

School Massacres: Terror and Impunity

When Seung Hui Cho chained the doors of Virginia Tech's Norris Hall before firing into each of four classrooms, now serving as holding pens, he followed unconsciously in the tradition of other perpetrators of school massacres who herded, ambushed, or trapped their victims before murdering them. Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, of Westside Middle School near Jonesboro, Arkansas, fired from a sniper's nest on children like themselves who had been marched out of the building after Golden set off the fire alarm. With the doors automatically locking behind them, the evacuated students now stood exposed to fire from semiautomatic weapons. Barry Loukaitis of Moses Lake, Washington, stationed himself in the doorway of his algebra class, blocking the means of escape, and shot and killed two students and a teacher with a deer rifle. Kip Kinkel of Springfield, Oregon, raised the same procedure to a higher level. Having already murdered his parents, he armed himself with 1000 rounds of ammunition and drove to Thurston High School, where after shooting two students in the head he took up a position just inside the doorway of the cafeteria—sealing the exit—and fired from the hip. Kinkel had given some thought to ambushing dozens, perhaps hundreds. As was noted at his sentencing hearing, some days before the Thurston massacre Kinkel confided to a friend that “he wanted to lock the doors except

for one, put a bomb in the cafeteria, and then pick people off one by one after the bomb exploded and they tried to escape.”¹ Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold similarly intended to ambush students fleeing the devastation of Columbine High School after their propane bombs had detonated. When, in the event, the bombs failed, they simply turned themselves loose, and not the least inhuman of their acts was to pen their prey in the school library and make it a killing zone. In one way or another, all of these murderers staged a fantasy of their own supremacy before captive audiences—fantasy, because the real world was closing in on them even then.

A number of the perpetrators of massacres seem to imagine that they will be able to slip away after the deed or otherwise evade reality. On May 26, 1994 in Union, Kentucky, Clay Shroud murdered his parents and sisters in cold blood, then headed for school, armed, with the intention of gunning down his English teacher and the assistant principal. After holding a class hostage for seventeen minutes, he surrendered. Explaining his killings to police, he said that he “felt trapped in a way” at home and just wanted to get free. (The irony of a hostage-taker complaining of feeling trapped seems to have made no impression on Shroud.) “I was either going to take some stuff and all the money I could find and leave, disappear somewhere, or I was going to kill them and take some stuff and disappear,” Shroud said. Asked why he shot his sisters, Shroud replied, similarly, “because I figured I had to get out of there.” As he later put it, “I just had to get away from everything.” So detached from his own acts was this youth, and so oblivious to the law, that he supposed he could simply walk away from the slaughter of his family. He who left others no escape would “disappear.” Murder was the

highway to freedom. Luke Woodham, author of the Pearl High School massacre, also seems to have dreamed of killing with magical impunity. After brutally murdering his mother, Woodham proceeded to school with a hunting rifle hidden under his coat, and killed two students and wounded seven. Reportedly, the circle or cult Woodham belonged to talked of laying siege to the school, “setting off napalm fires and cutting telephone lines before killing selected people and then fleeing to Louisiana, Mexico and, finally, Cuba.” As Evan Ramsey of Bethel, Alaska, talked over his plans for a school massacre, a friend advised him not to kill himself. “You got to live the fame and the fortune,” the friend said, as if these were the natural sequels of multiple murder.

For the school shooters who cut off the possibility of escape for others, the fantasy of their own escape must have particular appeal. Having worn camouflage gear and packed cans of survival rations, eleven-year-old Andrew Golden intended to melt into the woods once he had done his shooting. In actuality both he and his confederate were captured minutes after they murdered five persons and wounded ten. Although Eric Harris went far beyond Golden in his bloody ambitions and in the scale of his hatred, he too seems to have entertained fantasies of escape. After shedding rivers of blood at Columbine High School (Harris wrote in his journal),

if we still can we will hijack some awesome car, and drive to the neighborhood of our choice and start torching houses with molotov cocktails. by that time the cops will be all over us and we start to kill them to[o]. . . . itll be like the LA riots, the Oklahoma bombing, WWII, Vietnam, duke and doom all mixed together.

maybe we will even start a little rebellion or revolution to fuck things up as much as we can. i want to leave a lasting impression on the world. . . . if by some weird as shit luck my [that is, “me”] and V [for “Vodka,” that is, Klebold] survive and escape we will move to some island somewhere or maybe mexico new zeland or some exotic place where Americans cant get us. if there isn’t such a place, then we will hijack a hell of a lot of bombs and crash a plane into NYC.

That Harris entertained the fantasy of wreaking destruction on the world and getting away with it—escaping to “some island somewhere”—doesn’t mean he was delusional. (He knew his survival was unlikely.) It does, however, measure the ocean of hatred that separated him from the world.

Even as he recorded his fantasy of escape, Harris recognized that he couldn’t get away with mass murder, and in the event, as we know, he and Klebold shot themselves in the library of Columbine High School where they had killed so many. Considered as a kind of dramatic exit, however, their suicide too represents a mode of escape. The two certainly escaped justice—unlike, say, Kinkel and Ramsey, who intended to commit suicide but could not bring themselves to do it, and now serve prison sentences of 112 years and 210 years respectively. In all likelihood, in the minds of Harris and Klebold suicide itself was a ticket to “some exotic place where [the law] can’t get us”—the realm of legend. As the most romantic of all acts, suicide would raise their deeds to the level of the heroic and confirm and secure their fame. “I want to leave a lasting impression on the world.” By booby-trapping the school as well as Klebold’s BMW, Harris and

Klebold would put the finishing touches on their work of destruction even after they made their exit. They would hold others captive to terror while enjoying the most perfect impunity themselves, that of the dead. Far from being an expression of despair, dual suicide was their last laugh—a vanishing act staged to frustrate their pursuers and amaze the world.

When Kinkel drove to Thurston High School on May 21, 1998 armed to kill, he left the soundtrack of a movie of *Romeo and Juliet* blaring over the dead bodies of his parents. Unlike the famous pair, Harris and Klebold committed suicide in the name of nihilism, world-hatred and their own celebrity. Harris and Klebold so gloried in their own imaginary legend that it is said they “discussed which famous director—Tarantino or Spielberg—should make the film version of their life story. Their code letters for the Columbine attack were NBK, standing for the title of their favorite movie, *Natural Born Killers*,”² whose homicidal heroes miraculously get away with dozens of murders, cultivating their legend all the while. If in the Columbine library Harris and Klebold were the free among the unfree, so too did the pair rise to the heights of fame where those around them remained in the mire of ordinary existence. It is well known that like Harris and Klebold many of the perpetrators of school massacres were devotees of a fantasy universe filled with hate music, personal cult-movies (Loukaitis is said to have rented *Natural Born Killers* no less than seven times), and video games that are tests of killing skills. Michael Carneal’s victims in Heath High School, in West Paducah, Kentucky, had figuratively chained themselves together by joining hands in prayer, virtually posing like a group portrait for his bullets. Carneal may or may not have had much experience

with guns, but he did spend untold hours playing Doom, Castle Wolfenstein, Redneck Rampage, Mech Warrior and Final Fantasy, acquiring the marksmanship he later turned against human targets. The 6th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati, in wisely concluding that video games did not “cause” Carneal to fire on a circle of praying students, reasoned that “it is simply too far a leap from shooting characters on a video screen (an activity undertaken by millions) to shooting people in a classroom (an activity undertaken by a handful, at most) for Carneal’s actions to have been reasonably foreseeable to the manufacturers of the media that Carneal played and viewed.” But while video games didn’t cause Carneal to kill (in the sense of making it impossible for him to do otherwise), their very remoteness from reality may have abetted his estrangement from the human world and fed the fantasy that he could somehow get away with murder. “It was kind of like I was in a dream,” he said of the act of shooting eight people one by one (five in the head), with the implication that although he was performing the action, it was not serious enough to result in his capture and the loss of his liberty. Whatever Carneal’s plans for that morning, they do not seem to have included getting caught.

Contrary to fantasies of escape, no one slips over the border to Mexico after committing a school massacre, though some may think of evading the law by getting themselves killed as Kinkel tried to do when he pled with his captors in the cafeteria of Thurston High School, “Just kill me! Shoot me now! I want to die.” (They did not honor his request, whether because they were in no mood to do his bidding or because unlike him they couldn’t kill or because they realized intuitively that if they killed him they

would be walking right into another trap.) But the fact is that either the perpetrators of a school massacre commit suicide or they get caught, and once caught they are in checkmate because there are too many witnesses and too much evidence to admit of any doubt that they did what they did. Still, they still have one last thin hope of avoiding prison—the insanity defense. Young men who only yesterday told friends it would be cool to do some killing, now become exhibits of psychological helplessness, and practiced liars like Kinkel become pictures of the most genuine affliction. Kinkel’s defense team tried to build a case that he was out of his mind until he called an end to it and pled guilty to four counts of aggravated murder and twenty-six of attempted murder. Not that his team abandoned the insanity card even then. At his sentencing they brought forward all the psychological arguments they gave up the right to use at trial, contending that he suffered from delusions among other ills, and therefore wasn’t really guilty even if he already pled guilty. (Another defense team now claims that he was disserved by the first.) The lawyers in cases like this make common cause with those committed as a matter of doctrine, not just tactics, to the substitution of therapeutic for moral and indeed legal categories and judgments.

The press, too, finds it hard to discuss school massacres without resorting to pet psychological theories—that the killers felt bullied, had a poor opinion of themselves, were depressed, were unloved, had a favored sibling—whether or not these banalities fit the facts, and whether or not they are adequate to the deed itself. Repeated endlessly, such clichés resemble nothing so much as an incantation recited over and over to ward off harm. Precisely because school massacres are so shocking, they are

almost ritually interpreted as some sort of proof of mental disorder or diminished capacity, and every cold-blooded act, every evidence of callous preparation (as when Carneal calmly put on ear plugs before beginning to shoot) will only confirm the original presumption of illness. Many say that a person “has to be crazy” to fire into a prayer circle or turn a semiautomatic weapon on students packed into a cafeteria at its busiest hour—not stopping to think that this line of argument converts ruthlessness into a defense and makes atrocity self-exonerating. If Carneal fired with a two-handed grip into a circle of his fellow students with the indifference of someone playing a video game, that only means he didn’t comprehend the reality of death. If Kinkel like Cho paused for hours in between killings, if he timed his entry into the school cafeteria for the greatest possible carnage, if he booby-trapped his house with bombs and lied to the police about it, we must remember that even schizophrenics lost to reality can deliberate and lay plans. (That Kinkel, for whatever reason, didn’t carry out his original idea of a mass ambush casts doubt on his claim, advanced after the fact, that he “had no choice” but to do what his voices commanded.) Had Cho lived, some would have said, without fail, that his ruthlessness proves his insanity, that this executioner of 32 strangers was unmercifully tyrannized by his own delusions, and the care he put into preparing his rampage and cutting off his victims’ lines of escape only shows how detached from everyone and everything he really was.

Cho *was* detached, though this doesn’t mean he was somehow innocent of his own actions. The profound severance from the human world exhibited by Cho when he transformed his face into an inexpressive mask and shot his victims repeatedly;

exhibited by Harris and Klebold when they laid plans for death and destruction as if they were writing the movie of their triumph; by Loukaitis when he seized a classroom and staged his own script in blood in front of all eyes; by Kinkel when he lay in wait for his mother after having executed his father, ambushed her as she ascended the steps from the garage, and gabbed on the phone with friends while both parents lay dead on the floor—this radical moral dissociation does not mitigate, it aggravates. It defines malice.

¹ Joseph Lieberman, *The Shooting Game: The Making of School Shooters* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2006), p. 180. Kinkel was a proficient bomb-maker.

² Lieberman, p. 223.