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Vassar College

The Spectacle of Death: School Shootings in America

A Thesis submitted in the partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts
in Media Studies

By
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Thesis Advisor:
Professor Justin Patch

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the phenomenon of school shootings in the evolving American mediascape. My opening establishes a historical human fascination with violence and representations of violence. This transitions into the spectacularization of trauma and violent figures in popular American culture. My discussion is built around two case studies and two popular films in two different time periods: first, the Columbine shooting in 1999 and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, released in 1994. Second, the Isla Vista shooting executed by Elliot Rodgers in 2014 and Lynne Ramsay's 2011 *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. I place fictional and real world killers in context with each other, considering how the media ecologies in different time periods transform murderers into icons.

Exposition

We have all felt it. That moment when you're running around the playground at school and a child falls and hurts himself. You join the group of children gathering around the sound of crying, maybe offering help or maybe just standing wide eyed at the sight of blood or an extremity twisted in an unnatural way. That moment your car approaches flashing lights on the side of the highway and traffic slows. All the drivers can't help but ease off the gas as they turn to catch a glimpse of a smashed windshield, an overturned vehicle, or even an unfortunate passenger lying beneath a white sheet on the shoulder. It can be painful to observe but we cannot tear our eyes away from these spectacles. Deep seated human curiosity drives a desire to observe the horrific.

The embedded human relationship with violence has always been accompanied with representations. "There is, as everyone knows, a long-standing association between death and reproduction" (Seltzer 24). Deaths at crime scenes and on the battlefield alike are captured in images by witnesses who survive. These images serve as testaments to the fact that violence has occurred, preserved in archives that outlast witnesses and physical evidence of destruction. Humans are so tied to the power of violence that we feel the need to create representations that allow us to reflect upon and extend the impact of violence.

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses historic human attraction to representations of pain. She references centuries old depictions of central Christian figures intensely suffering. "It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked... There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching" (Sontag 40). There is an intrinsic human curiosity surrounding representations of pain. It doesn't mean that we're

sadistic or masochistic, but we do naturally gather around sites of trauma. Our gaze is drawn for a multitude of reasons. Maybe we want to prove that we are unafraid of pain. Maybe seeing others in pain generates a relieving emotional response, simply because it makes us feel something. Or, for some, the sight of suffering evokes feelings of pleasure.

One of the most basic examples of human dependency upon violence is our relationship with war. Since the dawn of time, people have functioned upon the belief that disagreements can be resolved through violent conflict. Sontag writes, “Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists” (Sontag 5). Historically speaking, war has been the norm, and peace the exception. No matter how far our society progresses, humans can not shake a dependence upon war, and by extension violence. Ironically, the development of the nuclear bomb was arguably the best technological advance in reducing conflict between major global states. The threat or idea of extreme violence and destruction is enough to scare people into changing the way that they behave, negotiating terms through discussion rather than forcefully clashing citizen’s bodies on the ground.

When a horrific image of great trauma is displayed, the emotional shock reaction that is induced cannot be controlled. This image can be interpreted a million ways by each viewer, even if there is a caption telling the viewer how to react. Photographs themselves are taken with a motive, and are aesthetic by nature. We see images through the eyes of the photographer, who has his own reasons for portraying the scene. “Not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with” (Sontag 53). The photographer makes aesthetic choices, framing the scene and choosing what to include, exclude, and focus upon. Photography objectifies its subjects; we are not struck by the personality of an anonymous bloody victim, we are struck by the gore and the lingering spectre

of pain. The power of images can be easily directed towards specific causes, yet can also have unpredictable effects.

Henry Giroux outlines a helpful critical framework through which to understand the impact of exposure to mediated violence. He first draws a distinction between historical, ritualistic, and hyper-real violence. Historical violence is typically portrayed in the context of real-world historical events, and prompts the audience to think critically, compassionately, and philosophically about the struggles of humanity. In general this means that the victims are humanized developed characters rather than the anonymous unfortunate. In contrast, ritualistic violence is designed to entertain and generate emotional excitement, built upon the spectacle and causing visceral responses to gruesome horror. In this case, the gory aesthetics and visual effects are more important than the humanity of the victims, who would most easily be indiscriminate or archetypal and two-dimensional characters. Hyper-real violence is the third category Giroux raises, which combines the aesthetic and emotional qualities of historic and ritualistic violence to create something realistic and shocking that is not likely to spur productive reflection (Ott 100). These categories span the spectrum of style and motive pairings that go into creating representations of violence.

The effects of violent media are typically broken down into four categories: aggressor, victim, bystander, and catharsis effects. The aggressor effect posits that exposure to violent media triggers arousal and aggressive behavior by constructing violence as the norm, and young people tend to mimic what they see (Ott 101). The victim effect raises the issue of audiences viewing mediated images as reality after prolonged exposure to television, leading to an exaggerated sense of danger about the world (Ott 101). The bystander effect, most closely associated with hyper-real violence, holds that media violence causes callousness about violence

directed at others due to desensitisation over time and exposure (Ott 102). The catharsis effect, typically most associated with historical violence, is built upon claims that exposure to mediated violence actually provides a release, alleviating real world feelings of aggression (Ott 102). Aside from witnessing instances of violence firsthand, there is only the representation, not the thing itself. The representation is an entity distinct from its origin, and tends to have more far-reaching erratic consequences.

Sontag writes about the nature of images of destruction concerning historical violence. She discusses opposing motives behind employing traumatic battlefield images. On one hand there is “the practice of representing atrocious suffering as something to be deplored, and, if possible, stopped” (Sontag 42). Displaying images of intense destruction to the public offers the possibility of illuminating war as a brutal practice that is not worth the toll it takes. Images towards this aim would typically show the deaths of innocent civilians. Perhaps when domestic audiences are faced with the cruel reality of violence, we could find the courage to reject the practice altogether. On the other hand, “if governments had their way, war photography, like most war poetry, would drum up support for soldiers’ sacrifice” (Sontag 48). Images capturing intense loss simultaneously capture the power of the military to dominate. These types of images typically show destroyed landscapes or anonymous masses of bodies where the faces aren’t in focus. This way it is harder to humanize the victims. These images tell citizens to be proud to be associated with a military that possesses such vast strength. The soldiers are manly heroes with a cause, their weapons acting as extensions of their masculinity. Ultimately, the spectacle of shocking images tends to confuse and blind us to the meaning behind them; we are only able to register them on a superficial scale.

In contemporary domestic spheres, a constant stream of violent media is produced and delivered to the public, constituting a critical portion of the multi-billion dollar American entertainment industry. Horrific content is shown in news stories, movies, television shows, and internet forums. The most popular American shows feature murderers, doctors, soldiers, detectives, monsters, essentially centering upon characters living traumatic narratives, or sites of trauma themselves. In 1997 “the most popular current television series, *ER*, is pure wound culture- the world, half meat and half machinery, in a perpetual state of emergency” (Seltzer 26). There is no limit to the number of stories depicting violent acts that humans commit against each other, because there is a popular demand for that type of content. Mark Seltzer effectively sums up our societal obsession over human pain with the term ‘pathological public sphere.’ He defines it as “one of the crucial sites where private desire and public space cross” (Seltzer 3). The relationship between private life and the public nature of media is a crucial piece of this discussion. Death is viewed with a mix of admiration and disapproval. Most people fear calling painful images beautiful, yet cannot resist looking at them. Our eyes are drawn en masse to sites of death, both real world stories and dramatic imaginations, and it is difficult to simply explain the appeal.

The concept of trauma and reactions to trauma are keystone of this subject. Trauma has “come to function as a switch point between individual and collective, private and public orders of things” (Seltzer 5). Trauma is on one hand experienced internally by the person who lives through specific traumatic events. On the other hand trauma is viewed by the public as a label. The question of who the label is applied to and what experiences qualify as traumatic is a moral judgement. Audiences reserve the right to decide whether or not to validate victims, rejecting their stories or reacting with empathy. Many stories about trauma are written with the intention

of creating a public discussion concerning motives and possible preventive measures. Authors and specialists provide their own explanations for why they think events transpired the way they did, and others respond, agreeing or refuting. “The violence of [traumatic] events experienced affects even the researchers studying it, and the pain and suffering it produces exert a sort of fascination for them” (Fassin 281). Those who research and document traumatic events cannot help but get swept up in the spectacle. This effect leads to the fetisization of trauma, because the author’s end goal is writing a story that people want to read. They must magnify the spectacle of trauma in order to make it popular and capitalize off of it. The public story becomes its own entity, distinct from the event itself, and those who lived it. The facts are far less important than what is written in the most popular story.

It is crucial to recognize how we organize socially, and in particular what we consider to be mainstream. In his book on radical democratic politics, Ernesto Laclau says “‘Hegemony’ will not be the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis” (Laclau 7). I define hegemony as the dominance of one social group over another. Objects and ideas are defined by what they are *not* as much as by what they are. In terms of society and nationality, the ingroup is defined by the outgroup. We know what the status quo is because of people or actions that are not accepted. Slap a label on it, and you have the ‘outsiders,’ those relegated into separate cultural pockets, whose opinion is not validated by the mainstream, and therefore labeled irrelevant. Public discussion is dictated by the capitalist attention economy, meaning it doesn’t matter how many people are speaking, it only matters how loud one’s voice is. Take, for example, the National Rifle Association (NRA), one of the top three most influential lobbying groups in the US. Currently, the NRA claims to have five million members (although some sources claim this number is inflated) which makes up for just over one percent of the American

population. The NRA is an incredibly wealthy group, flush with cash from gun sales, that has been able to buy up airtime and even started its very own television network: National Rifle Association Television (NRATV). Despite representing such a small percentage of citizens, NRA representatives are able to successfully block any meaningful gun safety legislation. The NRA is also able to direct public discussion of shootings in a way that doesn't harm sales, blaming individuals, not easy access to weapons.

As the modern world becomes increasingly heavily mediated by technology, the competitive nature of the attention economy is taking a greater toll on individuals. There is an intense pressure to find a place to fit in, exacerbated by other people constantly posting edited versions of themselves and their lives on public social media profiles. Societal "isolation and fragmentation is not a contingent event: it is a structural effect of the capitalist state, which is only overcome in a revolutionary atmosphere" (Laclau 9). Each citizen responds differently to the idea of the state and the identity that comes with it. Some identify with the mainstream and feel comfortable operating within the status quo. Others reject the status quo and find themselves alienated from their communities. Feelings of alienation are reinforced by the constant slew of attractive characters with romantic relationships and exciting lives dominating television and social media platforms.

Public narratives are streamlined and edited by those who have the voice and means to record them. This inevitably means that some individuals, too complex for a label and too different to categorize, are erased in the process. "A social category or sector may not be reducible to the central identities of a certain form of society, but in that case its very marginality vis-a-vis the fundamental line of historical development allows us to discard it as irrelevant" (Laclau 21). There is a long standing need to simplify reality in order to be able to record history.

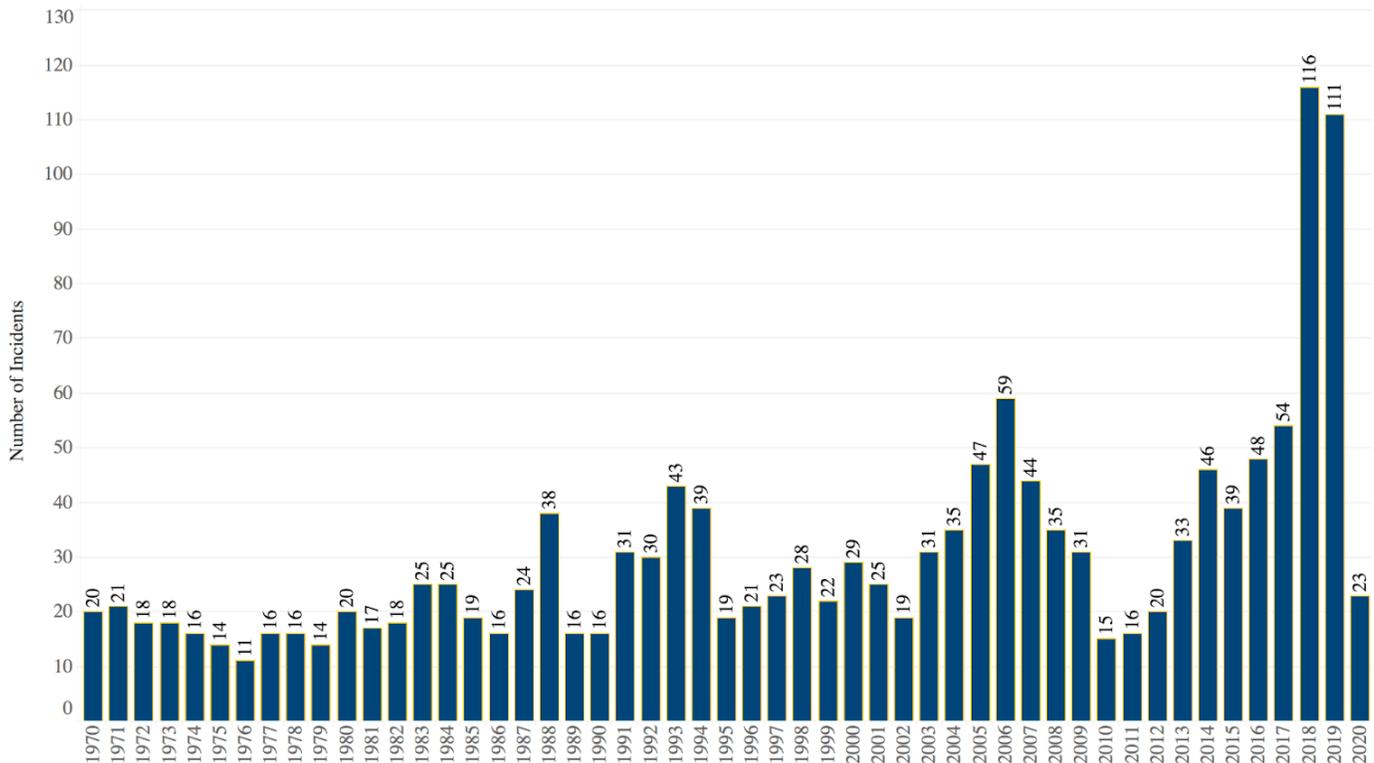
Voices that do not fit neatly into an overarching explanation are shut out, left in the dust of the past. The issue is, a small but terrifying selection of individuals reach a point where they are willing to do literally anything to prevent themselves from being thoughtlessly discarded.

In a society that glorifies violence, there is one clear path to capturing the attention of the American public. School shootings have become an unfortunate series of sensational headlines that capture American consumers all too often. There are so many stories about teenagers who murder their classmates and teachers with assault weapons that the headlines are no longer a surprise. The next attack isn't a matter of 'if,' it's a matter of when.

This graph, from the Center for Homeland Defense and Security at NPS, shows the number of school shootings by year. The numbers indicate any instance where a gun was fired on school property, however, most of the incidents resulted in death or injury. There is some fluctuation but the trend is clearly moving upwards, with a significant surge in 2018.

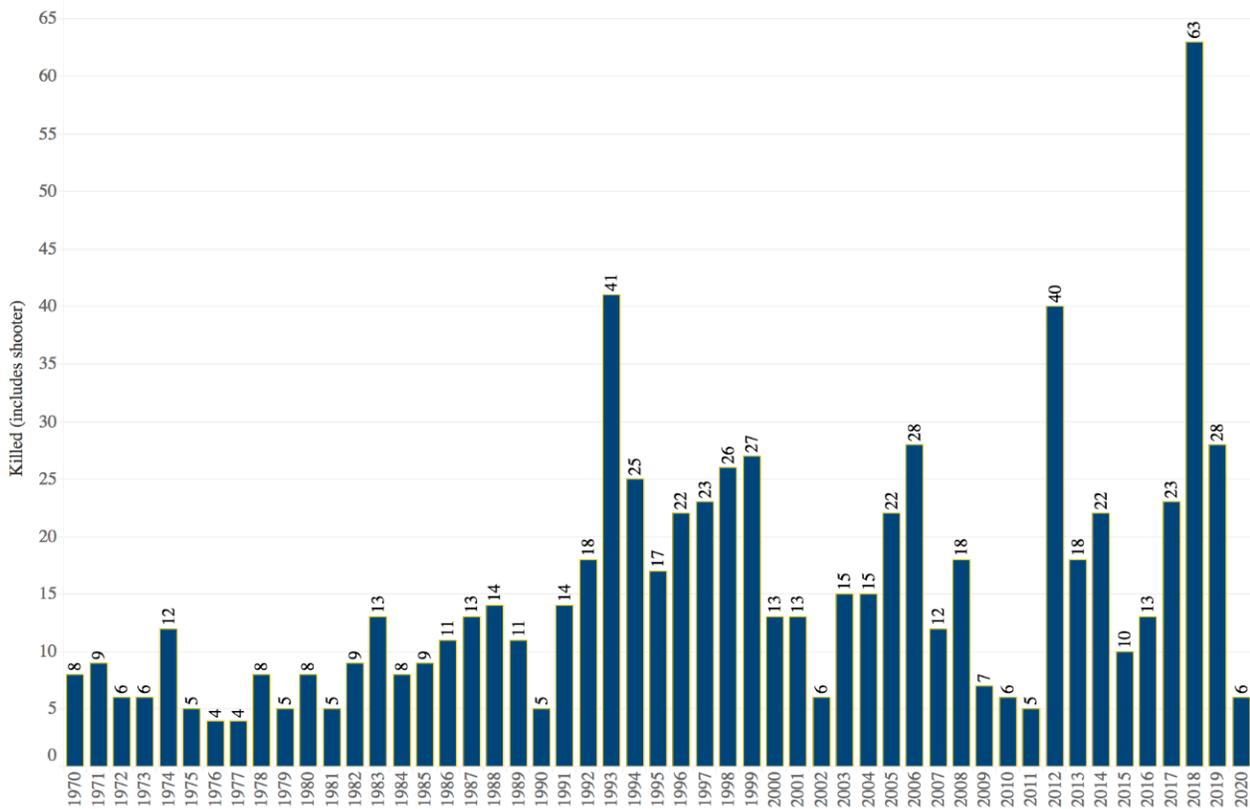
INCIDENTS BY YEAR

Based on publicly available data on incidents from 1970-present



This second graph, from the same source, captures the number of school shooting fatalities by year. This also shows an increase in modern times with a surge in 2018. In just the first month of 2020, six people have already been killed by gun violence on school property. To boot, these graphs only track K-12 campuses, not taking into account gun brutality at universities.

Number of Fatalities Including Shooter by Year
Based on publicly available data on incidents from 1970-present



School shootings are a hot topic, as American citizens are desperate to prevent further deaths of their children. Nobody wants young students to feel unsafe while they are getting an education, but no meaningful solution has yet been enforced to halt this trend. Countless articles, books, documentaries, and reports have been made trying to find some common thread

connecting these young shooters that could explain what exactly triggers a teenager to murder his classmates. Sadly, there is no simple answer, no specific gene or trait or history that can definitively distinguish a young killer from his classmate. These tragic, horrific stories are picked apart in the spotlight during the search for an explanation. As with other violent stories, the obscene spectacle of death ends up obscuring the facts and limiting the discussion. Audiences read these types of stories and get caught up on the gruesome details, losing a sense of the overarching message. It is just as crucial to explore the media landscapes of school shooters as it is to pick apart the shooters themselves.

There are two school shootings that have been made critically important by the American public. Firstly, the shooting at Columbine High School by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold in 1999. It was not the first school shooting in America but it is certainly the most infamous, and is often discussed as the beginning of this now common disturbing trend. Secondly, the Isla Vista shooting near Santa Barbara College by Elliot Rodgers in 2014. Rodgers is notable due to his harrowing online footprint and sadistic manifesto that he left behind. These shooters all shared a desire for fame, but lived and died in completely different media ecosystems. These environmental differences are critical for understanding the relationship between a media economy that fetishizes violence, developing technology, and increasing instances of school shootings.

Case Studies and Discussion

The social environment and mediascape of the 1990s were very different than they are today. The internet was in a rudimentary early stage, still not used by the average citizen during that time. The number of available web pages was extremely limited. Email and cell phones were around, but mostly limited to use in the business sphere. There was no social media like we have today, people got in touch via landlines from their homes. The majority of people got their news from newspapers or television broadcasts. NBC, CBS, ABC, and PBS were by far the most popular national news channels and essentially dominated the news. These major news outlets were dedicated to non-partisan journalism (although by today's standards each of these sources is labelled center-left), portraying slightly different takes on the same stories. Debates over current events took place in the same location, thus the national narrative was very centralized. In the public realm, there was little public diversity in viewpoints concerning the news.

Being a teenager in the 1990s was fundamentally different than it is today. High school is a crucial growth period for young people, who are working to define themselves and experiencing a myriad of firsts. Teens are coming into contact with serious adult aspects of life, including sex, substances, and violence. In the 1990s many teens experimented with pornographic magazines and films. While many people used porn in private, it was not exactly discussed publicly or openly normalized. Pornography is understood as “the reduction of sexuality to the body moved, and seduced, by the image and by the machine... there is the erosion of the boundaries between body and world, body and image, body and machine” (Seltzer 21). Humans are accustomed to experiencing new sensations through visual representations

before experiencing them in reality. However, when we learn of new sensations through machine produced images, the human aspect of intercourse is reduced through digital remediation.

It was generally easier for parents to censor some of the content that their children were exposed to in the 1990s. Pornographic videos were much harder to come by, needing to be purchased in stores that require customers to be over eighteen years of age. However, it is well known that most teens are exposed to some form of pornography before they experience sexual acts for themselves. It's important to note that mainstream porn was much less violent than it has become recently. Porn stars had more control and were generally better treated in the industry. Pornography is a machine of the male gaze, the vast majority of it created by men for men. Female actors are objects whose goal is to pleasure the male actor on screen, and the man at home who is watching the act. There is an innate desire to try to recreate what is seen. These representations become the first point of reference for how young men expect their sexual partners to behave. It can be difficult to reconcile reality with fantasy when the time inevitably comes.

High school is also usually the first time young people try altering their mental states. This typically includes experimenting with alcohol and other substances. The desire to explore different possible states of reality is common and natural. This happens in another way when teens occupy themselves with books, television, and video games, transporting themselves into story worlds. During the 1990s it was feasible for teens to access content outside of what their parents would accept. In fact, forbidden content would appear even more enticing, merely because of the fact that it is forbidden, and one might have to work a little harder to access it. There is a wide variety of violent programming, including war and murder themed games,

specifically marketed to boys. Violence is inextricably linked to gender roles and notions of masculinity.

War is a deeply gendered subject, as historically, the vast majority of soldiers have been men. At a young age, many boys are taught that there is nothing more brave and manly than going into a warzone and taking ‘enemy’ lives, all the while being prepared to die yourself. Without a draft in the US, there are still millions of young men who voluntarily enlist in the military every year. The lure of the gruesome power associated with war affects those who do not ever become physically involved. Domestically, millions of young men love virtually playing the part of soldiers while never even having to leave their homes.

The original first person shooter game was created by John Carmack in 1993. For the first time, the screen displayed the point of view of the avatar. This creates the illusion that the gamer is seeing through the eyes of the avatar. The graphics were not sophisticated, yet during testing, “[gamers] would literally fall out of their chair or jump away from the keyboard. It was a reaction that we’d never seen in any other form of video gaming” (Engber 2014). In 1993, the video game ‘Doom’ was released, then ‘Quake’ was released three years later. The goal of both games is basically to shoot approaching monsters and zombies before they can attack you. These games were the first nationally popular first person shooter PC games. The difference between these games and their predecessors is that ‘Quake’ and ‘Doom’ were available on PC, so one could now play in private. The early versions of this type of game were crudely pixelated, yet the point of view perspective proved captivating. At least two close high school classmates in suburban Ohio, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, thought so.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were two close friends who both felt socially isolated at their high school. They externalized their loneliness by turning it into anger at those around

them. They were angry at the girls whose attention they desired but never got. They were angry at other boys who they felt had more than them, in particular the athletes of the school. On April 20th, 1999, Harris and Klebold executed a long planned attack against their high school, using home-made bombs and machine guns to kill as many students as possible. Columbine came after a series of shootings across the US, including in Oregon and Arkansas, but it was the most fatal one at that time, resulting in fifteen deaths and many more injuries.

Analyzing their personal diaries shows that each boy internalized his loneliness in his own individual way. In a 2015 Retro Report on the Columbine shooting by The New York Times, author David Cullen concluded from his research that “for Eric it was primarily a murder, for Dylan it was primarily a suicide.” Eric Harris had a deep desire for different kinds of recognition and connection. He felt excluded at school and had low self-esteem. He had an avid interest in German, idealized the Nazis, and exhibited racist and homophobic behavior. The attack on the school was purposefully planned on Hitler’s birthday. He desired fame and recognition, posting regularly on his website, including murder fantasies directed at classmates before the attack. This website contained angry rants about the world and information on building weapons at home. Although his diary was private it is clear he wanted the public to see his words posthumously. “I wonder if anyone will write a book on me. Sure is a ton of symbolism, double meanings, themes, appearance vs. reality shit going on here. Oh well, it better be fuckin good if it is written” (Harris 10). Little did he know just how much content he has come to inspire, even decades after his death.

On a basic level, what Harris really wanted was validation from those around him, especially girls and popular boys, namely athletes. He wrote rape fantasies and about his craving to be physically intimate with a girl. His frustration manifested through violent fantasies. He

directed rage at women and boys who ‘denied’ him the validation he needed, rather than looking inwards to consider the factors within his control. He blamed his blood thirst on those around him for not treating him better. “If people would give me more compliments all of this might still be avoidable (Harris 8).” He claims he didn’t truly want to kill his classmates and end his own life, but there was no one to bring him back from the edge, and his closest friend, Dylan, encouraged him. It was easier to blame others than shift his internal thought process.

Dylan Klebold had depressive suicidal tendencies that became homicidal, partially through the influence of Eric Harris. “I hate this non-thinking stasis. I’m stuck in humanity. Maybe going “NBK” (gawd) with Eric is the way to break free. I hate this” (Klebold 12). ‘NBK,’ a reference to the film ‘Natural Born Killers,’ was what the pair named the attack in planning (more on this later). The early pages of Klebold’s journal illustrate a young man in a lot of pain, feeling misunderstood and excluded but not initially outright violent towards others. “I don’t fit in here thinking of suicide gives me hope, that I’ll be in my place wherever I go after this life ... that I’ll finally not be at war with myself, the world, the universe” (Klebold 2). He felt overwhelmed by self-hatred but felt that nobody could or wanted to help him, not even his own family. The idea of getting a gun seemed to alleviate his sense of helplessness. A weapon allowed him to feel like he was finally in control, a rationale rooted in notions of masculinity.

Harris and Klebold were both deeply involved in the video game world of ‘Doom,’ to the point where it was blending into reality. Klebold wrote “(By the way, some zombies are smarter than others, some manipulate . . . like my parents.) I am GOD, [Eric] is GOD the zombies will pay for their arrogance, hate, fear, abandoned, & distrust” (Klebold 9). He saw the people around him as ‘zombies’ that deserved to be punished for their inability to understand him. In some ways he approached the world as a video game where he had the power to decide which

characters to eliminate without consideration for their personhood outside of his one-dimensional view of them. Both boys repeatedly referred to their future victims as ‘zombies’ that deserved to die. They may have used the framework of the video game as a way to detach themselves from the heinous crimes they committed at the end of their short lives. A major source of inspiration for the pair was clearly one of their favorite films, *Natural Born Killers*.

Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*, something of a cult classic, was released in 1994. It is an artsy violent film featuring two popular and beautiful young movie stars, Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis. The pair play a murderous couple, Mickey and Mallory Knox, who travel across the US killing indiscriminately. Their first victims are Mallory’s parents, her father portrayed as a disgusting abuser, and her mother a pathetic pushover who does nothing to protect her children. The couple decide to elope, and gleefully take Mallory’s parents’ lives as a symbol of their newfound freedom. They have a personal private marriage ceremony on the side of a bridge highway. They throw Mallory’s childhood belongings into a deep gorge, and declare themselves married by their own authority. They make a blood pact and in their eyes they are united, clearly not caring what the world deems appropriate.

The couple is eventually cornered in a pharmacy, seeking medicine in a vulnerable position after Mallorie suffers a rattlesnake bite. They are separated and sent to jail. Wayne Gale (played by Robert Downy Jr), a media mogul who is obsessed with their infamous story. Wayne is a selfish character in every aspect of his life. He is obsessed with selling a great story, willing to sacrifice anyone and anything to get it. He is married, but blows his wife off constantly so that he can spend more time chasing stories. His mistress gets the majority of his left-over energy. His career is built upon his program *American Maniacs*, selling stories of killers to American

audiences, capitalizing off of the bloody crimes they committed. He publicly condemns them, even though his success is dependent upon their murders.

Wayne visits Mickey in jail to do an exclusive interview. He questions Mickey about his history in an attempt to figure out how he can live with himself having taken fifty-two innocent lives in three weeks alone. Mickey says that regret is a wasted emotion and rejects the very notion of innocence, labeling everyone as guilty in our modern society for one reason or another, even if it's not readily apparent. According to him, each person in the world has a personal demon that feeds on weakness and pushes him or her to eventually become corrupted over time. Most people deny the existence of their personal demons, living in constant dishonesty about who they really are. Mickey simply embraces the demon more openly than others, a strong individual who can't help but prey on the weak. He likens himself to a wolf, a natural predator who doesn't pretend to be anything else. He claims that the greatest crime is living passively in a society that lies rather than let the natural order of things play out. Mickey's closing statement is, "Shit man, I'm a natural born killer."

The interview is aired to the rest of the jail and Mickey's words resonate with the inmates so much, a riot is incited. Warden McClusky (played by Tommy Lee Jones) gets a call and immediately goes to shut down the interview. He is portrayed as a cruel, tightly wound macho overlord who has "seen too many prison movies, and [is] intoxicated by the experience of being on TV" (Ebert 1994). The Warden and Wayne get into a screaming match, Wayne desperate to continue the interview, and the Warden desperate to regain control of his prison and assert himself as the head of the operation. Amidst the confusion, Mickey wrestles a gun from one of the guards, killing some of them and disarming the rest. He takes Wayne and the cameraman hostage, then leads them through the prison to find his way to Mallory. Mickey is a hero, rising

above the odds against him in order to rescue his true love in distress. The law enforcement officers and the reporters trying to capitalize upon his crimes are the ones we judge.

Mallory is kept in an isolated cell, where the sadistic detective, Jack Scagnetti, who arrested her is allowed in to torment her. Earlier in the film, before he has captured the infamous couple, Scagnetti hires a prostitute to come to his motel. He undresses her, strangles her, and leaves her behind, confident that he will never pay for what he's done. His entire career as a policeman is built around hunting down Mallory and Mickey Knox. When he finally captures them, he is lauded with praise by law enforcement officials, although Mickey and Mallory's fan base of American consumers denounce him. Visiting Mallory in jail, Scagnetti is clearly sexually attracted to her and focused on dominating her in every possible way. No matter his best efforts, she bites and scratches, resisting him fiercely like a wild animal. She refuses to compromise her fiery personality; she too is a 'natural born killer' who cannot be tamed. When Mickey busts into the cell to save Mallory, he kills all the other guards and is locked in a standoff with Scagnetti. After a few minutes, Mickey pretends to surrender as Mallory sneaks up behind the smug cop, suddenly stabbing him viciously and repeatedly in the throat. As he bleeds profusely in the corner, Mallory and Mickey reunite, kissing passionately in the middle of a room filled with bodies.

The entire escape sequence is streamed live to American audiences. Reporter Wayne frequently addresses the camera, narrating everything that happens. He directs the camera at the embracing couple, happily announcing that they are finally united. Action scenes are intercut with the facial reactions of an anchorwoman receiving the feed from Wayne's camera. She smiles with relief when the couple reunites and makes their escape, with Wayne, and the camera,

as their final hostage. The warden is left trapped in his own prison, ripped apart by a mob of furious inmates.

The film ends with Mallory, Mickey, Wayne, and a camera alone in a secluded forest, having successfully evaded law enforcement. They make Wayne film them telling their side of the story, happily reunited by fate in a riot they didn't start. When they prepare to leave, Wayne frantically asks more questions, trying to prolong the interview in the hope of postponing his own death. He is in disbelief when they set down the camera and cock their guns at him. He begs for mercy, but Mickey coldly tells him, "you're scum Wayne. You did it for the ratings... killing you is a statement, I'm not sure exactly what it's saying but, you know, Frankenstein killed Dr. Frankenstein." Wayne continues to plead, outlining possible publicity stunts they could do in the future. He says that they need to leave somebody alive to tell the tale. In unison Mickey and Mallory say, "We are! Your camera." Wayne stares down the lens in disbelief, then stretches out his arms in acceptance of his bloody end. Mickey and Mallory riddle him with bullets, embrace, then walk into the forest offscreen. The film then switches between different channels on television, cutting between real famous publicly aired murder trials, house fires, an ice skater falling, then a montage of artsy sexual gore shots of Mickey and Mallory and fire explosions.

The film is a montage of different styles of cinematography. There are quick, jarring cuts, and frequent switching between animation, grainy reels, black and white film, nature shots, past, present, and cartoonish and sitcom styles. The visual switches are accompanied by aural effects, clear audio mixed with tinny filters and interspersed heavy rock and orchestral scoring. These audio and visual changes represent constant switching between different points of view and states of reality. When Mickey is killing, the sound of an animal roaring sometimes accompanies his actions, upholding the fact that he is a 'natural born killer.' The overall effect is disorienting,

fitting for a movie that claims to be ironic yet illuminates the very real thirst for gore and glorification of killers in American consumer culture. The director Oliver Stone “understands that celebrity killers have received such a bizarre status in America that it’s almost impossible to satirize the situation” (Ebert 2). Mickey and Mallory are blood thirsty and ruthless, killing a large number of innocent people, yet by the end of the film, the audience is rooting for them to make their escape and live happily ever after. The characters that represent the establishment, the nuclear family, media actors, and law enforcement for example, are incredibly unlikeable. They are worse than the murderers simply because they’re dishonest about the reality of the world.

Harris and Klebold clearly empathized with the murderous characters. They finally found common ground with a charismatic fictional duo that took back their power through killing. Mickey and Mallory were lonely and dissatisfied before they united forces; they only became free and happy once they started killing. They hate everyone except for each other, shooting anyone who bothers them in the slightest. The boys’ diary entries capture the dissatisfaction they had with their lives, and their superiority complexes. They were disconnected from their community, blaming their problems and feelings of inadequacy on those around them. Klebold felt so alienated and unhappy in his world that he was ready to take his own life to end his pain. He found energy by externalizing his woes, transforming his pain into anger. “The reason people piss me off is to test my trigger finger, & my adrenaline” (Klebold 15). He got into the selfish frame of mind that he was suffering because other people wanted him to and the only way for him to feel better was to make them suffer. Harris’s insecurity over being unable to lose his virginity blossomed into rage: “Right now I’m trying to get fucked and trying to finish off these time bombs. NBK came quick, why the fuck can’t I get any? I mean, I’m nice and considerate and all that shit, but nooooo” (Harris 11). He believed that he deserved to receive sex without

having to change anything about himself or his attitude. It was the girls' fault for not choosing to sleep with him. Klebold and Harris shared the attitude that they were intellectually superior to everyone around them. They saw themselves as two heroes united against the rest of the world, just like Mickey and Mallory.

A school shooting is, at its core, an incredibly drastic act of rebellion. It is a destructive event that upsets the system so violently, it cannot be ignored. Harris and Klebold felt mired in a community that wouldn't accept them, and eventually "the feeling of being trapped seems to have curdled into a weird, incoherent mix of hatred" (Hari 7). Rather than try to succeed within the system that rejected them, they reclaimed power by leaning into the hatred and using weapons to violently disrupt the norm. They felt that they had important, superior ideas to share, but nobody would listen. Harris and Klebold used the shooting to break through the anonymity of their small town ecosystem. Along with the plans and personal beliefs that they recorded in hand written journals and Eric Harris's unpopular internet blog, the pair filmed themselves monologuing and secretly preparing in their family homes. This video archive is known as *The Basement Tapes*. The tapes themselves have been destroyed, however police descriptions of the content are still available to the public. The boys again demonstrated a thirst for notoriety, proud to demonstrate their ability to execute such a daring operation, suggesting the grand reasoning for this bloodshed was some sort of societal critique. In one clip, "Harris and Klebold discuss the fact that they want to distribute the videos to four news stations, and that Harris is going to scan his journal and then send copies by E-mail, and distribute blue prints and maps" (Zimmerman 9). Even while claiming they didn't care about what other people thought, their actions demonstrate that shocking and impressing the public was a significant motivation behind the attack.

Although they didn't live to see it, their sudden attack memorialized them as horrific celebrities for decades to come. Columbine was not the first school shooting in the US, but it is often referenced as the origin of the phenomenon. There are several reasons why Columbine has generated such a pervasive enduring influence. School shootings were certainly not common at that time. The American public was shocked to hear that two middle-class white boys in a nice suburban neighborhood could commit such heinous crimes. There were some disturbing instances leading up to the attack. In English class the pair demonstrated an interest in violent projects. Harris even wrote an imagined school shooting told from the perspective of a bullet. He also staged a bloody fake suicide in front of a girl who had rejected him, laughing and jumping up when she began screaming for help. However, these events were not taken very seriously by the adults around them, chalked up to flares of dramatic teenage angst. By most accounts from those who knew them, they seemed normal, Harris charismatic and outgoing, Klebold more shy and reserved. They sometimes sometimes clashed with teachers, but were both considered intelligent students with potential. A year before the attack, they were put on juvenile probation for theft, but completed the program early for good behavior. They had pretty typical family lives, no broken homes, with parents who loved them.

In 2017 Susan Klebold gave a Ted Talk about how it feels to be the mother of one of the world's most infamous shooters. She struggles to reckon with the maternal guilt of not knowing the extent of his problems until it was too late. She says, "the cruel behavior that defined the end of his life showed me that he was a completely different person from the one I knew." She thought of herself as a caring parent who raised a compassionate son, until she received a phone call on April 20th 1999 that revealed her son as a monster. In *The Basement Tapes*, Harris talks about the potential reactions of his loved ones in the days leading up to the attack. He states,

““Yea...Everyone I love I’m really sorry about all this. I know my mom and dad will be just like just fucking shocked beyond belief. I’m sorry alright. I can’t help it” (Zimmerman 3). Harris clearly loved and admired his family, but he kept the darkest parts of himself hidden from them. Later in the tape he “describes his parents as the “best parents” and states that anything they would have tried to do this past year he would have gotten around it” (Zimmerman 10). He knows that the tapes will be found after his death, and makes sure to absolve his family of any blame, owning his crimes. Both boys were living double lives, putting on a facade for loved ones, then delving together into dark fantasies when they were alone.

The immediate aftermath of Columbine was complete chaos. In the 1990s, these specific instances of violence were far from common. It was very difficult for audiences to process how and why two teenagers would cause such devastation in their own small community. Many Columbine students were interviewed directly following the incident, yet “many of these students were incorrect in their claims and, despite acknowledging almost no connection to Eric and Dylan, continued to report what they thought they knew about the shooters” (Rico 7). One of the most popular televised falsehoods was that Harris and Klebold were part of a sinister gang known as the ‘trenchcoat mafia.’ Their attack was supposedly a revenge fantasy against the jocks planned or supported by the gang. Due to their style choices, wearing trench coats, chunky platform boots, and lots of black clothing, it was easy for audiences to associate the pair with goth culture or satanic tropes. John Savage was a student who personally knew both killers, and was an actual member of the ‘trenchcoat mafia.’ Savage explained that the group was composed of video game nerds, who met up to play dungeons and dragons and the like. Neither Harris nor Klebold were involved, yet public television networks broadcasted the sensational version of events immediately, without fact-checking. Audiences were told that the killers were part of a

sinister, underground, jock-hating subculture. As Dave Cullen says in a Retro Report Documentary, “horrors like Columbine terrify us, and we need an explanation, so if even if we don’t have the answer, we find one, we find it really too fast.”

Facts about victims were also warped by the sensational force of the media. The story of the death of Cassie Bernall has birthed its own cult spin off. Cassie was a beautiful young Christian who was cornered by one of the killers in the Columbine library. He put a gun to her head and asked, “Still believe in God now?” When she replied yes, he shot her. Her parents turned her story into a “bestselling book, *She Said Yes*, that explicitly compared her to the early Christian saints who died for their faith. There are now more than 7000 websites dedicated to her, and several churches take her name” (Hari 2). Cassie Bernall became an icon, a representation of the strength people can find in faith, drawing religious communities closer together. Yet, Cassie Bernall never had that interaction before her death. “Cassie’s story was later debunked when surviving students currently identified Columbine survivor Valentine Schnurr as the student who defended her faith” (Rico 3). This story never happened to Cassie Bernall, but it doesn’t actually matter, because people believed that it did long enough for “the martyr Cassie” to have a significant impact on the American public. The facts are not nearly as important as the news stories that are published, and the audience responses that those stories generate.

In real-world and fictional narratives alike, there is a desire to create a clean pattern of cause and effect. Television is a linear monologic medium, the form itself creates the demand to search for an easy answer which can never be the case for any crime like this. Shows and films require a neatly packaged beginning, middle, and end. It makes the story more easily digestible for the public. The term trauma is often used to explain away acts of violence. “Trauma stands in

for rather than defines the causes of repetitive violence” (Seltzer 6). This is a simple way to pack up discussion and dismiss killers by labeling them as victims of trauma who eventually repeated the violence they experienced. It is the token explanatory plot point of nearly every killer movie out there. Despite the lack of evidence supporting a correlation between abuse and future violence, dramatic reproductions repeatedly reinforce this idea of ‘Victim as Murderer.’ Slotting people into categories never encompasses the whole truth. There are many people who experience trauma and never hurt anyone else. Oversimplification in the name of neatly tying up a story is the name of the game in our modern world. The manipulation of the facts and commentary to this end in public broadcasts results in societal distrust and fragmentation when falsehoods are revealed.

Harris and Klebold were victims of bullying at their school. They discuss their poor social treatment in their diaries and *The Basement Tapes*. Jock types and popular kids picked on them for being different, and they used this as partial justification for the attack. Former friends of Eric and Dylan have corroborated stories of how the shooters were bullied throughout school. Yet in early reports, those stories were quickly shut out of popular media coverage in the name of respect for the victims. Instead, the duo was framed as jock hating ‘trenchcoat mafia’ members, targeting popular kids. “There seems to have been an anxiety that some people would conclude that the victims (picked, it seems, at random) somehow deserved to be murdered” (Hari 5). There is a need to simplify the story and the characters. There must be a clear line between the antagonists and the victims. High school politics can be brutal, but most people agree that killing someone for bullying you is a completely unjustified response. Most, but not all.

Some people deeply empathize with the Columbine killers. There are countless online blogs that extol the duo as heroic avengers. Melissa Andersen, a 17 year-old girl who runs an

‘Eric and Dylan fan site’ says, “The reason I believe Eric and Dylan were really cool to do what they did is because they stood up for themselves. Every single day they were teased and I can relate to that” (Hari 2). There are thousands of others just like Melissa, who recognize the pair as victims rather than monsters. They choose to embrace the killers and condemn the system as the real source of pain. Obsessions over the shooters are motivated by many different reasons. Some people empathize with them over shared bullying trauma. Some people think they are attractive, adorning their blogs with fan art that recreates bloody scenes from the massacre. Some people are trolls, simply participating in the sites as an act of disruption. In all these cases, “part of the appeal of partaking in a Columbine fandom may stem from exploiting this lure of the forbidden and tapping into our curiosity for scenes (and people) of violence” (Rico 21). Thus, we return to the allure of the violent spectacle.

As years pass, every scrap of information about the Columbine shooting, whether true or false, has been co-opted in the name of building sensational stories. The mere invocation of the name reignites attention. Audiences are lured by the possibility of a new discovery or analysis that could possibly finally explain why that shooting happened, and by extension how to stop the current succession of shootings. It is the continued discussion of past events and people that allow them to have a persisting influence on the present. Columbine has been so heavily discussed that it will forever hold a place in the collective American memory. A horrific media spectacle, Columbine’s reach extends far beyond the victims and survivors who physically experienced it.

The canonization of Columbine in the collective imagination has magnified its impact. “The effect of Harris and Klebold’s example was to make it possible for people with far higher thresholds-- boys who would ordinarily never think of firing a weapon at their classmates-- to

join in the riot” (Gladwell 14). Harris and Klebold are terrible figures, yet infamy is still fame. There is something appealing about their story that draws the admiration of angsty teens. Part of this appeal is the normalcy of their lives before the shooting. They weren’t abused, abandoned, or coerced. They weren’t diagnosed with serious mental health issues and hadn’t committed any violent crimes before the attack. They weren’t psychotic, clearly capable of empathy and processing emotions. We can never know who they truly were, but under the spotlight, they have become entertainers.

The power of Harris and Klebold as icons functions to extend their legacy of violence. As of 2015, “17 school shootings have been directly connected to the Columbine massacre as well as 37 planned or attempted shootings, resulting in a total of 66 deaths and 49 wounded... [Eric and Dylan’s] legacy persists with their fans” (Rico 2). Sociologist Larkin “looked at the twelve major school shootings in the United States in the eight years after Columbine, and he found that in eight of those subsequent cases the shooters made explicit reference to Harris and Klebold” (Gladwell 12). Representations of shooters provide inspiration for future attacks. The facts indicate that shooters are influenced by each other, and the rising number of cases is a significant factor leading others to do the same. School shootings have simply become something that people do, often tied to the suggestion that the attack represents a societal critique, or some other deep message. We feel the need to probe and scratch, rearranging the facts in the hope of finding a satisfying answer, but there never is one. These instances of violence can never be fully explained, and thus are always shrouded with an air of tragic mystery.

As the scope and reach of internet platforms exploded into the early 2000s, the creation of national collective narratives has become futile. Unlimited access to a broad variety of sources and opinions makes it increasingly difficult to control how audiences will respond to stories, or

how stories will be packaged and distributed. Audiences have grown increasingly suspicious of sources that claim to be objective. Citizens are free to seek out any narrator that appeals to their personal beliefs. Individuals who feel marginalized within their physical communities are now able to connect with one another remotely. Virtual spaces prove to be safe ground for airing taboo desires or beliefs. Users have the ability to operate through a veil of anonymity, protected by randomly generated names at a safe distance behind the screen.

There have been huge technological leaps and bounds in the past three decades that have completely changed the way we live. By the 2010s, life compared to the 1990s is virtually unrecognizable. Essentially every single person owns a cell phone, and the vast majority are smart phones. The entire world is available for constant contact, complete with immediate access to the internet. We have entered into the Second Industrial Revolution, “the field in which the communicative characters of man and of the machine impinge upon one another” (Seltzer 17). Technology has become more than a mere extension of man, it has fundamentally changed the nature of man. Humans and machines are involved in a circular relationship due to the prevalence of social media.

Modern societal participation requires establishing and maintaining an online persona. Websites and applications including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube have become staples of everyday life. Social media is used by people as a way to have their existence recognized and validated. We post content online as a way to build up an image of how we want to be seen by the world. Our participation in these forums is underlined by the idea that anyone can become a public figure if they are interesting enough. Each individual has the freedom to document and edit the narrative of his or her life, publishing it with the click of a button. We take cues from the material that other people post when we are curating our own images, eager to

convey a unique personality and prove that our lives are satisfying or exciting. Online profiles constitute a crucial part of who we are. There is no clear boundary between the virtual and real world spheres of life that our personhood is straddled across. Virtual and physical realities blend together.

Modern intimacy with machines informs who we choose to be, and what we choose to want. “The shock of contact between bodies and machines (eroticized accidents: real, planned, simulated) is also the traumatic reversal between private fantasy and the public sphere” (Seltzer 15). Machines bridge the gap between reality and fantasy, representing and thus transforming desire. Teenagers growing up in this heavily mediated world rely on social media as the basis for identity construction. Young people are constantly exposed to virtual representations of celebrities, community members, and their peers. It is all too easy to idolize characters that one doesn’t actually know. It can be difficult for young people to recognize that online profiles are edited for public display, and are not necessarily true to who the figures behind them really are. All that matters is the real time validation of behavior and lifestyles, measured by the number of views, likes, and comments that posts generate.

Expectations of how life can and should be are informed by figures that individuals find relatable or admirable. “Representations not only describe reality but transform it” (Fassin 277). For many young people today, virtual representations inevitably come to form the basic understanding of what it means to be feminine or masculine, straight or gay, funny or boring, cool or loser, victim or hero. Teens internalize the behavior they observe in different media contexts as they grow and try to become independent. It is essentially impossible for parents to censor what their children see when wifi connection is so readily available. In terms of sex and romance, the desire to recreate what is seen can become deeply problematic. Graphic

pornography is incredibly easy to access, and many boys in particular view large quantities of it before they are old enough to view it critically. Mainstream heterosexual porn videos have become increasingly violent, the male stars physically dominating and demeaning the women, ejaculating on their faces. Most porn is made by men for men, so the pleasure of the male actors is the focus, while the women are merely objects of pleasure.

The male gaze extends past explicit sexual content, acting as a defining feature of the entire mainstream mediascape. Laura Mulvey's theory outlines the power of this objectifying lens. "Mulvey asserts that all female objects will eventually create anxiety for viewers/ subjects because their very existence as women references the absent phallus, Oedipal "castration" and social shortcoming" (Ott 178). From early adolescence, boys are taught that masculinity is premised upon the domination of women. This notion is echoed in porn, television, literature, and representations of male public figures. Men are supposed to be powerful and stoic, having complete control over their lives. The worth of a man is measured by his ability to earn money, and attract and seduce beautiful women. As young men are growing and finding their place in the world, there is significant pressure to live up to these ideals of masculinity. When they are unable to achieve these standards, it can make them feel worthless. Feelings of rejection and inadequacy are amplified within the context of social media where so many other people display seemingly carefree happy lives.

The basis of most media is to make consumers feel that there are always other people living better lives. For example, reality television has become a popular outlet for audiences to temporarily escape their lives by viewing the lives of others. Some reality shows can help put things in perspective for middle class consumers by focusing on disadvantaged subjects who are struggling with poverty or health issues. However, most popular shows center on wealthy

subjects living exorbitant lifestyles. “These shows reveal a sharp disparity between the lifestyles of their economically advantaged subjects and their largely middle- to lower-class audiences. On the other hand, the media also regularly suggest that all these class distinctions are permeable” (Ott 148). The capitalist attention economy depends upon consumers feeling unsatisfied so that they keep trying to attain goals, largely social and economic, that are always just out of reach. This system is contingent upon the belief that maybe someday every dream could come true, but one just has to keep reaching until that day. When the illusion is shattered the consequences can be devastating, particularly in the case of young men who feel powerless and are willing to do anything to take back control.

Elliot Rodgers was a young man who was intensely frustrated by his inability to live the life he thought he deserved. On May 23rd 2014 in Isla Vista California, his anger erupted into a violent killing spree that left six dead and fourteen wounded. The 22 year old first stabbed his two roommates and one of their visiting friends to death one by one as they entered their school apartment. Three hours later he drove to a sorority house and opened fire on the women outside, killing two of them. He continued driving through the town, shooting at pedestrians through the window, killing another male student. When the police cornered him, he shot himself in the head.

In the months leading up to this vicious attack Rodgers painstakingly typed out a self-titled ‘manifesto’ into a word document. It is a 141 page autobiography explaining how he grew from a happy young boy into a lonely, angry young man. He talks about his family, friends, and lifestyle down to the intimate details of his sexual frustration. He kept the manifesto private during his life, but in the meantime shared his thoughts on a public YouTube channel that has since been deleted by his family. The videos are intense, illuminating his extreme political views

about controlling women and his anger towards the entire female gender for their rejection of him. He also spent a lot of time on Facebook and other sites, looking at peoples' lives through the idealistic filter characteristic of social media profiles. Their apparent happiness, demonstrated through pictures of their friends and parties, infuriated him, reminding him of his own loneliness. "The most meanest and depraved of men come out on top, and women flock to these men. Their evil acts are rewarded by women; while the good, decent men are laughed at... I hated the girls even more than the bullies because of this" (Rodgers 48). He harbored resentment against men who had more than he did. In his mind, they deserved to be punished for making him feel worth less than them. He thought of himself as something of an underdog warrior looking to correct the balance of life through violence. On Rodgers's 'Day of Retribution,' he uploaded one final video and sent out his manifesto to several different news outlets. He wanted the whole world to see his point of view in his words. In life, he felt powerless to make himself seen, so he made sure that he could not be ignored in death.

Elliot Rodgers was an incredibly narcissistic individual. He was intensely focused upon superficial definitions of success and coolness, constantly concerned with what everyone else thought of him. "People having a high opinion of me is what I've always wanted in life. It has always been of the utmost importance. This is why my life has been so miserable, because no one has ever had a high opinion of me" (Rodgers 116). He didn't really know what people thought because he got close to so few people outside his family. He just assumed that they hated him and wanted him to suffer even though most people didn't know him well enough to judge him. He became incredibly angry, to the point of physical expressions of violence, whenever he saw someone who he perceived to be happier or more successful than him. There were multiple occasions where he would throw his drink onto couples or attractive women who he felt ignored

him in public. He felt competitive angst towards the profiles around him. He grew up in California, arguably one of the most superficially beautiful places in the world, with his father relatively in the spotlight of the entertainment industry. His Facebook friends, particularly people he had gone to school with as a child, projected serene happiness, but he never got close enough to the real people to see through the mirage of the screen. He blamed his inability to get a girlfriend upon the female gender as a whole, transforming his loneliness into a festering anger that boiled constantly beneath his shy, quiet exterior.

Although his parents were divorced, they both worked to provide him with opportunities and support him as best they could. He relied especially heavily on his biological mother, although their relationship was fraught with tension. On one level, he resented her Malaysian descent because he was a supremacist who was ashamed of his mixed race heritage. More openly he expressed anger and disappointment at the fact that while she had many rich boyfriends, she never remarried after the ordeal of divorcing his father. Elliot was obsessed with being rich, thinking that it would solve all of his problems and that once the world could see how powerful money would make him, all the pretty blondes in the world would flock obediently to his arm. He felt strongly that his mother should sacrifice her own happiness by marrying herself off to a rich man, so that Elliot would officially be part of a rich family. Although he resented her deeply, she was a crucial pillar of support for him. Whenever he was really having a hard time he would call her and go running back home. His parents hired multiple therapists for him, but he refused to believe that anyone else could possibly know what was best for him. He even resented her for her help, believing that she thought he was a burden to her, and all her consoling couldn't really rectify his problems.

Elliot was in frequent conflict with his stepmother Soumaya, who he rejected as a parental figure. She was a beautiful bilingual Moroccan woman who was actually a star on 'Le Vrais Housewives,' a reality television show about rich French women living lavishly in Hollywood. His father respected her immensely and allowed her to discipline Elliot in his home, much to his chagrin. He was extremely insecure about his masculinity because he believed that "no one respects a man who is unable to get a woman" (Rodgers 110). Having to submit to his father's new wife, in addition to being a virgin, was beyond frustrating for him. She herself struggled to live with him due to his demanding, spoiled attitude, and generally irritable demeanour. Soumaya represented so much about women that Elliot hated, being strong and independent, expressing her wealth, and being proud to publicly display her beauty and her husband, Elliot's father.

Elliot Rodgers externalized all his problems. He was furious that he couldn't get a girlfriend or at least lose his virginity. In his mind, this problem stemmed from the fact that all women are attracted to the wrong type of man. He couldn't accept that there was anything wrong with him or that he would need to change. He expected women, blonde white girls specifically, to come up to him and flirt just because of how he looked and the cost of what he was wearing. The target of his anger became the Alpha Phi sorority at Santa Barbara College, where he thought the most beautiful women on campus lived. He wrote, "They are all spoiled, heartless, wicked bitches. They think they are superior to me, and if I ever tried to ask one on a date, they would reject me cruelly" (Rodgers 132). He never actually tried talking to one of these sorority sisters because he assumed he already knew what they would say based on the few early negative interactions he had with young women. He projected his self-hatred onto the world and those around him.

Rodgers participated heavily online, largely as an escape from his unhappy reality. There was a prolonged period in Elliot's teenage years when he remedied his loneliness by playing World of Warcraft for up to fourteen hours at a time. It is an incredibly realistic first person immersive video game. Graphics have come a long way since Quake and Doom were first released. Rodgers writes, "my first experience with [World of Warcraft] was like stepping into another world of excitement and adventure. It was a video game world, but they made it so realistic that it was like living another life, a more exciting life" (Rodgers 39). He claims that around age 13 his social life ended when he swapped hanging out with friends for a virtual life. He played alone in his room, interacting with other players through the medium of the game. He enjoyed it because he was one of the best, and rose quickly to the highest possible level. In the real world Rodgers wanted to feel better than everyone else, but he always felt inferior because he couldn't get a girlfriend and wasn't the richest one of his peers. In life he couldn't win, but in the game he could. It was also an outlet for his violence because in the video game world, one could easily take out other players by killing their avatars and sending them back to earlier levels.

Along with his YouTube channel, Rodgers spent a significant amount of time spreading his views on sexist Reddit forums and the PUAhate website, which is essentially a men's rights group with a large INCEL (involuntarily celibate) base. INCeLs are straight men who are frustrated at their inability to find female sexual partners. They feel entitled to sex, and blame women for not giving it to them. There are countless so-called INCEL forums scattered across the internet, where these lonely men are able to find comfort in talking to people with the same problems. Some of these men are just sad, but many of them are furious. Rodgers felt partially validated by these communities, but didn't think they were taking the movement far enough. He

wrote “many of [the members of PUAhate] share my hatred of women, though unlike me they would be too cowardly to act on it” (Rodgers 117). Following the attack, Rodgers is often referred to as ‘the patron saint of the INCEL movement.’

Rodgers displayed a considerable lack of empathy throughout his life, one psychiatrist even diagnosed him as a sociopath. His attack didn’t come as a massive shock because there were warning signs. People who knew him well knew that he was a hateful person, capable of committing these crimes. The massacre was almost prevented when somebody who viewed Rodgers disturbing YouTube video reported him to the police. Officers came to his apartment, but he was able to persuade them to leave. The reports on his crimes are straightforward because concrete evidence was readily available, in the form of his YouTube channel and manifesto. He clearly explained what led him to murder and suicide. There is some comfort in the idea of other school shooters being just like Rodgers: mentally deranged outsiders with no redeeming qualities. The Isla Vista shooting was a tragedy, but at least there were answers.

The trope of the school shooter being a psychopath is reinforced through popular fictional representations. The 2011 film *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, directed by Lynne Ramsay, tells the chilling story of a mother coping with the fact that her son turns out to be a school shooter. She has a very close yet fraught relationship with him. Every time she manages to connect with him through an activity and get closer, he flips a switch and hits her where it hurts most at the last second. For example, as a child he watches her carefully decorate her office with maps. When she leaves for a minute to take a phone call he splatters paint all over the walls, grinning at her when she returns to see the destruction. In his teenage years, mother and son spend the day mini-golfing together before going out to dinner, and actually have a nice time. Despite their plan, before they leave for the restaurant Kevin gorges himself in the kitchen, slobbering over an

entire chicken with his bare hands. He refuses to eat with her at the restaurant, and cruelly mocks her for trying to have an emotional connection with him. He reveals his dark, hurtful, psychopathic nature to her, while putting on a normative, cheery front when with his father. His mother, who knows him better than anyone, feels at her core that something is wrong. Every time she tries to explain these issues to her husband, he dismisses her, telling her she's too harsh. He can't recognize the parts of Kevin that only his mother sees.

We Need to Talk About Kevin is visually artistic, placing foreboding meaning on imagery. There is a trope of red and cleansing of the red throughout. The film oscillates between past and present, intersplicing Eva living alone in the present, and Eva with her growing family up until the mass shooting. At the beginning of the film, somebody throws red paint all over the front of her house and car. The red bleeds into the light that comes into her house, shading her face with a bloody hue when she lies near the window. She spends a significant amount of time scrubbing and scraping her walls, porch, and window panes. Each time her hands are stained red and she frantically watches it off in the sink. This bloody motif throughout the film demonstrates the guilt she feels and accepts for her son's actions.

Eva is often approached in public by angry broken people, relatives of victims, who feel the need to remind and punish her for what her son did. One woman slaps her, another smashes all the eggs in her carton at the supermarket. She takes the blame for the actions of her son. People don't empathise with her even though she also lost her entire family; Kevin killed his father and sister the night of the massacre. They direct their anger at her because she raised him and she survived. She accepts their anger because on some level she also believes it's her fault, that she should have known, or that she could have prevented the tragedy. She lives alone in a small dirty house, works a menial job below her paygrade, picks broken shells out of her

omelets, quietly accepts blows from angry strangers, scrubs hateful graffiti from her property, and faces her murderous son in prison once a week.

I'm particularly intrigued by the use of sound in the movie. The score builds to a fever pitch at certain scenes to effectively place emphasis. There are sequences underlined by the gradual crescendo of wildly cheering crowds. A curious thing happens as the volume builds where it becomes unclear if the noise is joyful cheering or panicked screaming. This audio is often accompanied by shots of Kevin, smiling, laughing, raising his arms to the sky with pleasure. It sends the message that in his sociopathic mind, he doesn't care whether they're cheering or screaming, as long as they're making noise for him. When his mother asks him why he did this at the end of the film he responds, "I used to think I know, but now I'm not sure." There is no cut and dried reason for the mass murder; it is ultimately an act of rebellion. His whole life he grew up pushing the boundary of disobedience one step farther each day, lacking the emotional empathy to regret hurting people. It begins with refusing to play learning games with his mother, purposefully soiling himself so she had to clean him, stuffing his sister's guinea pig down the garbage disposal, blinding his sister in one eye, and finally murdering and injuring most of his family and classmates.

We Need to Talk About Kevin establishes the killer as having a clear, sinister pattern of behavior leading up to the attack. Kevin was by nature cruel and lacked empathy. The person closest to him, his mother, knew that something was fundamentally wrong. Our society yearns for a set of specific characteristics that all school shooters share, so that we could prevent future potential attacks. There have been more than 850 school shootings since 1999, the year of Columbine, and no clear common thread has yet been established. Sometimes the perpetrators are rich, sometimes they're poor. Sometimes they have serious mental health problems,

sometimes they're neurotypical. Sometimes they are suicidal, sometimes they're not. Sometimes they had a troubled history, sometimes the shootings were their first crimes. Sometimes they were targeted at specific people, sometimes they were anonymous acts of destruction. Sometimes the people close to them suspect what they are capable of, sometimes the violence comes as a complete shock. We try to construct the profile of an archetypal school shooter through artistic representations, maybe in the hope that it could translate to real life. We want to believe that there is one broken thing, and if we could just fix that one thing we could halt the current disturbing trend of young men killing their classmates. It is more painful and difficult for the public to accept that "the problem is not that there is an endless supply of deeply disturbed young men who are willing to contemplate horrific acts. It's worse. It's that young men no longer need to be deeply disturbed to contemplate horrific acts" (Gladwell 22).

Morbid fascination with murder and death is a staple of American consumer culture. Fictional and real world killers alike are put on a pedestal based on the amount of attention and content they generate. Entertainment functions as a humanizing force, as many of the most popular shows and movies delve into the psyche of the killer, trying to understand him. In reports of school shootings, most of the victims become an anonymous blur, smoothed over as archetypal sweet kids in the wrong place at the wrong time who deserved better. The story hones in on the perpetrators, making a spectacle of their lives, exaggerating every scrap of personal information available to the public. They are blown into mythical figures, much bigger than they ever were, much more dimensional than the ones who died by their hands. "Celebrities need to be a presence, to be the focus of media attention, and to be someone with whom the public can readily identify" (Rico 7). Whether we like to accept it or not, horrific figures can be celebrities just as easily as heroic figures. The intrigue of the villain cannot be overestimated. Many

spectators become obsessed with the killers, going through the details of their lives to try to discover what exactly made them snap. There is a huge audience for school shooters. Each new headline contributes to a horribly familiar atmosphere that speaks to everyone's collective experience.

Public acts of violence are normalized and contorted into amusing anecdotes. The other day, my housemate asked me who I think the hottest mass murderer is. I happen to have a vast body of knowledge on this subject, as I have done a significant amount of research on the subject and I enjoy watching true crime. I evaluated the looks of these serial killers as I would a popular celebrity. The fetishizing gaze of how we consume media permeates our treatment and internalization of these news spectacles. We are so far removed from the acts themselves, real people and real crimes become forms of banal entertainment, indistinguishable from fictional characters on a screen. Humanizing villains has become common in television, twisting our moral boundaries, and normalizing murder, making us empathize with murderers. We yearn for an understanding of these violent criminals. We condemn them, yet we cannot deny the excitement they provide from a safe distance behind the screen.

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