GUN VIOLENCE AND THE MEANING OF AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Bryan R. Warnick

Department of Educational Studies
The Ohio State University

Sang Hyun Kim

Department of Education
Chosun University

Shannon Robinson

Department of Educational Studies
The Ohio State University

ABSTRACT. In the United States, targeted school shootings have become a distinct genre of violence. In this essay, Bryan Warnick, Sang Hyun Kim, and Shannon Robinson examine the social meanings that exist in American society that might contribute to this phenomenon, focusing on the question: "Why are schools conceptualized as appropriate places to enact this form of gun violence?" The authors analyze the social meaning of American schooling by using empirical data, everyday observations, films, and poetry, and then connect these points of meaning to stories of individual school shooters. Through this analysis, three aspects of school stand out. First, schools are places of both real and symbolic violence, where force and power often rule the day. Second, schools are places connected to expectations of hope and refuge, friendship and romance, and when these expectations are not met, bitter resentment flows against schools. Third, suburban schools are seen as places of expressive individualism, which, in rare cases, is manifest in terms of "expressive violence." Together, these points of meaning can make schools, for some youth, seem like appropriate places to express violent intentions. The essay concludes by speculating about how this analysis can be applied to prevent school shootings.

On February 27, 2012, seventeen-year-old Thomas "T. J." Lane entered Chardon High School in Chardon, Ohio, with a Ruger MK III .22 caliber handgun. He fired ten shots at a group of students sitting at a cafeteria table, killing three students. T. J. has never explained why he took a gun to the lunchroom that day. He has never explained why the idea of perpetrating violence in a school intrigued him and tempted him. Whatever the reason, this incident was one of the latest episodes in the tragic history of "targeted school shootings." These are shootings "where the school was deliberately selected as the location for the attack and was not simply a random site of opportunity."[1] These shootings involve a student or former student as the shooter, with the target being current students or teachers. Examples include the shootings at West Paducah, Kentucky (1997); Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998); Springfield, Oregon (1998); Littleton, Colorado (1999); Red Lake,

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1. Bryan Vossekuil, Robert A. Fein, Marisa Reddy, Randy Borum, and William Modzeleski, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 9.

Minnesota (2005); Blacksburg, Virginia (2007); Newtown, Connecticut (2012); and, more recently, Marysville, Washington (2014).

In this article, we try to better understand the phenomenon of targeted school shootings. We approach this topic with some reluctance. The exaggeration of chaos and school violence is often a vehicle that detractors of public schools use to reinforce their claim that public education or progressive education has failed.[2] For those of us that care about public education, it is wise not to exaggerate or overemphasize school shootings. In reality, overt violence has been declining steadily in schools since the 1990s[3] (yet, as we will see, symbolic violence and forms of "microviolence" are another matter). Another reason for this reluctance has to do with our doubts about whether a philosophical response to this sort of suffering is appropriate. When the Sandy Hook school shootings occurred in 2012, we authors were all deeply saddened and troubled. Some of us had children who were six or seven years old, about the age of the children who had died. We felt the urge to "do something," and we turned to philosophy of education because that is what we have been trained to do. But when kids have died — particularly when children have been killed by other children — the abstracting task of philosophy, the making of broad connections and abstract generalizations, seems to do violence to the individuality of each story. The only way we have found to partially alleviate the unease of approaching school shooting philosophically is to immerse ourselves in the tragic stories surrounding school shootings — to learn about, and remember, the individual narratives.

As we read about these stories, we found it difficult to find many compelling generalizations. Most of the shooters were white males in rural or suburban

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2. One commentator, for example, overemphasizing the presence of violence in schools, writes, "[t]his retrogression toward anarchy has occurred during the reign of 'progressive' education." See Glenn Wolceshyn, "Socializing Students for Anarchy," *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1997, http://articles.latimes.com/1997-02-18/local/me-29990_1_social-harmony.

3. Rachel Dinkes, Emily Forrest Cataldi, Grace Kena, and Katrina Baum, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2006* (Washington, DC: U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2006), 10.

BRYAN R. WARNICK is Associate Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Department of Educational Studies at The Ohio State University, Ramseyer Hall, Building 090, 29 W. Woodruff Ave., Columbus, OH 43210; e-mail <warnick.11@osu.edu>. His primary areas of scholarship focus on questions related to ethical and political aspects of education, learning theory, and educational technology.

SANG HYUN KIM is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Department of Education at Chosun University, 309 Pilmun-daero, Dong-gu, Gwangju, Korea, 501–759; e-mail <utsdohko@chosun.ac.kr>. His primary areas of scholarship are ethics and education, the history of American educational ideas, and authority and freedom in education.

SHANNON ROBINSON is a Doctoral Student in Philosophy of Education in the Department of Educational Studies at The Ohio State University, Ramseyer Hall, 29 W. Woodruff Ave., Columbus, OH 43210; e-mail <robinson.1837@buckeyemail.osu.edu>. Her primary interests are social justice, liberal education, ethics, and educational policy.

contexts, and most were socially troubled in some way. Beyond that, what impressed us at first was how little the perpetrators seemed to have in common. Some of them were bullied, whereas others were bullies. Some came from obviously dysfunctional homes, whereas others had seemingly very concerned and engaged parents. Some had identifiable mental illness, whereas others had no such diagnosis. Some had particular quarrels with certain people within the school, whereas others wanted to make an expressive statement about who they were, not caring much about who they killed. Some of them seemed remorseful after the shooting, shaken by what they had done; others have spent their time in prison as quasi-celebrities, reveling in their fame and status.

This lack of generalizations across the stories is sometimes even apparent within an individual story itself. For example, the state attorney's report on the Sandy Hook shooting is a collection of inconsistent descriptions of the shooter, Adam Lanza. There is no clear vision of who he was, what he had experienced in his life, or why he did what he did. The report concludes:

> The obvious question … is: "Why did the shooter murder twenty-seven people, including twenty children?" Unfortunately, that question may never be answered conclusively, despite the collection of extensive background information on the shooter through a multitude of interviews and other sources. The evidence clearly shows that the shooter planned his actions, including the taking of his own life, but there is no clear indication why he did so, or why he targeted Sandy Hook Elementary School.[4]

The same thing could be said about the phenomenon of school shootings in general. The only factors that initially seem to draw these events together are (1) easy access to powerful firearms, and (2) a troubled student who interprets a school as an appropriate place to use them.

We want to focus on the second question of interpretation: Why are *schools* interpreted as appropriate places for violence? One can imagine many venues in which such violence could be possible, many venues in which kids congregate, many venues in which a troubled youth could wreak the desired havoc. Why don't we have a genre of violence targeting youth soccer games, for example, or shopping malls? It is true that students spend a lot of time in schools, but this by itself does not explain why schools are chosen to be places of violence. Our task is to try to explain why schools are specifically chosen for this particular genre of violence.

To answer this question, the "exegetical question of school shootings," we must investigate the meaning of American schooling. In what follows, we first explore how schools as institutions and spaces are understood and imagined in American society. We analyze the social "meaning" of school by using empirical data, everyday observations, films, and poetry. We explore both experiential

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4. Stephen J. Sedensky III, *Report of the State's Attorney for the Judicial District of Danbury on the Shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School and 36 Yogananda Street, Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012* (November 25, 2013), http://www.ct.gov/csao/lib/csao/Sandy_Hook_Final_Report.pdf, from 3.

meanings (the ideas students construct about schools from their lived interaction with schools) as well as aspirational meanings (the ideas that exist in the larger culture about what schools *should* be). We then connect these meanings to the stories of individual school shooters. We argue that there are at least three possible points of meaning that contribute to schools being interpreted as places appropriate for violence. First, schools are places of both real and symbolic violence, where force and power often rule the day. Second, schools are places connected to our highest expectations of hope and refuge, friendship and romance, and when these expectations are not met, bitter resentment flows against schools. Third, suburban schools are seen as places of expressive individualism, which, in rare cases, is manifest in terms of "expressive violence" — violence meant to send a message about the identity of the shooter. Together, these points of meaning create a view of schools suggesting that schools are appropriate places to express violent emotions.

Microaggression and Symbolic Violence

The first answer to the exegetical question of school violence was proposed by Sam Rocha, Ben Johnson, and Bryan Warnick in a previous article in *Educational Theory*.[5] There, it was speculated that schools are considered appropriate places for shootings because schools are, in some fundamental sense, already places filled with coercion and force. Bullying is an obvious example. The most recent survey from the National Center for Education Statistics, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, reports that 28 percent of twelve- to eighteen-year-old students indicated being bullied at school during the school year.[6] The percentage seems to climb as the children get younger, with 37 percent of sixth graders indicating that they have been bullied at school. Twenty-three percent of schools reported that bullying occurs in their schools on a daily or weekly basis. The stories linking bullying to school shootings are well-known and need not be rehearsed here. Many school shooters did indeed face intense, humiliating, and heartbreaking bullying. It makes sense that students who are bullied perceive schools as a place of violence. It is not simply that students are bullied, however, and then become violently angry at their victimizers. The existence of bullying also changes how students interpret the meaning of the school environment. Even those that were not bullied themselves can see that bullying occurs, and this sends a message that schools are appropriate places for force and intimidation.

There is more contributing to the interpretation of schools as places appropriate for violence. There are the omnipresent "microaggressions," which are brief, everyday exchanges that (often unintentionally) send a message of dominance and

5. Bryan R. Warnick, Benjamin A. Johnson, and Samuel Rocha, "Tragedy and the Meaning of School Shootings," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 371–90.

6. National Center for Education Statistics, "Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2013" (June 2014), retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2013/key.asp.

denigration.[7] Microaggression often occurs as teachers and educators use shame and humiliation in the classroom. Paul Zimmer addresses this type of violence in his poem, "Zimmer's Head Thudding against the Blackboard," where basketball is used as a metaphor for the violence:

> At the blackboard I had missed
> Five number problems in a row,
> And was about to foul a sixth,
> When the old, exasperated nun
> Began to pound my head against
> My six mistakes.

Zimmer begins to cry, whereupon he is then thrown back into his seat. At that point, he swears to be a poet one day and to "curse her yellow teeth with this [poem]."[8] Experiences of intentional and unintentional humiliation, shame, and degradation are not uncommon in schools. Educators can exercise power against students in ways that send the message that schools are places dominated by the use of force.

It is important to keep in mind not only the explicit acts of violence, or the humiliation and shame that they cause, but also the violence that can occur in the day-to-day practice of schools. Of course, force and coercion are present in many social contexts. Schools are unique, however, in that attendance in legally compulsory. Schools are also different from other contexts in terms of the overall amount and intensity of coercion. Students are forced to do examinations, test preparation, and classroom exercises. They are forced to sit in certain assigned seats, forced to speak or to remain silent, forced to run or to not run, forced to use the bathroom or to "hold it," depending on the time. Coercion even extends beyond school hours as students are forced to do homework and out-of-class projects. Some trends in educational reform — for example, the increasingly strict surveillance and control advocated by some educational reformers — only serve to increase the presence of coercion. If we define violence as an exertion of force to change the environment, then schools are fundamentally places of violence.[9]

Looking back over the stories of school shootings, it is easy to find ample evidence that school-related coercion and control played a role in the lives of school shooters. Andrew Golden shot five people, partly as a reaction against the disciplining actions of his teachers. Peter Langman claims that "the primary

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7. Usually, this term has been invoked in racial contexts, where a dominant culture sends messages of inferiority to a minority group. See Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010).

8. Paul Zimmer, "Zimmer's Head Thudding against the Blackboard," in *Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School*, ed. Maggie Anderson and David Hassler (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 21.

9. In their contribution to this issue, "Sense, Nonsense, and Violence: Levinas and the Internal Logic of School Shootings," Gabriel Keehn and Deron Boyles offer an additional way of thinking about how this violence is expressed in schools, where commercialism in schools reduces student relationships to relations of consumers and commodity.

motivation [Golden] had for the attack was his anger at teachers."[10] This seems odd because Golden was seen as a well-behaved student and rarely required disciplining,[11] so the discipline he received must not have been out of the ordinary in frequency or intensity. But when Mitchell Johnson was asked why the two boys attacked the school, he replied, "Andrew was mad at a teacher. He was tired of their crap."[12] The "crap" of the teachers in this case seems to be nothing more than the day-to-day practice of schooling in which teachers exercise authority and control over students.

Another possible example of the day-to-day use of force in education contributing to a school shooting incident is the case of Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho. On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui shot and killed thirty-two individuals, professors, and students, and wounded twenty-five others. He was painfully shy, a loner who rarely talked. At fourteen, he was diagnosed with "selective mutism," which is the consistent inability to speak in selected social situations, particularly school. Those who suffer from selective mutism often have a deep-seated fear of embarrassment. In high school, Seung-Hui was given an exemption from oral presentations as part of an individualized education program (IEP), and with this accommodation, he successfully earned his diploma. At Virginia Tech, however, he received no such accommodations. He was repeatedly placed in situations where he was forced to talk. The situation escalated during the fall of 2005 when he was enrolled in a creative writing course taught by the renowned writer Nikki Giovanni. The report from the Virginia Tech Review Panel states:

> [Cho] wore reflector glasses and a hat pulled down to obscure his face. Dr. Giovanni reported to the panel that she would have to take time away from teaching at the beginning of each class to ask him to please take off his hat and please take off his glasses. She would have to stand beside his desk until he complied. … Cho also was uncooperative in presenting and changing the pieces that he wrote. He would read from his desk in a voice that could not be heard.[13]

This behavior, together with some violent writing, prompted Giovanni to demand that Seung-Hui be removed from her class, threatening to resign if he was not removed. Seung-Hui subsequently met with the chair of the English department and another faculty member, where he was asked to withdraw from the class and participate in personal tutoring. He interpreted this (correctly) as being "kicked out" of Giovanni's class. He reluctantly agreed, but after the conversation, he "appeared to be crying."[14] In subsequent semesters, Seung-Hui had difficult

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10. Peter F. Langman, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 24.

11. Jonathan Fast, *Ceremonial Violence: A Psychological Explanation of School Shootings* (New York: Overlook Press, 2008), 43.

12. Ibid., 47.

13. Virginia Tech Review Panel, "Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007," retrieved from http://cdm16064.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p266901coll4/id/904, 42.

14. Ibid., 44.

encounters with other faculty members. The professors would demand that he remove his hat, that he speak up, and that he fully participate in discussions and group projects, or that he withdraw from their courses. Some faculty members reacted to his quiet personality with contempt, one of them claiming that his quietness was an attempt to manipulate his professors in order to get out of coursework.[15]

There are many examples, therefore, of Seung-Hui being forced to comply with the demands of those in power. He responded with his own show of force and many people were subsequently killed. It is important to point out that nothing that happened to him seems much different from what occurs in schools and universities every day, so it hardly counts as a criticism against the faculty of Virginia Tech. It is clear that educators at all levels have the ability to force students to speak, to demand that they remove hats and sunglasses, and to control what they say and when they say it (no disturbing poetry!). Whether they are a necessary evil of education or not, such commands send the message that schools are places dominated by the use of coercion and power. This sort of symbolic violence plays a role in investing the school with certain experiential meanings. Because schools are places of force, power, and imposition, they are places where displays of force and power are deemed to be natural and appropriate. Because schools are places of symbolic violence, they are places where real violence can seem to be a logical fit.

THWARTED EXPECTATIONS

It is too simplistic, however, to say that schools are interpreted as places appropriate for violence because of the microaggressions and coercion that are experienced in them every day. There are not only these experiential meanings of schools, but also the aspirational meanings. We think the spell that schools sometimes cast over those contemplating violence has as much to do with the highest hopes and ideals we have for schools as it does with the flaws and shortcomings of actual schools. Schools are often experienced as places of force and coercion, to be sure, but they are also seen as places where students hope to find refuge, romance, and friendship. It is not just the disappointments of life that lead to violence, then, but the fact that those disappointments are framed against a backdrop of much higher ideals. This is a psychological experience that we are probably all familiar with: the pain of a letdown is intensified when expectations are high.[16]

Schools are, first of all, places that we hope are geared toward the protection and nurturing of children and young people. And, in fact, many students do find a sort of refuge in schools. They find friends and mentors, teachers, administrators,

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15. Ibid., 50.

16. The idea of a thwarted expectation is also manifest in Jane O'Dea, "Media and Violence: Does McLuhan Provide a Connection?," in this issue. O'Dea argues that consumer society promises power and attributes that it cannot deliver, which results in student rage. The question remains, though, of why this rage should be directed at the school.

and staff who care about them. Consider, for example, Naomi Nye's poem, "Rain." In this poem, a teacher contemplates her supposed failure, that the only thing a student remembered from his year in her classroom was that "somebody tutched [him] / on the sholder." The teacher holds this up to the narrator of the poem as an example of her "wasted life" — this touch, after all, was all the third grader would remember! Looking at the words that the child had written, though, the narrator sees the letters as "houses in a landscape" that the child could "go inside" and "be safe," in spite of the rain clouds gathering outside.[17] In school, the student had found at least one place of compassion and friendship in the face of what the reader imagines is a rather bleak life outside of school. The touch of a caring adult had transformed the school into a type of sanctuary. Of course, not all schools provide these experiences, perhaps far fewer after the dehumanizing educational reform efforts of recent years. Yet, it remains the case that we *want* schools to be these places.

This aspirational vision of schools as refuge creates an expectation: In schools you will find somebody who understands and cares. This is the hope that many bruised and battered children take with them to school. When this expectation is not met, however, what seems to follow is a deep sense of betrayal, a betrayal that turns to animus directed at the school community. School becomes an appropriate place for violence because it is the site of this betrayal of high expectations. The school promised refuge, it produced ostracism; it promised caring relationships, it produced cruelty; it promised the nurturing of individual potential, it produced stifling conformity.

Consider the case of Scott Pennington, a seventeen-year-old who in 1993 killed his teacher and a janitor, and took his English class hostage for fifteen minutes. Pennington's mother was psychotic, his father physically abusive and distant. Pennington was slow to develop physically and talked with a stutter. He was teased mercilessly at school for his skinny body, thick glasses, and strange haircut. He was once seriously beaten when he accidently bumped into a student in a hallway. As an apparent beacon of hope in the story, Pennington was befriended by a caring teacher, Mrs. McDavid, a woman with a reputation for her devotion to her students. She even gave Pennington her unlisted personal telephone number. Here was the teacher, we might have hoped, that would give this battered kid refuge. Mrs. McDavid, unfortunately, began to grow increasingly concerned about Scott's tortuous writing and self-loathing, but she did not seek help. Pennington was later devastated when Mrs. McDavid later in the year gave him a "C" for his midterm grade, ruining, he thought, his chance for a college scholarship. He begged Mrs. McDavid to change his grade and she refused, sending Pennington into a downward spiral. Mrs. McDavid later became one of the two victims of Pennington's rampage. In this case, at least, it seems to us that it wasn't just the violence that Pennington endured from his peers; it was that he sensed hope and

17. Naomi Shihab Nye, "Rain," in *Learning by Heart*, ed. Anderson and Hassler, 21.

sanctuary in the school under the watchful eye of a caring teacher, and this hope was thwarted.[18]

Expectations can be thwarted by school systems that do not live up to the idea of being a refuge, where caring adults nurture students who are hurting. Schools also set expectations when it comes to peer relationships. They are seen as places to forge meaningful peer connections and friendships, and this expectation can often lead to bitter disappointment. The disappointment of being a social outcast is intensified because the school holds out the possibility of so much more. Schools not only promise friendship, but perhaps even more prominently, they are built up as places of heterosexual romance. Think of the portrayals of schools in American television shows and movies, where romance among students is central to the plot. Consider also that American schools implement many activities that are designed to pair up romantic couples: proms, dances, queens and kings. A central meaning of American schools is that they are places to find love. Reading the stories of shootings, there are many instances of male shooters who long for female companionship and then feel rejected. Schools hold this promise of romance in a way that shopping malls and soccer fields do not; therefore, schools become the site to express disappointment and bitterness.

In their book *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, Katherine Newman and her coauthors describe the factors contributing to the Westside Middle School shooting near Jonesboro, Arkansas. One of the shooters, Mitchell Johnson, was driven by social frustration, anger, and fear. For example, Mitchell was "cut from the basketball team, dumped by his girlfriend."[19] Mitchell and his partner, Andrew Golden (discussed previously), sensed that they had failed the school's tests of masculinity and were therefore destined to be outsiders to the social life of their small town. In other words, they sensed that they had lost the "status tournament of adolescence."[20] The idea that schools were places of romance resonated with Mitchell. According to Langman, Mitchell "developed two obsessions: girls and gangs."[21] Mitchell did well with girls, but his standards were very high. He tended to take his relationships with girls too seriously for his age, even discussing marriage with them. Even though Mitchell later denied it, a student reported that Mitchell had said that he was going to shoot all the girls who had broken up with him. According to a friend of Mitchell's victims, two of the victims were girls who refused to go out with him. And a third victim, Candace, had broken up with him.[22] Because school held the promise of romance and peer connection, the school was caught up in the disappointment of thwarted love and

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18. Pennington's story can be found in Fast, *Ceremonial Violence*, 28–30.

19. Katherine S. Newman, Cybelle Fox, Wendy Roth, Jal Mehta, and David Harding, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 151.

20. Ibid., 271.

21. Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 108.

22. Ibid., 110.

friendship, thereby becoming the appropriate place for violence. Newman and her coauthors write, "It is not coincidence that the boys used the school as the outlet for their anger. Schools are both the location of their social failures and the center of community life, not just for students but for everyone in [American] small towns."[23]

Perhaps it is Columbine shooter Dylan Klebold who best exemplifies the explosive potential of thwarted expectations. Dylan seems to have clearly felt a sense of social isolation. He wrote in his journal that he must "go to school, be scared and nervous, hoping that people can accept me."[24] He often felt that his peers did not accept him, which led to increasing bitterness. Such feelings made Dylan feel, in the words of author David Cullen, "cut off from humanity,"[25] as can be seen when Dylan writes in his journal, "My existence is shit" and "I don't fit in here."[26] Dylan did not find the friends he wanted. The school offered hopes that people would "accept him" but then did not deliver. Dylan also bought into the idea that schools were places to forge romantic connections. Indeed, Langman claims that his journal reveals a desperate fear of rejection and an obsession with finding true love, an observation echoed by Cullen.[27] Unfortunately, Dylan found success at this task of finding love in school to be elusive. He writes in his journal, "I don't know why I do wrong with people (mainly women) — it's like they are set out to hate and scare me," and "I know I can never have them."[28] On April 20, 1999, Dylan saw his school as the appropriate place to show his disappointment with the thwarted social promises of schooling, killing twelve students and a teacher at Columbine High School.

SCHOOLS AS STAGES FOR INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

The last piece of the puzzle has to do with specifically middle-class expectations for the role of the school. It surprises some people that many of these targeted shootings occur in otherwise peaceful rural or suburban environments. It is therefore possible to refine the question we are exploring here: What is it about *these* schools that make them seem like acceptable places for violence?

In a sociological analysis of Hollywood films about high school, Robert Bulman makes the argument that these films express the values of the suburban middle class.[29] The middle class has the resources to access consumer entertainment on a mass scale. Hollywood therefore responds to, and perpetuates, the value structure

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23. Newman et al., *Rampage*, 152.

24. Quoted in David Cullen, *Columbine* (New York: Twelve, 2009), 174.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 174–75.

27. Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 52; and Cullen, *Columbine*, 174–75.

28. Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 53.

29. Robert C. Bulman, *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture* (New York: Worth, 2005).

of the middle class. Bulman notices that the value structure of the high school films he surveys often depends on the setting in which the film is placed. Films set in urban environments express a set of middle-class values that is different from films set in other environments. Urban school films champion what Bulman labels "utilitarian individualism," the view that individuals can get ahead socially and economically if they work hard and play by the rules. In urban school films, the protagonists are middle-class teachers who descend on schools to impart middle-class values to wild urban youths. Examples of these films include *Stand and Deliver* and *Blackboard Jungle*.[30]

Suburban films, in contrast, display a different value structure. Suburban films focus almost exclusively on the students. These films tell stories of suburban youths seeking to find and express themselves in the face of stultifying school rules, oppressive parents, uncaring teachers, and rigid social cliques — think of *The Breakfast Club*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, or, more recently, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.[31] Instead of utilitarian individualism, you see championed the expressive individualism of Henry David Thoreau. High school is a journey about resisting social pressure and finding the "real you." The search for expressive individualism amid peer conformity and school authority is how the middle class understands the high school experience.

One key aspect of suburban high school films is how they engage with the notion of social cliques. The various groups in suburban high schools — jocks, nerds, preppies, druggies, and so forth — often play significant roles in advancing the suburban film narrative. A common narrative theme in suburban high school films is that of students coming to find, construct, or express their own identities by resisting these social groups, or by forming friendships across different groups. This sort of reaction against social cliques frequently seems to playa role in how the shooters understand themselves. In suburban films, the student protagonists react against cliques and conformity, asserting their individuality through breaking down social walls. This same pattern can be seen in many suburban school shootings, where the violence is seen as an act of defiant self-expression (often a specifically masculine type of self-expression) against social groupings. The shooter uses violence to assert his individuality against oppressive cliques, rules, or authority figures. As Jonathan Fast writes, "adopting an *identity* that justifies or even glamorizes extreme violence as a way of righting the wrongs a child has endured offers an ameliorative way of thinking about previous indignities, as well as providing hope for the future."[32]

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30. *Stand and Deliver*, directed by Ramón Menéndez (Warner Brothers, 1988), and *Blackboard Jungle*, directed by Richard Brooks (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1955).

31. *The Breakfast Club*, directed by John Hughes (Universal, 1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, directed by John Hughes (Paramount, 1986), and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, directed by Stephen Chbosky (Summit, 2012).

32. Fast, *Ceremonial Violence*, 152 (emphasis added). Fast's language of "adopting" an identity is a useful corrective here. It is not necessarily the case that school shooters have access to a singular, authentic

There is an aspect of the shooter's personality that Fast believes can best be expressed in terms of violence. And because schools act as stages for individual expression — that is, as sites on which students can claim a new personality — they are then interpreted as appropriate places to enact violence. School shootings operate as existential statements, asserting a self in the middle of suburban conformity. The violence as expressive individualism can be seen in the publicity efforts that some school shooters undertake prior to their actions. For example, the expressive elements are evident in the Columbine shooters production of their "basement tapes;" and with Seung-Hui Cho, who "paused during his shooting in order to FedEx a press kit with photos, a DVD, and a document explaining his motives, to NBC news."[33] These students wanted people to know who they were and why they were going to start shooting.

One of the clearest examples of school violence serving as a stage for expressive individualism can be found in the case of Luke Woodham, who killed two students and wounded seven others on October 1, 1997. Luke was overweight, wore thick glasses, and was often teased. He would retreat into his room to read philosophy and write poetry. He believed himself to be a unique personality, writing in his journal that "no one would think like I did."[34] He fell in with a group of friends who were interested in violence and the occult, and who goaded him into committing increasingly serious crimes and acts of aggression, including the torture and murder of his family dog. On the day of his school shooting, he also beat and stabbed his mother, eventually suffocating her to death under a pillow. After her death, he left a sort of "manifesto" to the world. In it he describes his sense of being hated and ridiculed. He describes how his own identity had become constructed around hate: "I am the hate in every man's heart." This identity was about to be enacted on the expressive stage of the school. He urges his readers, "Live by your own rules.… Live your life in a bold new way. For you, dear friend, are a superman." He continues, "I am not insane. I am angry. The world shit on me for the final time. I am not spoiled or lazy, for murder is not weak and slow-witted. Murder is gutsy and daring."[35] With the shooting, Luke became the gutsy and daring superman that he believed existed inside him but that no one else seemed to recognize. The school became the place where he would show the world who he really was, where he would be true to the identity that he believed was full of hate.

In a school shooting at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky, fourteen-year- old Michael Carneal killed three students and injured five more on

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inner identity, an identity that they then outwardly express through violence. It may be that the violence constructs an identity as much as exposes a preexisting identity. The school, though, remains a stage on which one constructs an identity as much as a venue for expressing an identity.

33. Fast, *Ceremonial Violence*, 19.

34. Ibid., 142.

35. Ibid., 156.

December 1, 1997. Michael came from a family of highly successful people. His father was a high-profile lawyer, his mother was a stay-at-home mom with some post-graduate education, and his sister was valedictorian of her high school class and popular among her peers.[36] Michael was much less successful in his social journey than the rest of his family. In Michael's story, we see interaction with multiple school groups as he attempts to find his place on the social ladder. He tried hard to fit in with a fringe group (the Goths) by giving them stolen goods and by bringing a gun to school. However, the group never did embrace him.[37] Although he was teased sometimes at school for his strange antics, it seems that he did not shoot the people who made fun of him, but rather the people he envied. He targeted the socially and academically successful students, later acknowledging that he "envied the popularity of the students in the prayer group whom he shot."[38] Afterward, he described his reaction to the shooting, speaking of it as an expressive project: "I was feeling proud, strong, good, and more respected. I had accomplished something. I'm not the kind of kid who accomplishes anything. This is the only adventure I've ever had."[39] Newman and her coauthors conclude, "In his mind, [the shooting] refuted the claims that he was weak or gay and provided definitive evidence that he could be every bit the man to the kids who had thrown him into lockers. As Michael put it, 'I thought maybe they would be scared and then no one would mess with Michael.'"[40]

Violence as an act of expressive individualism can also be seen in the Columbine shooters, where we see a fixation on social cliques and groups. Langman reports that, in his journals, Dylan Klebold did not complain about harassment or bullying, but expressed hostility toward the popular students because of their status. He wrote, "I see jocks having fun, friends, women, ALIVE," and "I hated the happiness that they [jocks] have"; he also noted that "others' achievements are tormentations."[41] During the shooting, Dylan and Eric Harris were said to target the "white hats," or jocks (even though it seems no jocks were actually killed).

Thus, in the Columbine shootings, we see the attempt to break free from social cliques and from suburban conformity that is characteristic of expressive individualism. We also clearly see the idea that the violence was an attempt at self-expression. Eric and Dylan carefully prepared hours of videotape, explaining to the world why they had done what they had done, reveling in their preparations. In the basement tapes, there is much discussion of the legacy they wanted to leave through their violence. They "assure each other that their murderous rampage will

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36. Newman et al., *Rampage*, 22.

37. Ibid., 29–32.

38. Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 150.

39. Quoted in Newman et al., *Rampage*, 6.

40. Ibid., 152.

41. Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 53–54.

endure in the daydreams and nightmares of the public," and they talk about "being ghosts who haunt the survivors."[42] They discuss their actions as moving them to a higher level of existence, their lives becoming "art," their killings a "masterpiece." Sociologist Ralph Larkin writes:

> [Eric Harris] seemed to be enthralled by the notoriety that they would receive. This appeared to be his major concern when talking with a journalist in a chat room about the Oklahoma City bombings. In the basement tapes, Klebold noted that people would take notice at the time and date of the videotapes they were making. He also considered what movie director could best be trusted with the script of their story; Quentin Tarantino topped their list. They also wanted the story to have a lot of "dramatic irony."[43]

The Columbine shooters' concern with individual expression is best exemplified by Eric, who was particularly bothered by the idea that his life, and his carnage, would be deemed "unoriginal."[44] Thus, he tried to distance what he had done from the actions of other school shooters who had preceded him: "Do not think," he says, "we're trying to copy anyone."[45] Columbine was to be *his* statement.

Eric's journals are filled with reflections about a part of himself buried deep inside that could only be expressed in terms of violence and dominance. He wrote, "My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, if you don't like it, you die."[46] But, as Langman points out, Eric knew that his peers did not perceive him as "the law." His position would have to be asserted by killing those who did not recognize his superiority, including boys who teased him and girls who rejected him. Eric wanted not only the school to know, but also the whole world to know, the true self that was inside. As he wrote in his journal, "HATE! I'm full of hate and I love it. … Yes I hate and I guess I want others to know it."[47] Because suburban schools are deemed places of self-expression, the school became the place were Eric expressed the hate he found within himself.

CONCLUSION

We have groped our way here toward an admittedly speculative response to the exegetical question of school shootings. We have analyzed the cultural meanings of American schools, using empirical data, everyday observations, films, and poetry, and we have tried to connect this analysis to the individual stories of school shooters. We conclude that schools are interpreted as places appropriate for violence because of the following three points of meaning:

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42. Fast, *Ceremonial Violence*, 202.

43. Ralph W. Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 194.

44. Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 33.

45. Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche, "The Columbine Tapes," *Time Canada* 154, no. 25 (1999): 24.

46. Quoted in Langman, *Why Kids Kill*, 142.

47. Quoted in Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine,* 135.

1. Schools are already places of symbolic microaggression and coercion where force rules the day. Thus, they are places where the use of force seems natural and appropriate.

2. Schools are places where we invest hope in creating places of refuge, friendship, and romance. When these expectations are not met, resentment flows against schools.

3. Suburban schools are seen as places of "expressive individualism," where students react against social cliques and find out who they really are. For students who see themselves as having a violent identity, schools become appropriate places to express this identity.

Is there anything in this analysis that might provide guidance regarding how we can respond to school shootings? With respect to the first meaning involving the prevalence of force, this analysis suggests that we make schools more student-centered and less coercive. It suggests that the more tightly we try to *control* schools in order to make them safe, the less safe they may actually be. Metal detectors, video surveillance, and the like support the message that schools are places of domination and control, amplifying the very message that leads to violence. It may also be the case that certain educational reforms, such as intensive testing focused on externally imposed standards, send the messages of coercion and control as well, thereby contributing to the interpretation of violence.

With respect to the second point of meaning, there are at least two options. First, schools could try to better live up to the expectations that are placed upon them. This would mean that schools redouble their efforts to become places of refuge where troubled students can find caring adults and form authentic human relationships. Many of the articles in this issue, in different ways, take this gentle approach to school violence, and it is a response we would also endorse. At the same time, though, if we redouble efforts to recreate schools as places of refuge, it might also serve to highlight and strengthen the very expectation that leads to bitterness and disappointment. For those students who do not find refuge in schools — and there will always be some, even with increased efforts — the distance between the now heightened expectation and their lived reality will be all the greater, perhaps contributing to increased rage directed toward the school. This suggests the second option, which would be to *lower* expectations for schools as places of refuge and relationships. It is difficult to contemplate what such an approach might mean, and we, at least, would be reluctant to give up the idea that schools should provide refuge and friendship. The strategy of lowering expectations makes most sense when it comes to expectations of romance. Is it really necessary, for example, for American schools to focus on pairing up heterosexual couples through dances, proms, royal courts, and so forth? Perhaps the best solution to thwarted expectations, therefore, would be one that takes a mixed approach: redoubling efforts to make schools more caring, while deemphasizing schools as places to find love.

Finally, with respect to the third point of meaning, the implications are even less clear. For one thing, we are not sure how to change the "cultural meaning" that American schools are stages for individual expression. For another, we are not entirely certain that we should want to try. After all, should we stop thinking of schools in terms of Thoreauvian ideals, where students can find and express their true thoughts and feelings? Perhaps, in the end, the solution is to multiply the avenues for self-expression in schools, giving students expressive tools that can be used in the place of gun violence. Allowing students many different types of opportunities and formats for speaking, writing, and creating might pull some troubled students back from the brink.