

The Cultural Forum of School Shootings

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Like most people, I've spent countless hours in front of the television in shock, horror, anger, and disbelief as I've watched seemingly endless news reports of one school shooting after another. The various responses to the Parkland, Florida shooting particularly frustrated me. As I listened to Donald Trump criticize violent video games and movies for warping the killer's mind, I couldn't help but think about the reaction to the 1999 Columbine High School massacre and how *Doom*, *Natural Born Killers*, *The Matrix*, and Marilyn Manson were blamed for inspiring those shooters. To put it in TV terms, it felt like watching a bad rerun. I wondered, "Have we as a society really not furthered this discussion at all over the last twenty years?"

As a media scholar, I couldn't help but wonder what role television plays in maintaining this dialogue. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch discuss how television acts as a "cultural forum" in which television programs can portray and comment upon contemporary social, political, and cultural issues. In doing so, the audience of that episode can then discuss and debate that particular topic. Although the cultural forum is not a flawless model (particularly in today's current age of exponentially more content and much smaller audience sizes), I think it can be useful for this issue. That is, what topics do these episodes bring up? What inspires the fictional killers to commit their atrocities? Examining what is brought up on fictional programs exposes how it may impact discussions surrounding real-life school shootings.

Given the increase in mass shootings at high schools since Columbine, it is no surprise that numerous American television programs have constructed storylines around these tragic events. Overall, fifteen episodes include or show the aftermath of a school shooting.¹ From this selection, there are a couple of repeated issues, namely bullying and mental psychosis. Nearly all of the fictional shooters are white male social outcasts who are bullied by popular students which are often represented by jocks and cheerleaders. The school shooting therefore acts as a way for the fictional character to

¹ In chronological order, these episodes are *Picket Fences's* "Guns 'R' Us" (#2.11, 1994) *My So-Called Life's* "Guns and Gossip" (#1.3, 1994), *7th Heaven's* "Johnnie Get Your Gun" (#3.07, 1998), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* "Earshot" (#3.18, 1999), *Law and Order's* "School Daze" (#11.22, 2001), *CSI's* "Bully for You" (#2.04, 2001), *Law and Order: SVU's* "Manic" (#5.02, 2003), *One Tree Hill's* "With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept" (#3.16, 2006), *NCIS's* "Bait" (#3.18, 2006), *Numb3rs's* "Dark Matter" (#2.19, 2006), *Cold Case's* "Rampage" (4.01, 2006), *Criminal Minds's* "Painless" (#7.04, 2011), *American Horror Story's* "Piggy Piggy" (#1.06, 2011), *Glee's* "Shooting Star" (#4.18, 2012), and *13 Reasons Why's* "Bye" (#2.13, 2018). The Canadian high school program *Degrassi* also addressed school shootings in its *Next Generation* episode "Time Stands Still" (#4.08 and 4.09, 2004) and *Next Class* episode "#SorryNotSorry" (#1.10, 2016); however, I left those out of my discussion since I'm only covering American programs – sorry *Degrassi* fans!

reclaim his/her² social power over the popular kids. Mental health is also often discussed in these episodes, but always pejoratively. The perpetrators are often described by other characters as psychos, psychopaths, and sociopaths. Although the shooters' actions are certainly abnormal, the use of these terms often prevents any further discussion regarding the characters' motivations. While the shooters may be mentally disturbed, the episodes rarely dig any deeper into why the characters act out in this specific manner. *American Horror Story* is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon as Tate's motives are never described or shown despite his being asked about them multiple times throughout the season.

Individual episodes may bring up other possible causes beyond bullying and mental health, although these reasons may be limited to the specific situation being depicted on the show. *7th Heaven* and *Numb3rs* both address violent video games as potential motivating factors. *Law and Order: SVU* provides a commentary on forced school medication and immoral pharmaceutical practices as its shooter is given anti-depressants which create psychosis as a potential side effect. Finally, *Numb3rs* and *13 Reasons Why* feature shooters who are sexually assaulted by other students, thereby taking the bullying narrative to a further extreme.

While these shows and episodes may successfully bring up these issues, I have two major issues with their presentation of school shootings. First, the episodic format fails to portray any resulting trauma which may be felt by the other students. By limiting the trauma to one episode, these shows do not present any long-term psychological effects on the survivors. While this can be understandable for procedurals who only focus on solving the crime, the teen shows miss the opportunity to portray any effects by maintaining the traditional Very Special Episode format. The shooting itself often becomes old news for, if not completely forgotten by, the characters by the next episode. While this strategy is understandable for an episodic format, it limits the necessary discussion surrounding the traumatic event. Second, none of the episodes discuss gun control. To an extent, it is understandable due to the focus on the characters' emotions through the traumatic event. However, the lack of any long-term narrative related to the trauma limits any sort of political response or discussion. The audience never sees the characters start gun control campaigns like the Parkland survivors; it is merely a return to normalcy after the tragedy. Hopefully future school-shooting episodes will address these issues rather than sweep them under the rug to avoid controversy. By doing so, television episodes could progress our discussions of school shootings rather than limiting them.

² I use his/her to be both gender neutral and because there are female killers in the *CSI*, *Numb3rs*, and *Glee* episodes; however, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators are white men.