

The Killer as Auteur Insanity, Intimacy and Death in Virginia

Cho Seung-Hui's cold-blooded shooting down of several of his fellow students and professors speaks to certain issues that have come to constitute in certain respects the quality of American life today: the nature of freedom, the persistence of loneliness amidst intimacy, and the overarching importance attached to "image", thanks to the power of visual technology.

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On April 16, only days before the eighth anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings, in which two teenaged boys killed 12 students and a teacher before turning their guns upon themselves, Cho Seung-Hui went on a rampage at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and shot dead 32 people before taking his own life. Though "mass killings", defined in the US as episodes of violence accounting for at least four deaths, are not uncommon in contemporary American history, and have shown a precipitous increase over the course of the last decade, the Virginia Tech killings have been described as unusual in many respects. Early in the morning that day, Cho shot dead two students at a dormitory on campus. Nearly two hours after he committed the initial murders, at 9 am, Cho mailed to National Broadcasting Company (NBC) studios an express package, consisting of numerous discs and writings that offered a "multimedia manifesto" of the killer's views, from the campus post office.

Not only had Cho not been apprehended that morning, his identity and whereabouts had remained unknown to the police. We have all heard of colossal American intelligence failures, and the ignorance of American spymasters who knew nothing of the plots that led to September 11, 2001, or even of what was transpiring within Saddam Hussein's Iraq before specious arguments about Iraq's supposed arsenals of weapons of mass destruction were placed before the world, but the Virginia Tech shootings put a new gloss on words such as "intelligence" and "failure". At 9:25 am, university officials, who had been "investigating" the killings, finally displayed a

modicum of sense to relay an email message to the university community that a killer was on the loose. Cho Seung-Hui, meanwhile, was making his way to Norris Hall, the engineering building, where minutes later he commenced his killings, moving methodically from one room to another in search of prey. The police never fired a shot at Cho; rather, somewhat in the manner of Hindi films, where the police arrive on the scene a tad too late, campus police reached Norris Hall, guns drawn and ready to be fired, just as Cho, having finished with the killings, ended his own life. Whatever else he may have done – perhaps shower, or fortify himself with a "Power" energy bar – besides visiting the post office in the 150 minutes between the two killings, Cho added a new segment, adverting to the 7 am shootings, about himself on tape.

Many questions have been raised about the university's tardiness in issuing a warning, its failure to shut down the campus or evacuate major buildings, and, as details from Cho's life were unearthed in the immediate aftermath of his murderous rampage, the inability or unwillingness of the university to prevent Cho from harming others. It is now known that in October 2005, Cho submitted a piece of writing in a poetry workshop which his instructor, perceiving it as a "veiled threat rather than something explicit", found sufficiently disturbing that she brought it to the attention of the campus police, university officials, and psychological counsellors. Late that year, after two female students complained of being stalked by him, Cho was committed to involuntary overnight hospitalisation for a psychiatric evaluation. The detention order described him as probably suffering from a mental illness acute enough to prevent him from looking

after himself and constituting an "imminent danger to self or others". But nothing came of this evaluation, except, as is much the norm in the US, Cho was put on an anti-depressant belonging to a class of drugs known as Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI).

These anti-depressants have been associated in numerous studies with provoking homicidal and suicidal fantasies, though the pharmaceutical companies and their advocates argue, to the contrary, that such drugs are intended to inhibit homicidal tendencies. Whatever the pretensions of science, researchers appear to come to conclusions towards which they have a political predilection; but, at any rate, far too many people are on prescription SSRI anti-depressants for them to be removed from the market. Cho now also seems to be the person who, a month ago, anonymously issued bomb threats against the university, most likely as a way of judging the preparedness of the university's emergency services. One can surmise that the university's response to the threats did nothing to dissuade Cho from executing his plans. One can also surmise, from all that is now known of Cho's troubled history, that the university will soon be the target of some of the most massive law suits in American history for wilful negligence.

A 'Model Minority'

Interesting as are all these considerations, Cho would not appear to fit the profile of a mass killer in one important respect. Initial reports described him as an "Asian" man, but the word "Asian" is not calculated to excite huge antipathy among Americans. More often than not, these days one hears of Asia's re-emergence as a centre of global economic activity, and Asian Americans, to varying degrees, carry the reputation of "model minorities". Though there is an immense socio-economic difference between, for example, Americans of Japanese and Indian descent and, on the other hand, the Hmong and Cambodians, from a white American perspective nearly all Asian Americans are likely to be seen as law-abiding, hard-working, ambitious, bound by family values, and proficient in academic work.

Cho obviously defied these public expectations of Asian Americans, and some segments of the Korean American

community to which Cho belonged have now asked for forgiveness on his behalf.

One could describe this gesture as an unusual and, in this case, perhaps unnecessary and inexplicable admission of collective guilt; one could also describe it as a minority's awareness of the fact that, even in a purported multicultural democracy, it could easily be scapegoated and must thus take pre-emptive measures to protect its interests and integrity. This is the hard lesson learned by Muslims from west Asia and south Asia in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001. But the matter is more complicated. If some minorities are "models", others are not; and the "model minority" discourse is clearly targeted at recalcitrant African Americans, Hispanics, and other alleged laggards in American society, even as white Americans deploy it as a reminder to their own children of the advantages to be gained by returning to family values and the ethic of hard work. But the investment of conservative white Americans in the "model minority" discourse stems from other considerations as well: for example, among Korean Americans the commitment to evangelical Christianity, which has come to the fore in American politics over the course of the last two decades, constitutes a visceral part of their experience. Cho's killings, whatever their other consequences for law enforcement and gun control, will doubtless lead to a reconsideration of the idea of the "model minority".

As expected, the killings have been followed by renewed demands for gun control, but one can also safely predict that nothing concrete will emerge from the hullabaloo. The debates have centred on why the background safety checks required before handguns can be purchased proved inadequate, how it was at all possible for guns to end up in the hands of a person declared mentally disturbed by a psychiatrist, and whether state and federal laws are commensurable. Some allege that no laws were broken, while others opine that the laws need to be more strictly enforced. These anaemic debates are useful to many, furnishing ammunition to those Americans keen on demonstrating that they belong to a democracy where vigorous debate is still pursued, while at the same time precluding any possibility of substantive reform not to speak of a radical reordering of the priorities which inform American society. It is a truism to say that the gun culture is so deeply enshrined in the American way of life that that nothing more than mere cosmetic measures will ever be entertained in Congress to curtail drastically the rights of ownership over guns. So long as the right to bear arms is

enshrined as a constitutional right, and the courts declare themselves bound to the hoary sentiments of the supposedly infallible "founding fathers", far-reaching judicial actions on this question are outside the realm of possibility.

An estimated 220 million handguns, i.e., nearly one-third of the world's total, are in circulation in the US; at least 41 per cent of American households have firearms; and the US gun death rate is easily much higher than that of any other high income country. The gun lobby in the US has decried the frequent comparison that have been made with Japan, which in 1995 recorded fewer homicides by firearms than the US did in one single day that same year, on the grounds that Japan is in every respect a tightly regulated society and that recreational hunting is largely unknown in Japan. But the comparison with neighbouring Canada is equally instructive: though, according to the Coalition for Gun Control (www.guncontrol.ca), the rates of homicides without firearms are roughly comparable in both countries, the rate of homicides with firearms is 6.5 times greater in the US than in Canada. The folklore surrounding guns in the US is immense; and one can gauge the reticence with which critiques of gun culture are entertained by the fact that, in the wake of Cho's killings, even the allegedly radical *Counterpunch* magazine has published articles arguing that the country doesn't need any more gun control. Indeed, if one thought that the National Rifle Association had been chastened by Cho's killings, it is well to reflect on the pronouncements of the likes of Tom DeLay, who has openly come out saying that had Virginia permitted people to carry concealed weapons, Cho would mercifully have been shot down as soon as he had commenced firing.

Rationality of Loneliness

Cho has been described as a loner: nothing is known of any friends, and his Indian roommate has spoken of him as reclusive. One can reasonably suppose that this is the description that is typically offered of mass killers. The American university campus is, notwithstanding its political provincialism, cosmopolitan in its own way, and it is striking that among Cho's 32 victims were an Indonesian, an Indian professor and a graduate student from Mumbai, and a French professor from Nova Scotia, Canada. Most poignantly, on Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, 76-year old Romanian-born professor of engineering Liviu Librescu, who had survived the Holocaust, surrendered his life so that his students might

live; and the young Lebanese woman, Reema Samaha, who previous summer had been trapped in Beirut while Israeli warplanes reduced the city to rubble, could not escape the gunman's hail of bullets in bucolic Virginia. However alienated Cho may have been from American life, one wonders why, in the diverse setting of American university life, he could find no one with whom he could converse. No one appears to have asked whether Cho's loneliness offered cues, which no one detected, about the lack of intimacy in American life. At the memorial for the slain professor, G.V. Loganathan, originally from Chennai, 33 candles were lit for the victims: in the words of the organiser of that gathering, Kusum Singh, Cho "also was a lost soul". Perhaps, in that moment, Cho was at last granted the intimacy which he might have been craving.

These words have slipped easily from some tongues who have spoken of Cho: loner, loser, loony. Life in the US can be miserable for anyone so burdened. Whatever the official assessment of Cho's mental health, anyone who wilfully takes innocent lives, and seeks to strike widespread terror, can only be described as insane. No certificate of insanity is required from a health professional. There are, nonetheless, many registers of insanity, and one cannot say with any certainty that Cho is any more deranged than those who engineered an insane war in Iraq and have sent tens of thousands to their deaths, or even more insane than those who, now vindicated by the US Supreme Court, claim to value the lives of the unborn while remaining indifferent to the shattered lives around them. But let us stay with Cho: his insanity may have been of a cold-blooded rather than helpless variety, an insanity which alerts us to the pathology of instrumental rationality. Cho's insanity was not such as to preclude him from understanding that contemporary world views are fundamentally shaped by the image. Secular life long ago banished the idea of transcendence, but the image is the incarnation in which the ideal of the afterlife survives and flourishes. The police say that the QuickTime video files and still photographs Cho sent to NBC studios are demonstrable proof of the preparation that went into the massacre, but what they do not appear to have understood is that Cho was directing his own film, playing the lead role in it, creating – on reel and in real life – a montage of shots, and acting every bit the auteur. The death of the auteur was heralded some time ago, but Cho Seung-Hui paves the way for a new conception of the Killer as Auteur. **EW**

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