

THE GUNFIRE DIALOGUES

Notes on the reality of virtuality

By *Thomas de Zengotita*

The incident at Columbine High School on April 20 arrested our attention not only because fifteen people were killed but because it consolidated our sense that school shootings say Something Important about Society. As a media event, it is related somehow to O.J. and Di and Monica, but practical preoccupation with causal “factors” distracted us, and the possibility of general synthesis was sacrificed to the need to Do Something. The essentials emerged within days of the event but flattened into cliché as the buzz of commentary echoed across our virtual polis. Still, they can be recovered.

The boy appeared in a local-folks-react piece on one of the morning shows just days after the shootings. He was white-ethnicky, pudgy and pimply, with purple streaks in his dreadlocked hair and a couple of studs in his face. He spoke with a defiant whine. He didn’t condone the shootings, and he wasn’t into Hitler, but he had been harassed by jocks all his life, and those kids in Colorado “at least . . . took a stand.” He thought a lot of other kids like him would kind of idolize the Trench-coat Mafia.

He was right. Saturday’s *New York Times* covered online discussions of the Littleton massacre. The tone was set by psychologists and Web-site executives hyping virtual communities, but quotes from the kids told the tale: “I would never personally do anything like that, but it did take guts” and “Even though I would never take someone else’s life, maybe it will make people think before they open their mouths next time. . . .” The cruelty of prep and jock “culture” toward those who didn’t fit in was the underlying issue for these kids. Cokie Roberts made it official that Sunday morning, and *Rolling Stone* columnist Jon Katz’s Web site became a polling resource for the mainstream. The floodgates opened and commentators everywhere were publicly recalling their high school days. Cliques joined Kosovo on the national agenda.

Sally Satel, a Yale psychiatrist, had an op-ed piece about the busloads of “grief counselors” who are as much a feature of such scenes as are SWAT teams and flower shrines. She focused on the “commodification of grief,” the “unholy therapeutic alliance” between the talk-through-your-feelings-and-get-to-closure counselor and the empathic servants of the twenty-four-hour

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news cycle. And can anyone doubt that stricken mourners, no matter how authentic their feelings, respond at some level to implicit expectations when the cameras roll? Especially since they have seen this show on TV before; now, suddenly, they are in it.

For it is very much a show, and not only in the trivial sense that anything covered by the media becomes a show. "Senseless school shooting" is now a genre with resonance across the country because it unites universality and specificity so compellingly. There is a set: the open space of parking lots and sports fields around the one- or two-level brick-and-concrete sprawl of buildings, the school name and colors and logo—all pretty much interchangeable across the exurban landscape. There is a cast: kids made for yearbook pictures, local law-enforcement and school officials rising, or not rising, to the occasion, local volunteers in emergency services likewise, and local religious and political leaders, too. An indefinable quality of localness pervades the scene. It's the hair and mustaches, the jackets, hats and eyewear, the cars and trucks—you can feel the nearby malls and the traffic on the interstate at the edge of town. It isn't New York and it isn't L.A. It's the heartland, and everyone knows this plot: reconstructing the lives of the killers, tracking down accomplices, the community outpouring of support, the coming together, the healing process—and the rifts and recriminations as well. Likewise the spectators; we distinguish immediately between this genre and natural-disaster or horrors-of-war "shows." We know how to respond as an audience as surely as we would know how to play our roles if, God forbid, we suddenly landed a part.

"Shows" belongs in quotes because, like all things postmodern, this is a reflexive entity, and that reflexivity testifies, in its practical futility, to the power of the total phenomenon. No amount of media self-criticism makes a dent. For "coverage of senseless school shootings" is also a genre. The correspondents are in moved-to-the-breaking-point-but-professional mode. The anchors are in grave-demeanor-reserved-for-inexplicable-evil mode. The expert guests and other commentators are also grave, but inexplicability is not their provenance, and I-told-you-so and now-maybe-you'll-listen drives their spin toward gun control or family values or psychological-intervention programs.

The point here is not exploitation of personal pain for commercial or political gain. We are not at that familiar level of criticism. Indeed, many in the media have been moved to even more reflexive contortions because of just such concerns: correspondents asking interviewees about their grief now also ask how they feel about being interviewed about their grief. No, the point is to call attention to an emergent level of culture that transcends issue-oriented efforts to solve a social problem.

The key to the success of the show is the way everyone can identify so specifically with the set, the characters, and the plot; that is why the outpouring spreads, and innumerable other local responses are organized, or erupt, under the sign of "could it happen here?" It is like a myth played out in "real time," embracing millions of people. That is how the personal becomes the political. That is why ideologies no longer cohere and issues fragment; they can't compete with such narratives.

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e come closest to addressing the situation as a whole when asking how violence in the media influences behavior. Cultural conservatives focus on permissive standards related to content, and surely that content goes way beyond anything imaginable thirty years ago. People who commit these acts always show evidence of its influence. The Littleton shooters spent a lot of time with *Natural Born Killers* and goth CDs and hate Web sites, but libertarians point out that Charlie Starkweather was inspired by comics and rock and roll, and argue that agency must be attributed to the person, not the muse. So the debate resolves itself into this question: Is the influence of today's media qualitatively different from yesterday's?

The answer is obviously yes. What is shown makes a difference. Satur-

tion and production values matter, too. Interactivity from the killer's point of view in a graphic video game goes right to the sensorimotor brain centers. High school cliques have always been with us and jocks have always bullied geeks; the geeks now have something besides the chess club to retreat to—they have games like Doom, entire environments of testosterone-stimulating violence in which they compensate virtually for physical inequities. And compulsions of mimesis among the psychotically inclined have thresholds. This can be denied only by pointing to the fact that overall violence among teenagers, in school or out, is dramatically lower than it used to be. But that just confirms that, in an age when the organized and ritualized Fifties fistfight seems quaint, conflict-resolution programs collaborate un-

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wittingly with computer games to nudge violence into virtuality. It also tells us that healthier kids, who never act out, cope differently with the same stimulations. What it does not tell us is that those stimulations might have powerful effects on them, perhaps just as corrosive in subtler ways.

The sheer amount of media absorbed by kids who commit such acts, the variety and intensity of its modalities, and the recurrence of specific items on their personal-favorites list tell us that something comparable in force to the oral culture Plato attacked in *The Republic* has emerged among us. Comparable in force, but very different in context and functionality. The performative Homeric narrative of pre-literate Greece provided irresistible paradigms of behavior and evaluation in an essentially tribal society. To counter the momentum of so enveloping a tradition, Plato recommended the detachments of a rational philosophy. The post-literate fusion of fact and fiction in multimedia narratives of our day are similarly enveloping, but we resist through detachments of knowingness and irony. Or most of us do. But, resistant or not, we all know what counts: being on the show.

The really decisive piece of media in the Columbine case was the tape the shooters and their friends made for a video-production course in their school. In the tape, the boys rehearsed the event they would one day—but what is the verb here? Enact? Perform? A word like that is needed. The model of plan followed by action will not apply. That model belongs to an age when events in the real world and accounts of those events in the media were es-

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entially separate. That difference no longer exists. For the shooters knew what coverage they could expect in their second production of "school shootings." They were already and always "on"—just like the people in Hollywood and New York, pitching angles on this story to one another before the bodies were out of Columbine's library.

So we are faced with a new space for public culture somewhere between reality and simulation, between action and acting—and this holds not just for latent psychotics but for the rest of us as well. Saying, "Well, millions of kids listen to Marilyn Manson and never harm anyone" misses the point. *Those* kids are just as influenced in a *different* way by the totality that is this virtual space. They go ironic rather than psychotic. They are the "apathetic" ones, for whom politics is, at best, a field of self-expression in which certain people identify with certain issues and "promote awareness" of them—a politics in which issues have fans.

Think of it all as do followers of Nietzsche among French intellectuals. The brain and its structures, the body and its desires, meet culture directly. Inclinations and threshold are built into our neurochemistry, and stimulating content and forms of behavior are imposed by technologies of communication and the administration of daily life in routines of work and play. The more enveloping and penetrating the stimulations and routines, the more uniform and centerless the settings of our lives—and what else should we expect but occasional psychotic eruptions on a vast plain of disengagement sustained by an economy devoted to simulations?

Traditional opinion leaders don't want to see this phenomenon whole. Those in the mainstream have a piece of the action—their material interests are increasingly vested in the immaterial economy. They must see the new technologies as a force at least *potentially* for good. People on the left don't want to see it either, but, ironically, this is because the media seem to them not material enough! They cling to old bread-and-circuses, opiate-of-the-people critiques. They learned nothing from O.J. and Di and Monica. They can't believe that virtual reality is *real*. But the folks who are creating virtuality have a deeper understanding. From *The Truman Show* to *The Matrix*, a slew of recent movies is exposing the project built into these technologies. The wonder is that we don't let this surreptitious confession sink in. After all, don't these technologies have as their explicit purpose making representations more and more realistic (think computer graphics and animations) and making reality more and more representational (think Times Square and sanctioned graffiti)?

A few years ago, Benjamin Barber wrote a book that characterized posteverything culture as *Jihad v. McWorld*. He had principally in mind developments that preoccupy political thinkers—global corporate media vis-à-vis retribalization after the Cold War: Hutu killers in Nike paraphernalia and so on. Columbine showed that the phenomenon Barber described is not essentially residual, that a hybrid entity with a structuring life of its own has emerged on the planet, a life in which Serbian three-fingered salutes echo homey gangsta signs and Hitler's birthday and high school movies converge seamlessly with Trench-coat Mafia and twenty-four-hour coverage of "Terror in the Rockies." To Muslims and Christians add Hilfiger and piercing.

Half-convinced, perhaps, you ask, "What is to be done?" And the answer must be, "Don't ask *that* question so fast." For if, as a gigantic matter of historical fact, our world is becoming so intensely reflexive that distinctions between action and performance and reality and representation are eroding at every level of our lives, then that question, asked immediately, represses the realization that we are at an utter loss. And that realization might spur us to take up a challenge to our understanding, which we cannot afford to leave to prophetic digerati and deconstructing academics. Because this much can be said for certain: we are all in the show, and the show must go on. ■