

Murderous Art

The rash of mass shootings in America speaks not just to the absence of rational gun laws, but also to a culture that glorifies violence, in the reality of endless warfare and in the fantasy of entertainment. While some response must come through politics, other action can come from individuals, says Michael N. Nagler.

By Michael N. Nagler

Until recently I didn't even know there was such a thing as white supremacist music. Wade Michael Page knew; the "domestic terrorist" who killed six people at the Oak Creek Sikh temple in Wisconsin had played in a neo-Nazi band called "Definite Hate" and started one called "End Apathy" in 2005.

So Page, when you think of it, has something in common with his immediate predecessor in mass murder, James Holmes, who perpetrated the Aurora, Colorado, shooting two weeks earlier. Despite their differences, in his case also a form of contemporary "art," namely the Batman film, played some role in the buildup to his murderous violence.

Shortly after the Wisconsin tragedy I happened to pass the local movie house whose posters line the sidewalk. One, cleverly combining sex and violence, was an extremely offensive, larger-than-life, depiction of a naked woman being groped from behind by a robotic zombie.

As any advertiser will tell you, you can sell anything if you connect it, sub-rationally, with one of our deep desires. In this case (as in most) the desire is designed to unite people and create life; but what it's "selling," ironically, is a culture of violence and death.

Mind you, we're not talking about a red-light district in Vegas; this is the main street of a smallish American town. Schoolchildren walk by these posters every day, mostly without adult supervision. What must they be thinking?

What are we thinking? The day after the Aurora shooting four victims of the previous day's terror came to pay respects to the dead and wounded: *all four wearing Batman tee shirts!* I guess people will cling to their culture without ever asking where it's taking them.

If I were a typical follower of today's media, what would I understand about the Aurora shooting? That he drove a white Hyundai, that he purchased exactly 6,000 rounds of ammunition (all totally legal), and dyed his hair bright red. What I would *not* understand, what I would find it hard to think about in that welter of

details, is, *why is our country having an epidemic of mass murders?* Sixty of them since 1982.

That is the real question, after all; and even to ask it is to spot a very good candidate for the answer: we have a popular culture that's filling our minds with violent images, and news media that distract us from understanding it. A culture that smears over the distinction between fantasy and reality (when Holmes, playing the Joker from the Batman series, started his attack many thought it was part of the movie), and journalism more interested in lurid details or bland statistics than their meaning.

If the philosopher Epictetus is correct in his observation "The only thing that you can control, and you must therefore control, is the imagery in your own mind" we have defaulted on our most important responsibility as human beings, the care of our own minds.

There is a bright side. We can get it back. There is nothing to prevent you and me from stemming the flow of violence into our minds, as far as possible, and thinking for ourselves. If journalists, or lawyers, need to ask, what was it about this particular person that led him to do this particular thing, looking for reasons in those who have left all reason behind, we needn't join that exercise in futility. Instead, we can look at our own vulnerabilities, and power.

I would not underestimate the potential impact of each of us, you and me, taking back responsibility in this way. We are not talking about bodies or votes here, where numbers really are important, but ideas and images, which have a power of their own.

Clearly, if we want to be free of these murderous rampages we will have to face one very awkward fact: that the people who do these killings are part of us. They have crossed the line between fantasy and physical reality, but that line is getting blurrier all the time for all of us (look at "Stars Earn Stripes," NBC's new war game reality show where celebrities play soldier).

The mental world of fear and darkness they live in is only an extreme form of the world we've created all around us, and therefore within us.

Mind, I am not against art. I taught comparative literature at Berkeley for 40 years. But stirring up our crudest animal drives is not art. Driving ourselves into prisons of mental isolation is the opposite of art, a perversion of its purpose.

When an FBI spokesperson was asked why the agency did not keep closer tabs on an obvious lunatic like Wade Michael Page, he replied, there are "thousands of

them” in the white supremacy movement (not to mention others). Will we ever be secure trying to guess who is about to go over the edge? No, but we will be if we can create a new, sane culture. And while legislation may come in handy at various stages of that process, this is something we can only begin one mind at a time.

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