

STAGES OF GRIEF:
YOUTH, PERFORMANCE,
AND THE CULT OF
COLUMBINE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG KILLER:	
The Criminal Dramaturgy of School Massacres	6
III. RIPPING THE SYSTEM:	
Education, Initiation and the Theatre of Rock	27
IV. THE SUICIDE SHOW:	
School Terrorism on Stage and Screen.....	56
V. CONCLUSION.....	88
WORKS CITED.....	91

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“The sudden sun danced up the lawn,
The wind came keen and fine;
One singing through the hedge has gone
Against the sunrise line;
And on his lips, like some red rose,
The kiss of Columbine.”
Theodosia Pickering (1874-1944),
“At Columbine’s Window”

This study, Stages of Grief: Youth, Performance and the Cult of Columbine, examines the complicated relationship between rampage school shootings and art—framing the crimes as a kind of anti-hero’s journey. Along this journey of adolescent initiation, it is necessary to consider the influence of theatre and film, literature, television news, popular music, and the internet. What are the various components of successful initiation rituals around the world and how are depressed, artistic kids in western culture creating pathways to fame and recognition for themselves? Although school shootings are uncommon, and certainly not the epidemic suggested by the media, they point to a compelling trend. Much attention has already been given to the shooters’ biographies, the influence of violent videogames, and preexisting psychoses’, but little has been said about their creativity, and what this might reveal about their motivation. Little has been written about the cult-like fan clubs which have sprung up in praise of the shooters’ actions. This thesis sheds some light on this underexposed mania.

Although references to Marilyn Manson abound, I am not attempting to make a link between this artist and Columbine. That link was made long ago by others and for good or ill, rational or not, he's a card-carrying member of the Cult of Columbine. Manson is merely used here as an example of a larger phenomenon in popular music—over the years the names may change but the song remains the same.

Chapter One, A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG KILLER: The Criminal Dramaturgy of School Massacres, examines the Columbine massacre of 1999 in Littleton, Colorado as an example of a high profile crime, noteworthy for its creative and theatrical execution. Columbine is placed within the context of adolescent criminal history as well as performance history. Special attention is paid to the incorporation of theatrical language used in the news media to describe the events and characters in Littleton, as well as events and characters present throughout the entire history of rampage school shootings. Commonalities among these young killers with each other as well as with their close kin, celebrity stalkers, are revealed. Robert Nye's novel The Late Mr. Shakespeare is used to illustrate the complexities of idol worship and its relative significance to the issue of teens and popular music. Chapter One closes with a discussion of Stephen King's novel Rage, which he began writing in the late 1960s, while still a teenager himself. There is an established link between this book—which contains a wealth of performance language and a spectacular narrative—and two school shooters of record.

Chapter Two, RIPPING THE SYSTEM: Education, Initiation and the Theatre of Rock, delves more deeply into formal education, rites of passage, and popular music. A philosophy of education is brought forth as one considers the ways that the oppressive

nature of compulsory schooling may be contributing to the rise in campus shootings, while at the same time noting the ironic fact that the history of school shootings is full of academically gifted students. As stated previously, many school shooters have been artist-types relegated to the bottom rungs of the high school social ladder. The school dynamic is examined as well as the influence of school buildings and the surrounding suburban environment.

Teenagers strongly identify with the popular music they consume, and in the past ten years much has been made of school shooters' overwhelming predilection for the moody sounds of goth, industrial, and metal. Again, no single artist has been featured more prominently in connection with these young killers than the iconic, spectacular, self-proclaimed satanist Marilyn Manson. What might these kids be seeking in this realm and is there anything of value to be found there? Almost exclusively, rampage school shootings are the business of boys.¹ Therefore, the focus here is on male initiation and to that end the study of popular music is related to the work of poet and mens' studies scholar Robert Bly.

Chapter Three, THE SUICIDE SHOW: School Terrorism on Stage and Screen, offers critical analyses of stage plays and films which revolve around the theme of relevant school violence. Beginning with Jean Vigo's Zero de Conduite (1933) and closing with a discussion of new media such as YouTube, this chapter traces the performance history of rebellious youth in schools. At the centerpiece of this discussion

¹ There are a few instances of female shooters who targeted multiple victims, seemingly at random. These include Brenda Spencer, 16, who fired shots onto a school playground across the street from her home in 1979; Laurie Dann, 30, who shot six children at an elementary school in 1988; and Latina Williams, 23, who killed two of her classmates before committing suicide at Louisiana Technical College in 2008.

is a close examination of the films (and one stage play, columbinus) which sprang up in the wake of the Columbine massacre. Films discussed include: If.... (1968), Carrie (1976), Revenge of the Nerds (1984), Heathers (1989), Detention: The Siege on Johnson High (1997), The Basketball Diaries (1995), Light It Up (1999), Duck! The Carbine High Massacre (1999), O (2001), Home Room (2002), Bang Bang You're Dead (2002), Elephant (2003), Zero Day (2003), and Heart of America (2003). Connections are made with previously discussed material, including the novel Rage, fairy tales, the quest for fame, rites of passage, bullying, and the American public school system.

The word “grief” in the title here refers to many things. Certainly there is the kind of grief one experiences with the loss of a loved one, and many people are touched by this brand of grief following a rampage killing. One thinks of the many striking images that are splashed across the front pages of every major newspaper in the aftermath of a school rampage: the teenaged girls with their heads thrown back in horror, arm in arm with their friends, sobbing in unison. One may think of the mask of grief, worn by so many desperate people in each wounded community—people who elbow their way to the news cameras and peddle their stories of heroism, both real and imagined. Finally, there is the grief Robert Bly refers to when he says that the very process of becoming a man requires a descent into grief. Some insecure young men, feeling threatened, never allow themselves to grieve, while others never ascend from this dangerous journey.

In conducting this study, it has been my intention to shy away from posing questions that might lead to easy answers. Rather than focusing on the tired question of “why did they do it?” I have tried to lay bare some objective facts about the various cases and show these facts interwoven with performance art: first by viewing the boys as

frustrated performance artists, and finally by considering the impassioned responses to school shootings by professional performers and directors. I was not always successful at this objectivism, as the reader will soon see. It is a difficult subject to view from a distance. In the final analysis, I hope the reader will come away with a new perception of school shootings as misdirected attempts to create art—political art, if you will. In this age of school funding cuts for the arts, is it so hard to imagine that hopeless, angry, isolated and creative young men will resort to desperate measures in a last-ditch attempt to make a name for themselves as they take their final bow? I think not.

CHAPTER II

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG KILLER:

The Criminal Dramaturgy of School Massacres

“We cannot go on prostituting the idea of the theatre, whose only value lies in its excruciating, magical connection with reality and with danger.”

Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre of Cruelty*, First Manifesto

In 1910, France’s theatre of the macabre, The Grand-Guignol, presented André de Lorde and Pierre Chiane’s The Prison for Children. In this woeful tale, a group of boys escapes a torturous reform school, are caught by the authorities, and the young hero Georges “hangs himself rather than return to the school” (Gordon 76). In 1999, an enraptured worldwide audience sat immobilized in front of their television sets as injured children dangled bloody limbs out of school windows and ran for their lives while two teenage gunmen stormed the building with firearms and explosives. We were told the two had been victims of relentless bullying. In the end the death toll would reach 15, including the suicides of the two perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

If The Prison for Children had been typical of the Grand-Guignol, it was inspired by an actual event, the details of which could be found in newspapers, coroner’s reports or other factual documents (Gordon 7). It would be a clear-cut case of art imitating life. The latter story, the story of a school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado is an example of something a little more complicated. We now have life

imitating art imitating life to such an extent that it becomes nearly impossible to see where one ends and another begins. In fact, during the year they planned their siege, these teenagers appear to have been living in a world described by historian Daniel Boorstin and cultural critic Neil Gabler, where “everywhere the fabricated, the inauthentic and the theatrical are driving out the natural, the genuine and the spontaneous from life until reality itself had been converted into stagecraft” (Gabler 4).

It is interesting to note that Gabler’s Life, The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality was published in 1998, the same year Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold began planning their attack on their high school, the same year Eric Harris would write in his journal: “We will be all in black. Dusters, black army pants, and we will get custom shirts that say R or V in the background in one big letter and NBK in the front in a smaller font...” (Brown, 95). In another passage, Harris writes, “With sunglasses on we start carrying in all our bags of terrorism....”. With sunglasses on? The significance of referring to the violent Oliver Stone film Natural Born Killers (NBK) in this journal entry pales in comparison to Harris’ detailed description of his highly stylized intentions regarding what he and Klebold will wear while committing their murder-suicides. Clearly, Harris sought to present himself as a larger than life comic book anti-hero on a quest. The fact that he considered having these clothes custom-designed for the occasion is compelling and supports Joel A. Dvoskin’s claim that there is a “showbiz quality” inherent in this particular crime.

Dvoskin appeared in an A & E Investigative Reports episode entitled “Columbine: Understanding Why,” and acknowledges the “grand production style” of the shootings while his colleague Erin Spier supports this by noting that Klebold was

involved in drama at school and confided in someone that he was “planning a big production for the Spring of 1999.” Testimony from a former Columbine student named John Behunin describes a video the boys made for a class assignment. A narrator tells us the title of this video was “Hitmen for Hire” while other sources say it was “The Trenchcoat Mafia Protection Service” (Bartels).

In the video, the boys wore clothing similar to that which they would wear on the day of the attack and walked around pretending to shoot their arch-rivals, the school athletes. Either this was a formal rehearsal, or Klebold and Harris were simply planning ahead to leave something behind that would make good footage for the televised documentaries of their lives. After all, Klebold reportedly fantasized about the movie that might be made about them after their deaths (Goldstein 2) and Harris wished to “leave a lasting impression on the world” (Brown 96). Either way, the fact that they chose to dramatize and preserve these acts on videotape, as well as the fact that the boys left videotaped, rather than written suicide notes is remarkable. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message” (Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* 8). One can only imagine to what extent these young men believed themselves to be the “gifted video producers” Dvoskin claims they thought they were. At present, the boys’ video footage, otherwise known as the “basement tapes,” is being held under lock and key by the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department in Colorado. Some members of the media have been granted access to them in the past and have quoted from them at length, but undoubtedly there are buried references in these works which would support a longer study of Harris and Klebold’s intent to stage a bizarre Guignolesque performance that would immortalize them.

One thing is clear, however, Klebold and Harris were not the first criminals to envision themselves as production artists. Richard Schickel refers in Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity to the “criminal’s whirlwind dramaturgy” (11) and cites John W. Hinckley, Jr., who attempted to murder President Reagan as a confused ode to the film Taxi Driver, as a case of “The ordinarily powerless person recasting life itself as a film and placing himself in the role of director, violently taking charge of formless existence and shaping it to his liking” (9). This is consistent with Harris’ comment in his journal that planning his attack on his school “feels like a goddamn movie sometimes” (Brown 122) and also recalls a description of the Grand Guignol as a place where “each spectator could play out his fantasies of victimization and retribution” (Gordon 18). Considering the prevalence of bullying at Columbine, it is not hard to see a voyeuristic connection here.

Schickel also observes how convicted serial killer Ted Bundy opted to forgo the opportunity to plea-bargain for a lighter sentence and instead sealed his fate in the electric chair by choosing to legally represent himself and “play big scenes” (10) during his last public appearances in court. Even a psychiatrist who examined Bundy couldn’t resist describing him as “the producer of a play” (11). When Schickel made his observations back in 1986, school violence was considered an urban problem. On the other hand, teen suicide appeared to occur en masse during this period in the suburbs and was practically marketed as an epidemic on television news programs. So when white middle-class adolescents began to turn their violence outward, killing or injuring innocent children in the public schools toward the end of the 1990s, the media whipped the American public into a frenzy. Although the suburban suicide pacts in towns as diverse as Plano, Texas

and Bergenfield, New Jersey were remarkable for their contribution to the public discourse vis a vis why were these kids who had been given everything failing to thrive (Gaines), these acts were not particularly cinematic.

The new wave of teen violence which swept through Pearl, Paducah and Jonesboro a decade later was different. In some cases the perpetrators proudly cited the scenes of carnage from films they hoped to emulate (Pollack 359-360). More importantly, they appeared to inspire and compete with one another, creating “copy-cat” crimes, facilitated by maximum exposure on the television news. Kip Kinkel was one 15-year-old boy who criticized the school shooters for neglecting to commit suicide and, thus, damning themselves to incarceration. Note the language one author uses when he says Kip “proclaimed that if he were to attempt such an act he’d be certain to kill himself to complete the drama” (Lieberman 158). Kinkel would later go on to murder both his parents before going on a shooting spree at his school in May of 1998. According to a PBS Frontline documentary made about him entitled “The Killer at Thurston High,” he had been enamored of the highly romanticized suicides in Baz Luhrman’s 1996 film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, which had been shown in one of his classes. As it turned out, Kinkel was tackled and disarmed by his fellow students before he could kill himself.

When the police arrived at the scene of Kinkel’s home, where his father lay dead in the bathroom and his mother on the floor of the garage, they heard loud operatic music wafting through an open door. Apparently, before leaving home that morning to complete his deadly mission at school, Kinkel had had the foresight to set his CD player on continuous play at a volume that could be heard from the street. Obviously he had intended to set the scene for the law enforcement officers who he knew would arrive that

day, and what more fitting a score than the soundtrack of Baz Luhrman's Romeo + Juliet?

In Michael Moore's documentary Bowling for Columbine, the manager of a restaurant owned by American Bandstand host Dick Clark quips that "Music is the soundtrack of our lives." In focusing on the personal histories of the Columbine shooters, popular magazines such as Time have done a wonderful job of turning two suburban teenagers into veritable rock stars. In addition, much of the mainstream media has used the incident to support its own existing agenda regarding a longstanding opposition to heavy metal-tinged music and the violent content of video games, film and television.

No doubt one can learn much about an adolescent's predilection for the theatrical by taking note of his interest in popular culture—particularly the musical groups whose concert performances may serve as the suburban teenager's first introduction to "theatre." It is interesting to note, then, that the favorite groups of Klebold and Harris were among the most theatrical rock artists of the period. The controversial performer Marilyn Manson may not have been a favorite of the boys as originally argued in the media, but Manson was a familiar target and became the poster boy for the media witch hunt that ensued in the wake of the Columbine massacre (Manson, "Columbine: Who's Fault Is It?"). Manson was a favorite of other 90s era shooters as well as later school shooters who emerged in the 2005-2007 time period. We do know that Harris and Klebold were fans of German imports KMFDM and Rammstein, who were also widely criticized by the media following the Columbine attacks, with the criticism focused on the bands' violent lyrics and dark themes. It is noteworthy that the stage personas of all of these artists tend

to borrow heavily from the S & M sex culture, which capitalizes on the eroticism of humiliation.

In the wake of Columbine, Marilyn Manson was routinely lambasted for being a negative influence. In 1999, the cross-dressing self-proclaimed Satanist was the cultural heir apparent to a throne previously occupied in the 1970s by Alice Cooper and in the 1980s by Ozzy Osbourne. He was an easy target. A closer look, however, reveals much more. In his 1998 autobiography The Long Hard Road Out of Hell, Manson describes a performance from early in his career, when his band was still performing in nightclubs. During one theatrical interlude, a pregnant housewife is seen ironing the wrinkles out of a Nazi flag and after giving herself an abortion offers the fetus to a glowing television set. Manson comments “If we didn’t drive home our point about the fascism of television and the way the American nuclear family sacrifices its children to this cheap, mind-numbing baby-sitter, at least we looked good trying” (116).

In this context, claims that Klebold shouted “Heil Hitler!” when he made strikes while bowling (Freemantle A1) and the fact that he and Harris chose April 20th, Hitler’s birthday, as the day to kill themselves, take on an entirely new meaning. Manson’s book was published and became a New York Times bestseller while the boys were still alive, but it is unknown whether or not they read it. Here Manson, though unconventional and arguably repellant in the imagery he chose, was clearly a model for advocating performance as a means of challenging the American dream of suburban complacency, while at the same time criticizing the medium of television.

Although there is wisdom to be gleaned by noticing the shooters’ tastes in popular music (a subject further explored in Chapter Two), the focus here is on the very medium

whose broadcasters sought to place blame elsewhere: the television news—particularly the twenty-four-hour Cable News Network (CNN). This station, along with “reality” TV shows and melodramatic criminal documentaries, continue to blur the distinction between reality and entertainment, and it is worth noting that this programming began to flourish in the 1990s—a pivotal time in the lives of children who would come of age during this period.

It is noteworthy that the mastermind behind CNN, Ted Turner, is a successful entertainment mogul who was once married to an actress. CNN presents itself as a 24-hour window on the world, from which viewers are expected to draw conclusions about the society in which they live (Postman, *How To Watch TV News* 23). The problem, of course, is that CNN, like the network news programs that compete with it, is controlled by highly biased conglomerates whose political and commercial interests are necessarily restrictive. In one particularly disturbing article presented by Time magazine in December of 1999 after reporters had been granted access to Harris and Klebold’s infamous basement tapes, the report begins with this sensational statement: “The natural born killers waited until their parents were asleep upstairs before heading down to the basement to put on their show.” Theatrical allusions aside, the reader is first and foremost made aware of how the writer attempts to manipulate the emotions of the reader by referring to the boys as “natural born killers.” It is congratulatory, even celebratory and the overall effect is that of a creepy plug for the movie. It is interesting to note that the powerful conglomerate Time Warner owns both Time magazine and Warner Brothers Pictures, which produced Natural Born Killers. Time Warner is also a parent company to CNN.

Some claim, as Michael Moore does in Bowling for Columbine, that the media continue to implement the “if it bleeds, it leads” approach to television journalism in an effort to instill in the American public a culture of fear that distracts us from the real issues. Rather than focus on the question of televised violence and its purported power to desensitize children to violence, my claim is that the medium itself is most remarkable not for its content, but in its ability to transform real suffering and loss into entertainment. In looking at the television-induced phenomenon of what Gabler calls “postreality,” a state characterized by indistinct boundaries between truth and fiction in what he refers to as our “Republic of Entertainment” (11), special attention must be paid to the language used in describing criminal and deviant behavior in the media, including the internet. Douglas Ord is a Canadian writer whose internet site is devoted to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. It is called “From Absolute Other to Eric and Dylan.” In it, he criticizes the media for sensationalizing the tragedy. For example, Time magazine branded the boys early on as the “Monsters Next Door,” while at the same time painting a haunting portrait of the boys as brilliant madmen. Ord illustrates his point by incorporating a host of colorful quotes by Breton, Foucault and Deleuze. Like others before him with less noble intentions, he resorts to using the language of drama by noting that on April 20, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado there was “no known director, no known script”, and refers to the National Rifle Association’s annual meeting in Denver that year as “the next act in an unfolding drama.”

Another writer marvels at the boys’ secrecy while they “staged their rehearsals, gathered their props” (Goldstein 1). In “The Killer at Thurston High,” the narrator also chooses the language of the theatre to describe Kip Kinkel’s behavior by referring to its

“violent choreography” and to the attack at his school as the “last act in his own tragedy”. Finally, this theatre jargon spills over into the writings of the criminals themselves as Eric Harris remarks in his journal on “The amount of dramatic irony and foreshadowing” when he speaks of his forthcoming crimes (Brown 122).

In her book Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings, Katherine Newman notes that even after they committed their crimes, Jonesboro shooters Mitchell Johnson and Andréw Golden gave others the impression that they were assuming roles in a performance. “Even those who observed them during the long months they were in the Craighead County Jail were looking at two boys who were ‘on stage.’ The audience was no longer the kids in Westside classrooms...” (45).

Performance terminology and analogies crop up again and again when writers discuss school shootings. Perhaps no one employs this tactic more often than Joseph Lieberman, author of The Shooting Game: The Making of School Shooters. When discussing the Kip Kinkel case in his introduction, Lieberman remarks that the crime was “looking more and more like a modern Greek tragedy” (xiii). When describing Elizabeth McKenzie, one of the injured students at Thurston whom he later interviewed, he says that during the shooting she stood still and watched “as if this were all taking place on TV” (15). Later, and once again in reference to the Kinkel story, he incorporates this melodramatic passage: “For now however, the tragedy had just begun and another act was about to commence” (17). Perhaps most compelling is Lieberman’s assessment of the Evan Ramsey shooting, which took place in Bethel, Alaska in February 1997. Ramsey had widely publicized the event and like many school shooters, claimed later that his classmates either egged him on or didn’t believe he was tough enough or daring

enough to pull it off. He announced his intended date, time and location, but instead of being too afraid to attend school that day, students gathered in the mezzanine area above the cafeteria to watch the scene unfold, “as if they were spectators in a bush-league Roman Coliseum” (176). To Lieberman, even the very experience of participating in high school culture is a performance: “Like most students, they conducted their peer relationships in the daily ‘communal theater’ of high school as if they were players in a sit-com world where everything could be a joke and ‘serious’ problems seldom extended beyond transitory glitches on their uphill journey through adolescence” (314).

In 2002, Deanna Wilkinson, professor of criminal justice at Temple University, and Jeffrey Fagan, professor at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, teamed up to produce a report entitled “What Do We Know About Gun Use Among Adolescents?”—and as the following quote illustrates, even scholars resort to using theatrical language when discussing school shootings. They say: “For adolescents in rural areas, schools are the dominant and perhaps exclusive stage where public performances are carried out, and are the crucible where status is won and lost in repeated everyday interactions” (30). It should be noted that within the context of this paper, Wilkinson and Fagan speak only of “urban” and “non-urban” crimes, so their reference to rural areas would likely include suburbia.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were creative and, by all accounts, especially bright kids. They took demanding courses in the humanities: German, philosophy and creative writing. During an apologetic passage from the basement tapes where both boys acknowledge no wrong doing on the part of their parents, Harris quotes from Shakespeare’s The Tempest when he says “Good wombs hath borne bad sons” (Goldstein

2). In any event, they were the antithesis of the jocks in a school where “the sports trophies were showcased in the front hall – the artwork down a back corridor (Adams A1). Time magazine went so far as to label them “intellectual outsiders,” which brings to mind William Pollack’s study Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood. In this book, Pollack elaborates on a common theme from his interviews with boys. This theme was based on the notion that it was “not a good idea to be too smart for it could lead to being labeled a nerd, dork, wimp or fag” (16).

Not only were the Columbine High School athletes guilty of labeling Harris and Klebold as such, but the American media followed suit. Never mind the fact that in reality both boys were physically attractive and in all of the published photographs of them, fashionably dressed. The fact is, neither of them conformed to the image of the stereotypical “geek”, but both were accused of being homosexual simply because they were intelligent and creative. Were they, like many boys, afraid of the further censure that would surely come if they allowed their creative sensibilities to flourish in public in more traditional ways? Was executing the Columbine massacre with such a dramatic flair the only way they could see to make an artistic statement while at the same time flaunting the masculinity that was so frequently challenged?

When Joel A. Dvoskin says Klebold and Harris “made themselves into a video production and got the local media to be their local crew,” he’s not kidding. Those kids knew that their attack on Columbine High School would be the real-life horror story of the year. They even considered dropping off copies of their infamous basement tapes to local television stations right before the attack (Brown 206). No doubt the senior class pictures they posed for just weeks before April 20th were considered to be the perfect

publicity stills. In one photo the boys are shown wearing sunglasses, pretending to point guns at the camera, and in another Eric Harris tries a little too hard to look diabolical.

In Grand-Guignol, The French Theatre of Horror, authors Hand and Wilson discuss the significance of the “centrality of the witness,” which was so important to the success of the horror genre (Hand 44). Simply put, it harkens back to the philosophical question regarding the sound of the proverbial tree falling in a forest. Although early news reports claimed Klebold and Harris intended to “blow up the school” (Associated Press A1), a Columbine student remembers seeing diagrams Klebold and Harris had made illustrating the placement of surveillance cameras within the school cafeteria (Brown 118).

Remembering that this was a suicide mission, noting the location of the security cameras with the intention of avoiding them seems unlikely. Instead, the more likely scenario would have the boys noting these cameras as any professional cinematographer would, and indeed, the images these cameras captured have provided many documentary film makers with valuable footage for their exposés.

Dylan Klebold’s final project for the drama department at Columbine High School was a stage adaptation of Mary Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein (Brown 101). Frankenstein is the story of a monster abandoned by his creator. Overcome by feelings of isolation, alienation and sadness, he seeks revenge for having been brought into a hostile world...and who can blame him? “It’s humanity,” Dylan Klebold says, flipping an obscene gesture toward the camera. “Look at what you made,’ he tells the world” (Abbott 4A). Since these boys were familiar with the words of Miranda from The Tempest, it is likely they would have recognized those of Caliban as well: “You taught me language

and my profit on't is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language" (Shakespeare 1616).

One aspect of the Columbine case that continues to be compelling so many years later is the idea of the perpetrators as artists, as directors – a phenomenon Richard Schickel discusses in Intimate Strangers by citing the criminal activity of celebrity stalkers: "every man his own auteur, the multi-talented director-writer-star of his own drama." (9). People who kill celebrities are not so very different from those who—like school shooters—target those at the top of the social hierarchy. It is a love/hate relationship and often the killer resents the power wielded by the object of his obsession. As discussed earlier, John W. Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate the president of the United States in 1982, in an effort to "impress" the actress Jodie Foster, with whom the would-be assassin had become obsessed. Reportedly, Foster began to receive three thousand letters per month from Hinckley prior to the attempted crime (Schickel 2).

Although few of us succumb to such bewildering impulses in an effort to make real our fantasies of intimacy with celebrities, many of us do nurse these fantasies and as the job description of the popular musician in society becomes more similar to that of the actor (as it has since the advent of MTV), the stalking of musicians becomes more common. Mark David Chapman murdered John Lennon outside his apartment in New York City on December 8, 1980 and has become a celebrity himself because of it. He even turns up in a song by none other than Marilyn Manson. Lyrics from the song "Lamb of God":

There was Lennon in the happy gun
there were words on the pavement

we were looking for the lamb of god

we were looking for Mark David.

Most recently, we may consider the onstage murder of Pantera guitarist Dimebag Darrell by a deranged fan, Nathan Gale, exactly twenty-four years later on December 8, 2004.

Although Gale was 25 at the time of the murder and technically no longer a teenager, he would have been 15 in 1994 when the heavy metal band Pantera exploded onto the national scene as their album Far Beyond Driven debuted at number one on the Billboard charts. Since 15 may well be considered the age of influence in regard to popular music, it is not beyond the scope of this study to consider the violence of Gale's act as an adolescent aberration, and certainly one with a dramatic, if tragic dénouement. Like Gale, Harris and Klebold were both suffering from varying degrees of mental illness—rather, all had a history of psychotropic drug use under the care of physicians—although these drugs are widely believed to be over-prescribed. Both Gale and school shooter Kip Kinkel are said to have been suffering from varying degrees of paranoid schizophrenia.

One might believe that the purveyors of drama (i.e., actors) are perhaps most likely to inspire such aberrant behavior in an already psychopathic personality, due in no small part to the deceptive nature of their trade. However, performers—whether strippers, Shakespearean actors or jazz musicians—all practice the fine art of deception to some degree. In response to contemporary assertions that television feeds the unhealthy imagination of the abnormal psyche, Schickel again makes a compelling case by stating that “Nothing fictional on television can compare, in emotional intensity, to the drama enacted before the mind's eye” (9). This quote brings to mind Joseph Lieberman's

reference to the contemporary adolescent as a media-infused breed unto themselves:

“We tend to forget that love, sex, death and violence are just channels that young people surf through as they switch programs on the inner TV of their minds” (178-79).

In his novel, The Late Mr. Shakespeare, author Robert Nye approaches his subject by crafting an historical novel, the surprising result of which is to have his narrator murder not his idol and subject, but the public image of his subject. It is, in some sense a call to arms for all of us to kill our idols. Nye’s approach is not unlike that of Marilyn Manson, whose concert shirts once featured the slogan “Kill Your Parents.” Adults may read and enjoy Nye’s ironic work and understand the metaphor there. While deciphering metaphor in works of literature in schools is part of the official secondary school curriculum, teachers and parents must make a concerted effort not to suppress the voices of artists like Marilyn Manson but to help kids understand the difference between literal and metaphorical interpretations within popular culture. While adolescence is the appropriate time for separation, for rebellion, and for challenging authority, Manson was not literally suggesting that fans should kill their parents.

After the Columbine incident, Manson called Klebold and Harris “dipshits” and “idiots” in an editorial he wrote for Rolling Stone Magazine. True to form, the mainstream media chose largely to ignore Manson’s stance on Columbine, as it would have challenged their longstanding position that Manson is the Pied Piper of Sodom. By the time his critical piece had been published in Rolling Stone, Manson fans Kip Kinkel and fellow teen killer Clay Shroud had already killed their parents. Would it have mattered if adults in their lives had not rejected the controversial work of their idol but instead been there to help them understand the metaphor?

In the opening pages of Nye's novel, it is some fifty years after Shakespeare's retirement and his narrator, Robert Reynolds, a.k.a. Pickleherring, is an octogenarian who as a youth played everything from Cordelia to Cleopatra and has now retired to the attic above a London brothel. It is here that he intends to write the biography of a man he not only openly adores but despises as well—presumably for his power in consuming so much of the younger's time and energy. Is this not the same resentment that moves the delusional fanatic to take action and kill his idol? Like Chapman and John Robert Bardo, who murdered the actress Rebecca Schaeffer in 1989, Pickelherring sets the wheels of fate in motion not out of malice but out of "love" and as an attempt to own the object of his affection.²

"You shall have no other Gods before me," the first of the ten commandments marks a clear distinction between acceptable religious behavior of Elizabethan-era Christians and the polytheistic pagans who came before them. Pickleherring observes "And behind the phantom of the player stands the god of the playwright. I was myself created by Mr. Shakespeare," (25) and, of course Harold Bloom boldly credits Shakespeare with having invented humanity. In writing about the antitheatrical movement in Elizabethan England, David Hawkes points out that the major objection to the stage is that it fosters idolatry. What was most threatening to them, however, was the combination of worshipful behavior with commodification. Pamphlets of the period repeatedly criticize the theatre for charging admission. Does such commodification, turning artists such as playwrights, actors and pop musicians into "products" make an

² Prior to making the trip from his home in Tucson to Los Angeles, Bardo wrote to his sister, telling her "I have to eliminate something I cannot attain," and although on the surface Bardo, a high school dropout, seems to have misspoken, it is important to remember that "attain" means not only to achieve, but to possess.

imbalance of power in the relationship between human-product and consumer inevitable? What happens when demand exceeds supply? When mental illness is figured in to the equation, the implication is obvious. However, I will argue that even those of us who are not mentally ill do nurse fantasies of destroying the imperial reign of our idols, and adolescents who are attempting to initiate themselves and break free of their parents may be more susceptible to this fantasy than most.

Note that Nathan Gale killed a guitarist widely acknowledged as the heavy metal guitar hero of the 1990s. Also, Gale killed Dimebag Darrell on stage in the middle of a performance—security guard Ryan Melchiorre confirmed that many spectators believed the gunshots had merely been “part of the show” (Kaufman). Like Klebold and Harris, Gale made a public spectacle of his crime—turning murder into stagecraft. Gale went on to shoot members of the audience and road crew before police arrived and shot him to death.

In an age when high school students watch porn during class on their cell phones, the activity of banning books such as The Catcher in the Rye from school libraries is but a distant dream from the 1980s. In fact, displayed in the body of the library itself at Garza Independence High School in Austin, Texas there is a large poster that encourages students to “Read Banned Books.” Even fundamentalist Christians, who once characterized tainted books as “Child Abuse in the Classroom,” (Richburg) might be delighted today to discover a controversial book (and not a firearm) in the duffel bag of an angry teenaged boy. One book that seemed to fly under the radar until the high renaissance of school shootings in the mid 1990s was Stephen King’s Rage. Originally published under the pen name of Richard Bachman, Rage tells the story of Charles

Decker, a disgruntled high school boy who kills his Algebra teacher and takes his class hostage. A copy of Rage was found in the locker of Michael Carneal, a fourteen-year-old who shot into a prayer group in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three and wounding five in December of 1997 (<http://www.horrorking.com/interview7.html>). More than a year prior, fourteen-year-old Barry Loukaitis walked into his algebra class in Moses Lake, Washington and shot three students (killing two) and his teacher. He quoted directly from Stephen King's Rage when he said out loud to the distressed class "This sure beats Algebra, doesn't it?" King asked his publisher in the U.S. to discontinue publication of this book after the Paducah incident, but according to Worldcat, more than 2000 copies of the book are located in libraries worldwide.

Again, as with the works of non-fiction discussed earlier, one is struck by the prevalence of dramatic language in this book. After Decker kills his Algebra teacher and another adult administrator, a popular boy named Ted attempts to talk sense into his fellow classmates who are disturbingly nonchalant. "He killed two people. This isn't TV. These people aren't going to get up and go off to their dressing rooms to wait for the next take. They're really dead" (121). Interesting that King's characters were accused of confusing reality with theatre in the late 1960s, predating the advent of violent video games and bloody television shows, which often shoulder the blame for confusing kids and desensitizing them to violence. Then again, King was honing his skills as a master of horror fiction and the theme of this book would have been considered impossibly surreal at the time of its publication.

King also seems to look into the future when he has Decker describe the clamoring news media outside the window of his controlled classroom. "Everything

beyond the windows was television. They were the show, not me” (85). Is this not a familiar scenario, eerily reminiscent of Columbine on CNN? Although the acts he commits are morally reprehensible, the scene is made more perverse by Decker’s casual attitude and his comic wisecracks. One is reminded of troubling reports of the boys at Columbine laughing during their killing spree or saying peek-a-boo before they shot someone. As Decker speaks to an administrator via intercom, he commands to be heard “while I describe the last act of this little comedy” (111). Finally, toward the end of the story, Decker mourns the fact that he had “started out as the main attraction and had ended up as the sideshow” (99).

It is difficult to accurately assess the full extent of Columbine’s influence on today’s teen population as even uttering the names of Harris and Klebold can result in having ones name put on the principal’s list of potential terrorists, but the online community – a place where one can voice opinions anonymously—is teeming with fan clubs, YouTube odes, websites and long rambling dedications. Certainly, every school shooter since the Spring of ’99 has been at least aware of what Klebold and Harris did...and in most cases has made public or private declarations of their respect and admiration for what went down in Littleton, Colorado. Even young people whose violent acts took place outside the bounds of school have recognized their pride in being a part of history which includes the legacy of Klebold and Harris.

A twenty-four-year old Colorado man, Matthew Murray, posted quotes to the internet (almost verbatim) from Eric Harris’ journal before killing several people at a church and missionary training center near Denver (Kohler) in 2007. That same year, a nineteen-year-old high school drop-out named Robert Hawkins opened fire on an Omaha

shopping mall, killing nine people including himself. Although he didn't directly acknowledge the influence of Klebold and Harris in his suicide note, he was a young man who'd grown up with their easy infamy and wanted a piece for himself. Hawkins' biography appears right alongside those of other "celebrity killers" like Mark David Chapman and Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho in Ray Connolly's Daily Mail article "Fame: This Fatal Attraction."

Columbine is relevant because it marks a moment in history when young people began to execute violent crimes in extremely dramatic ways, first mimicking and then inspiring theatre-laced narratives in both fiction and non-fiction. As Mark Ames says, "You start to get the sense that Columbine is the American Idol of the new millennium" (176). In the realm of performance studies scholarship, Columbine and Columbine-like crimes are notable because—as Ames brilliantly illuminates in his book Going Postal—they have more in common with antebellum slave rebellions than we would like to admit. This assertion, that the oppressive and abusive environment of suburban public schools and not the presence of some nebulous "evil" may be directly responsible for the occurrence of rage massacres on campus—will serve as the basis for the discussion in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER III

RIPPING THE SYSTEM:

Education, Initiation and the Theatre of Rock

“School is a teenager’s personal stage, a social theatre, and the place where they are branded by their peers as winners or losers.”

Joseph Lieberman, The Shooting Game

At the age of fifty, Adolf Hitler made a respectful pilgrimage to his hometown of Fischlham in Austria, and while there, made only two stops: the gravesite of his parents, and his old school. He remarked on the seminal role of the “schoolyard” as his first battlefield: “It was here that my first ideals took shape. My association with the rougher boys made me the very opposite of a stay-at-home. Even then my speaking talents were being developed in violent arguments with my school friends. Woods and meadows were then my battlefields” (Cox).

As one critic points out, it is ironic that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who executed the Columbine massacre on Hitler’s birthday and who were reportedly bullied at school, admired a man who would graduate from schoolyard warrior to become perhaps the biggest bully in human history (Lieberman 194). However, Lieberman explains: “If the object, after all, is to offend as many of your peers as possible, and to make a statement against contemporary society, what better way than to embrace the twentieth century’s most abhorrent political leader and one of its worst mass murderers?” (194).

Certainly those who are bullied feel powerless, and thus it would make sense for Klebold and Harris to be attracted to a forceful figure with such undeniable power as Adolf Hitler. Very likely this power play carried over into the boys' much-discussed love of violent videogames. However, there is the possibility of a deeper connection to Hitler, one that goes beyond the surface-level attraction to violence and power. Indeed, there is unexpected magic that lurks at the heart of Nazi Germany: art.

As a youth, Hitler aspired to be a painter but his father wished for him to follow in his footsteps by becoming a customs official. In fact, Hitler referred to himself in adulthood as a frustrated artist. What's more, Nazi culture was very theatrical—full of marvelous rituals and pageantry. Joseph Campbell has this to say: “The power of a well-constructed ritual to move from centers that are beyond those of your personal intention or control is terrific. We've lost all sense of that, we just don't know anything about that...but here comes a man with a genius for that kind of thing, and look what happened” (Kennard).

Is it such a stretch to imagine that boys who did not fit in with the predominant culture of high school—that is, a culture revolving around sports rather than arts and letters—could be attracted to a man and a movement that seemed to offer such a perfect marriage of art and military might? Could it have been this compelling blend of beauty and evil that the boys found so irresistible? Dylan Klebold was active in the drama department at school and Eric Harris was a prolific and talented writer. Both boys were well-known at school—and later to the world—as budding filmmakers whose creative project “Hitmen for Hire” was an eerie prelude to their shooting spree in the spring of 1999.

Klebold and Harris were not the first school shooters known to have been fascinated with Nazism. In fact, that distinction belongs to fifteen-year-old Richard Needham, who shot a classmate in 1978 after being harassed about the Nazi pin he wore to school. Needham was tried as a juvenile and sentenced to psychiatric treatment, during which time he earned his high school equivalency diploma and went on to receive his Ph.D. In fact, in 1992 he was hired to teach at City College of New York (Lieberman 78). Recall how Time magazine referred to Harris and Klebold as “intellectual outsiders.”

The Columbine boys were also not the only “artist types” to have orchestrated a school rampage shooting. Santee, California shooter Andy Williams was an actor (Ames 165), Seung-Hui Cho—famous for executing the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, was a playwright. Jeff Weise, a Native American who shocked the world in 2005 by killing his grandparents prior to attacking his school on the Red Lake Reservation in Minnesota was an animator who posted his bizarre works on the internet (Lieberman 226). Weise was also a fan of Hitler. Al DeGuzman, a nineteen-year-old who failed to execute a planned siege on his community college in January of 2001 “was described by everyone who knew him as nice, artistic, intelligent...” (Ames 205).

One creative teenager who chose words over weapons was author Stephen King. In 1966, King was still in high school when he began working on Rage. Aside from the many theatrical and dramatic allusions in the book, Charles Decker’s complaints are pretty standard: his father hates him, his classmates have always made fun of him, he cannot get lucky with the ladies. A closer look, however, brings forth what begins to

emerge as an underexposed motive in real-life rampage school shootings: backlash against anti-intellectualism and a deep-seated fear of a hum-drum future in the suburbs. In referring to a fellow classmate whom Decker finds attractive, he laments: "I thought of her married to some slob with five two-button suits and fancy pastel toilet paper in the bathroom. It hurt me with its inevitability" (75). Couple this observation with a later rant against the pervasive and ironic prevalence of the brawn-over-brains attitude in American public schools and the message is clear: "Most kids don't give a hoot in hell for brains, they go a penny a pound, and the kid with the high I.Q. who can't play baseball or at least come in third in the local circle jerk is everybody's fifth wheel" (178). In his 1999 Keynote Address to the Vermont Library Conference, King admits that the book was a direct reflection of his own frustrations as a high school student.

Luke Woodham was sixteen years old in October of 1997 when he injured seven people and killed two at his high school in Pearl, Mississippi. A friend of Woodham's claimed that he was "tired of society dealing the thinkers, the learners, a bad hand. He felt that why should Johnny football player get the glory when in fact, he does nothing" (Holland). Katherine Newman elaborates: "School shooters often target those at the top of the social hierarchy, the jocks and the preps, at least in their initial hit lists, a pattern that supports the notion that it is the entire institution that is under attack" (249).

Fourteen pages later, Newman again makes this point by citing the case of Regent's Scholar Anthony Barbaro, who started a fire in his school during a holiday break and began shooting at cars and passersby from an open window at Olean High School in New York in 1974. "Given the scant evidence that Barbaro was marginalized," says Newman, "and that he broke into the school when classes were not even in session, his attack seems

to have been directed neither at the social hierarchy nor the school's teachers and administrators. Rather, it was an attack against the school as an institution" (263).

In Going Postal: From Reagan's Workplaces to Clinton's Columbine and Beyond, Mark Ames points out similarities between contemporary school shootings and the corporate rage massacres that emerged as a trend in the mid-eighties. Although certainly there are cases in both environments that include specific targets for murder, the attacks that are most compelling are the ones that remind one of André Breton's assertion that "The purest surrealist act would be to go into a crowd and fire at random" (Ord). Ames argues that there are no random victims, however, and points out that Standard Gravure, the site of a workplace shooting in 1989, did not survive as a company in the wake of the attack. He claims that this is one of the goals of rage massacres: "[T]he perpetrators are attacking the entire company, the workplace as an institution, the corporate culture, at least as much as the individuals whom they shoot. That's why there are no 'random' victims—everyone in the targeted company is guilty by association, or they're collateral damage" (19).

On April 19, 2008, the thirteenth anniversary of the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, eighteen-year-old Ryan Schallenberger's parents turned him in to authorities when a package of ammonium nitrate was delivered to their home in their son's absence. Upon further investigation, police found bomb making plans and other writings, which they say assured them they had been successful in averting an attempt by Schallenberger to bomb his high school. Media paint a portrait of Schallenberger as an academic all-star and confirm that the high school senior had been up against only one other student for the title of Salutatorian at graduation the following month (Riddle).

Because Chesterfield won the 2007 1A Football State Championship and were runners up in 2006, there is little doubt that sporting enthusiasm is extremely high there, just as it was at Columbine. Again, it appears to be a case of sports insider versus academic outsider.

John Taylor Gatto sheds some light on the subject of institutional schooling in The Underground History of American Education. Buried in this enormous study is a reference to the Athlete's Americanization League, which sought "to provide free sports equipment for every public school with its battle cry: 'Sports are the logical antidote for unrest.'" (<http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/11k.htm>). Unrest? According to Gatto, schools are not "failing" as the media would have us believe. Instead, he and colleague David Albert argue: "On the contrary, they are spectacularly successful in doing precisely what they are intended to do, and what they have been intended to do since their inception." That is, as Albert contends, "to ensure a docile, malleable workforce to meet the growing, changing demands of corporate capitalism," (Dumbing Us Down, xxii). Compare this assessment with a passage from Eric Harris' journal:

Ever wondered why we go to school? Besides getting a so called education...it's societies' way of turning all young people into good little robots and factory workers, that's why we sit on desks in rows and go by bell schedules, to get prepared for the real world, cause 'that's what it's like' well god damnit NO IT ISN'T! One thing that separates us from other animals is the fact that we can carry on actual thought. So why don't we? People go on day by day routine shit, why can't we learn in school how we want to, why can't we sit on desks and on shelves and put our feet up and relax while we learn?

Would it have made any difference if Harris' parents had sent him to an alternative, student-directed school, one that made him feel empowered? Would it have made any difference had someone handed him a copy of Grace Llewellyn's Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education? Sadly, we'll never know.

John Taylor Gatto taught for thirty years in New York public schools and won many professional awards. He would not buy the idea that some children are born especially bright or artistic. In his thirty years of teaching he encountered too many children who challenged his assumption that "genius" was a quality reserved only for a privileged few. Gatto writes: "The trouble was that the unlikeliest kids kept demonstrating to me at random moments so many of the hallmarks of human excellence—insight, wisdom, justice, resourcefulness, courage, originality—that I became confused" (*Dumbing Us Down* xxxv). In short, Gatto began to wonder "whether it was possible that being in school itself was what was dumbing them down" (xxxv). He might concede, however, that by adolescence, some children may be more likely than others to reject the status quo and question the seven lessons Gatto says he unwittingly taught in his schools for three decades. These lessons were: 1) Confusion 2) Class Position 3) Indifference 4) Emotional Dependency 5) Intellectual Dependency 6) Provisional Self-esteem and 7) Surveillance.

On the suggestion that there should be a national curriculum, Gatto replies: "We already have a national curriculum locked up in the seven lessons I have just outlined" (*Dumbing Us Down*, XX). Gatto takes no prisoners. In the introduction to Gatto's book Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling, David Albert

once again eloquently supports Gatto's thesis that schools exist for economic reasons, and that society "has only a limited use for hundreds of millions of self-reliant, critically thinking individuals," and goes on to assert that although it may "occasionally pay lip service to their value," the system "ultimately has no real use for artists, dancers, poets, self-sufficient farmers, tree lovers...or for that matter stay at home moms and dads, all of whom, when they endure at all, do so at the margins and on the periphery of the social economy" (xxvii-iii). Thomas Moore comes right out and says that "Violence in schools is screaming at us to stop doing this thing we call 'teaching' (Gatto xvi) while Austrian school economist Ludwig von Mises asserts that "Continued adherence to a policy of compulsory education is utterly incompatible with efforts to establish lasting peace" (114).

Consider a gruesome crime that occurred in Japan in 1997. The head of an eleven-year-old boy was found on a sidewalk in Kobe outside a school, and the killer was later identified as a fourteen-year-old boy. In Japan at that time, criminals of this age could not be publicly identified, so the perpetrator remains nameless. What is telling though, is that the killer left taunting notes, one of which read "I am not forgetting revenge for the compulsory education that has produced me as an invisible existence..."(Lieberman 290). Although this is a sketchy English translation, the idea seems pretty clear. Compare this to a statement from student to principal in Stephen King's *Rage*: "Before the day's over, we are going to understand all about the difference between people and pieces of paper in a file" (36). Beyond the cold, totalitarian and bureaucratic environment of school, we find the sterile fatalism of the suburbs—an environment idealized by American families as the best place to raise children. Although

the suburbs may indeed be a fine place for very young children, they include many features that isolate teenagers from the very things they need as they transition into adulthood.

In Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream, the authors include a dreary photo of a treeless horizontal cluster of buildings that are not “as it may appear, a refugee relocation center or a storage depot”; at the same time, they concede that perhaps it might be considered a storage depot of sorts as it is “the place where we store our children while earning the money to pay for their cars” (121). The picture is, of course, an American high school campus that could be located just about anywhere. When journalist Mark Ames moved to Santee, California in the aftermath of Andy William’s school shooting there in January 2004, he describes a physically depressing environment that is ominously similar to the passage above. “Santana High School is a flat-roofed, dark brown, long, windowless, foreboding structure that looks more like a storage facility than one for youthful creativity and learning” (Ames 164).

On a very basic level though, and aside from the aesthetically insulting trend of importing “temporary” manufactured outbuildings to serve as classrooms, contemporary school construction has mirrored most residential construction since World War II. That is to say, the trend has been to build horizontally, rather than vertically. After World War II when families began to move to planned communities in the hopes of having the best of both worlds, little thought was given to the sustainability of the suburbs. There seemed an endless supply of land, and people were anxious to make use of their newly purchased automobiles and enjoy a country lifestyle far from the industrial pollution and stress of the city. In the 2005 documentary The End of Suburbia, new urbanist James

Howard Kunstler suggests that as the ultimate compromise, this popular neighborhood model actually offers not the best, but the worst of both worlds:

It's not country living, it's a cartoon of country living and a cartoon of a house. It has none of the amenities of country life, none of the organic systems: rivers, forests, fields, agriculture, none of that. You just get a lawn, which is an industrial, produced artifact. It has none of the amenities of town, in fact it has all of the disadvantages of both.

Kunstler does not give examples of what he considers the “amenities of town” but he certainly is not referring to the access to goods and services that once drove people “into town.” Instead, Kunstler might be referring to the intangible benefits of town: murals painted by subway artists, musical buskers passed on a street corner whose melody lingers block after block while one travels on foot, the diverse cornucopia of people who are rare in the suburbs: college students, the elderly, the poor, and people of color. Is it possible that suburbia may actually be the worst place in the world to raise our future artists and intellectuals—those who may be more likely than anyone to feel insulted (whether consciously or not) by the artless sterility of nowhere?

Natural adolescent rebellion and a search for selfhood often causes teenagers to momentarily reject the values and mores of their parents. Parents are seen as deeply unhip, while trendsetting 18-24 year olds capture the attention of those young people who are headed in that direction soon. Eighteenth century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had this attraction in mind when he wrote in Emile; Or, On Education: “[A] child's governor ought to be young, and even as young as a wise man can be. I would want him

to be a child himself if it were possible, to be able to become his pupil's companion and attract his confidence by showing his enjoyments" (51).

The problem is, young adults are largely absent from the suburbs. Living in the suburbs isolates teenagers from realistic representations of people in their twenties, a segment of the population that often moves away to large cities after high school graduation. Instead they are left with the perverse caricatures created for reality television on shows such as Elimidate and MTV's Real World series. The Real World is, of course, anything but the real world – a world where work is suspended and the only people cast are attractive, melodramatic and self-absorbed. Reality television has replaced the situation comedy as the favored television genre. On every network there's a fresh crop of sadly desperate people, enjoying their fifteen minutes of fame, seeming to have their very existence validated by an appearance on television.

In the Satyricon, the Roman author Petronius says "I'm sure the reason such young nitwits are produced in our schools is because they have no contact with anything of any use in everyday life" (37). Perhaps the same could be said of television. As the television set has become a fourth wall in most homes, so too have its performers become dysfunctional members of our own families. Ordinary, "everyday" life does not produce the ratings needed to attract advertisers. Is it irrelevant that so many of us burden our children with the worst humanity has to offer? Once upon a time families moved to the suburbs to shelter their children from the harsh realities of city life: from drugs, prostitution, and crime. Somehow it has gone unnoticed that although we have succeeded in shielding our young people from all the best city life has to offer: the art, the

diversity, the physical exercise that comes with independence from cars—we do very well at providing them with the worst of that world through the medium of television. Instead of singing songs around the piano, families gather around an enormous television and sit in silence during the few hours they are together in the evening. Add to this the fact that extended families do not live near each other as they once did. More and more people today make lifestyle choices based on the kind of job they want or how big a house they can afford to buy in a particular area. In suburbia, the very design of the houses discourages interaction among neighbors. Gone are the large front porches that were once the scene of lively conversation, gone are the sidewalks that made it safe for people to visit their neighbors, gone are the carports from which you might wave or say hello. Now drivers with an electric garage door opener can literally never be seen by the people who live right next door. In this kind of world, it is no wonder that children sometimes look for mentors in popular culture.

Of all musical genres that appeal to teenagers today, none are perhaps more worrisome to parents or more obviously connected to the need for ceremony than goth and metal. The definitions of these two genres vary, and indeed they have evolved over the years and continue to be the source of much debate among youth on the internet. When considering the dark sub-genre of black metal, it is clear that the two share an almost reverent attitude toward death and ritual. Do the fans of this music really, as the media would have you believe in their sensational coverage of teen suicide and murder, want to kill and be killed? Obviously, as we have seen with school shootings, some do. Most do not, and either way, their morbid style of dress may simply be a method of drawing attention to the metaphorical death of childhood. They are in mourning.

Although metal music is hardly the exclusive domain of the male and is certainly not as described in Donna Gaines' 1980s portrait Teenage Wasteland, where "the girls go for the grooming; the guys go for the riffs" (64), metal is still largely considered boys' music. In this discussion, which is one of initiation, it is important to recognize the fact that in most cultures around the world, boys and girls have gender-specific rituals that mark their transition to adulthood. Because rampage shootings are executed almost exclusively by boys, the focus here is on the initiation of the young male. Much has been written about gang activity as an inner city example of how young people in Western culture are attempting to create rites of passages for themselves that will provide the kind of dangerous challenges they crave. In adolescence, boys' needs for risk-taking and adventure are a biological imperative. They are hard-wired for it and there is no use trying to make them more like their sisters. Rather than provide them with appropriate risks, parents and teachers become immobilized by fear.

As teachers become more paranoid about lawsuits, and as parents continue to be fearful of their children's own mortality, they may lose sight of the real needs of these young people and become self-serving in their efforts to guide them. Although cited here as a contemporary issue, this fear actually has a long history. Eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke at length about the dangers of over-protective parenting: "You may very well take precautions against his dying. He will nevertheless have to die. And though his death were not the product of your efforts, still these efforts would be ill-conceived. It is less a question of keeping him from dying than of making him live" (47). He goes on to make the prophetic assertion: "The man who has lived the

most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life. Men have been buried at one hundred who died at their birth (47).

This protection comes at a price. Boys spend years fighting monsters, dueling enemies and engaging in rescue missions – but the computer keyboard and game control stick are their only weapons. They have no visceral connection to these victories. One complaint filed by both Harris and Klebold in their videotaped suicide note was that their parents would not let them fight back when they were taunted. We cannot keep them from fighting back. As Michael Meade warns: “Aggressions that are not educated, led out, and directed can only erupt inappropriately or burn internally under layers of suppression or doses of numbing” (Mahdi 62). Boys do the best they can, and some will find the physical challenges and rituals they need in sports. Others will experiment with drugs, join a religious group, or look for a mentor outside the family or school. Indeed, they will find one—somewhere in our electronic village.

Metal music (the term to used to encompass a broad range of styles including the hybrids goth-metal and industrial-metal) is a suburban disease—and it is the music of choice for many contemporary school shooters. Metal is one way to bring the auditory assault, the ugliness, the grime and the raw power of the city to the suburbs. It is also a tangible manifestation of what one writer calls the “beautiful rage” of adolescence (Mahdi 52-53). Trapped in an isolated “bedroom community” with no place to go even if you had public transportation, the young suburban male has no dragons to slay, no kingdoms to conquer, no food to hunt and no job to do that matters. In a town dotted by strip malls that could be anywhere, a place almost totally devoid of art and diversity, a place where every father seems chained to a boring nine-to-five office job, and every

mother seems sated, thanklessly shuttling the children to and from soccer practice, it's a wonder we don't have more violence in the suburbs.

Where there is not violence, there is the threat of violence that never quite subsides. The boys who executed the Columbine massacre in 1999 have passed into myth, and in their wake lies a trail of worshipful websites. Today's high school seniors have grown up with that myth; it is a distant memory from childhood. They are attracted to it as their ancestors were attracted to the stories of dragon slayers as told to them around the peat fire. We cannot blame them. We have taken away the stories of King Arthur and replaced them with the bumbling misadventures of Buzz Lightyear. So instead of having their biological hunting instinct satisfied by the vicarious experience of battle through myth and fable, some of the more confused and romantic young men will take matters into their own hands, staging battles in schools, in relationships, with themselves.

"His eyes looked like flames of fire, his face was grim and ugly...and his long locks of hair hung down upon his broad shoulders like curling snakes" (A Child's Book of Stories 386). Such is the description of a much-feared giant in the classic tale of "Jack the Giant Killer," but it could just as well be a poetic passage from a concert review of Mastodon, Cradle of Filth, or any other aggressive rock outfit—for these icons, too, are symbols of a boy's dark side. We are living in a period when those traditional stories and fables that so enlivened our ancestors are being stripped down, cleaned up and all but completely exorcised of any significance or moral. Well-meaning parents hastily censor the gore of Grimm's fairy tales to make all stories appropriate for the youngest of their children. Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid," once a strong figure of soul-

searching and self-sacrifice, becomes a perky, shallow Playmate of the Month in Disney's hands. Rather than meeting her tragic end and dissolving into sea foam after having her tongue cut out, our young heroine exists in a chronic state of joy, frolicking with her orchestral sea chums right up until the date of her marriage with the prince. Indeed, for Disney's mermaid it is not becoming human but marriage that becomes her principal goal (Trites 147). The five-year-olds who turned out in droves to enjoy this tepid fantasy in 1989 are the same ones who, ten years later, would make Marilyn Manson a household name. Finally, these children had some real monsters to contend with. Locked away in their squeaky clean suburban bedrooms, these kids were ready to be scared. They needed it. They hungered for it because it is human nature.

Recall that when Eric Harris recorded his dramatic plans to declare war upon Columbine High School in his journal, the clothes he and Klebold would wear during the siege were among the carefully planned details. "We will be all in black" (Brown 95). Published photographs of Jeff Weise, Kip Kinkel and others seems to support the notion that an ominous wardrobe of black provides the costume of choice for a school shooter. In his essay "Litima: The Inner Heat," Michael Meade reminds us that red and black are the colors often worn during initiations, and suggests that these colors are appropriate considering "the road of initiation is made of flames and shadows, fire and ashes, tears and smoke" (Mahdi 58). Do these boys who are so often criticized and worried over in the media, the ones dressed from head to foot in black, have something to teach us? I will argue that they most certainly do, and that their idolatry of the "wild men" who are so unlike their fathers is a natural part of their craving to reconnect with nature and to seek a more holistic view of what it means to be a man.

The poet Robert Bly has become well-known in recent years as the godfather of the “men’s movement.” In his book *Iron John*, he examines an old tale that was collected by the Brothers Grimm around 1820. Bly speculates that the story is actually much older, perhaps ten or twenty thousand years older. It is a story of initiation. In it, a man discovers a wild, hairy man at the bottom of a pond and delivers him to the king, who immediately imprisons him in an iron cage outside the palace. One day, the young prince, an eight-year-old boy, is playing with his golden ball when the ball rolls into Iron John’s cage. The boy approaches the cage and asks for his ball back. Iron John says he will give the ball back if the boy will unlock the cage and set him free. The boy says nothing and walks away. The scene is repeated the next day. Bly suggests that in reality, the “next day” could mean that ten or fifteen years have passed, and that perhaps the boy is now twenty-five-years old. At this rate the boy would be nearing forty by the third day, but this assumption is inconsistent with the ages for initiation throughout the world. In fact, this story makes the most sense if we assume that the boy is around the age of fourteen or sixteen on the third day.

On this day, when Iron John tells the boy once again that he will give back his golden ball if he unlocks the cage and sets him free, the boy tells him that he would do this, if only he knew where to find the key. Iron John tells him that he must steal the key from under his mother’s pillow. So the boy steals the key from under his mother’s pillow, unlocks the cage, and rides off into the forest upon Iron John’s shoulders. Once there he will undergo a series of trials. Bly is careful to distinguish between the “wild man” and the “savage”—for the wild man in our story does not symbolize violence or crude machismo—but “forceful action undertaken, not with cruelty, but with resolve” (8).

With his scraggly hair he is also a symbol of nature and sexuality, and, of course, an abundance of hair has long been associated with rock music, heavy metal in particular.

Most child development experts will agree that in the life of every child, boy or girl, the mother is and should be the center of all. When a boy reaches the age of twelve, however, it is widely believed that the father should take over as the primary guide. Although traditionally the boy is initiated by an older man who is not his father, the father's presence can facilitate the appropriate selection of a mentor. Too often, however, fathers are not present. Bly contends that the trouble began with the industrial revolution. Finding no more work on the farm, father was driven far from home to work in the city. Many fathers simply do not have the luxury of spending a lot of time with their children. In the documentary A Gathering of Men, Bly meets with Bill Moyers to talk at length about how this separation is preventing boys from learning from their fathers the "male mode of feeling." He quotes from the German psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich, saying that when a boy is not with his father, "a hole will appear in the son's psyche, and that hole does not fill with little Bambis and Walt Disney movies, it fills with demons."

Is it such a great leap of logic to consider that the satanic and demonic symbolism so prevalent in metal culture is attractive to boys because it paints a perfect picture of this hole in their souls? After the industrial revolution, men also began to bear the burden of grief at having lost their connection to the land and to physical work. Is this theme not explored most beautifully on the stage in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman? Or how about Sloan Wilson's woeful ode to the commuter The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit? When the film was released in 1956, a reviewer in The New York Times refers over and over again to the film's protagonist as a "hero." Yet in Wilson's 2003 obituary, this same

character is remembered not as a hero but as a man who “learns the usefulness of expedience and hypocrisy on the job in the corporate culture” (Saxon B9). The children of these 1950s archetypes became hippies, but hippie culture (much like the punk culture that succeeded it) lost its integrity when it became a marketable commodity. Marilyn Manson mocks a famous mantra by the Beatles in his song “Disposable Teens”: “You say you want a revolution, and I say that you’re full of shit!” Ironically then, Manson proves he knows his market well and is all too willing to play into their hands with a rebellious, empathetic anthem.

When Bly writes of absent fathers, he is not writing about fathers who have physically deserted their families. One of the things that troubled mainstream society the most about Columbine was that both shooters had parents who were still married. Haven’t we come to believe that this, much like that house in the suburbs, is part of an ironclad formula for success? This is one of the hidden problems with suburbia. How many hours must mother and father work to make that sizable mortgage and keep up with the Joneses? Sometimes even fathers who are physically present are emotionally absent, and that can be just as bad. Frequently the boy is left to find a mentor on his own.

At the heart of this consideration of a boy’s search for a mentor, or “second king” (Bly, Iron John x), is a boy’s own dissatisfaction with his first king, his father. The lack of love from, or literal absence of, the father is such a common theme in metal music that the pop-punk band Bowling for Soup chose to satirize this cliché in their song “Girl All the Bad Guys Want.” The narrative of the song is grammatically flawed, but telling. “Her name is Nona, she’s a rocker with a nose ring, her CD changer’s full of singers that are mad at their Dad.” Indeed, the genre is full of angst-ridden men who confront their

fathers directly. Nickleback vocalist Chad Kroeger hands down this pronouncement in the band's hit single, "Never Again": "Father's a name you haven't earned yet."

Likewise, Jacoby Shaddix of Papa Roach has made no secret of the biographical roots of their song "Broken Home," which contains the lines "I know my mother loves me, but does my father even care if I'm sad or I'm angry? You were never ever there when I needed you." With Pantera, not only does one see this personal confrontation of the father, but we also witness a rock star who considers himself a father figure to his fans: "You'll never be the father I am...the bastard father to the thousands of the ugly, criticized, the unwanted...the ones with fathers just like you." Judging from the commercial success of these artists, young fans who feel victimized are obviously drawn to this lyrical material, and what it lacks in poetic virtuosity it makes up for in sincerity. One can rightfully conclude that singing along to these lyrics at concerts is therapeutic for them (Christenson 203).

Granted, Nickleback and Papa Roach are commercially viable, melodic metal artists, and many hardcore fans would balk at even categorizing them as true metal, though they are often branded as such by the mainstream media. Still, if marijuana is the gateway drug to the heavier stuff, "nu metal" may very well be the gateway to black metal. This could explain why fans of this darker, scarier subgenre tend to be a bit older. Having lost in their attempts to grasp the brass ring of vicarious initiation through commercial metal as young teenagers, those still searching dig deeper underground. Some may be surprised to learn that the roots of black metal can be traced back to their grandpa's favorite band, Led Zeppelin. This band once staged a record release party as a

black mass that took place inside underground caves that were once the scene of the rituals of Sir Francis Dashwood's Hellfire Club two hundred years prior (Moynihan 4).

Black metal is an extreme music for extreme times, and nowhere is it more clear that masculine society is issuing a clarion call for ritual and ceremony. The names of the bands speak volumes: Ritual Carnage, Ritual of Hate, Superjoint Ritual, Ritual Day, Dark Ritual, Ritual Orchestra, Ritual Steel, Zombie Ritual, Ancient Ceremony, Illicit Rite, Sacred Rite, Funeral Rites, Immortal Rites, Nocturnal Rites, Ancient Rites, Rites of Degringolad, and the list goes on and on. Websites celebrating the genre boast names like Fleshrites and Night Ritual. Even those bands who chose more nebulous monikers released albums with such titles as Ceremony in Flames, Ceremony of Innocents or Medieval Rites.

Fans of black metal adopt, as do fans of many other forms of "alternative" music these days, the tribal look that includes piercings, tattoos, and scarification. Never before in our history has tattooing been so popular in the west. In the documentary Body Art, an artist at the Fine Line tattoo parlor in New York City acknowledges the relationship between this current phenomenon with the bloodletting tradition so common in tribal rites of passage: "The pain is a relevant part of the process." Likewise, a Japanese Tsunami artist in this same documentary concurs that "Pain is definitely one of the appeals because without pain, there is nothing to be proud of." No pain, no gain. In tribal cultures an important part of the initiation of youth involves the "making of wound patterns" (Bly 28). Undergoing this process is a test of endurance and the permanent marks are a testament to one's maturity and strength. In New Guinea, the more pain a young man can stand during his initiation, the more respect he will have among his elders, and his skin

will clearly show how much he's endured. Conversely, we live in a culture where every advertisement on television seems to promise us relief from the slightest discomfort. Today, even young children are administered pain medication when they are given standard immunizations.

Body Art also profiles a man named Mark Potaro, a conservative car salesman by day, but "when the business suit comes off, he lets the world know he's an illustrated man!" This harkens back to Bly's idea of the postindustrial man who is completely out of touch with his primitive nature, castrated by the forces of economy. The creation of this myth of the moonlighting "wild man" is a necessary fantasy, seducing the modern man with promises of "yes, you can have it all." Even Disney has sunk its dirty claws into the undercover wild man theme with its animated feature The Incredibles. The hero of the film is Bob Parr, a man who, according to the film's official website:

[U]sed to be one of the world's greatest superheroes, saving lives and fighting evil on a daily basis. But now, fifteen years later, Bob and his wife have adopted civilian identities and retreated to the suburbs to lead normal lives with their three kids. Now he's a clock-punching insurance claims adjuster fighting boredom and a bulging waistline. Itching to get back into action, Bob gets his chance when a mysterious communication summons him to a remote island for a top-secret assignment.

Can you hear that rumbling sound in the distance? It is the sound of Nascar dads cheering. Each one is saying, "Look son, dads can kick ass!" Overcome with nostalgia for his own lost youth, he is surely a man who was never properly initiated into adulthood.

Finally, because tattoo and piercing shops are primarily located in cities, suburban youth must travel into the heart of the beast for body modification. Indeed, one can often hear of them making pilgrimages in groups, sometimes beginning their journey with a ceremonious round of alcohol drinking or drug use. Drug use among teens is a frequent sound byte on the evening news, but it is important to remember that experimentation of this sort in a controlled environment, in the presence of elders, is a common practice in the process of initiation. With their hostile anti-drug position, even former hippies who failed to “just say no” in their own adolescence run the risk of alienating their children who may experiment with drugs among strangers and in dangerous quantities.

This alienation from the parents is an important component of the rite of passage, for this is the time when the boy must find out how he is like and how he is not like his parents. In tribal culture this would involve someone’s coming and physically taking the boy away, like the young prince who disappears into the forest upon the shoulders of Iron John. However, the modern American boy, unless he goes away to camp or boarding school, will very likely remain with his parents. Ironically enough, the kids who embrace extreme music and the abrasive fashion statement that goes with it will often find themselves embattled with their parents or, at the very least, going through a prolonged period of psychological separation. This will suffice.

Of course, physically marking oneself as a “dissenter” in these times is difficult when young people in certain “hip” cities who are pierced, tattooed and scarred may well be in the majority. Outside the city, however, one can still stand out as a young person who rejects the blandness and artlessness of the suburbs by converting one’s own body into a traveling exhibition. More importantly, the bonding and group identification that

results by altering one's own body with metal and ink can sometimes result in a musical crossover, as the "look" belongs not only to heavy metal, but to punk, goth, industrial and other genres. This can be a blessing if a boy finds himself stuck in the circular self-pity of Nickleback and Papa Roach. After all, what happens when our sons' idols are not the wise men who can lead them to enlightenment and maturity, but more closely resemble grown children still preoccupied with their own childhood grievances? Some will follow their instinctual hunger for ceremony, myth, and dark romance to the underworld of black metal, but the lucky ones will find the cerebral messengers who lie in wait at metal's fringes.

Marilyn Manson, unlike his contemporary Kurt Cobain, was not ashamed of his heavy metal roots. Manson admits in his autobiography, The Long Hard Road Out of Hell, that as a kid his favorite band was Iron Maiden. Formed in 1976, Iron Maiden stands today as an iconic metal band that, some argue, has influenced today's young metal musicians more than any other in the genre. Although their fans are satirized in a pop song by the band Wheatus ("Yeah, I'm just a teenage dirtbag baby. Listen to Iron Maiden, baby...with me"), scholar Robert Walser labels the band postmodern, and compares its album Seventh Son of a Seventh Son to the song cycles of nineteenth century composers Schubert and Schumann. All of the songs on this album, he notes, are "concerned with the related topics of fate, clairvoyance, visions, and philosophical speculation" (152-153). In the 1980s, Iron Maiden was known for its highly theatrical stage show that included a giant-sized puppet based on "Eddie," the monstrous mascot that had appeared on many of their album covers. The band's lyrics are intelligent and strongly influenced by classical stories of heroes.

As Deena Weinstein notes, “The heavy metal subculture identifies with, or at the least, is fascinated by the monster, who is feared by and excluded from society. But it also identifies with the hero, who defends goodness against evil forces, often those who control society” (219). In Iron Maiden’s song “The Flight of Icarus,” the classical story of the boy who flies too close to the sun, is used to explore the father-son relationship, the very relationship that is central to the boy’s understanding of himself and the nature of which determines his ability to be successfully “reborn” as a mature man. In the Iron Maiden version of the Icarus story, the father intentionally tricks the boy, which results in his undoing. Once again, issues with father arise and this time they deconstruct a story we thought we knew.

Marilyn Manson, born Brian Warner, was a kid who did what many kids do. He enjoyed the sensational drama and overarching masculinity of heavy metal as a fourteen-year-old, while continuing to allow his musical tastes to grow and evolve, always with an eye toward the macabre, the hostile, and the severe. Although much of Manson’s own music features heavy, crunchy guitars, his offerings have been fairly diverse, with one album, Mechanical Animals, alienating many devoted fans and drawing comparisons to Pink Floyd and David Bowie. Looking every bit the part of a transsexual alien on the cover of that album, Manson stands in stark contrast to Iron Maiden’s lead singer Bruce Dickinson, a man who looks only slightly unlike a textbook illustration of a Cro-Magnon man. But Marilyn Manson, the band, is the perfect example of a potential crossover act. Metalheads can be drawn in by the heavy guitars and explosive live show, and if they stay they will get more than they bargained for.

The idea of the rock and roll messenger is not a new one. To many in the late sixties and early seventies, Jim Morrison was the perfect rock star. Physically, he was Michelangelo's David sprung to life. Although he supposedly resented being regarded as a sex symbol, Morrison's magnetic stage presence and striking good looks were exactly what made people pay attention. In essence, his sex appeal allowed him to be subversive. Ray Manzarek, the Doors' older and more studious looking keyboard player, could never have accomplished what Morrison did. Manzarek had been a highly regarded graduate student in cinematography at UCLA before he formed the Doors. He was well-read, and it showed. He looked, as Morrison's biographers claim, like a "stern young schoolmaster in a Kansas frontier town" (Hopkins 61). Manzarek was an interesting character, but he was no rock star. Morrison's strength lay in the fact that he did not look like an intellectual.

While at Florida State University, Morrison had also studied film and was reportedly a fan of Theatre of Cruelty founder Antonin Artaud (Hopkins 220). No surprise then, that at the height of his career with the Doors, he found himself completely transformed by the arresting work of the Living Theatre, which performed *Paradise Now!* on the campus of the University of Southern California in February, 1969. Morrison watched (and sometimes participated in) *le Living* for a week straight. After the ensemble's final performance, the Doors played a show in Miami and the singer began to experiment with antagonizing the audience. "You're all a bunch of slaves!" he wailed (Hopkins 220-23; 230-231). Morrison was fascinated with the idea of bringing this kind of "theatre" to the masses, and he wanted desperately to start a riot. In the end, people did not quite "get" it, but even today, many years after his death, kids are still reading the

best-selling biography of his life and scurrying to get their hands of the works of his favorite writers: Aldous Huxley and the poets Rimbaud and Baudelaire. In this way, his influence as a messenger—and his role in bringing “real” theatre and literature to people with no formal education—cannot be underestimated.

One of the young people who picked up a copy of Morrison’s biography was Brian Warner (Manson, The Long Hard Road Out of Hell 47). The so-called king of 90s shock rock, Marilyn Manson is aware of the power he has as a messenger, and he does not intend to die before bringing fine art to the unsuspecting pupils under his tutelage. The brilliance of the internet makes it possible now for famous rock stars to have direct access to their fans, and Manson takes full advantage of this like no one else. In fact his web environment is an internet “stage” worthy of a study all its own. Visitors to this colorful landscape will find links to the work of celebrated Viennese artist Gottfried Helnwein, who has been a collaborator of Manson’s in recent years. One of these partnerships resulted in a monochromatic and foreboding portrait of Manson posing in Mickey Mouse ears. Again, recall Bly’s assertion that the hole in a son’s psyche “does not fill with little Bambis and Walt Disney movies, it fills with demons.” Manson suggests that his fans check out the work of the challenging Franco-Argentine filmmaker Gaspar Noé, one of his favorites.

In this way, the rock star is not so much an initiator as he is a guide. He is a messenger who delivers young boys into the hand of the true masters, the wise ones whose work transcends time and place—the poets and playwrights who can liberate our sons from a black-and-white world. Adults in the adolescent environment must quietly support this journey, helping to decode violent metaphors and assuring the safety of

young people in transition. Michael Meade warns: “take away the nourishment of a community, which sees beauty and value in the extreme dances of the initiates, and youth appear to be wasting their time” (60). Once again, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Mark Ames claims that “Bullying, in our cultural propaganda, is simply a dramatic plot device which the hero overcomes” (193). Not only does he resort to using the language of the theatre here, he also uses the word hero. The hero with a thousand faces, as Joseph Campbell would call him; Parsifal, in search of the Holy Grail. In private Waldorf Schools, adolescents in eleventh grade perform a play based on the legend of Parsifal. Public schools in the United States have completely lost touch with students’ needs to connect with timeless stories of adolescent heroism. Instead, the play chosen most often to appeal to teenagers in high school is Romeo and Juliet—a romantic tragedy that ends in suicide. In this play, the parents are the bullies and there are no heroes.

Much has been made of the bully theory in regard to Columbine, and yet Harris never mentions being tormented by bullies as an inspiration for the attack. A friend of the boys, Brooks Brown, recalls walking with them near the school when jocks drove by throwing bottles and calling names, to which Klebold replied “Don’t worry, man, it happens all the time” (Adams & Russakoff A1). There is no doubt they were harassed for being different, but too many times Harris is vehement in his journal that the two are going on this mission to kill as many people as possible. As Harris says in one of the basement tapes, “Our actions are a two man war against everyone else” (Shepard).

In fact, in the very last tape they made, Harris bequeaths some of his personal belongings to a few friends. “Morris, Nate, if you guys live, I want you guys to have whatever you want from my room and the computer room.” If you guys live? These

were associates whom Harris deemed worthy of receiving gifts, and yet he acknowledged the fact that the intended benefactors may not survive the attack. They may actually be what Mark Ames referred to earlier as collateral damage—part of the system that must die. Although Columbine was devastating, many people now realize that it fell short of Klebold and Harris' ultimate goal. As Christian Slater's character in the movie Heathers says, "People will look at the ashes of Westerburg and say 'Now there's a school that self-destructed, not because society didn't care, but because the school was society.' That's really deep, huh?"

CHAPTER IV

THE SUICIDE SHOW:

School Terrorism on Stage and Screen

“Basically, when Columbine happened, to me, there was something undeniable about the almost Shakespearean quality of this drama/tragedy...of these two characters, their relationship, their plot, and that they followed it through.”

Ben Coccio, Writer and Director of Zero Day

“Directors will be fighting over this story,” says Dylan Klebold in one of the videotapes he made with Eric Harris prior to their attack at Columbine High School, “I know we’re going to have followers, because we’re so fucking godlike” (Klebold, “Journal”). Among their most avid “followers” have been people with the power to spread the killers’ infamy over miles and generations: American filmmakers. From 2002 to 2003, a total of five feature films were made in response to the rash of high school rampage shootings which occurred in the mid-to-late 1990s: Home Room (2002), Bang Bang You’re Dead (2002), Heart of America (2003), Elephant (2003), and Zero Day (2003). Each of the films is unique, offering different perspectives and utilizing various techniques, but they all leave the viewer wondering one thing: why? Certainly workplace massacres have not inspired creative memorials on this scale. What is it about school shootings that draw these artists in? Is it a feeling of moral responsibility due to the fact that the victims were children? Conversely, could it be a feeling of artistic kinship, as many of the shooters have been sensitive, misunderstood creative types? In Seductions

of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil, Jack Katz admits that “As unattractive morally as a crime may be, we must appreciate that there is genuine experiential creativity in it as well” (8). Of course, some crimes are more blatantly creative than others, and thus have a more obvious connection to the traditional performing arts. It comes as no surprise then to see traditional directors and writers turn to this material for inspiration, just as Dylan Klebold said they would.

In addition to the five feature films, there have been a number of television episodes revolving around the theme of school shootings, a Discovery Channel Zero Hour docudrama based on Columbine called “Massacre at Columbine High” (2004), a controversial satire called Duck! The Carbine High Massacre (1999), the United States Theatre Project’s award-winning play called columbinus (2005) and Michael Moore’s Academy Award-winning documentary Bowling for Columbine (2002), which is only tangentially related to its namesake. The primary function of this chapter will be to review these works which were made after Columbine, within the larger context of representations of high school terrorism before Columbine: most notably the stunning British film If....(1968) and Bonnie Culver’s play Sniper, which she wrote in 1991— just prior to the onslaught of public school massacres that occurred in the latter half of the nineties. School shooter material on YouTube will be examined, as well as peripherally related material such as the Lifetime drama Dawn Anna (2005), based on the story of a woman whose daughter was Columbine victim Lauren Townsend, and the seminal French film, Zero de Conduite (1933).

Jean Vigo’s Zero de Conduite caused such a stir that the film was banned by censors and not released to the public until after World War II. The English translation

of the title is “Zero for Conduct”, and the film centers on a group of young adolescents who are chronically blamed for any wrongdoing at their mixed age school, whether they are responsible or not. Oppressed and resentful, the students soon hatch a plot and their innocent weapons consist of “Old books, shoes, tin cans” that they eventually foist upon the administration during an alumni’s day celebration, all the while carrying their homemade black flag festooned with a skull and crossbones. The film itself is difficult to follow and seems fragmentary, due in no small part to the budget constraints of the time and the age of the film (Jacobowitz 3). Although their weapons are naïve and childish, their battle cry is not: “It’s war! Down with school! Down with the teachers! Hurrah for revolt! Liberty or death!”

Taking a cue from Zero de Conduite, writers David Sherwin and John Howlett produced a script called Crusaders (1960), based on Sherwin’s own distressing private school experience in Britain. In a 2003 episode of BBC Scotland’s Cast and Crew, Sherwin dares to compare his old school to a “Nazi war camp.” Sherwin passed the script on to director Lindsay Anderson and the two collaborated, eventually producing a film that would be known as If..... Upon its release in 1968, this film caused a sensation in England for challenging the British establishment. Although it is perhaps most meaningful and was certainly more blasphemous to audiences in Great Britain, it won the Pomme d’Or at Cannes and effectively launched the career of actor Malcolm McDowell, who would later perfect his role as a young anarchist in Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (1971).

If.... begins as what seems like a straightforward tale of a young men’s boarding school, not unlike that depicted in Thomas Hughes’ novel Tom Brown’s Schooldays

(1916), which is set in Victorian times. There is the usual mix of dowdy, demanding schoolmasters, freshman hazing, and the establishment of a firm pecking order among students, sometimes with humiliating consequences. The film's lovable antihero Mick Travis and his two friends Johnny and Wallace are singled out by the administration and senior students for refusing to conform to the school's conservative dress code and for having a smug attitude. In fact, Travis and his friends are literally beaten in an attempt to break their collective will and for no particular infraction. This abomination sets the wheels in motion for retribution, though the film becomes increasingly more surreal and disjointed, leaving the viewer to wonder if certain scenes are not mere fantasy.

As was typical during this time period at such a school, the boys are trained in the use of weaponry and indeed, they actively practice military maneuvers. While armed, Travis and company begin shooting at their comrades and injure the chaplain, the Reverend Woods. Later, when being reprimanded for this action by the school's headmaster, the Reverend Woods is ejected from within a large drawer in the wall. Again, the viewer is disoriented and begins to wonder what is going on. The final scene of the film portrays a full-scale massacre on school grounds using machine guns no doubt procured from the school's military program.

When a female cohort of Travis', who has enlisted in the revolution, viciously shoots the school's director in the head, he falls backward, bleeding. However, in the next scene the place where he once stood is empty, save for a burning hole in the ground. He has vanished as mysteriously as the Wicked Witch of the East. The device of fantasy is used here to place a comfortable distance between the audience and the message, but the message itself is clear: it is 1968, and it is the dawn of a worldwide youth rebellion.

Anderson was always hesitant to admit that the film was a sign of the times, and very likely this sprang from his desire to have If.... stand alone as a work of art. In the DVD commentary, McDowell says comparisons to Columbine are off the mark and that the “only thing it has in common with contemporary school shootings is the choice of venue.” However, one cannot help but think of Eric Harris when Travis boldly claims that “One man can change the world with a bullet in the right place.” This kind of anarchic platitude is so like the things Harris wrote in his virulent journal. What’s more, the character based on Harris in the play columbinus challenges his teacher’s take on natural selection by insinuating that with today’s technology “anything can make you the fittest in the right situation” (Karam 52).

After If.... came the film that would put writer Stephen King on the map. Carrie opened in theaters on November 3, 1976. In this story, it is a young woman who is bullied and made fun of by her teenaged peers, although her feminine power is undermined by the fact that her deadly vengeance in the end is literally beyond her control. After a final prank at the Senior Prom leaves her covered in pig’s blood, Carrie’s supernatural powers become unhinged and deadly chaos ensues. Carrie is a horror movie, and much like the art films that preceded it, its world is far removed from reality.

Although the 1980s were full of blood and gore and teens everywhere scurried to watch slasher films like Friday the 13th and A Nightmare on Elm Street, the serial murders in these films were not typically motivated by vengeance against peers and there was very little in the way of character development. Still, this trend was heavily marketed to teens and they responded with vigor. The directors of the documentary Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film acknowledge this genre’s connection to the

theatre of the Grand Guignol and when asked if he thinks audiences' blood lust will ever wane, New Line Cinema's Director of Development Jeff Katz asks: "Are there teenagers today? Will there be teenagers tomorrow? Will there be teenagers five years from now? If the answer is yes, then slasher movies aren't going anywhere" (Going to Pieces). This begs the question: what is it about the nature of these films that appeals to adolescents? Is it this same yearning for initiation and ceremony, the same struggle to come to terms with the death of childhood which sometimes manifests itself in an interest in dark strains of popular music? Some would argue that the horror genre as a whole functions as a substitute for pornography in the adolescent, and in fact Linda Badley would point to the philosophy of James Twitchell as exemplified in his books Dreadful Pleasures and Preposterous Violence. Twitchell argues that "horror films provide an adolescent rite of passage, as fairy tales are to children. They are cautionary tales that demonstrate the dangers of unconventional sex, implanting taboos while providing safe outlets for repressed sexual energy and anxiety" (Badley 5).

Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum lay 1984's Revenge of the Nerds. No doubt playing upon the success of 1978's National Lampoon's Animal House, this lighthearted comedy places a group of underdogs at the center of the film, making fools out of their rivals, the college jocks. Here, the nerds are a more diverse group than one might think, and certainly not confined to the stereotype of the computer geek in ill-fitting clothes. In fact, in this film anyone who is not an athletic, beer-guzzling alpha male is a candidate for membership in the social underclass. Revenge of the Nerds features a scruffy stoner named Booger, a flamboyant African-American queen named Lamar Latrell, and an outrageous violin prodigy named Poindexter. With that diversity

in mind, perhaps the Columbine killers truly were considered nerds within the context of their culture, saturated as it was with jock propaganda.

In one scene, after they have been humiliated by the jocks, Booger suggests retaliating with violence: “I say we blow up their house.” However, Gilbert (a character who does conform to our popular perception of the nerd) is the voice of reason, insisting that resorting to violence would “bring us down to their level.” Two years later in Edmonton, Oklahoma the first of a series of workplace massacres would take place when a postal carrier, Patrick Sherrill, opened fire on his colleagues, killing fourteen people and wounding six before committing suicide (Ames 18). Our culture as a whole became more mean-spirited and “don’t get mad, get even” became the mantra of millions. Rage massacres in other post offices followed, spawning the phrase “Going Postal,” and before long, overworked employees in corporate environments began killing their colleagues *en masse* as well. It was into this milieu and very likely buffeted by the success of the teen slasher genre in the eighties that Heathers was born.

Heathers is a black comedy which opened in theatres in the spring of 1989, and much like Carrie, the central focus is on the emotional bullying among teenaged girls. Heather and Veronica are best friends, but Veronica resents Heather for dominating the relationship and for being unnecessarily cruel to others. When Veronica meets J.D., a boy who, like a modern-day school shooter is a smart but quick-tempered loner with an anarchic streak, her life is changed forever. They methodically begin to kill their classmates and when Veronica regains her sanity and rejects him, J.D. steals dynamite from his father, a professional demolition man, and hatches a plan to blow up the school. Although he is thwarted in his attempt to do this, he does succeed in a suicide bombing.

Conveniently enough, Veronica is standing nearby at the time and the explosion ignites her cigarette. Again, like all of the other previous films, this subject matter was considered too provocative for filmmakers to explore it with any hint of realism. It is only after school shootings began to make headlines on a regular basis that filmmakers started to change their attitude. From that point on, the films were “inspired by” actual events.

In a made-for-TV movie which appeared in 1997, airing as Detention: The Siege on Johnson High, a disgruntled former student returns to his old high school to kill the teacher who gave him a failing grade. As he enters the building, the camera cuts to a class in session. A student is in front of his class, confidently giving a presentation to his peers. He says “[A]nd since there’s injustice everywhere, nowadays when it’s so tough on the streets, you do it to me, I’ll do it to you.” As his teacher nods in approval he concludes, “ Just like the old testament says, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Not lacking irony, this same student is later discovered mortally wounded as the shooter’s vengeance mission turns into a full-on spree. This movie was based on the true story of school shooter Eric Houston of Olivehurst, California whose attack occurred in 1992.

Around this time playwright Bonnie Culver began working on Sniper, a play borrowing heavily from the facts of Anthony Barbaro’s attack on the community of Olean, New York in 1974. Barbaro had been a high school student at Olean High but school was out for winter break. Nonetheless, Barbaro assumed a sniper position inside the school and began firing from a window into the street below, killing three and wounding eleven before surrendering to police. He later hanged himself in his jail cell. The young Bonnie Culver was deeply moved by this story, as she had just left this area of

Olean with her mother after buying a wedding dress (Phone interview). Not much older than the killer herself and meditating on her near brush with death, Culver nonetheless identified with the shooter and believed she knew what might have driven him to the brink of sanity. “I grew up in that area,” says Culver, “and unless you were in to hunting and fishing and the church and school athletics, there really wasn’t much else. My identification with him was being interested in the arts and there really wasn’t anything for me to pursue. There weren’t writing groups, there wasn’t any big library to go to, so you feel as if you’re isolated in ways other than its geography, which is also very isolating” (Phone interview).

Barbaro was a Regent’s Scholar and his fictional likeness in Sniper is Anthony Vaccaro, a sensitive boy who falls in love with a girl who recites Shelley and talks back to the school principal. His parents resent him as they are grieving the loss of their “other” and favored son, Chris—a son who liked to fish, a son whose simple parents understood him. Vaccaro’s mother seems more indebted to the church than she does to her own son, while questions spiral in the young Anthony’s head about why the rules keep changing in Catholicism, in relationships. His life spins out of control and he finds himself in a jail cell surrounded by a chorus who chant “why, why, why...” (Culver 84). Anthony Barbaro’s journal was released to the public after his suicide, and this same haunting question “why, why, why?” obviously tormented him.

“It seemed the perfect dramatic question,” says Culver “and obviously he himself did not understand” (Phone interview). Culver compares the play to Our Town “gone bad” as it relies on familiar “stock characters from towns.” Ironically, years later in Zero Day, the film’s two main characters, who are modeled on Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold,

stand in front of their school, filming themselves. They say “this is our school, our nemesis, in (beat) *our town...*”, one cannot help but think of that perennial favorite performed in high schools everywhere.

Before the shooting, Culver’s Anthony appears to be a typical teenager: that is, he is moody, curious, passionate and rebellious. America has mixed feelings about its teenagers, and mixed feelings result in mixed messages. On the one hand, we sexualize them, as in the films Kids and Thirteen, and on the other hand we implore them to “just say no.” Popular musicians have celebrated them since the advent of rock ‘n’roll: “Sixteen Candles”, “Sexy and 17”, “Teen Angel”, “Smells Like Teen Spirit”. Yet the mainstream media, with its “monsters next door” propaganda, does what Michael Moore claims in Bowling for Columbine: they crank up the fear factor. Nothing scares people more than the thought of an out-of-control teenager with all of their “repressed sexual energy.”

Yet Michael Ventura looks toward the ancients for inspiration: “They waited until their children reached the intensity of adolescence, and then they used that very intensity’s capacity for absorption, its hunger, its need to act out, its craving for dark things, dark knowledge, dark acts, all the qualities we fear most in our kids—the ancients used these very qualities as teaching tools” (Johnson 11). In essence then, for adults to attempt to oppress these desires in the adolescent is to do the very thing which Michael Meade warns against: “Aggressions that are not educated, led out, and directed can only erupt inappropriately...” (Mahdi 62).

In the end, both the real Anthony and the fictional one, commit suicide. Robert Bly says “In ancient times the movement of the man was downward, a descent into grief.

Before you're really a man, that descent has to take place. It's referred to in the fairy tales as a time of ashes, and a time of descent..." (*A Gathering of Men*). Of course one may also recall the brooding archetype of Hamlet, and his quiet contemplation of "to be or not to be." Suicide is a common preoccupation during the teen and young adult years, only today—as with mass murder—even one's own death can be an act of theatre.

Hotelier Terry Brand spent three months learning to fly in order to "stage a high profile suicide" (Giles 47) on the southern coast of England. He says "My full intention in learning to fly was to move on in one dramatic moment" (47). Consider the bizarre case of twenty-one-year-old Ricardo Lopez, who for nine months recorded a video diary documenting his obsession with the pop singer Bjork and her love life. He was discovered dead in his home on September 17, 1996, the victim of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Lopez had recorded himself holding up a package and heading out the door to mail it, and police were able to identify the address, trace the package, and intercept it before the "potentially lethal body trap packed with sulfuric acid" made it to Bjork's home (Ali 29). What's more, Lopez even saw fit to videotape his own suicide, complete with a soundtrack—the song "I Miss You" by Bjork. As one of the aspiring rampage shooters in *Zero Day* asks, looking forward to his own posthumous celebrity—"How can you just kill yourself?"

In 1995, Leonardo diCaprio starred as ex-junkie turned musician/author Jim Carroll in Scott Kalvert's *The Basketball Diaries*. The story revolves around Carroll's descent into heroin addiction after being a successful basketball player at his private high school in New York. Most remarkably, the film features a slow-motion dream sequence wherein Carroll enters his classroom in a long black trench coat and opens fire on his

classmates. The tagline for this film on the Internet Movie Database is very telling: “The true story of the death of innocence and the birth of an artist.” Victims of Michael Carneal’s school assault in Paducah, Kentucky filed a lawsuit against the filmmakers in response to testimony from an adolescent psychiatrist named Diane Schetky who claimed Carneal “was ‘conditioned’ by exposure to violent media,” including this scene from the Basketball Diaries (PBS).

In the wake of Kip Kinkel’s 1998 assault on Thurston High School in nearby Springfield, Oregon, Pacific Northwest writer William Mastrosimone wrote a play entitled Bang Bang You’re Dead (1998). Mastrosimone said he was moved to write the play when his fifteen-year-old son came home from school one day and told him one of his classmates had written a menacing threat on the chalkboard. “I, like every other parent,” said Mastrosimone, “was shaken to the core because we understood that our kids are no longer safe anywhere” (McMahon). Mastrosimone is most well known for having penned the script to Extremities (1986). His play Bang Bang You’re Dead debuted with a cast culled from Thurston High School in April of 1999—just two weeks before Harris’ and Klebold’s attack on Columbine High School. Although still relevant, Mastrosimone would later see fit to update his script by producing an after school special-style film for Showtime as a play-within-a-film, which will be discussed later.

Just a few months after Columbine, in the summer of 1999, William Hellfire and Joey Smack began filming a movie which made their screen names seem droll by comparison. Duck! The Carbine High Massacre was videotaped on a shoestring budget in New Jersey and the DVD features this pre-emptive strike: “We realize that some people may find it offensive, obscene, sacrilegious and thoroughly disgusting. However,

it was bound to become a motion picture eventually, or even worse a made for TV movie. So we decided to do it first.” With its hollow script and profusely bloody scenes, the goal seems to have been little more than to shock and offend. A closer look reveals a few gems, however. The killers’ suicide scene, for instance, is probably the most realistic in the entire genre. It is anything but romantic, and absolutely stunning in its portrayal of the killers’ quiet defeat by their own hands. Further, the two gunmen in the film are the only characters who have fully developed personalities, and as such they are the only ones to whom the viewer can relate. In a special features interview included on the DVD, Hellfire recalls that in media reports immediately following Columbine, the victims only received small blurbs with inane minutiae such as “he liked his mother’s pork chops” – whereas the killers’ biographies stretched over several pages. Thus, Hellfire and Smack call their victims merely Bible Girl or Spam Boy, among others. Eventually the directors were publicly arrested for bringing real guns on to the school property where they shot their film in the summer, and they became the subject of an investigation by the FBI (Russell).

Also in the immediate wake of Columbine, the film O, a modern retelling of Othello that takes place on a high school campus, was originally slated for release in late 1999. Due in part to the controversial interpretation, Miramax pawned the film off on Lions Gate and it was shelved for two years out of respect for the public’s sensitivity in the aftermath of Columbine (LaSalle). Although the violence in this movie happens off campus, there were just too many “privileged” but dead teenagers to put before American audiences at this time. At the heart of the film there is—of course—jealousy. Certainly it could be argued that jealousy lies at the heart of both celebrity murders and school

shootings, for what are the school's star athletes and drill team captains if not celebrities in miniature? The perpetrators are always on the outside looking in. In *Q*, the Iago character becomes Hugo, and Othello becomes Odin, the school's star basketball player whose girlfriend is the most popular girl on campus, Desi. "I didn't want to be a jock," wrote Dylan Klebold in his journal, "I wanted the happiness that they have and I will have something infinitely better." Klebold was envious of the jocks' happiness, but it could not touch the infamy and immortality he believed would soon be his. In this light, Hugo's film-closing monologue—played over a background of operatic music and before a familiar scene of emotional teenagers being interviewed in front of an endless sea of ambulances and police cars—is especially haunting:

All my life I always wanted to fly. I always wanted to live like a hawk. I know you're not supposed to be jealous of anything but—to take flight, to soar above everything and everyone—now that's living. But a hawk is no good around normal birds. They can't fit in—even though all the other birds probably want to be hawks. They hate them for what they can't be—proud, powerful, determined, dark. Odin is a hawk, he soars above us—he can fly...and one of these days everybody's going to pay attention to me—because I'm going to fly too. (*Q*).

Craig Bolotin's *Light It Up* premiered in November of 1999, and though it involves a group of teenagers who hold their school hostage, the setting is urban and the cast is primarily composed of people of color. Their intentions also seem noble and thus, their attack may be perceived as an act of civil disobedience. In this story, students rebel when a favorite teacher is suspended and their demands include repairing broken windows and leaking roofs, and supplying enough textbooks for all students. Although

released just six months after Columbine and directly in the middle of many thwarted copycat attempts by teenagers in the suburbs, this film must have been perceived as having had less in common with contemporary school shootings than did Q, even though the crimes in Q took place off campus. Still, certain commonalities do surface as when one of the two white students, a boy named Rivers, confronts one of his fellow revolutionaries in a quiet moment and makes a confession:

You know my pops used to always brag about how his generation gave a shit and how we don't care about nothin'. You know, in the sixties they had Vietnam to fight over. They had voting rights, they had all kinds of shit. Well you know what? Now I got my own little war story to tell. And you know something? This might give my little bullshit life some meaning (Light It Up).

The irony is that Rivers is enjoying the adventure and the fame, since the school at this time is surrounded by both the media and admirers from the neighborhood, but otherwise he and the other students seem little-concerned about fighting for their cause, which is almost an afterthought. In a film released in 2003, Zero Day, one of the characters talks about how "In Europe, in Medieval times if somebody insulted you, you whipped out your fucking sword and you dueled them...now it's time for the duel."

Of course this is hardly a fair comparison since he and his cohort intended to assault unarmed people with automatic weapons, but nonetheless, these are all examples of young men craving grand-scale adventure in their lives. It is a brand of trouble alluded to by Robert Bly when he speaks of the separation between father and son at the dawn of the industrial age (A Gathering of Men). In the Bill Moyers' program, Bly opens the documentary with a hero's tale. In every ancient story of initiation, the hero looks for

risk-taking opportunities to prove he is successfully making the transition from boy to man, and thus, Bly has his hero wonder aloud if there's "anything dangerous to do around here?"

Today's boys find themselves in the primary care of women—mothers and teachers who are often alienated by a boy's fascination with battle and weaponry. A boy may come to feel that his preoccupations are wrong; indeed, he may come to believe that the very fact of his maleness is something to be ashamed of. Christina Hoff Sommers explores this phenomenon in her book The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men, and it is likely this backlash which helped insure the success of Conn and Hal Iggulden's The Dangerous Book for Boys, which includes among other things, the blasphemous suggestion that every boy must own a Swiss army knife. It is interesting to note that the parents of both Kip Kinkel and Dylan Klebold were said to have disallowed their sons to play with toy guns as children. Could fuel be added to the fire through the creation of a taboo?

Data entry clerk Gary Brecher of Fresno, California calls himself the War Nerd and writes a column with that name for The Exile newspaper in Moscow. On the Public Radio International program To the Best of Our Knowledge, Brecher riles commentator Jim Fleming with his provocative assertion that "war is fun." Although he acknowledges his lack of support for the current war in Iraq, it is telling that he refers back to feelings he had in adolescence, a time when his philosophy began to take root: "When I was a kid the book that meant the most to me was this story of John Paul Jones, this U.S. privateer during the revolution, and I just remember making a decision when I was about 14, that I liked that story better than what passed for real life—which was, I don't know, a hot sort

of suburb in the middle of nowhere.” With this in mind, consider school shooter Michael Carneal’s confession to a psychiatrist about the feelings he had after stealing guns from a friend’s house while his friend was out: “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” (Newman 6).

Just prior to the much-publicized premiere of Michael Moore’s Oscar-winning documentary Bowling for Columbine at Cannes, a little film called Home Room quietly debuted at the Taos Talking Picture Festival on April 12, 2002. Home Room is the story of an unlikely and slow-developing friendship between two teenaged girls—one is the pretty and popular victim of a recent high school shooting, and the other a friend of the shooter who visits the wounded girl in the hospital. Although the film begins sensationally, with police sirens blaring and the crime still very much in progress, it becomes apparent right away that the shooter is not the focus of the film. In fact, he is never identified by name. Police refer to him simply as “the perpetrator” and the girls only hint at his identity and refer later only to “he” or “him.” This approach is exactly the opposite from that of the media, who put the shooters at Columbine on center stage and relegated the victims to the wings.

In October of 2002 the film version of William Mastrosimone’s Bang Bang You’re Dead premiered on Showtime, directed by Guy Ferland. In the play, the main character of Josh is modeled on school shooter Kip Kinkel, who is visited—one could say haunted—by all of his victims. It is unashamed in its blatant didacticism, and, in fact, Mastrosimone initially used the play as a kind of therapeutic vehicle for those who had been students at Thurston when the shooting occurred. At the end of the play, full of

remorse, Josh cries out to the victims who torment him: “I didn’t know it would be forever...I thought I could just hit the reset button and start over” (Mastrosimone 64), which is, of course, a reference to the influence of videogames—a hot topic in the media at this time.

In the film, the main character is Trevor, a boy who is too cool to be a nerd and too nerdy to be a member of the edgy, dangerous clique known as the Troggs. The school’s drama department is staging a production of Bang Bang You’re Dead, and Trevor secures the lead role as Josh. A public outcry ensues in the community, and this closely mirrors Mastrosimone’s own experience when he launched the play in Springfield less than a year after Kinkel’s attack there. Taking a cue from Harris and Klebold’s “Hitmen for Hire,” Mastrosimone has Trevor produce a video for his film class, which includes a scene of torture involving a school jock. As with a later film, Heart of America (2003), there is severe bullying in this film, and not surprisingly, the term bully is almost synonymous with the term athlete. Eventually, their mutual loathing of the jocks brings Trevor and the Troggs together, and they begin to test weaponry out in open fields. Here, as in Zero Day, the writers and directors shadow Harris’ and Klebold’s Rampart Range video, where they test their weapons in a wilderness area near their homes. Due to the school’s zero tolerance policy, Trevor is suspended from school for making the threatening video, but arrives on campus in time to discover the Troggs preparing for a siege. With his conscience and self-confidence bolstered by a blossoming romance, and his growing attachment to the moving play he is in, Trevor saves the day and thwarts the Troggs in their attempt to shoot up the school. Although certainly moralistic, Showtime’s Bang Bang You’re Dead succeeds where the original play falters.

The character of Trevor is more fully developed than that of Josh, and his future is a sea of possibilities. The film won four daytime Emmys for writing, directing, acting (Ben Foster), and best overall “Outstanding Children’s Special.”

Mastrosimone’s Trevor is a perfect example of an otherwise rational human being, pushed to his limits by ritual disgrace in the public sphere. He fantasizes about murder for the very reason Jack Katz gives in his book, Seductions of Crime: “In committing a righteous slaughter, the impassioned assailant takes humiliation and turns it into rage; through laying claim to a moral status of transcendent significance, he tries to burn humiliation up” (312). One is reminded of how Klebold and Harris frequently postured their own transcendent significance by referring to themselves in their writings as gods.

In Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity, David Giles claims that the history of fame begins when individuals assume names and attribute their work as the product of an individual (12). In Showtime’s Bang Bang You’re Dead, Trevor says that school shootings must “happen at school, because this is where they took my name away.” He boldly suggests that committing this crime—a school shooting—is an opportunity to finally regain ownership of his identity.

Adapting the play for the screen allowed Mastrosimone to incorporate some of the devices at work in Columbine—most notably the role of the video camera and the concept of the “video diary”, the heightened discord between the “freaks” and the “jocks”, and the submission of a violent film as a class video project. However, the next three films: Uwe Boll’s Heart of America, Gus Van Sant’s Elephant and Ben Coccio’s Zero Day, were the ones that were obviously built on the Columbine model. For the first

time, the focus is on a *pair* of boys who enter a pact to destroy the school. This is important because where there is a pair, there is a bond. Each of the three filmmakers chooses to explore the possibility of this bond in different ways. For Van Sant, it is an opportunity to explore the theme of homoerotic tension, while Boll plays the betrayal card. With Coccio's "Army of Two" it is a straightforward and solid friendship that drives the action forward. In fact, Coccio goes so far as to say that "this may sound kind of perverse, but it's also kind of a buddy film" (Spigelman).

Is this not one of the aspects of Columbine which has secured Klebold's and Harris' places as kings in the pantheon of school shootings? Jonesboro shooters Andrew Golden, 11, and Mitchell Johnson, 13, were the only other pair of record to have executed a school massacre, and they survived. Klebold and Harris were more mature, they left behind a volumous cache of writings and videos, and they ended their siege with a romantic double suicide, becoming instant martyrs to a legion of marginalized youth. No casting director could have done a better job at choosing two boys for these roles as they each have their own distinctive look and attitude, thereby increasing their chances of appealing to the largest number of people possible. Journalist Dave Cullen refers to them as "the depressive and the psychopath," (Cullen) and one popular analogy has the boys embodying the divergent traits of comic book characters Calvin and Hobbes (<http://home.eol.ca/~dord/FCHED05.html#FCHTED>). The relevance of their video legacy in elevating Klebold and Harris to cult status cannot be overstated. Perhaps art historian Tom Gunning of the University of Chicago says it best in the documentary The American Nightmare. He points to the dawn of cinema, when people imbued this new medium with a brand of power which exceeded mere art. "People received it," says

Gunning “by saying ‘this is immortality’—death will no longer be total, because we will have images of people, not just still photographs but of their movements, of a moment of their life, and so what at first seems to promise immortality ultimately delivers ghosts” (American Nightmare). Hence, the story of Columbine becomes a real life horror movie with its own posthumously released commentary track and production notes courtesy of the directors.

Uwe Boll’s Heart of America preceded Gus Van Sant’s more famous film, Elephant, by three months. Debuting at the San Francisco Independent Film Festival on February 13, 2002, Heart of America may be Boll’s only respected film as he has garnered a reputation in the industry for doing videogame adaptations, and doing those poorly. Although these hack films make money for Boll, audiences love to hate him and often say they feel cheated after watching one of his movies. Although Boll’s spin on the school shooter theme may seem to have integrity when compared to these adaptations, the film is still far from art and relies too heavily on clichés and a pulsating techno soundtrack to move the sensational story forward.

The film was obviously inspired by Columbine, as this is literally the first time a pair of shooters is featured on screen in a serious film with this theme: one boy is dark, the other fair...although Boll and co-writer Robert Dean Klein also choose to incorporate a female shooter into the storyline as well. Today, Heart of America seems more distant from the Columbine story than it probably did in 2003, as few still believe Harris and Klebold were severely bullied and their primary motives now seem to have been fame and “inflicting ‘the most deaths in U.S. history’” (Cullen). An FBI special agent assigned to the Columbine case, Dwayne Fuselier, believes the term “fame” actually trivializes

what these guys were after. The shooting at Columbine High School was originally intended as a small part of a much larger attack featuring powerful bombs that failed to detonate. Had the bombs worked, the death toll could easily have been in the hundreds. Journalist Dave Cullen explains, “[T]hey were gunning for devastating infamy on the historical scale of Attila the Hun. Their vision was to create a nightmare so devastating and apocalyptic that the entire world would shudder at their power” (Cullen). For the boys in Boll’s film, however, bullying is the only motivation. Boll ends the film with a moral message: it is never too late to change your mind. One of the boys backs out at the last minute, but the approach seems heavy-handed and moralistic. The film made festival rounds to little acclaim before being released on DVD.

On May 18 that same year, Elephant debuted at Cannes and was the talk of the festival, eventually winning the top prize, the Pomme D’Or. The synopsis of director Gus Van Sant’s most recent film, Paranoid Park is described by rottentomatoes.com as “a gorgeous, unforgettable tone poem that captures the myriad complexities of teenage life,” (http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/paranoid_park/) and the same could be said of Elephant. The characters of the shooters are merely sketches, loosely based on Klebold and Harris but liberally suffused with Van Sant’s own preoccupations, including homosexuality. The film is a full fifty minutes underway before we see any kind of discussion ensue between the two budding killers. Rather than explore that relationship in depth, or the underlying motive for the shootings, Van Sant chooses instead to highlight the surreal nature of staging a two-man war in an otherwise desperately ordinary environment. However, he does subtly incorporate two striking details from the Columbine story. Before the attack, one of the boys reviews the rampage plan with the

other and ends his speech with the phrase “Have fun!”—these words were scrawled in a notebook left behind by Dylan Klebold as the last in a list of things to do on April 20th: Park cars, set car bombs for 11:18, get out, go to outside hill, wait. When first bombs go off, attack. have fun!” (Klebold, “Notebook”).

Is this not what Gary Brecher meant when he said “war is fun”—a welcome diversion from the boredom of domesticated life in the suburbs? Is this not what Stephen King had in mind in Rage, when he has Decker describe the state of mind of his hostages: “Their eyes were so cool and somehow detached (shock can do that): you’re ejected like a fighter pilot from a humdrum dream of a life to a grinding overloaded slice of red meat...” (36)? Or how about Mick Travis’ proclamation in If.... that “War is the last creative act”? In another scene from Elephant, one of the shooters stops in the middle of his attack to take a rest break in an empty cafeteria. While there, he casually takes a drink of water from a cup left behind by a student who has long ago fled the scene. Surveillance video from the Columbine High School cafeteria shows Eric Harris going through these same motions. It is an odd scene, and yet it does speak to his incomprehensible state of mind—the idea that he would take time out to quench his thirst after ruthlessly murdering several people at point blank range.

Of all the films made in response to Columbine, none is more effective in capturing the strange appeal of the two young shooters than Zero Day. Writer/director Ben Coccio intentionally refrains from judgment of their actions, and instead shows two confused but likable teenaged boys who chronically commit their lives to videotape. Here, his protagonists Cal and André are funny—one might even say charming—until the very end when their musings become madness. They display character traits any parent

or teacher would cherish: they have a goal, they are devoted to that goal, they are reaching for the stars and nothing will stop them. Coccio almost makes his characters too likable, as neither of the boys seems as fueled by hatred as Eric Harris appears to be in his journal. In fact, this may be one reason why, when we see this hatred unleashed upon their fellow students via security camera footage during their attack, it is disorienting. The viewer may even feel betrayed, but perhaps that is the point. This final scene which documents their siege is the film's weakest moment—partly because their motivation has been so modestly established, and partly because it is simply too long to employ the security camera device. In Zero Day the two lead characters are not bullied and tormented ruthlessly by their peers as they are in some of the other films such as Heart of America and Bang Bang You're Dead. This keeps the film closer to our contemporary perception of Columbine.

The issues of fame and recognition are brazen in Zero Day. Over and over again Cal and André talk of the great infamy that will follow them in to the grave. In one scene the boys discuss bequeathing their videos to the media, and near the end of the film as they ready themselves to enter the school and begin their attack, the thing André seems most concerned about is how well they are documenting everything for survivors. He anxiously asks Cal (who is filming): "It's not going to start taping again, it's not going to tape over what we did? It's not going to erase anything?" When Cal says no, André continues, "You're sure? You started a fresh spot?"

At fifteen and sixteen respectively, Cal and André are, in fact, two years younger than Harris and Klebold were when they executed their attack at Columbine. This casting decision makes the boys seem even more vulnerable and causes the viewer to

have more empathy for them. Over and over again, Cal makes random proclamations that “these are the best years of your life!”—very likely this is done to highlight the perversity of a popular saying when, in fact, this time of transition to adulthood is one of the most difficult periods of one’s life. Believing the cliché that things should be springing up roses only serves to isolate the adolescent. Julie Tallard Johnson opens the first chapter of her book The Thundering Years: Rituals and Sacred Wisdom for Teens by saying “The journey into adulthood is the intended time to claim the Warrior’s way” (6)—only Johnson’s warrior is one of the spirit.

The single most glaring imagistic disconnect between Zero Day and *Columbine* is the physical appearance of the community in which the respective shootings take place. The environment of Elephant suffers from this as well. Published photographs of Eric Harris’ home and his neighborhood show Littleton as a treeless bedroom community dominated by tract homes where the garage is the focal point of every dwelling. It is—in fact, a fitting backdrop for a crime as merciless as *Columbine*. Littleton’s streets are said to be safe, but they also seem to have no soul. It is a freshly painted, neatly trimmed, cookie cutter mirage. In contrast, the historic anytowns of Coccio and Van Sant—with their chipped paint picket fences and the graceful dance of shadows from a canopy of trees overhead—are pleasant. The cars on the streets are old and the houses are small enough to create a sense of place. Coccio’s world seems especially personal and artful enough to give the viewer one fewer reason to believe the sincerity of Cal and André’s proclaimed rage. This may also be due to the fact that in Zero Day, one observes playful, healthy interactions between the two boys and their parents, whereas in other films the parents of shooters are either abusive or completely absent.

When the filmmakers involved in the Dawn Anna project saw the film's namesake accept a teaching award they became aware of how, as a single mother of four, Anna had battled a rare brain disease while working as a volleyball coach at Columbine High School and then later lost her youngest child, Lauren, in the Columbine massacre, they knew immediately that this woman's story needed to be told. It is the kind of tear-jerking tale that would find a home on the Lifetime network, and it did just that when Dawn Anna first aired in January of 2005. This is not a story of the attack, though it is notable for the same reason Home Room is notable—it puts the victims at the center of the story. Not surprisingly, the popularity of both Dawn Anna and Home Room pales in comparison to that of the films where the killers and their attacks are the main focus. As with the media, “If it bleeds, it leads.”

In many of these films there are references to the thespian's trade. In Zero Day when the boys steal guns from a friend's house they leave a note saying “Sorry we stole your guns, we needed it (sic) for a movie”—this comment harkens back to Klebold's remark to a friend that he and Harris were planning a “big production for the spring of '99.” In Home Room one of the two main characters, Alicia, steals a television remote from the wounded student, Deanna, whom she is visiting in the hospital. She taunts the girl by insinuating that she is addicted to the “God Box.” In Light it Up, there are two scenes where a character says “I watch TV, I know the drill”—in other words, I know how this scene will play out. Finally, in the film version of Bang Bang You're Dead, the character of Trevor appears to be a budding filmmaker and carries his video camera with him everywhere. The love triangle between boy/camera/gun is comically exposed when a police officer asks Trevor why he brings a camera to school, to which he replies:

“Same reason you bring a gun to work—to shoot people.” Although his images are not moving ones, it is noteworthy that the sensitive, artistic character of Eli calmly turns to capture the shooters on film as they enter the library in Elephant.

Taking its cue from Moisés Kaufman’s acclaimed docudrama, The Laramie Project, partners P.J. Paparelli and Stephen Karam began collaborating on columbinus in 2002. After visiting Littleton to interview residents there and traveling the country to speak with teenagers about the adolescent experience, the pair enlisted author Patricia Hersch (A Tribe Apart: A Journey to the Heart of American Adolescence) as dramaturg and the show they prefer to call a “theatrical discussion” premiered on March 8, 2005 at Round House Theatre in Silver Spring, Maryland. columbinus does contain some fictionalized elements, but the playwrights do not hide the fact that the profiles of the shooters are drawn as closely as possible to resemble the real Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Although this approach might bog down another story or make some artists feel constricted, having eight hundred pages of original writing done by the killers—some of it quite compelling—makes Paparelli and Karam truly worthy of the title playwright, rather than writer. At times Klebold’s words are attributed to Harris and vice versa, composite characters are composed from the Littleton milieu, but the overall product is highly effective in capturing the rise of the dangerous self-mythologies created by Klebold and Harris.

Karam and Paparelli are clever in their incorporation of the story of Leopold and Loeb—two highly intelligent upper middle class young men from “good families” who kidnapped and murdered a fourteen-year-old boy in 1924. Early tabloid reports which appeared after Columbine claimed that Klebold and Harris had been lovers, but the later

release of both the boys' journals show each of them preoccupied with girls, and Harris even goes so far as to list homosexuality in a list of things he hates because "it's just wrong!" (Harris, "Journal"). The Bible's first murderer makes an appearance in the same scene, and when Leopold scoffs at Cain saying "Because history is full of lone-wolf psychos...we were a team" (55)—the timeless appeal of the duo rings clear. Another passage drives this point home when Harris' character says, "Adventure is never taken alone." Klebold's character responds, "Never alone..." and a female member of the cast concludes with "Every rebel needs a mission and a partner" (69).

columbinus examines the details of what many people consider to be the critical event which set the wheels in motion for the boys' final rampage. In January 1998, Klebold and Harris broke into a van and stole some equipment in what appears to have been a thrill-seeking act of mischief. On stage the characters say "What a night. What a high. What a team" (72). The allusion is not so very unlike the "adventure" Michael Carneal had when he stole the guns from his friend's house. Later in the piece, when Harris and Klebold are being interrogated by the counselors they are required to see after the van incident, Harris admits that he has "had drinks, smoked pot, but I don't need that anymore" (90). It is as if these "doses of numbing" (Mahdi 62) have now ceded irrevocably to aggressions that must "erupt inappropriately", and merely the anticipation of his retribution leaves Harris sedate and resolute.

One telling monologue by the Harris character—and Harris' words do dominate the script as he was the more prolific writer of the two—is critical of the formal exercise of graduation, the primary sanctioned rite of passage endured by contemporary American teenagers. In the world of high school, the popular "jocks" and "preps" have a plethora of

school-sponsored rituals and pageants which represent their tribe: coronation, homecoming, prom, commencement. Do these sterile events meet the needs of teens with a flair for dark, intellectual drama? Harris jibes Klebold about the fact that he attended prom, and responds to Dylan's fears about dying in one of the work's strongest, imagined moments:

You can lick smelly ass until the day we throw our caps in the air and sing "Columbine. Oh Columbine"? And Miss Valedictory gives her prize-winning speech about how wonderful it was at Columbine High School, all the friends she made...when you and I and maybe four others out of a class of what, 350, actually talked to her? I'm not going to sit there to listen to bullshit spew from what is supposed to be the smartest person in the class...fuck me. No way. They don't deserve one more day past Tuesday. I want them to feel they almost got away with it (101).

Harris clearly has a different ceremony in mind, one that will make real all of his "craving for dark things, dark knowledge, dark acts..." (Johnson 11).

The brief history of YouTube dates back to 2005 and today the internet-based video platform captures the eyes of twenty million viewers (Wahl 21). YouTube's slogan is "Broadcast Yourself"—and for Generation Me, this is an unprecedented opportunity to fashion oneself into an instant film star. On November 3, 2007 YouTube became the center of worldwide controversy when an eighteen-year-old boy in Finland named Pekka-Eric Auvinen posted a video entitled Jokela High School Massacre. He then went to his high school and killed eight people before committing suicide. The well-read and well-spoken Fin may have been smart, but he was not an especially gifted videographer. Still,

the piece is worth looking at, as it features a romantic, red cast image of Auvinen pointing a gun at the camera, and a photo of the school which shatters into a million pieces as a song by KMFDM kicks in. Although he updated his YouTube profile on November 3rd to make sure everyone understood that “This is my war: one man war against humanity, governments, and weak-minded masses of the world!”

(<http://www.pekka-eric.com/ytpofile.html>) –his admiration for Eric Harris is clearly evident as he quotes from Harris’ journal and was said to have produced and posted videos condoning the Columbine massacre. One of his screen names was NaturalSelector89; in addition to alluding to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, it also refers to the slogan on the shirt Eric Harris was wearing when he died. It read “Natural Selection.” Auvinen’s choice of music is telling as he surely knew KMFDM was one of Harris’ favorite bands. Auvinen’s pre-attack post to his YouTube page is remarkable because of the instantaneous communication between auteur and viewing public. Although Klebold and Harris’ basement tapes have been viewed by and reported in the media, they are not public property and the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office believes these materials would result in many more youth uprisings if released. Not merely a depressed teenager angry at jocks for shoving him in the hallways, Auvinen writes:

Long live the revolution... revolution against the system, which enslaves not only the majority of weak-minded masses but also the small minority of strong-minded and intelligent individuals! If we want to live in a different world, we must act. We must rise against the enslaving, corrupted and totalitarian regimes and overthrow the tyrants, gangsters and the rule of idiocracy (<http://www.pekka-eric.com/ytpofile.html>).

The fact that Auvinen provided a press pack and manifesto in two languages for the media was both gracious and twisted, and in fact recalls a scene from Zero Day where the boys actually do refer to press releases.

In addition to the untold number of tribute videos posted in honor of the killers on YouTube, there are also many (albeit fewer) tributes posted which honor the victims. A surprising number of these—on both sides—are made by people who did not know these students from Columbine at all, but for whatever reason feel an affinity with them. The depth of this feeling nearly approaches, or sometimes crosses, the line into obvious mental illness. There are video love letters posted by girls who claim to be the ex-girlfriend of either Harris or Klebold, despite reports which say neither of them ever really had a girlfriend, and that both of them died virgins. There is one ode posted by a user called rebelwithacause14 entitled “A Tribute to Lauren Townsend” which contains disturbing images harvested from the Discovery Channel’s Zero Hour docudrama wherein actors re-enact the most brutal scenes of the attack within the library, where Townsend was killed. Ironically, this user chooses to close her video with a quote from Othello: “For thou has kill’d the sweetest innocent that e’er did lift up eye.”

The Young Turks are a group of self-professed liberal journalists, who, among other things, host a YouTube series which grapples with everything from “wives in porn” to the “aryan brotherhood’s support for Obama.” In one episode of their show entitled “Obsession with Fame,” commentator Cenk Uyger remarks upon the significance of Middle Eastern terrorists who leave behind videotaped suicide notes, as did Harris and Klebold. “Their way of fame is martyrdom—and remember what they do before they do the suicide bombings, not just 9/11 but any suicide bombings...what they do is they do a

videotape, supposedly for their families, telling them what happened, but in reality that's to be distributed...”, and he implies, broadcast.

The Yahoo news service recently published an article on its website with this provocative title: “Accused 9/11 mastermind wants death sentence.” When told that he would face the death penalty if found guilty of planning the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed seemed already to have accepted his fate, and indeed, celebrated its perks. “Yes, this is what I wish, to be a martyr for a long time” (Selsky). September 11, 2001 would have been Dylan Klebold's twentieth birthday. It was he who spoke of the hope to “kickstart a revolution,” though I'm sure he never dreamed that the revenge of the underdog would extend far beyond the schoolyard and have such dire global consequences—or did he? He and Harris dreamed big, after all. There is an ancient Greek homily which begs, “Let us die, that we may live” (Allen). As long as the culture values fame above all else, so long as it continues to be a place where the ego favors “public gratification” over honor, discipline, and nobility (Bly, The Sibling Society xi), there will always be a ready supply of young men who are willing to be martyrs; indeed, to die so that they may live.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A recent fashion spread in C San Antonio magazine depicts an attractive young woman with bleached blonde hair, her back against the camera and her hands high up on a wall in an alleyway. To her left, a young man assuming the stance of an assassin points a gun to the side of her head. Rather than expressing fear, the woman's face is ambivalent, and she, her attacker, and her male companion are all decked out in the latest trendy clothes and hairdos. Much like the heroin-chic of the 1990s which glamorized drug abuse, violence—whether directed toward ourselves or others—is turned into a fashion statement with a generous dose of sex appeal. It is a grim reminder that there is work to be done.

In the course of conducting this study, many examples of positive, innovative performance work involving teenagers came to light, but as the focus of the work narrowed, some of these things sadly fell away. One of the most tragic elements of the entire school shooting phenomenon is the presence of lost potential in these young creative, rebellious kids who have lost their way and therefore see violence against their peers as their only outlet for expression. Because of the inherently oppressive environment which exists in public schools, and due to a public school's dependence on government funding (which increases the likelihood of censorship) opportunities for theatrical expression by adolescents may be better realized in independently-run after-

school programs or by privately run theaters willing to either find ways to bring suburban kids into the city or reach out to them by offering radical programming in suburban community centers.

One such organization in Austin, the Theatre Action Project (TAP), was born on the wings of Augusto Boal. TAP was founded by a group of University of Texas graduate students as an interactive theatre company built on the principles of affecting social change among children and adolescents. They offer after school programming, summer camps, and in-school workshops that can be purchased by schools for a flat fee. TAP's programs can be personalized to deal with a myriad of issues relevant to young people in special populations and their offerings are similar to New York University's Creative Arts Team and ENACT (Educational Network of Artists in Creative Theatre), also of New York.

The success of the annual youth poetry slam festival, Brave New Voices, is a testament to the provocative performance work being done by teenagers across the country in both urban and suburban areas. Closely mirroring the aesthetic of rap music, spoken word is a vehicle that frees writing from the page and serves as a community-driven tool that builds, rather than burns, bridges between young people with differences.

One of the more obvious attempts to create contemporary non-violent rites of passage can be witnessed in the work done by Steven Foster and Meredith Little at the School of Lost Borders in Big Pine, California. Here, in 1982 Foster and Little began training vision quest guides to give "at risk" youth a wilderness rite of passage experience when they needed it most. This painstaking process is captured beautifully in the documentary, Lost Borders: Coming of Age in the Wilderness.

In this vein, podcast episode #109 of This American Life is called Notes on Camp and centers on the American custom of sending children away to summer camp. Such camps often have Native American roots, and the adults who went to sleep-away camps as children often speak of the experience as sacred and life altering. Unfortunately, we now live in a society plagued by fear. The media-generated fear Michael Moore alludes to in Bowling for Columbine certainly includes a fear of child predators. Such fear immobilizes many parents who might otherwise choose a sleep-away camp or scouting program for their child which could provide a valuable rite of passage for them. Being alone with nature gives children the opportunity to unconsciously find their place among the cosmos, to connect with something larger than themselves, and to be at peace with things exactly as they are.

In a school paper called “Just a Day,” Eric Harris shared some of his memories of fishing with his father: “The lake, the mountains, the trees, all the wildlife s\$*t that people seem to take for granted, was here. Now. It was as if their presence was necessary for me to be content” (Harris, “Just a Day”). Removed from the transcendence of both nature and art, stuck somewhere in the middle of the two in a suburban neighborhood that is neither here, nor there, Harris’ contentment was not built to last. With a commitment from adults who are not afraid to guide young people through the haunted labyrinth of adolescence, hope remains to move these sensitive initiates out of the darkness and in to the light.

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VITA

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