evolve into a species mature enough to use it?” Or is that the wrong question? Perhaps we should ask: “If we evolve into a species mature enough to shoot guns, would we care to?” In the meantime, in a culture bereft of a meaningful civic life but wash in miracles and spectacles, we live and die by the gun.

Postscript

On a Sunday, as we finished this paper, a story of another rampage style spectacle splashed across cyberspace: “Three Dead in Idaho Church Shooting.” A local police officer observed: “He was just shooting at anybody he could...” (Time). To paraphrase Press Secretary Perino: “And certainly, bringing a gun into a church and shooting ... obviously that would be against the law and something that someone should be held accountable for.”

Endnotes

1. The phrase “drained of significance” is borrowed from Richard Harvey (Brown 1987:173).

2. Religious devotion sets the United States apart from some of its closest allies.

Americans profess unquestioning belief in God and are far more willing to mix faith and politics than people in other countries, AP-Ipsos polling found...Only Mexicans come close to Americans in embracing faith, the poll found. But unlike Americans, Mexicans strongly object to clergy lobbying lawmakers, in line with the nation's historical opposition to church influence (USA TODAY 6/6/2005. "Poll: Religious devotion high in U.S.", p.1)

3. Data cited on religious beliefs can be found at The Harris Poll #11, "The Religious and Other Beliefs of Americans 2003" February 26, 2003 http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=359.

4. Among shooting rampages foremost in recent American history is the March, 2005 Red Lake Reservation high school shootings in Minnesota, where ten people died, including the gunman; the March, 1998 Jonesboro, Arkansas massacre where five students were killed; the Columbine killings in April, 1999, where fourteen students were killed followed by the suicides of the shooters; and the 1997 West Paducah, KY school shooting where a fourteen year old gunman killed three classmates.

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Media Spectacle and the “Massacre at Virginia Tech”

Douglas Kellner

The mainstream corporate media today process events, news, and information in the form of media spectacle. [2] In an arena of intense competition with 24/7 cable TV networks, talk radio, Internet sites and blogs, and ever proliferating new media like Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube, competition for attention is ever more intense leading the media to go to sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle that attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible.

The 1990s saw the emergence and proliferation of cable news networks, talk radio, and the Internet, and megaspectacles of the era included the O.J. Simpson murder trials, the Clinton Sex scandals and impeachment, and on a global level the life and death of princess Diana. The era also saw an intensification of celebrity news and scandals, with Michael Jackson perhaps the most sensational case (see Kellner 2003a).

The new millennium opened with a hung 2001 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, and a 36 day Battle for the White House and frenzied media spectacle, resulting in a 5-4 Supreme Court decision for Bush that blocked the counting of votes in Florida and generated one of the most momentous political crimes in history that I describe in my book *Grand Theft 2000* (Kellner 2001). This spectacle was soon followed by the 9/11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, the deadliest attack on U.S. soil in its history, and perhaps the most extensive global media spectacle ever, inaugurating an era of Terror War (Kellner 2003b).

Following the model of his father's 1991 war with Iraq, the second Bush administration's Iraq war was also orchestrated as a media spectacle, although after declaring victory in May 2003, events flipped out of control and the spectacle in Iraq has often been a negative and highly contested one, leading to a collapse of Bush's approval ratings and unraveling of his administration (Kellner 2005).

The Bush years have been a series of spectacles from 9/11 and Iraq to the abject failure of the Bush administration during Hurricane Katrina, [3] scandals involving criminal trials of its highest officials and top Republican congressional supporters, and in Spring 2007 a scandal that involves its Attorney General and Bush loyalist Alberto Gonzales. The spectacle of “Gonzogate” involves one of the most systematically political attempts to establish partisan control of the Justice system in U.S. history, whereby federally appointed Attorney Generals who failed to carry out Bush policies were fired, however competent, while those who carried out Bush administration politics were kept on or promoted, however corrupt or incompetent.

In addition to making a spectacle out of major political events, the media produce spectacles around events and controversies of social and everyday life, often providing forums through which major political issues and social struggles are negotiated and debated. In April 2007 alone, revelations that three Duke Lacrosse players accused of gang rape were innocent raised issues of a rogue prosecutor and prosecutorial media flying out of control. During the same week, racist and sexist comments by radio and television personality Don Imus, who called the Rutgers university women's basketball team a “bunch of nappy-headed hoes,” generated a media firestorm and debate over appropriate language in regard to race and gender, the limits of free speech, and corporate media responsibility. The resultant media spectacle and focus on the event and issues led to the end of Imus's long radio career and a subsequent heated debate over the incident.

The shooting rampage at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007 generated a media spectacle with local, national, and

even global media following every twist of a shooting that was represented in the media as producing the highest death toll of any gun-related mass murder in recent U.S. history.[4] Such a claim was irresponsible and false and is setting the stage for someone to try to break the record. Yet the event has also generated debates over gun laws and control, school safety, mental health care, and what causes teen-agers and young students to kill their class-mates and teachers. There was also a racial dimension to the shooting as the assassin was revealed to be a Korean American Seung-Hui Cho.[5]

1.1 Reading the Spectacle with Critical Social Theory and Cultural Studies

In my studies of media spectacle, I deploy cultural studies as diagnostic critique, reading and interpreting various spectacles to see what they tell us about the present age, using media spectacles to illuminate contemporary social developments, trends, and struggles.[6] The “popular” often puts on display major emotions, ideas, experiences, and conflicts of the era, as well as indicating what corporations are marketing. A critical cultural studies can thus help decipher dominant trends, social and political conflicts, and fears and aspirations of the period and thus contribute to developing critical theories of the contemporary era (see Kellner and Ryan 1988 and Kellner 1995, 2003a and 2003b; and 2005).

I therefore see the spectacle as a contested terrain in which different forces use the spectacle to push their interests. Against Debord’s more monolithic and overpowering totalitarian spectacle, I see the spectacle as highly contested, subject to reversal and flip-flops, and thus extremely ambiguous and contradictory. For instance, the media spectacle of the US/UK invasion of Iraq was used by the Bush administration to promote their war policy and the so-called “Bush doctrine” of preemptive war. While the spectacle went through several stages from the opening triumphant “shock and awe” bombing of Iraq through Bush’s May 2003 “Mission Accomplished” spectacle, later horrific events in Iraq caused a reversal of the spectacle, and it is now hotly and bitterly contested.

Since the rise of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham England in the 1960s, as well as in subsequent versions of cultural studies throughout the world, there has been a long-standing tradition of taking on the big issues of the era. The Birmingham School critically analyzed the assaults against working class culture by American mass media and consumer culture. In this conjuncture, British cultural studies stressed the need for media literacy and critique, learning to read newspapers, TV news, advertisements, TV shows and the like just as one learns to read books (see Kellner 1995). The project helped generate a media literacy movement, expanded the concept of literacy, and introduced a new, powerful dimension of pedagogy into cultural studies.

Later, in the 1980s, British cultural studies took on the rise of Thatcherism and the emergence of a new rightwing conservative hegemony in Britain, by explaining how British culture, media, politics, and various economic factors led to the emergence of a new conservative hegemony (see Hall and Jacques 1983). Larry Grossberg (1992), Stanley Aronowitz (1993), myself (Kellner and Ryan 1988, Kellner 1990 and 1995), and others engaged in similar work within the U.S. during the Reagan era of the 1980s, applying cultural studies to analyze the big issues of the time.

Indeed, one of my major focuses of the past two decades has been the use of cultural studies and critical social theory to interrogate the big events of the time: The Persian Gulf TV War (Kellner 1992), Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election (Kellner 2001), From 9/11 to Terror War on the September 11 terrorist attacks and their exploitation by the Bush administration to push through rightwing militarism, interventionism, unilateralism and a hard-right domestic agenda, including the Patriot Act (Kellner 2003b), and Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy (Kellner 2005), which demonstrated how the Bush administration consistently manipulated media spectacle during its first term and in the highly contested and controversial 2004 election. In my books *Media Culture* (Kellner 1995) and *Media Spectacle* (Kellner 2003a), I use cultural studies to critically interrogate major phenomena of the day like Reagan and Rambo, Madonna and pop feminism, rap and hip hop, cyberpunk and the Internet, McDonald’s and globalization, Michael Jordan and the Nike spectacle, and other defining cultural phenomena of the era.

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach that can be used to address a wide range of cultural phenomena from advertising to political narratives (see Kellner 1995 and 2003). A multiperspectival and interdisciplinary enterprise, it draws on a number of disciplines to engage production and political economy of culture, critical engagement with texts, and audience research into effects. As a transdisciplinary

enterprise, it has its own integrity as defined by the practices, methods, and work developing in its ever-expanding tradition. And it is counterdisciplinary, by refusing assimilation into standard academic disciplines, being open to a variety of methods and theoretical positions, and assuming a critical-oppositional stance to the current organization of the university, media, and society.

In the following study, I will illustrate my approach to merging cultural studies with critical social theory by providing a diagnostic reading of the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech in April 2007. First, I analyze the construction of the media spectacle of the Virginia Tech shooting, and how old and new media together helped produce the spectacle. Examining how the spectacle was constructed by various individuals and social groups, I analyze how the text of “The Virginia Tech Massacre” was interpreted and deployed by different individuals and groups to use the spectacle to promote their own agendas.

1.2 The Shooting and the Politics of Race

Initial media reports indicated that there was a shooting in a dorm on the Virginia Tech campus shortly after 7:00 A.M. on April 16. The first word was that it apparently involved a romantic clash in which a young woman and her resident dorm adviser were shot and the boyfriend was under suspicion. At the initial news conference after the first shooting, the Virginia Tech President Charles Steger stated that authorities initially believed the murder in the West Ambler Johnston dormitory was a domestic dispute and that the gunman had left campus.[7] Apparently, police who arrived at the dormitory questioned the roommate of the young woman Emily Hilscher who was the first victim of the day, said that her boyfriend had just dropped her off, and that he was a well-known gun enthusiast. This led the Virginia Tech police and administrators to believe that it was a lover’s quarrel gone array, thus following prey to a stereotype of media culture.

Approximately, two hours after the West Ambler Johnson shootings reports broke out that a shooter had entered Norris Hall, which houses the Engineering Science and Mechanics program, and was at the time also the site of many language courses, and began a killing rampage. Suddenly, it was clear that a major media event was underway and representatives from all the major U.S. broadcasting networks and print publications rushed crews to the scene, as did many foreign media.

Throughout the United States, and indeed the world, web-sites like www.nytimes.com highlighted reports indicating that over 30 students and faculty were killed and that the gunman had shot himself, setting off a media frenzy that involved old and new media. Virginia Tech information web-sites like www.Planetblacksburg.com and the student newspaper site www.collegiatetimes.com were loaded with hits and many student observers of the horror posted on these or other Internet sites, or on their Facebook or MySpace pages. One enterprising young student, Jamal Albarghouti, used his mobile phone to capture the gunshots coming out of Norris Hall and police breaking in. After filming the events, Albarghouti sent it to CNN, which placed it on its online I-reports site where it was watched by millions. CNN quickly broadcast it on air, where it was replayed repeatedly and then shown by other networks. Jamal was described by CNN as our “I-reporter,” interviewed throughout the day, and featured in an interview with Larry King on his Larry King Live show.

Dan Gilmor, author of the popular citizen journalism text *We The Media* noted: “We used to say that journalists write the first draft of history. Not so, not any longer. The people on the ground at these events write the first draft.”[8] Gilmore perhaps exaggerates, but it is true that old and new media now work in tandem to piece together breaking stories with “citizen journalists” supplementing regular journalists and bloggers supplementing corporate media pundits.

As people throughout the world accessed mainstream media sources and new media, so too did mainstream reporters check out MySpace and YouTube and used material drawn for these and other new media sources. As young people from Virginia Tech disseminated cell phone video and images, as well as first person written reports put up on their own new media spaces, it was clear that new media were now playing an important role in the time of the spectacle in constructing representations of contemporary events. Old media had lost its monopoly and was forced to rely on new media, while a variety of voices and images previously omitted from the mainstream corporate media found their own sites of dissemination, discussion, and debate for, as we will see, better and worse.

Every major news corporation rushed crews and top network broadcasting people to Blacksburg in one of the most highly-saturated media sites of all time. There were estimates that at the peak of the coverage, there were more

than 600 reporters on the scene and four or five acres of satellite television trucks.[9]

The shooter was at first described as an “Asian male,” leading to a flurry of speculation. Often initial racialized attributions of the killer in a mass murder spectacle plays on deeply-rooted racism. In the Oklahoma City bombings of 1994, initial allegations targeted Arab, Middle Eastern perpetrators, setting off a paroxysm of racism. Soon after, when it was discovered that the villain was a white American Timothy McVeigh, who had fought in the Gulf War, there was shock and disbelief (see Chapter 3.12).

Likewise, on the day of the Virginia Tech shooting, as Media Matters reports:

right-wing pundit Debbie Schlusel ‘speculat[ed]’ in an April 16 weblog post that the shooter, who had been identified at that point only as a man of Asian descent, might be a “Paki” Muslim and part of “a coordinated terrorist attack.” “Paki” is a disparaging term for a person of Pakistani descent.

Schlusel wrote, “The murderer has been identified by law enforcement and media reports as a young Asian male,” adding, “The Virginia Tech campus has a very large Muslim community, many of which are from Pakistan.” Schlusel continued: “Pakis are considered ‘Asian,’” and asked, “Were there two [shooters] and was this a coordinated terrorist attack?” Schlusel asserted that the reason she was “speculating that the ‘Asian’ gunman is a Pakistani Muslim” was “[b]ecause law enforcement and the media strangely won’t tell us more specifically who the gunman is.” Schlusel claimed that “[e]ven if it does not turn out that the shooter is Muslim, this is a demonstration to Muslim jihadists all over that it is extremely easy to shoot and kill multiple American college students” (quoted from <http://mediamatters.org/items/200704170006>).

Soon after, the media began reporting that the murderer was “a Chinese national here on a student visa,”[10] which led Schlusel and rightwing bloggers to find “[y]et another reason to stop letting in so many foreign students.” Some conservative bloggers talked of how young Chinese receive military training and that this could account for the mayhem, while other rightwing web-sites and commentators argued that the Virginia Tech event showed the need for tougher immigration law.[11]

When the killer was identified as a “South Korean national,” Seung-Hui Cho, and “a South Korean who was a resident alien in the United States,” racist comments emerged about the violent authoritarianism of Koreans.[12] Frightened Korean students began leaving the Virginia Tech campus, Korean communities everywhere grieved, and the president of South Korea made a formal apology.[13]

This apology was not enough for the likes of Fox TV’s Bill O’Reilly who argued that “the Virginia Tech killer was Korean, not American.”[14] When Jam Sardar, an Iranian American and correspondent for Comcast Network, went on Fox News Channel’s “O’Reilly Factor” on April 20, 2007 to discuss the question of whether representation of Cho’s ethnicity was overplayed, O’Reilly did most of the talking, argued that Cho’s ethnicity deserved top billing and denied that Arab Americans were victims of any significant backlash after September 11, leading Sardar to comment: “Thanks for letting me listen.”

There were also speculations throughout the first day that Cho had not acted alone and that there was a second shooter. On the 8:00 p.m. CNN Paula Zahn Now, Zahn and her CNN correspondent Brianna Keilar repeatedly speculated about a second suspect, confusing what officials described as “a person of interest,” probably the boyfriend of the young woman shot in the first dorm murder, with a possible second suspect. Zahn, Keilar, and others on the show spoke, however, of intense anger of Virginia Tech students that there was not an alert by the administration after the first shooting, a theme that disappeared from the mainstream corporate media soon thereafter.

Early revelations about the shooter profiled Cho as a loner who seemed to have few if any friends and who generally avoided contact with other students and teachers. There were reports that he had left a rambling note directed against “rich kids,” “deceitful charlatans,” and “debauchery,” which police found in his dorm room and which commentators used to narrativize the event as unspecific revenge killings.

The first representation of Cho portrayed a static photo of an unsmiling, shy, sad, and rather ordinary young man in glasses, that replicated a certain stereotype of Asian-American males as nerdy, awkward, and self-effacing, but also non-threatening. Classmates interviewed on television indicated that he rarely spoke and that few knew him. Other reports recount his extreme alienation, starting in high school. There were reports that in high school Cho was mocked in school for the way that he spoke. According to a student at Virginia Tech, Chris Davids, who went to high school with Cho:

Once, in English class, the teacher had the students read aloud, and when it was Cho’s turn, he just looked down in silence, Davids recalled. Finally, after the teacher threatened him with an F for participation, Cho started to read in a strange, deep voice that sounded “like he had something in his mouth,” Davids said.

“As soon as he started reading, the whole class started laughing and pointing and saying, ‘Go back to China,’” Davids said. [15]

While there were reports of bullying at middle and high school, and in a Christian youth group that Cho participated in,[16] there was no evidence that he was bullied at Virginia Tech where it appears he initially tried to fit in. Yet he was obviously haunted by demons and insecurities evident in his writings, two of which from a play-writing class were posted on the Internet.[17] These texts, and previous work in his writing classes, had deeply disturbed other students who had access to them, leading one of his teachers to confront the English Department chairman about Cho. Professor Lucinda Roy, a distinguished English professor and then Chair of the Department, agreed to work with him personally, but Cho was unresponsive leading Roy and others to advise him to seek campus counseling in 2005, an event that I will return to later in the narrative.

As the media spectacle unfolded during the first days, it was generally overlooked that the Virginia Tech Massacre could be seen as an attempt to act out some of his violent fantasies and create a media spectacle in which Cho appears as the director and star. Just as Al Qaeda has been orchestrating terror events to promote their Jihadist agenda, and the Bush administration orchestrated a war in Iraq to promote its geopolitical agenda, so too have individuals carried through spectacles of terror to seek attention, revenge, or to realize violent fantasies.

In 1994, Timothy McVeigh participated in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing hundreds and unleashing a major media spectacle of the era—linked to the deadly U.S. government attack on a religious compound in Waco a year before (see *Guys and Guns Amok* Chapter 3.12).[18]

Almost exactly eight years to the day after the Oklahoma City bombing, two teenage middle-class white boys, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, went on a shooting rampage in Columbine, Colorado before taking their own lives (see Chapter 3). Hence, perhaps not by accident the Columbine High shootings took place on April 20, while the Oklahoma City bombings took place on April 19, 1995, on the anniversary of the government siege of Waco that killed members of a religious community some years before. While Cho’s April madness preceded the April 19-20 nexus by a couple of days, he joined a constellation of American domestic male terrorists that call attention to a constellation of serious social problems in the USA today.

1.3 Convocation and Cho’s Multimedia Dossier

The cable news networks were covering the “Virginia Tech Massacre,” as it quickly became designated, in wall to wall coverage and when George W. Bush agreed to speak at a Convocation at Virginia Tech along with the Virginia governor on April 17, the two state Senators, and a congressional delegation, the major broadcasting networks put aside their soap operas and daytime programming and covered the convocation live, making it a major media event.

Although George W. Bush had avoided for years going to funerals for victims of his Iraq war, he arrived with his wife Laura ready to make a speech and then do interviews with the network broadcasting news anchors who had assembled in Blacksburg for the event. Bush was at a critical time in his presidency. His Iraq policy was opposed by the majority of the public and the Democrats appeared ready to fight Bush on his failed policy. In November 2006 Congressional Elections, Republicans lost control of the House and the Senate and committees in both chambers were investigating a series of scandals in the Bush administration. Bush’s Attorney General, one of his closest operatives Alberto Gonzalez, was caught up in a major scandal and there were calls for his resignation. Questions concerning Bush’s competency were intensifying and it appeared that his last months in office would be conflicted ones.

Yet, in 1995 it appeared that Bill Clinton’s presidency had failed and was collapsing after Republicans won control of Congress in the 1994 off-term elections, and when Talk Radio was fiercely savaging the Clintons and inventing scandals like the so-called “Whitewater Affair” (see Lyons and Conason 2001). It is believed that after the tragedy of the Oklahoma City bombings Clinton reconnected with the public and his ratings went up steadily from that time, taking him handily through the 1996 presidential elections and enabling him to survive a major sex and impeachment scandal (see Kellner 2003a).

Could Bush also establish himself as Mourner-in-Chief and would publics rally around him as they did after 9/11? Bush’s speech, live on all the major US television networks, followed Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine. Kaine took an Old Testament approach, speaking of Job and his sufferings and the mysteries of faith. Bush, by contrast,

took a New Testament line speaking of the love and care of God for his people, suggesting that belief in God and the power of prayer would get them through their ordeal. His carefully crafted sound-byte read: “Today our nation grieves with those who have lost loved ones at Virginia Tech. We hold the victims in our hearts. We lift them up in our prayers. And we ask a loving God to comfort those who are suffering.” After a few further clichés and generalities from Bush, members of the local Christian, Moslem, Judaic, and even Buddhist faith got a few minutes of national airtime to pitch their religions, before the convocation turned inward to Virginia Tech concerns and the major broadcasting networks cut off their coverage.

Bush and his wife Laura were interviewed for the major news networks that night and it was clear that he was not even going to consider stricter gun control laws and by the weekend the buzz word for his administration was “mental health,” a safe topic that could replace gun control for national debate and political action. It is unlikely that Bush’s performance as Consoler-in-Chief would help him much as the following day there were some of the most deadly bombings in the Iraq war and by the end of the week hundreds of Shiites were dead from terrorist bombings, Shia politicians were pulling out of the government, and it appeared the Iraq debacle was worsening. And on Thursday April 19, 2007 a congressional grilling of Bush’s Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez produced such an inept and embarrassingly incompetent performance that even conservative republicans were calling for his resignation.

Meanwhile, intense media focus continued to unravel facts about the assassin Cho, about his victims and acts of heroism, and about failures of the Virginia Tech administration to deal with Cho and the resultant crisis. A multimedia package that Cho mailed to NBC News on April 16, apparently after the first murder in the dorm, and widely shown on April 18, revealed that Cho indeed was planning a media spectacle in the tradition of the Columbine shooters who he celebrated as “martyrs.”

A picture and video gallery in the multi-media dossier sent to NBC is said to have contained a DVD which held 27 video clips, 43 captioned still photos, and a 1800 word document that could reproduce the rant that was reported on the first day.[19] The material made it clear that Cho was planning to carry out himself a plan that he had constructed as “Massacre at Virginia Tech.” One of the photos in which Cho posed with a hammer in his hand reprises the Korean “Asian Extreme” film *Oldboy*,[20] which itself is a revenge fantasy in which a young Korean inexplicably imprisoned in a room goes out a rampage of revenge against his captors. Another pose shows Cho pointing a gun at his own head, another iconic image of *Oldboy*, which in turn is quoting Robert de Niro’s famous scene in *Taxi Driver*, in which he follows a slaughter of perceived villains with a suicidal blowing of his head apart, just as Cho did. Further, as Stephen Hunter argues, much of the iconography in the photo gallery quotes poses in films by Hong Kong action director John Woo, as in the images where Cho holds two guns in his hands, and points a gun at a camera. Further, Cho brandishes Beretta and Glock guns featured in Woo’s movies, that include *The Killer* where a professional assassin goes down a corridor, enters a room, and systematically mows down its occupants.[21]

The transformation of Cho’s image was striking. The shy nerdy student was suddenly aggressively staring in the camera with cold and calculating eyes, tightly holding guns, wearing a backwards black baseball cap, fingerless black gloves, and a black T-shirt under a khaki photographer-style vest. When he spoke in a mocking monotone, he spit out belligerent taunts and verbal assaults at all and sundry, laced with obscenities. Cho’s construction of a violent masculinity is apparent in the gap between the first still photo and his multimedia dossier when he assumes the guises and paraphernalia of of an alpha dog, ultra-macho man. The very exaggeration and hyperbole of the dossier, hardly a “manifesto” as Brian Williams of NBC described it when he introduced it to a shocked nation, calls attention to the constructedness and artificiality of hypermaleness in US society. Further, his extreme actions call attention to the potential destructiveness and devastation in assuming an ultra-macho identity. Since Cho was apparently not able to construct a normal student and male identity, he obviously resorted to extremity and exaggeration.

Cho’s literary expressions in his dossier and personal symbols also point to an aesthetic of excess. Earlier reports indicated that Cho had written in ink “Ismail Ax” on his arm. The “Ismail Ax” reference, led some conservatives to conclude that Cho was Islamic inspired. Jonah Goldberg, for instance, speculated that:

First it was Johnny Muhammad, now it was Cho Sueng Hui aka Ismail Ax. Precisely how many mass shooters have to turn out to have adopted Muslim names before we get it? Islam has become the tribe of choice of those who hate American society... I’m talking about the angry, malignant, narcissist loners who want to reject their community utterly, to throw off their ‘slave name’ and represent the downtrodden of the earth by shooting their friends and neighbors. This morning I read that the Virginia Tech shooter died with the name Ismail Ax written in red ink on his arm. The mainstream press doesn’t seem to have a clue as to what this might mean. To quote Indiana Jones, “Didn’t any of you guys go to Sunday School?”[22]

But on the evening of April 18, NBC reported that the package with the multimedia dossier was addressed as sent from “A. Ishmael.” The latter literary spelling of the Old Testament and Koranic “Ismail” could refer to the opening of Herman Melville’s classic *Moby Dick*, where the narrator begins with “Call me Ishmael.” This reading would position the shooter as on a revenge quest, as was Captain Ahab against the White Whale, *Moby Dick*. But it also positions Cho himself within the great tradition of American literature, as Ishmael is the narrator of one of the United States’s great novels. Another Internet search noted that the literary character Ishmael is also “tied to James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Prairie*, Ishmael Bush is known as an outcast and outlawed warrior, according to an essay written in 1969 by William H. Goetzmann, a University of Texas History professor. In Cooper’s book, ‘Bush carries the prime symbol of evil—the spoiler’s axe,’ the professor wrote.”[23]

Perhaps the Ishmael Ax moniker positions Cho as well in the tradition of Hollywood and Asian Extreme gore films featuring Ax(e) murderers, as other photos in his dossier show him with knives and hammer in hand, iconography familiar from horror and gore films, which he had apparently studied.[24]

Yet, Ismail/Ishmael is also a Biblical name, prominent in both the Judaic and Islamic religions. As Richard Engel points out: “Ismail is the Koranic name of Abraham’s first-born son. In one of the central stories of the Koran, God orders Abraham (called Ibrahim) to sacrifice Ismail as a test of faith, but then intervenes and replaces him with a sheep. Muslims reenact this story by sacrificing a sheep on Eid al-Adha (feast of the sacrifice) during the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.”[25]

Cho’s references in his text thus span high and low culture and various religious and literary traditions in a postmodern pastiche. The references to Christ in his rambling “manifesto” position Cho himself as sacrificial and redemptive, although he also blames Jesus for his rampage, writing: “You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy’s life you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people.” But then: “Jesus loved crucifying me. He loved inducing cancer in my head, terrorizing my heart and ripping my soul all this time.”

Another excerpt from his text positions Cho as a domestic terrorist carrying out a revenge fantasy when he writes: “you had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today.... But you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off.”

The “you” in the message seems to refer to all the fellow students and teachers who failed to grasp his creative genius and who ridiculed his writings and behavior. “You” also could refer to you and I more generally as part of a culture that Cho has could come to violently and psychotically reject, although “You” could also refer to the media itself as his inspiration, for his sick murder rampage was clearly based on media culture and its vehicle was media spectacle.

Cho thus can be seen as a domestic terrorist assassin in the tradition of Timothy McVeigh, the Unabomber, and the two Columbine shooters (see Chapter 3), the latter of whom he mentions in the text as “martyrs.” Richard Engel, NBC’s Middle East Bureau chief noted in his blog that Cho’s “testimony” videos were grimly reminiscent of suicide bombers who left videos explaining their actions and trying to justify themselves with grievances and higher purposes.[26] But Cho also positions himself as a vehicle of class revenge:

You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn’t enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren’t enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn’t enough. Your vodka and Cognac weren’t enough. All your debaucheries weren’t enough. Those weren’t enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything.

The ensuing media spectacle apparently achieved what the crazed Cho had in mind, a spectacle of terror a la the 9/11 terror attacks which attracted scores of media from all over the world to Blacksburg in saturation coverage of the event. His carefully assembled multi-media package revealed to the world who Cho was, and won for him a kind of sick and perverted immortality, or at least tremendous notoriety in the contemporary moment.

There was a fierce, albeit partially hypocritical, backlash against NBC for releasing the media dossier and making a potential hero and martyr out of Cho. No doubt, any network getting such a scoop would broadcast it in the current frenetic competition for media ratings, and all of the networks gave saturation coverage to the dossier, each image of which was burned with the NBC logo, just as earlier video camera footage of the gunshots echoing from Norris Hall all contained the CNN logo.

Cho was media savvy enough to know that NBC (or any television network) would broadcast his material, while it is well-known that the police in the Columbine shootings only later released small portions of the killers’ videos

and writings. It should also be pointed out that Cho's videography and picture posing replicated the form of young people's posting on sites like MySpace or Facebook, while his video is similar to the kinds of postings young people put on YouTube. Previously, Cho's Facebook nom de plume was QuestionMark?, a phrase he also used in text-messaging. Now the world had at least some idea who Seung-Hui Cho really was, although many question marks remain.

1.4 Guns and Political Scapegoating

Every time that there is a significant school, university, or workplace shooting, there is discussion of the need for stricter gun laws, but after some brief discussion the issue falls away. After Virginia governor Timothy Kaine returned to Blacksburg from a Tokyo trade conference on April 17 of the Virginia Tech Convocation, he announced that he would appoint a panel at the university's request to review the authorities' handling of the disaster. But, in a widely quoted statement, he warned against making snap judgments and said he had "nothing but loathing" for those who take the tragedy and "make it their political hobby horse to ride."^[27]

The pro-gun lobby, however, and rightwing pundits, was ready with its ammunition and took an offensive role. Rightwing Internet sites began immediately claiming that the fact that Virginia had banned guns from state universities meant that there were no student shooters able to take down the assailant. I saw this position articulated on MSNBC the day of the shooting itself by a Denver law school professor with the MSNBC Live anchor Amy Robach agreeing that the scale of murder might have been reduced if students were allowed to carry guns. A sane gun authority on the show reacted with horror to the idea of having unrestricted guns on campus, but was cut off by the anchor and not able to articulate his position. Indeed, consider having a classroom, dorm, or public university space full of armed students, faculty, or staff, who might go off on a sudden whim, and one can easily imagine a daily massacre in a gun-saturated America.

While both sides on the gun controversy tried to get out their points of view, the pro-gun control side was quickly marginalized, as I will show. Initially, however, in Sacha Zimmerman's summary:

Before the blood had even dried at Tech, the gun-control debate erupted. Both sides of the issue seemed to be in a race for the first word, for the best spin. "It is irresponsibly dangerous to tell citizens that they may not have guns at schools," said Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America. Meanwhile, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino was quick to awkwardly assure the world that the president still believes in the right to bear arms. And Suzanna Hupp, a former Texas state representative and concealed-weapons advocate, appeared on CBS's *The Early Show* not 24 hours after the shootings for a debate: "Why are we removing my teachers' right to protect themselves and the children that are in their care?" Her opposition, Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, swiftly sprung into action: "Let's prevent these folks from getting these guns in the first place. ... If they can't get that gun with a high-powered clip that's shooting off that many rounds that quickly, then we're making our community safer."^[28]

The corporate broadcasting media, however, allowed few pro-gun control voices to be heard. Representative Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), whose husband was killed and son seriously injured in a Long Island Rail Road shooting, was on several networks. She urged House leaders to move quickly to push forward stalled legislation that would improve data bases that could be used in conducting criminal background checks on potential gun purchasers, an issue she had been pushing for years. While Philip Van Cleave, President of the Virginia Citizens Defense League conceded that allowing faculty and students to carry guns might not have prevented the rampage, he claimed that at least "they wouldn't die like sheep, ... but more like a wolf with some fangs, able to fight back."^[29] The macho Right, in fact, attacked the Virginia Tech students for not fighting back more ferociously against the assassin. As *Media Matters* compiled the story:

In the April 18 edition of his daily program notes, called *Nealz Nuze* and posted on his website, nationally syndicated radio host Neal Boortz asked: "How far have we advanced in the wussification of America?" Boortz was responding to criticism of comments he made on the April 17 broadcast of his radio show regarding the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. During that broadcast, Boortz asked: "How the hell do 25 students allow themselves to be lined up against the wall in a classroom and picked off one by one? How does that happen, when they could have rushed the gunman, the shooter, and most of them would have survived?" In his April 18 program notes, Boortz added: "It seems that standing in terror waiting for your turn to be executed was the right thing to do, and any questions as to why 25 students didn't try to rush and overpower Cho Seung-Hui are just examples of right wing maniacal bias. Surrender-comply-adjust. The doctrine of the left. ... Even the suggestion that young adults should actually engage in an act of self defense brings howls of protest."

In the April 17 edition of his program notes, Boortz had similarly asked: “Why didn’t some of these students fight back? How in the hell do you line students up against a wall (if that’s the way it played out) and start picking them off one by one without the students turning on you? You have a choice. Try to rush the killer and get his gun, or stand there and wait to be shot. I would love to hear from some of you who have insight into situations such as this. Was there just not enough time to react? Were they paralyzed with fear? Were they waiting for someone else to take action? Sorry ... I just don’t understand.” [30]

Boortz and other rightwing macho Rambos dishonor the heroism of professors and students who blocked classroom doors, with one elderly 76 year old professor, holocaust survivor Liviu Librescu, getting killed trying to block the door shut so students could escape out the window. Another professor and his students were able to block the door of their classroom and prevent Cho from entering. Further, there could well be untold tales of heroism, as well as many documented ones.[31]

Rightwing response to the Virginia Tech tragedy was both appalling and revealing. Some prominent rightist commentators took the occasion of the tragedy and intense media spectacle to bash liberals or their favorite targets. Media Matters reported that “(o)n the April 19 broadcast of his nationally syndicated radio show, host Rush Limbaugh declared that the perpetrator of the April 16 Virginia Tech shootings “had to be a liberal,” adding: “You start railing against the rich, and all this other—this guy’s a liberal. He was turned into a liberal somewhere along the line. So it’s a liberal that committed this act.”[32] But it is doubtful Cho had a coherent political ideology, and he clearly inserted himself in the tradition of domestic terrorists including the Columbine shooters and Timothy McVeigh, hardly “liberal.”

Professional ‘60s-basher Thomas Sowell blamed the Virginia Tech and Columbine shootings on ‘60s culture and its alleged “collective guilt” that supposedly blamed ‘60s urban violence on society and somehow sent out the message that it was okay to kill people because it’s all society’s fault.[33] Sowell’s failure in argument and reasoning is stunning, as no one makes the arguments about the ‘60s he claims, and puts on display the simple-minded tendency of rightwing ideologues to blame everything on their own pet peeves and ideological obsessions.

But the most extreme example of rank hypocrisy and political exploitation of the Virginia Tech tragedy was a dual intervention by Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer. Krauthammer, one of the most enthusiastic advocates to this day of the Iraq war, reasonably wrote in his April 19 Washington Post column that it is terribly inappropriate to exploit tragedies like the Virginia Tech shootings to make ideological arguments. But later in the day and less than 48 hours after the shooting, Krauthammer was on Fox News exploiting the shootings to promote one of his personal hobby horses. As Glen Greenwood notes in his Salon blog, Krauthammer just couldn’t help running to Fox News “to explain why the Virginia Tech shootings and the killer’s ‘manifesto’ are connected to Al Jazeera, the Palestinians and other Muslim Enemies who dominate Krauthammer’s political agenda”:

KRAUTHAMMER: What you can say, just—not as a psychiatrist, but as somebody who’s lived through the a past seven or eight years, is that if you look at that picture, it draws its inspiration from the manifestos, the iconic photographs of the Islamic suicide bombers over the last half decade in Palestine, in Iraq and elsewhere.

That’s what they end up leaving behind, either on al Jazeera or Palestinian TV. And he, it seems, as if his inspiration for leaving the message behind in that way, might have been this kind of suicide attack, which, of course, his was. And he did leave the return address return “Ismail Ax.” “Ismail Ax.” I suspect it has some more to do with Islamic terror and the inspiration than it does with the opening line of Moby Dick [the bold marks are by Greenwood]. [34]

In fact, the “Ismail” and “Ishmael” references in Cho’s testimony could refer to the Ishmael character in either the Old Testament or the Koran, or it could refer to Moby Dick’s narrator Ishmael, or a hybridized fantasy of Cho’s deranged and disordered mind. Krauthammer’s blaming the massacre on “Al Jazeera, the Palestinians and other Muslim Enemies” give us insight into Krauthammer’s deranged and disordered mind that sees his Muslim enemies at work everywhere from Iraq to Blacksburg Virginia.

Never missing an opportunity to attack pharmaceuticals, the “church” of Scientology cited Cho’s reported use of antidepressants and sent twenty of its “ministers” to Blacksburg to help with the “healing” process. A scientologist spokesperson Sylvia Stannard claimed that the killings demonstrate “these mind-altering drugs” make “you numb to other people’s suffering. You really have to be drugged up to coldly kill people like that.” Indeed, according to a report by George Rush and Joanna Rush Molloy: “Even before Cho’s name was released, the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, a group founded by the church [of Scientology], said in a press release that ‘media and law enforcement must move quickly to investigate the Virginia shooter’s psychiatric drug history—a common factor amongst school shooters.’”[35]

Obviously, Cho had major mental health issues, and serious psychiatrists saw clinical evidence in Cho's dossier, writings and behavior of classical paranoid schizophrenia,[36] that itself could be genetically generated or the product of some terrible brain disorder, while others saw evidence of depression, acute autism, or various forms of psychosis, or claimed that there was no evidence he suffered from any specific mental illness.[37] Yet such disease is itself overdetermined and often impossible to pinpoint the exact casual etiology, just as shootings like the Columbine rampage are socially overdetermined. Medical reductions cover over the social problems that school shootings and societal violence call attention, just as do the repeated evocations by pundits that Cho was simply "insane," and that this explains everything, or that he was an exemplar of "radical evil," another popular conservative (mis)explanation.

After school or workplace shootings or similar events that become media spectacles, there are demands for simple explanation, scapegoats, and actions. After the Columbine shootings, certain pundits attacked the Internet, Marilyn Manson and various forms of goth or punk music and culture, violent films and television, video games, and just about every form of youth culture except bowling. In Cho's case, his alleged earlier interest in video games, his deep Internet fascination, and his seeming affinity for violent movies could lead some to scapegoat these forms of youth culture. This would be, I believe, a serious mistake. Rather than ban media culture from the lives of youth and its study from schools, I would advocate critical media literacy as an essential part of education from early grade schools through the university level (see Kellner 1995 and Chapter 4 *Guys and Guns Amok*).

In addition, however, I want to argue for multiperspectivist interpretations of events like the Virginia Tech Massacre or the Columbine Shootings (or for that matter for political events like the Iraq war). We still do not know exactly why the Columbine shootings took place and there are no doubt a multiplicity of factors ranging from the experiences at school of the extremely alienated teenage boys, to any number of cultural influences, including the culture of violence and violent gun culture in the US, or specific familial or individual experiences. As Michael Moore and a father of one of the teenagers shot at Columbine concluded in the film *Bowling for Columbine*, there's no one simple answer to why there is so much gun violence in the United States, but rather a variety of interacting causes, requiring multi-causal explanation (*Guys and Guns Amok* Chapter 3.32).

Likewise, we may never know why Cho choose to engineer and orchestrate the Virginia Tech Massacre and from his multimedia dossier it is clear that there were a range of influences spanning violent Korean and Asian films, the Columbine shooters who he referred to as "martyrs", religious texts and references ranging from the Koran to the both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, to possible literary influences. Reports of his life indicate that earlier he was devoted to basketball and video games and his dorm-mates note that he spent hours on the computer, often listening repeatedly to certain songs. Such reports were used to attack Internet games,[38] but few criticized his basketball obsession as fuelling murderous fantasies. Moreover, one report indicated that he wrote the lyrics to his favorite Collective Soul song "Shine," that he reportedly repeatedly listened to, on the walls of his dorm room:

Teach me how to speak

Teach me how to share

Teach me where to go

Tell me will love be there [39]

While the disappointment of such yearning could inspire rage, it is ludicrous to blame the music, or any one of Cho's media cultural influences, for the Virginia Tech Massacre, and pundits who pick out any single influence, usually one of their favorite targets, are irresponsible. Complex events always have a multiplicity of causes and to attempt to produce a single-factor explanation or solution is simplistic and reductive. As noted, Cho also had creative ambitions, understood the workings of the media and media spectacle, and carefully planned his moments of infamy. No doubt more facts and information may emerge concerning Cho's influences, motivations, and warped actions, but it would be wrong to at this time try to provide a one-sided interpretation or explanation.

Yet there is no doubt that he became obsessed with guns and violence gun culture during his last days. There are reports that he had thoroughly immersed himself in the culture of gun violence, buying one gun from a local store and another over the Internet, where the seller indicated he appeared a highly knowledgeable gun consumer. Cho bought ammunition from the Internet, went to a gym to buff himself up, went to a shooting range to engage in target practice, and thoroughly immersed himself in ultramasculinist gun culture.

Yet a constellation of influences helped construct Cho and we may probably never know the precise influences

of media culture, models of masculinity, gun culture, and the specific environmental influences of family, school, and social life. The overdetermined nature of events like school shootings requires multiperspectivist analysis and contextualizing the event in the life-situation of those involved. I have criticized certain one-sided interpretations of Cho's rampage and shown how the media spectacle of the “Virginia Tech Massacre” has been a contested event. In my forthcoming book *Guys and Guns Amok*, I put the Virginia Tech shootings in the context of analyses of alienation of youth, domestic terrorism, the construction of masculinist male identities in media culture and gun culture, and situate Cho in a constellation that includes Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombings, the Unabomber, and the Columbine school shootings to provide examples of individuals who construct their identities and produce media spectacles to advance their politics in a context of guns and men running amok. Hence, the sketch here of the “Virginia Tech Massacre” is provisional and requires a broader context to fully engage.

Endnotes

1. I am using the term “The Virginia Tech Massacre” because this was the phrase that the major broadcasting networks used from the beginning and continued to use through the opening days of the spectacle. This text is part of a larger project where I engage the spectacle of the Virginia Tech Massacre and put it in the context of the domestic terrorism of the Oklahoma City bombings, the Unabomber, and the Columbine High School shootings. The book, *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombings to the Virginia Tech Massacre*, will be published by Paradigm Press later this year. Thanks to Jennifer Knerr and Henry Giroux for facilitating a fast contract and for helpful comments on the text. Finally, I am putting all articles referenced in footnotes, most of which have hypertext links, while am referencing books in standard form.

2. My notion of media spectacle builds on French theorist Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle* (1967), but differs significantly from Debord's concept (see Kellner 2003a and 2005). Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was published in translation in a pirate edition by Black and Red (Detroit) in 1970 and reprinted many times; another edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994. The key texts of Debord and his group the Situationist International are found on various Web sites, producing a curious afterlife for Situationist ideas and practices. For further discussion of Debord and the Situationists, see Best and Kellner 1997, Chapter 3; see also the discussions of spectacle culture in Best and Kellner 2001 and Kellner 2003a.

3. See Douglas Kellner, “The Katrina Hurricane Spectacle and the Crisis of the Bush Presidency,” *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 7, Nr. 2 (May 2007):222-234, and Giroux 2006.

4. Thanks to Christine Kelly for e-mailing me (April 23, 2007) that: What also has to be challenged is the media's assertion that the VTech tragedy is the “deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history”. This isn't true. According to Peter Hart on FAIR 's (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) “CounterSpin” radio program this week, “The 1873 massacre of Black militia soldiers

during Reconstruction left an estimated 105 dead, the Sand Creek Massacre of Cheyenne left a comparable death toll, Wounded Knee was a massacre of around 300, the 1921 killings in Tulsa, OK...killings of African-Americans in what is often referred to as “The Black Wall Street” left dozens dead”. I would add to that the 1871 killing of 19 Chinese men and boys in Los Angeles and the 1885 massacre of 28 Chinese were killed and 15 wounded, some of whom later died, in Rock Springs, Wyoming. This is not to diminish what happened at VTech but if the media wants to make statements regarding an incident's historical context they should take the time to make sure they do the research. Or, perhaps, the killings of Native-Americans, Asians and African-Americans by white mobs don't really matter.

5. Following Korean conventions of listing the family name first, the Virginia Tech shooter was first referred to Cho Seung-Hui in the U.S. media, but the family intervened and requested the more Americanized designation Seung-Hui Cho, and I will follow this convention here.

6. On diagnostic critique, see Kellner and Ryan 1988 and Kellner, 1995, pp. 116-117.

7. Hank Kurz, Jr. “Questions Raised on Va. Tech Security.” *Washington Post*, Associated Press report. April 16, 2006, retrieved on 2007-04-16. See also Michael D. Shear, “Campus Shutdown never Considered,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2007:A01, which indicates that when Virginia Tech president Charles W. Steger and his top lieutenants gathered to assess the first shooting, they were called from the dorm by Campus Police Chief Wendell Flinchum who informed them that the police were on top of the case and were on the trail of the dead student's boyfriend, the suspect in the killing. Obviously, this assumption was dead wrong and a debate has unfolded concerning what the proper response should have been after the initial shooting.

8. Gilmore was quoted in Bobbie Johnson and Conor Clarke, “America's first user-generated confession. The U.S. college shooting marked a watershed moment for old and new media.” *The Guardian*, April 23, 2007 at

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/site/story/0,,2063112,00.html>.

9. Michael Bush, "Virginia Tech creates comms team in wake of tragedy," PRWeek, April 23, 2007 at <http://www.prweek.com/us/sectors/crisiscommunications/article/651936/Virginia-Tech-creates-comms-team-wake-tragedy/>.

10. This story was first reported by Michael Steed in the Chicago Sun-Times who claimed that the suspect was "a Chinese national who arrived in the United States last year on a student visa ...[who]... reportedly arrived in San Francisco on a United Airlines flight on Aug. 7, 2006, on a visa issued in Shanghai" at www.SunTimes.com (no longer accessible). The story quickly disappeared from the paper's web-site but not before it circulated through mainstream broadcasting media networks and the Internet.

11. For instance, see the posting by Peter Brimlow, "Virginia Tech Massacre: Gun Control—Or Immigration Control?", April 18, 2007 at the rightwing blog http://www.vdare.com/pb/070418_vt.htm.

12. On the fringes, there was speculation by Mae Brussell on whether Cho had CIA or Moonie connections given South Korea's close connections with the CIA and whether Cho was a Manchurian candidate whose programming ran amok, or was intended to divert attention from Bush administration scandals; see Brussels, "The Conspiracy Theory Blog" which continues to probe Cho/CIA/Moonie connections at <http://theconspiratorsnest.blogspot.com/search/label/VaTech%20Massacre> (accessed May 13, 2007). See also, Paul Joseph Watson, "Seung-Hui Cho Was a Mind Controlled Assassin," Prison Planet, April 19, 2007 at <http://www.prisonplanet.com/print.php> (Accessed June 2, 2007).

13. See Sandy Banks, "Ethnicity brings an unwelcome focus," Los Angeles Times, April 19, 2007:A01.

14. Bill O'Reilly, "Politics and Mass Murder," April 18, 2007 at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,266711,00.html>.

15. See Matt Apuzzo, "Former high school classmates say Va. Tech gunman was picked on in school," Associated Press, April 19, 2007 at <http://www.thetimesnews.com/onset?id=903&template=article.html>.

16. Evan Thomas, "Quiet and disturbed, Cho Seung-Hui seethed, then exploded. His odyssey." Newsweek, April 30, 2007 at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18248298/site/newsweek/>.

17. Two of Cho's plays were available on-line on April 21, 2007 at http://news.aol.com/virginia-tech-shootings/cho-seung-hui/_a/richard-mcbeef-cover-page/20070417134109990001. In its inimitable fashion, when these artifacts emerged on the Internet, a New York Post headline read "PSYCHO PENNED

POISON PLAYS," by LEELA de KRETSEK and KATE SHEEHY, April 18, 2007 at http://www.nypost.com/seven/04182007/news/nationalnews/psycho_penned_poison_plays_nationalnews_leela_de_kretser_and_kate_sheehy.htm.

18. We still do not know exactly who participated in the Oklahoma City bombings (see Chapter 3 of Guns Amok, forthcoming, for discussion of various theories).

19. Cho's multimedia dossier was archived at http://boingboing.net/2007_04_01_archive.html (accessed May 8, 2007).

20. The phrase "Extreme Asia" was a marketing slogan used to highlight an extreme form of horror and violence film emerging in Asia over the last decade, and the Sundance Channel regularly features "Asian Extreme" films. *Oldboy* (2004) is one of the most praised of this genre; made by Korean director Chanwook Park, it is part of his "vengeance trilogy." Curiously, Park directed the second segment of *Three Extremes* (2005), an Asian Extreme Horror fest by major Hong Kong, Korean, and Japanese directors. Park's segment features a successful director terrorized by one of the extras from his films who kidnaps his family, cuts off fingers of his piano-playing wife, induces the director to tell of his infidelity and to kill a young girl in the house. The crazed extra wants to demonstrate that although the director is rich, successful, famous, and thinks he is "good," he is no better than the pathetic extra. Bizarrely, the extra who torments the director looks quite similar to Cho.

21. Stephen Hunter, "Cinematic Clues To Understand The Slaughter Did Asian Thrillers Like 'Oldboy' Influence the Va. Tech Shooter?," Washington Post, April 20, 2007; Page C01 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/19/AR2007041901817.html?hpid=topnews>. A.O. Scott attacked Hunter's article, putting it in the context of attempts to blame media culture for shootings or acts of terror, but, in fact, Hunter does not overstep his claims on influence and was the first to call the attention to the uncanny resemblance between Cho's dossier and images in Asian Extreme films. See A.O. Scott, "Drawing a Line From Movie to Murder," New York Times April 23, 2007 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/23/movies/23movi.html?ex=1180843200&en=9bb670a87240317&ei=50>

70 I take the mediated position that media culture may have significant impact on behavior but should not be stigmatized or demonized as it is at most one factor among many in influencing violent behavior (see Kellner 1995).

22. Jonah Goldberg, National Review blog at <http://corner.nationalreview.com/post/?q=MWJINDUxODE4NjQ5NGY3NjlmMGY4MWI0OGRkNjJhODE=>

23. See "No Answers," The Tampa Bay Times, April 18, 2007 at <http://www.tbt.com/america/ata glance/article38944.ece>.

24. It was reported that Cho had taken courses in contemporary horror films and literature, a fact that

enabled conservatives to attack the study of popular culture and literature. See Marc Santora and Christine Hauser, “Anger of Killer Was on Exhibit in His Writing”, *New York Times*, April 20, 2007 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/19/us/19gunman.html>.

25. Richard Engel, “Cho’s ‘religious’ martyrdom video,” at <http://worldblog.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2007/04/19/157577.aspx>. Another reading was offered by the *New York Post* cited by the *New York Times*’ blog “the Lede” at <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/virginia/>:

“The reference may be to the Islamic account of the Biblical sacrifice of Abraham, where God commands the patriarch to sacrifice his own son. Abraham begins to comply, but God intervenes at the last moment to save the boy ... Abraham uses a knife in most versions of the story, but some accounts have him wielding an ax. A more obscure reference may be to a passage in the Koran referring to Abraham’s destruction of pagan idols; in some accounts, he uses an ax to do so. I should emphasize that these readings are all hermeneutical constructions and we will probably never know what meanings Cho was assigning to his text.

26. Richard Engel, *op. cit.*

27. Matt Apuzzo, “Va. Tech gunman writings raised concerns,” *Associated Press* Writer Tue Apr 17, 2007 at http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20070417/ap_on_re_us/virginia_tech_shooting.

28. Sacha Zimmerman, “The true roots of the Virginia Tech massacre. Generation Columbine, *TNR Online*, April 19m 2007 at <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070416&s=zimmerman041907>.

29. Leslie Eaton and Michael Luo, “Shooting Rekindles Issues of Gun Rights and Restrictions,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2007 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/us/18pistols.html?ref=us>.

30. “Boortz, others blame VA Tech victims for not fighting back,” at <http://mediamatters.org/items/200704180007>. Media Matters further notes that:

In questioning the actions of Virginia Tech students involved in the April 16 incident, Boortz joined the ranks of various commentators, including *National Review Online* contributor John Derbyshire, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Mark Steyn, who also writes for the *National Review*, and right-wing pundit and *Fox News* analyst Michelle Malkin.

In an April 17 weblog post on *National Review Online*’s *The Corner*, Derbyshire asked: “Where was the spirit of self-defense here? Setting aside the ludicrous campus ban on licensed conceals, why didn’t anyone rush the guy? It’s not like this was Rambo, hosing the place down with automatic weapons. He had two handguns for goodness’ sake—one of them reportedly a .22.” *Time.com* *Washington* editor Ana Marie Cox criticized Derbyshire in an April 17 post on

Time magazine’s political weblog, *Swampland*.

Steyn and Malkin have made similar statements, as the weblog *Think Progress* noted. In her April 18 syndicated column, Malkin wrote: “Instead of encouraging autonomy, our higher institutions of learning stoke passivity and conflict-avoidance. And as the erosion of intellectual self-defense goes, so goes the erosion of physical self-defense.” In his April 18 *National Review* column, Steyn suggested that Virginia Tech students were guilty of an “awful corrosive passivity” that is “an existential threat to a functioning society.” (*op. cit.*)

31. For a detailed account of the shooting, see David Maraniss, “That Was the Desk I chose to Die Under,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2007: A01. See also Raymond Hernandez, “Inside Room 207, Students Panicked at Rampage and Then held Off Gunman’s Return,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2007.

32. “Limbaugh said Virginia Tech shooter ‘had to be a liberal’” at <http://mediamatters.org/items/200704190008>.

33. Thomas Sowell, “Are Today’s Mass Shootings a Consequence of ‘60s Collective Guilt?” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 26, 2007: 19A.

34. Glen Greenwood, “Charles Krauthammer takes rank hypocrisy to new lows,” *Salon*, April 20, 2007 at <http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2007/04/20/krauthammer/print.html>.

35. George Rush and Joanna Rush Molloy, “Critics: Scientologists’ Va. Trip A Time to Prey,” *Daily News (New York)*, April 18, 2007: p. 24. Unfortunately, for the scientologists’ crusade against prescriptive drugs, a toxicology report indicated that there was no evidence of prescriptive drugs or toxic substances found in Cho. See “Cho’s toxicology report released, Tech announces changes,” *Collegiate Times*, June 21, 2007 at <http://collegiatetimes.com/news/1/ARTICLE/9130/2007-06-21.html> (accessed June 23, 2007). While I think it is a mistake a la the scientologists to blame school shootings on prescriptive drugs tout court, there are serious concerns about overprescription and misprescription of dangerous drugs that I do not want to ignore.

36. See, for example, Michael Welner, “Cho Likely Schizophrenic, Evidence Suggests,” *ABC News*, April 17, 2007 at <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/VATech/story?id=3050483>.

37. For wide-ranging discussion of the psychiatric debates concerning Cho’s condition, that no one can obviously definitively resolve at this point, see the open-minded and ended discussions on Robert Lindsay’s blog at <http://robertlindsay.blogspot.com/2007/04/did-cho-have-prodromal-paranoid.html>.

38. Anti-video game activist Jack Thompson appeared on *Fox News* the day of the shooting to point the finger of blame at video games, and Dr. Phil appeared

on Larry King Live to attack video games; see Winda Benedetti, "Were Video games to blame for massacre? Pundits rushed to judge industry, gamers in the wake of shooting," MSNBC Commentary, April 20, 2007 at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18220228/>. The commentary notes that the Washington Post had just pulled a paragraph from a story that claimed Cho was an avid fan of the game "Counter-Strike," and then

indicated that no video games were found in his room and that his suite-mates had never seen him play video games.

39. Cited in Nancy Gibbs, "Darkness Falls," Time, April 19, 2007 at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1612715,00.html>.

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Baudrillard (1929 — 2007) & Mao: The History of Normal Violence

Charles Lemert

When Annie and I arrived in Beijing, it had been two virtual days since we left New York for what turned out to be a thirty-hour trip that erased March 7, 2007 from our lives. We were met at the airport by my friend and colleague in sociology who, by the end of our stay, Annie came to call Auntie Ming. After greetings and inquiries as to the trip, her first question to me was, “How is this day being celebrated in the States?” The day was March 8, International Women’s Day, which of course was not being celebrated at all back home. If in China, and much of the sane world, it was not exactly being celebrated, the Day was noteworthy; so much for globalization in the fast-fading core. Time is very fast these days. Still some global spaces can pick and choose at will.

Not only that but, in some places, space makes for slow. It is nearly impossible to get anywhere fast when the place through or around which you must get is New York City. Annie and I started our impossibly long trip on a fast plane a good ten hours before take off. This just to get from New Haven, where we live, to JFK—a real distance of about 80 miles; hence, waiting, traffic, and security lines included, the speed of our airport trip was around 10 miles per hour or, not that much faster than it took Henry David Thoreau to walk same the same journey in 1843. Real space can grind virtual velocity to a halt, occasionally with real consequences. In our case, the unbearable slowness of fast time meant that my daughter and I were out of this world for the better part of three calendrical days. So far as news was concerned, we also missed March 6, 2007. For Annie, age nine, this meant little in particular. For me, it meant that in the time lost getting to China I also missed the day Jean Baudrillard died.

Actually, in real historical time, if there is such a thing, I had missed a good bit of Baudrillard. I had never met him, nor bothered to read many of his later books, which were, even when I was younger, a little too cool. My time diverged from his sometime after the famous *Simulacra and Simulations* essay in 1981—, just when, on the plane of my personal life, divorce and related troubles made books like *Cool Memories* (1987) dispensable. From the tiny window I afforded myself I could see his plane speeding off on a tangent I could not, then, pursue. I did not begin to catch up until my personal life had broken new ground to enter its own new time. Yet, Baudrillard’s death, like his life, is an event, so to speak, that is hard to outrun, impossible to ignore.



The end of Baudrillard may well have signified the end of the infamously important French tradition of post-something-hard-to-say-what-a-whatever-it-was that many in this world wished would never have been.

It has been my fate, if such a term applies to this world, to work in a field, sociology, that stirs the heart and mind with provocations so rich as to be too much for those encamped in the field's center ground. Though Baudrillard taught sociology at Nanterre, many of the profession abhorred his ideas which, when left unread, can indeed be overstimulating. The very idea that Disneyland and such like are the only reliable realities is unnerving to those who stake their sense of personal worth on hard realities that have rewarded them. The most memorable of these types, in my experience, was a lesser French sociologist whose academic post owed more to his bourgeois credits than to any real accomplishment. When invited to join an editorial project, he agreed on one condition: that Jean Baudrillard be excluded. Baudrillard sped on; this one sank of his own dead weight.

Baudrillard, in *The Illusion of the End* (1992), one of the books I caught up with, put the issue of our time just right: "The illusion of our history opens onto the greatly more radical illusion of the world." This was 1992, when he was among the first to appreciate the true importance of the events of 1989-1991 for Europe and the world.

Now we have closed the eyelids of the Revolution, closed our eyes on the Revolution, now we have broken down the Wall of Shame, now that the lips of protest are closed (with the sugar of history which melts on the tongue), now Europe—and memories—are no longer haunted by the spectre of communism, nor even by that of power, now the aristocratic illusion of the origin and the democratic illusion of the end are increasingly receding, we no longer have the choice of advancing, of persevering in the present destruction, or of retreating—but only of facing up to this radical illusion.

As Baudrillard's earliest books were written in the wake of the events of 1968, his later ones were of the events of 1989. What the queasy never quite understood is that the French social theorists who came into their own around 1968 were clear about what history was and was not. The French, after all, had invented History in the sense of the tragedy of 1789 and the farce of 1848. Europeans of the short twentieth century lived quotidian history with a sober intensity that even the Americans who died and suffered in the world wars had not. The Americans have always believed that History was on their side. This is an arrogance that can be justified only by an inexcusable abstraction from the surrealities of war. The Europeans lived with the violence of capital-H History—the tragedies and farces, the chambers and the saturation bombings, and all the rest that carried over with ever more sinister inventiveness from the failures of the nineteenth century ideal of History's purposeful End.

If lower-case history has anything good to say about the pathetic George W. Bush it might be that his time as the administrator of modern values exposed them for what they always had been—a phantasmagoria of moving pictures projecting the illusion of progressive History as more real than any true story could ever be. The Greatest Story Ever Told is that History triumphs, when in fact (so to speak) history just is what it is, without beginning or ending, save those supplied by popular fictions.

Modernity's bourgeois revolution was—referring to one of Baudrillard's early theories—a system of consumption created by necessity at one and the same time as the system of production. Already in *The System of Objects* (1968), "There are no limits to consumption." If the capitalist mode of production is to be History, then even Marx's all-too-neat, if all-too-prescient, idea that production determines everything of value planted the seed of its own revision. Consumption is not an end, but a resource. Thus, as Baudrillard made clear, use-value must be analytically cut from exchange-value in order to insert the ownership of desire. Without the manufacture of need, there can be no surplus value. Production, in the end, such as it is, does not produce value seeking subjects but consuming humanoids—reifications of the real beings ground down by the avarice of modernity. "The system of needs is the product of the system of production."

Thus, later, from the notoriously wonderful essay, *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981):

In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its entire vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced: this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.

In lines that would make Žižek blush, Baudrillard lends specific gravity to his semiotic theory of consumption as

a theory of history as the reality of History. When need is the only product of the modern system, then the fetishism of commodities is more than a moral error. It exhausts the meaning of historical reality, in the modern sense, as a fog of fungible references without referents—a system beyond systems that renders impractical the very idea of discernible values, whether material or ideal; hence, the hyperreality of all things—a universe without end in which social things disclose their perfect instability.

Beijing on March 8, 2007 was just the place to be forced to mediate on Baudrillard's passing into a time that never ends. On that day, in a city where many wear masks to protect what lung tissue remains, the air was uncommonly clear. The sun was bright. Tiananmen Square was crowded with tourists from the provinces. The Great Hall of the People was hosting the National People's Congress (an institution so illusory as to meet annually to rubber stamp decreed policies). Party flags were flapping in the brisk wind. Mao's Tomb, just across the Square from the Great Hall, was beset I thought by an unusually long line of visitors waiting to gape at the Chairman's remains.

Even on a bad weather day, Tiananmen is a sight to behold. Few places on earth, in my experience, better suit Baudrillard's theory of consumable objects. It is a Disneyland in which Mao is the ubiquitous Mickey Mouse. An enormous mug shot of the Chairman is mounted over the South Gate of the Forbidden City. His visage is plainly visible from any point in Tiananmen's 4.3 million square feet wide open space; or, better put, he, in death, stares far along the ancient axis of the city he meant to modernize.

The Forbidden City was the Imperial Palace of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1912). The Palace occupied an enormous center ground of the ancient walled city. From the Imperial Palace looking to the South, Tiananmen Square is framed to the West by the Great Hall of the People, with Mao's Tomb prominently in the very middle. Beyond the Square, on the same meridian, the eye can make out in the distance the delicate outline of the Temple of Heaven—the Taoist temples built in the fifteen century under the Ming Dynasty. Each year on the winter solstice, the emperors processed from the Imperial Palace to the Temple where they paid homage to the Heavenly powers. Just beyond, still to the South, the 700 acre Temple grounds that dwarf both today's Square and the much reduced grounds of the Forbidden City, stand the remnants of the outer Southern Gate of the once-walled city. The Communists had torn down most of the ancient walls, as they are destroying the remaining urban villages that carry on much as they did in the days of the emperors.

The empires were overthrown in 1912 by the nationalist revolution. Mao was then a young student in Changsha in Hunan Province. He served perfunctorily for six months in the Republican army. His studies were under local provincial scholars who taught rudimentary philosophy based on Confucian classics. Mao quickly soured on the nationalists and their enlightened politics that turned out to be as cruel as were the feudal ones they overthrew.

By 1927, then in his mid-thirties, Mao had risen in the ranks of the Communist Party and begun to organize the peasants in eastern Hunan. They were the peasants who lent force to the army of the romanticized Long March. The Communist revolution suffered many defeats by the Kuomintang before Chiang Kai-shek was vanquished in 1949. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the Party under Mao began a Soviet-style "reconstruction" program.

Jonathan Spence, in *Mao Zedong: A Life* (1999), said of Mao:

Both Hundred Flowers movement and the launching of the Great Leap show Mao more and more divorced from any true reality check. ... And he himself seemed to care less and less for the consequences that might spring from his own erratic utterances. ... For the strange fact was that Mao had created a world in which things could hardly be otherwise.

Hence, even if Spence exaggerates, the Cultural Revolution of 1966 proves the point that Mao's vision for China was defiantly trapped in the traditional China of the imperial dynasties—a world cut off from the outside, a world organized around what turned out to be Disneyland principles. The enduring suffering of the Chinese people, most notably the peasantry that formed the political foundation of Mao's revolution, continued until the Chairman's death in 1976, and continues still. The Tiananmen slaughter in 1989 was but the most visible sign of the irreal system that killed so many for so long, violating the moral grammar Mao had imposed, then destroyed in his own unreal system of human consumption.

Baudrillard and Mao were not of the same worlds, nor of like mind. Yet, in a weird way, both were caught up, to differing ends, in the two most symbolic of late modern years: 1968 and 1989. Baudrillard flourished in the events of 1968 which were in Paris a street theater replaying modernity's unfinished revolutions—1789, 1848, 1871, and 1968. That year must also have brought Mao to his senses, to a degree. In 1969, he declared the Cultural Revolution over. But it had already taken on a life of its own. He could not end what he had begun. He died in 1976 still swimming up river against the violence he had wrought out of the reality he had made after his own illusions. 1989, in Beijing,

was a Prague springtime—an oddly deferred revelation of the force of popular rebellion against the power of a state gone mad on its own ideological opiate. In Europe, as Baudrillard said, the End of the Revolution exposed the illusion of all the epiphanies of all of modernity's insistencies on the reality of its own systems—communist, aristocratic, democratic. 1989, in Beijing as well as Europe, established, as Baudrillard said, “a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death.”

Beijing today is a magic kingdom. Mao looks out in death over Tiananmen Square, guarding the Forbidden City modernity meant to tear down. Tourists from the countryside stream through the Palace gates under the overblown image of the dead Chairman. They are the fortunate ones who can afford the price of admission, even perhaps a cup of Starbucks sold at the coffee shop deep within the once forbidden Palace. They, the younger generations, are among the descendents of the same rural poor Mao championed before he became a surreal fact of his own imagination. Their distant cousins at several removes suffer in the remote provinces, some stealing into the capital city to work for scant pay, with irregular sleep and meager rations, to build the new, pseudo-modern buildings that will sell Buicks and Audis, Kentucky Fried Chicken and other Western poisons. They kill our dogs; we kill their children.

In the end, so to speak, the Magic Kingdom is everywhere. The postmodern China that Mao made possible is itself an imitation of the Western idea of the Good. Beijing is not yet Mumbai, but lord knows it is trying; and, if this, then Dubai cannot be far behind—the world as indoor mall, reality as shopping, truth as denial of the suffering one can see from the hotels late at night as peasants, chilled to the bone, work on pouring the foundations of the Kingdom.

It is not easy to get to Blacksburg, Virginia. Flying requires a series of hub connects. Driving is through the mountains. Blacksburg is a remote oasis on the wrong side of the mountains that separate the Blue Ridge playground from Appalachian poverty.

What made the slaughter of so many students and faculty at Virginia Tech so senseless was, in part, that it happened here. For a time, the world moved to Blacksburg to gawk at the terrible pain. In time, the dead will be forgotten in the system of death that moves on inexorably without ending.

I have lost a child to another kind of violence. I do not minimize the suffering of parents who lost children that terrible day. But in time's slow progress, life triumphs, for what that may be worth. Those who get through the pain will allow their dead to find their places in a time the living cannot, and must not, understand. Fast time or slow, all time, as Levinas and Heidegger taught, is the time of non-being. The dead measure what progress there might be.

Blacksburg shocks, still now and for a while longer, because it is so remote in a world where, the well-connected believe everything is connected. The rural poverty of the western Virginias is Appalachian, which in turn is a comparable to Eastern Hunan where Mao started out with the best of intentions on few clues as to what was and was not real History.

The rage that pushed a boy from Korea to murder innocents who, to him, no doubt, looked like all the faceless others who had, in his mind, tormented him is like unto the rage in all human beings. The normals hold it in. The paranormals pretend it is not there. The abnormals succumb to it. Normal violence is a terrible thing. It is the lifeblood of the modern world. Once it pours out of open wounds it drowns the pain.

Today, as for several centuries, normal violence is done in the name of class, ideals, values and all the rest of the purported realities by which this world has been organized since, say, 1500 or so, when the Iberians sailed for their India and the Mings built their Forbidden City. What were they escaping? Who were they sheltering themselves from? What makes them so different from the rest of us who have been invented in the wake of the modern illusion?

Blacksburg is not terrorism. It is not even murder. It is but one of the realities of a world that Baudrillard, among many others, saw dimly in 1968 and Mao, among many others, must have dimly figured out when he tried, in 1969, to stop the violence he had begun. Time moves, ever more now than then, in odd, tangential ways and speeds. It may even be reversible, but it certainly cannot be taken back. A thousand mile march may begin with a single step. But if its drummer beats too hard, the march will not end well.

Mao looks out on us as the reminder of what moderns wanted—a republic of peoples the world over. It is, instead, a state of continuous violence. If, as Baudrillard put it, we accept this world as a radical illusion, then, who knows—might we begin to live as people can?

Colonization and Massacres: Virginia Tech and Jamestown

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

In April 2007, all the news seemed to be coming from Virginia and was about mass murder, occurring yesterday (400 years ago in Jamestown) and today (April 16, 2007). I haven't heard any commentary on the analogy of these bookends of colonialism in the press. Maybe it's that I'm writing the first chapter of a history of the United States and have genocide on my mind.

The Virginia Tech killings were heralded as the worst "mass killing," "worst massacre," in U.S. history. Descendants of massacred ancestors—indigenous peoples, African Americans, Mexicanos, Chinese—took exception to that designation. But, I know what those headlines meant; they meant the largest number of innocents killed by one armed civilian, although even that's probably not accurate either, so they really mean with guns and in the last half-century or so, maybe beginning in 1958 with nineteen-year-old Charles Starkweather and his even younger girlfriend Caril Fugate who killed eleven in Nebraska and Wyoming. Then, in 1966, there was Charles Whitman up on top of the University of Texas tower, sniping and killing 13, wounding 31 others before being shot by police. Twenty years later, the post office killings began, in the quiet town of Edmond, Oklahoma, a few miles from where I grew up, giving rise to a new term, "going postal." Other workplace killings followed, with around 50 deaths up to now. More recently, school killings, or back to school killings counting Whitman in 1966, have prevailed, some 22 incidents since 1989 in the United States (a significant number in other countries as well).

Having lived through all of them, I have been interested in each one, ever since Starkweather, who was my age at the time. Each mass killing is followed by an orgiastic chorus of proclamations of a sea of normality punctured by a sole evildoer. Perhaps the incidents play a role in the society somewhat as Dostoevsky had his character, the "idiot," play as the member of the family who is weird or evil so that the rest of the family can be perceived or perceive themselves as "normal." With all the anger and tension we experience and observe daily, it's a wonder mass killings don't happen more often, but maybe the mass killer speaks for many and is a preventative.

The Dostoevskian "idiot" is a universal archetype under the patriarchal western family and the triad of family, church, and state. But, there's more to it than that in the United States. This can be seen from how we react. Some say we react so massively because it's the 24-7 television media and internet that causes us to dwell on such events. But, I recall the Starkweather crime spree from my youth in rural Oklahoma with no television at all and only local papers, and it didn't even happen in Oklahoma.

I think we have to go back to that yesterday in another part of Virginia, Jamestown, the site of the British queen's visit in April to celebrate the first permanent English colony in the western hemisphere; Vice-President Dick Cheney, in his Jamestown speech commemorating the 400 year anniversary called the birthplace of the United States. Indeed it is, a bloody birth at that.

When Cho went on his killing spree, there was a great deal of news about the 400 year commemoration, especially in Virginia. Was Cho curious enough to do an internet search about Jamestown? (Maybe the FBI knows from studying Cho's hard drive.) Or maybe Cho just looked at a book, or had taken a history course. Perhaps he saw some pictures of drawings of the Powhatan Indians who were killed by Captain John Smith and his soldiers to take their corn. Perhaps Cho saw a reflection of his own features in those Powhatan faces, and was reminded of what had happened to his own people, the multiple massacres of Korean civilians in the 1950s U.S. invasion and occupation,

the occupation continuing today. Or maybe it was Iraq.

In March, I had written a short essay, really a rant, that made the rounds on the internet, called "Hating the Rich." Although many comrade class warriors appreciated it, a few people warned that hatred leads to violence. I don't think that's true. In U.S. society we are not allowed to hate anyone or anything not designated by the State as the enemy. We are jumped on and accused of "playing the class card" or "playing the race card." I doubt that Cho was filled with hatred of any sort other than self-loathing. He did express scorn for "rich kids" in his videotaped suicide message, but the emotion was likely jealousy, or resentment, or maybe even love gone wrong, betrayal of that "American dream," he and his sister beneficiaries of their parents' near slave labor to pay for their elite educations.

And which is worse, Cho's destiny or that of his Princeton graduated sister working for the U.S. State Department's management of the Iraq war?

Cho, Not Che?: Positioning Blacksburg in the Political

Ben Agger

The power of our media culture was recently demonstrated in the week or so after the killing of 33 people (including the gunman Cho Seung-Hui) on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia on April 16, 2007. Day and night coverage of the event, and its aftermath, blanketed the airwaves, especially on the cable television channels such as CNN and MSNBC. These media framed the event and in so doing produced a viewership which held certain common assumptions and perceptions. The event was portrayed as somehow outside the political, an account that I want to challenge here. This is not to provide an alternative reductionism, which positions Cho and his victims entirely inside the political. The personal and political interpenetrate but they do not overlap entirely. In no way am I suggesting that Cho is a latter-day version of Che, in spite of his meandering messianism in which he defends his scorched-earth policy (replicating Columbine) on behalf of lost souls everywhere. But to view Blacksburg as occurring outside the political, merely as a human tragedy without social and political echoes and underpinnings, is to miss the point: Cho led a 'damaged life,' as Adorno termed it. And some of the damage was done by the world. Critical theory needs a social psychology in order to understand events such as those that occurred at Blacksburg.

How was Blacksburg framed as somehow outside the political?

1. Waves of psychologists and psychiatrists, some of whom were designated as hired hands of the networks themselves, were recruited to tell us that Cho was insane, implying or stating that his apparent mental illness (psychosis, sociopathy, etc.) was the result of organic causes. That might be partially true, but certainly no one could know this so quickly (or ever, given that he is dead).

2. The event was framed as a universal human tragedy and the dead were honored and remembered in collective vigils and demonstrations and by the wearing of Virginia Tech-themed and -colored apparel. By week's end, Hokie pride was on display. In this sense, the Blacksburg events were unifying themes supposedly cutting across political and party lines and thus preempting debate about the social causes and consequences of 'damaged life.' Virginia Tech became the latest version of the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina, although, again, these events, although seemingly 'natural,' were heavily influenced by social and political decisions and indecision. Nature, since the Frankfurt School's writings in the 1940s, is squarely within the realm of the political; and I am suggesting that human nature should be as well.

3. The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which enables citizens to form armed militias in face of government tyranny, was assumed as a given framework not subject to debate. Although gun control was discussed in some quarters, that was matched by the idea that students and faculty should arm themselves in order to prevent further massacres. I heard no one suggest repealing the Second Amendment, which allows individuals to own Uzis and other automatic weapons as a basic Constitutional right. I am not of the view that America was built on violence, that violence is as American as apple pie; rather, America was built on the possibility of revolutionary insurrection, which is a much more progressive reading of the Second Amendment than is offered by the NRA.

4. The psychologism discussed above drowned out consideration of Cho's immigrant status and his marginalization in his suburban Washington, D.C. high school, where he struggled to fit in. And most of the Virginia Tech students interviewed were Anglo and not Asian, suggesting that Cho felt equally marginalized in his university years. The two shooters at Columbine were also estranged from their fellow students and sometimes bullied. Although marginality need not lead to murder, it is important that these so-called mass murders involved young men with access to weaponry who experienced what Durkheim called anomie.

5. Any generationally-inflected cultural/political reading of Blacksburg and Columbine cannot blithely ignore the penchant among young men for violent video games. Cause/effect are difficult to disentangle, just as the psychic and the social/political do not sort neatly. However, solving existential problems by blowing people away is certainly prefigured by violent video games, especially those in which the young players actually simulate 'shooting.' I am not saying that video games 'caused' Blacksburg but that people who like violent video games are alienated and that alienation—the damaged life—is what led to Blacksburg.

6. The deaths at Blacksburg are no greater in number than the deaths in Iraq over a few days. We chose death in Iraq: a political decision. And yet the Blacksburg dead attract much greater attention, largely because we can position Cho outside of the political and thus create a narrative of undeserved death. A demography of death is sometimes betrayed by the media attention given it. From smallest to largest death counts: Columbine, Blacksburg, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, and U.S. casualties in Iraq.

7. The Virginia Tech administration has been faulted for reacting slowly to the first shootings, in one of their dormitories. That shooting occurred at about 7:15 A.M. It is suggested that they could have prevented the slaughter some two hours later if they had immediately called off classes. However, the local Blacksburg police led the Tech administrators to believe that the first shooting involved a 'domestic' situation and not a large-scale murderous rampage. They focused on the boyfriend of the girlfriend killed in the dormitory and kept him in custody all day until they realized that Cho was the shooter. They focused, mistakenly, on the boyfriend because he was a gun enthusiast. Again, the Second Amendment issue, this time leading tragically to many deaths.

8. Most so-called mass murderers are men. If we reject biologism, we must conclude that social and political influences predispose young men to commit these deeds, whereas women deal with their alienation in other ways.

Psychologism, the reduction of human problems to intrapsychic processes, is tempting because it leads us away from the political. Mass murderers are evil monsters, deformed by inherited madness. This explanation allows us to avoid the more challenging project, which is to trace the social in the psychic while refusing to reduce individuality to social structure—explaining away Blacksburg and Columbine.

Psychologism—reading Cho as mentally ill—misses the political and social dimensions of this tragedy which surely interact with his so-called state of mind. It is telling that Cho had no history of violence but suffered his wounds silently and privately. To be sure, he was accused of stalking a couple of women students and briefly institutionalized for this. But many men stalk without killing. More telling is that Cho was invisible, a 'question mark' even to himself (as he called himself in his self-describing screen name). Few adults picked up on Cho's damaged selfhood. Lucinda Roy in the English Department at Tech recognized his need. Nikki Giovanni, a poetry professor, refused to teach him because she said he was "mean." She had begun to read him politically as damaged; that is, she situated him in the interpersonal politics of the classroom in which his anger and self-loathing percolated. Everyone is potentially invisible in a huge bureaucratic institution such as a university. Invisibility should not lead us to psychologism; isolation is a social condition, the lack of connection leading troubled people down even more troubling paths. Isolation is the lack of the social (which is social).

One of my theses is that Cho does not occupy a different world from the rest of us but we belong to his world, in which many of us suffer agony, anxiety and isolation that could, given the right circumstances and crises, lead us down his road. To say he was evil, a rare demonic property, ignores the two, three, many Chos who make up what David Riesman years ago called the lonely crowd. We are not as lonely as Cho, nor as indignant, nor as likely to obtain small-caliber weapons. Perhaps we buffer our suffering with alcohol or drugs or entertainment. But we live in his world, eternally angry. Perhaps we do our violence by acting it out in perverted fantasy lives, allowing us otherwise to appear to function.

My other thesis is that the damaged life, as I am describing it and as Adorno termed it, is not a human inevitability but a product of particular social arrangements in which privatization and the lack of intimacy and community are endemic. Many choose to view people like Cho as evil or mad. I view them as damaged, perhaps even right out of the box. But for most people, the damage comes later, as they are mishandled by the world. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a signature work of the time: She argues that Adolf Eichmann, architect of Hitler's final solution to the Jewish problem, was not mad at all, nor evil, nor demonic, nor possessed. He was 'banal,' an ordinary guy carrying out orders. And he had a hand in killing over 6,000,000, not the 32 murdered at Blacksburg. Arendt makes it clear, as did the Frankfurt School in the study of 'authoritarian personality,' that powerlessness mixed with scapegoating can produce monstrous outcomes.

We await Cho's written 'manifesto,' carefully guarded by federal authorities. He may name names of people at Tech against whom he bore ill will. The video we have seen is sophomoric; he acknowledges his debt to the

Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, not to Regis Debray or the Unabomber or Lenin.

When I heard Cho speak on his death-day video, I thought he sounded like a person locked away in solitary confinement who was finding his voice after years of silence. He sounded strange to himself, spewing forth his childish manifesto with a voice that he had rarely heard. Astonishingly, people objected to the airing of this video, claiming that this ‘gave him what he wanted’—a platform. But the video was fascinating, showing a person possessed by his own words, which made no sense. No one who listened could possibly understand the roots of Cho’s alienation, lacking information about his particular background and sensibility. But everyone could understand that he was angry about something—the damaged life shadowing him.

It is important to position Blacksburg inside the political in order to resist the spectacular psychologism that turned Cho into an evil madman and not a person who suffers the world perhaps more intensely than the rest of us. This is not to deny organic causes and consequences of his behavior but to observe that these organic issues interact with the social and political in ways that produce variable outcomes. Not everyone who is bullied in school, or marginalized, picks up the gun. And in some societies, there are no guns to pick up. And just because some tried to help does not mean that mere helpers could penetrate Cho’s psyche to its core after years of isolation that emerged as self-hatred. His murderous behavior, pumping over 100 bullets into the bodies of his victims, led to his own self-inflicted demise. He committed suicide, which lay on the far side of his rampage. He could not differentiate himself sufficiently from the world in order to avoid bringing everyone down, murder/suicide blending to the point of indistinguishability.

The kids trapped in the classrooms of Norris Hall on the Tech campus were huddled behind desks and pretending to be dead, struggling to survive. They describe the eerie silence that followed Cho’s suicide. Most of the kids still alive did not realize he had killed himself; his own mortal wounding sounded exactly like all the others. The disturbing video taken by the student outside of Norris Hall whose soundtrack is punctuated by those echoing gun shots stands with the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination as a video chronicle of our times. Kennedy’s death, it could be said, ended the sixties before they got going and issued in decades of right-wing hegemony. This hegemony has deepened a culture of violence in which anyone can acquire automatic weapons (and bullets by eBay). And it could be said that Zapruder and Walter Cronkite, who broadcast the assassination weekend, initiated a media culture in which Cho copied Columbine and CNN positioned Blacksburg outside of the political, accompanied by the meaningless gestures of Americans wearing Virginia Tech colors in solidarity.

We should be worried about two, three, many Chos, souls so damaged that they cannot understand themselves in relation to the world. That Cho took the innocent down with him is literally correct: nearly all of the college kids interviewed during massacre week were sympathetic and caring. It was left to the Fox pundits, abetted by their dime-store psychiatrists, to spin the narrative of Cho’s irreducible insanity, thus distinguishing him from the rest of us.

We want him to occupy a different space from the rest of us. He must lie on the far side of civilization, as its Other. But he is borne of this society; he is the ‘question mark’ produced by alienation (Marx’s word) or anomie (Durkheim’s word). By that they meant people who lack social connection, community, intimacy, love, friends. To say that Cho became who he was (which we will never fully fathom, except via his deed) ‘because’ of the crushing aloneness that he seemed to suffer risks sociologism, the opposite mistake of psychologism. Self and society interpenetrate, intermingle, overlap to the point of near identity. Adorno’s point was that the self is also ‘objective,’ frequently object—like, in a society in which people’s inner recesses are occupied by social, economic and cultural imperatives. Kids play video games because they lack social connections. When I was a kid we went outside to play after school. Today kids either have too much homework or, if they don’t, there is no one outside when they seek playmates.

Imagine how bad this must be for petit-bourgeois Koreans in an affluent D.C. suburb. This is not to deny that Cho probably had serious issues before he came to America. But his probably already damaged self became more damaged at Virginia Tech, a virtual small town of 26,000 other students, none of whom connected with him, nor he with them.

The only rescue for damaged selves—and we are all damaged in our various ways, some hiding it better than others—are the nucleic utopian moments when we occasionally count for something. We are cherished, befriended, celebrated, sheltered. But in this atomized, individualistic world in which no one plays outside anymore only a lucky few achieve these utopian moments that prefigure larger political and social movements. During my childhood and then adolescence, we had an ample politics of everyday life in which young people could seek and find community and even move beyond into a humane politics. Our role models were Tom Hayden, Bob Moses, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Betty Friedan. These people embodied utopia, an otherness achievable by small changes that

accumulate into a new politics. The New Left, both black and white, was a politics of small gestures, both kindnesses and protests, that remade selves and reshaped national agendas. Today kids such as Cho identify with the Columbine killers; they lack utopian icons and ideas. They have no heroes.

Much of my argument about the objectivity of subjectivity that led to Cho's damaged life is drawn from Adorno. But I depart from Adorno where he proposed only a 'negative utopia,' a utopia defined by what it is not. His argument was compelling: the total society damages almost everything and everyone. Simply to gain distance affords room to move. But Marcuse, more grounded in early Marx and a certain reading of Freud, argues for a positive utopia, which in his 1955 book *Eros and Civilization* he calls a 'rationality of gratification' and in his 1969 *Essay on Liberation* he terms the 'new sensibility.'

Today, with no progressive social movements and a clannish society of fraternities and football, the Marcusean imagery seems overly abstract. My wife and I just finished a book, *Fast Families, Virtual Children*, in which we argue that family and school can become radical ideas if we understand family as convivial intimacy to be sought in public as well as in private and if we understand school to be a lifelong Chautauqua in which schools occupy a meso level in between private and public—a town meeting and a site of continuing education. Today, families, like childhood, are attenuated, and schools are prisons blending adult authoritarianism and rote learning. I have thought more than once about the Tech students who decided to attend morning class on that chilly April day instead of sleeping in and staying home. Perhaps they were called by the life of the mind and classroom conviviality, or perhaps they were worried about their GPAs. We will never know.

Cho had no such luck, either in high school, where he was marginalized, nor in college, where his marginality deepened and became malignant. To be sure, we should worry that there could be two, three, many Chos. But for every Cho who erupts, no longer able to accept his own agony, there are many more who suffer in silence. On a pre-patriotic school spirit campus such as Virginia Tech, in which Hokie-ism must be suffocating for skeptics and outsiders, kids like Cho are ticking bombs. But the damage of alienation/anomie/aloneness is much more general in an individualistic society in which 'community' is equivalent to collegiate sports fandom, reminiscent, of course, of the mass rallies captured by Riefenstahl during the Third Reich.

I hated school spirit from the beginning of my school days, perhaps recognizing that this was a form of pre-patriotism and an augur of the martial state, in which support of football teams suggests the support of armies. Watching the relentless Hokie-ism in the week after the deaths in Blacksburg gave me the creeps; I would have been on the outside looking in, not wearing orange and purple nor attending pep rallies. Few in America had heard of Hokie Nation before Cho, and I predicted to a friend of mine that high-school student applications to attend Tech will actually rise now that the nation has witnessed the *Gemeinschaft* demonstrated on the drill field on which Norris Hall sits. People will be drawn to the hallowed ground of the Tech campus, as the media spectacle of the ensuing weeks suggests to them their own participation in the group psychology of fascism, which is what big-time football schools are all about. The word 'hokie' already decides in favor of a sham—as in 'hokey,' make-believe.

Psychologism is an evasion. Cho wasn't evil; he was damaged. I am enough of an anti-psychiatry person to have grave doubts about posits of individual psychopathology as if the flimsy boundary between psychic health and pathology is in fact firm and obvious to trained professionals. The fact is that Cho wandered around aimlessly, with his indignation fermenting.

During the sixties, utopia abounded as a possibility, even if COINTELPRO, the White House, the police, the Klan beat back the New Left and presaged decades of mounting right-wing hegemony, which endures to the present. Kids could affiliate to causes and in communal projects in which their mortal aloneness could be buffered. Could a Korean-American kid have found meaning in the hectic fraternity life at Virginia Tech or in the stands at football games? Imagine how he felt walking the halls of his preppy white high school. Perhaps his parents applied relentless pressure on him to duplicate the academic successes of his Princeton-bound sister. I know a Korean girl in my daughter's high school class who is not allowed to recreate, having to keep her nose to the academic grindstone. She is 'grounded' if her grades sink below 95. She experiences America as a series of hurdles; she is old before her time.

We did damage to Cho by ignoring him. I have had problematic, angry students for whom I didn't do enough. We are ourselves damaged by the same social forces at play in his life. To be sure, we did not pump three bullets per victim into their agonizing bodies, as he did. Most of us are too bound in, or we have everyday opportunities for utopia—friends, hobbies, exercise, creative outlets, perhaps even a restorative politics.

One day we may piece together Cho's sad life, triangulating the interaction of his mental illness and his social isolation that led to April 16, 2007. In the meantime, we must not ignore the social and political as if Cho came

from another planet and walked among the Hokie Nation, which has only sane and decent citizens. Although no one reading these words is close to planning a murderous rage and videotaped confession, there are times when we want to lash out at enemies real and imagined. In the same way, we must recognize the Eichmann in all of us, the diligent engineer who does what he is told. More important than recognizing Cho and Eichmann in ourselves is recognizing them in others, who we can help or redirect. This redirection amounts to political action of a sort—acknowledging, even reaching out to, those who appear damaged by a world we recognize as our own.



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