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Mass Shooting Films: Myths, Academic Knowledge, and Popular Criminology

Jason R. Silva
CUNY Graduate Center

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Mass shooting films: Myths, academic knowledge, and popular criminology**Abstract**

This study compares cinematic constructions of mass shooting perpetrators, victims, and social factors against academic knowledge and news media to determine how films perpetuate myths, reinforce academic knowledge, and act as a source of popular criminology. Cinematic findings highlight perpetrators as young, White, school shooters, and motivation types including fame-seeking and defeated by society. Films construct diverse forms of victimization involving direct victims, indirect victims, and perpetrators as victims. Finally, movies emphasize sensational news media coverage as a contributing social factor. Implications of these findings suggest films blend with news media misconceptions and perpetuate myths that reinforce stereotypes of criminality, cause people to overlook warnings, and increase perceptions of risk. Despite this, they reflect academic knowledge by conveying nuanced perpetrator motivations and the news media's contribution to the phenomenon. They also provide a source of popular criminology by illustrating the public's fascination with violence and the emotional dynamics of victimization.

Keywords

Mass shootings, film, perpetrators, victims, social construction

Introduction

In the wake of Columbine, Sue Klebold (mother of the shooter Dylan Klebold) expressed fear mass shooting films based on her son's tragedy risk "perpetuating the myths" of the phenomenon (Brockes, 2016). Fox and DeLateur (2014) find common sense public assumptions about mass shootings are grounded in mediated myths and misunderstandings about the nature of the offense and those who perpetrate it. For example, news media narratives portrayed the Columbine perpetrators Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as bullied youth that targeted jocks (Frymer, 2009). In contrast to this, academic knowledge suggests Harris suffered from behavioral problems, Klebold battled depression, they were not bullied, and they did not target any specific group (Cullen, 2009; Mears, Moon, & Thielo, 2017). They strove to carry out a large-scale (unsuccessful) *bombing* of their high school to strike fear across the nation (not just their school) (Altheide, 2009; Cullen, 2009). It is important to identify the differences between academic knowledge and mediated narratives because they can contribute to drastically different public perceptions about the causes and consequences of mass shootings.

Media narratives provide the foundation for public information about mass shootings and play a critical role in the social construction of collective reality (Duwe, 2005; Rafter, 2007; Schildkraut, 2016). Columbine is viewed as the landmark incident that introduced the phenomenon into the cultural lexicon, and it contributed to extensive research examining the intersection between mass shootings and news media coverage (Fox & Savage, 2009). However, scholars have failed to consider the role of mass shooting cinema at the turn of the century. Films provide a multitude of images, captivating narratives, and definitions of behavior that exert a similar influence on the formation of public opinion as found in news media (Stack, Bowman, & Lester, 2012). They can also address the complexities of crime and criminality through a more

nuanced interpretation than the majority of news outlets (Rafter, 2007). Given the cinematic influence on public perceptions of crime, it is important to determine whether mass shooting films perpetuate myths, extend academic knowledge, and/or consider ethical and philosophical considerations beyond the scope of academic knowledge, thereby acting as a source of popular criminology.

This research uses an increasingly popular approach to studying crime and media: using existing academic knowledge as a starting point and then comparing cinematic representations (Clowers, 2001; Eigenberg & Baro, 2003; Rafter, 2007; Yar & Rafter, 2014). This work begins with a review of the relevant literature identifying academic knowledge and news media constructions of mass shootings. The significant news media influence on public perceptions requires its inclusion in the initial investigation and provides an innovative take on previous studies considering cinematic constructions. Additionally, the intertextual nature of media narratives suggest they often blend together when developing the societal image bank (Fiske, 1987; Nairn, Coverdale, & Claasen, 2006). A qualitative content analysis is then used to examine post-Columbine mass shooting films released between 2000 and 2015. Specifically, this study identifies the cinematic construction of mass shootings including perpetrators, victims, and societal causal factors. A discussion of the cinematic findings juxtaposed with news-mediated constructions and existing academic knowledge is used to determine the blended influence of mass shooting films on the social construction of the phenomenon.

Literature Review

Cinematic Constructions of Crime

McQuail (1994) suggests mass media has an influence on the social construction of reality, “by framing images of reality... in a predictable and patterned way” (p. 331). The media

sets the frames of reference viewers use to interpret and discuss social problems (Tuchman, 1978). While research has historically focused on the news media's social construction of reality, there is no basis for assuming cinematic representations play less of a role in shaping social sensibilities (Yar, 2010). Films carry out cultural work by providing interpretive frameworks through which viewers can organize their own experiences and perspectives (Yar & Rafter, 2014). Cinematic constructions blend with news constructions and academic knowledge in determining the public's accumulated common sense understanding of a phenomenon.

Tuchman (1978) coined the term "strategic web of facticity" in an analysis of the news to identify how news items worked. In other words, how brief accounts, organized to convey the newsworthiness of an event, are usually experienced as reliably factual. She argued that it is because the writers embed the details within a widely known commonsense about the world that creates a web (of mutually reinforcing) facts. Tuchman (1978) finds news is not a product of objective journalism, but rather a social construction. For Tuchman (1978), a web of facticity is a strategic practice which ensures a group of presented facts is seen as credible, and when viewed together, present themselves as self-validating. These facts are rooted in the intertextual nature of news coverage, blending with academic knowledge and public perceptions of a social problem. Intertextuality proposes any one text is read in relationship to others (Fiske, 1987). Intertextuality contributes to the cultural "image bank": the images and narrative fragments individuals deploy when interpreting events or situations (Fisk, 1987). Media portrayals of crime draw upon other accounts of similar high profile events and reinforce widespread common sense about the nature of crime and criminality.

Intertextual relations are so pervasive, that culture consists of a complex web of intertextuality, which can often extend outside of academic reality (Barthes, 1975). The power of

media driven popular belief can contribute to myths (i.e. inaccurate beliefs) concerning a given social problem (Taylor & Gunn, 1999). Research on cinema, crime, and social construction often compares academic knowledge against cinematic representations to identify how films construct reality. Eigenberg and Baro (2003) compare images of male rape in films with existing academic literature on sexual assault in prison finding prison films over-estimate the frequency of prison rape occurrences. Clowers (2001) compares film representations of maximum security prison life with her own work in prisons, concluding films misrepresent female prisoners as violent, sex-crazed monsters. These findings suggest cinematic constructions perpetuate the myths of sexual violence in inmate life.

Alternatively, Yar and Rafter (2014) examine the administration of justice when dealing with learning disabled individuals in crime films, finding they offer a realistic understanding of intellectually disabled rights and needs within the criminal justice process. Stack et al. (2012) compare cinematic representations of suicide by cop against academic investigations, finding constructions of demographic characteristics - including gender, age, and socioeconomic status – that reflect academic knowledge. Their findings suggest that while fictional films should obviously not be held to academic standards, they may purposely, or inadvertently, contribute to the cultural image bank in ways that advance academic insight.

Finally, Rafter (2007) examines sex crime movies finding cinematic representations of child molesters allow viewers to confront their complexity and move beyond an unequivocal hatred by seeing the compulsion through the offender's eyes. In this way, films can act as a form of popular criminology. According to Rafter (2007):

Popular criminology differs from academic criminology in that it does not pretend to empirical accuracy or theoretical validity. But in scope it covers as much territory –

possibly more – if we consider the kinds of ethical and philosophical issues raised even by [a] small sample of movies. Popular criminology’s audience is bigger... and its social significance is greater, for academic criminology cannot offer so wide a range of criminological wares (p. 415).

Film as a source of popular criminology is particularly relevant when considering academic approaches to victimization. Scholarly concern over victimization often reduces crime victims to sets in aggregated data (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). Politicians and policy-makers, alongside news media, will often use victimization to engage in debate over retributive justice (Ferrell et al., 2008). Films are therefore used to explore aspects of crime rarely mentioned including loss, violation, and mourning (Rafter & Brown, 2011). This form of cultural victimology is more attuned to human agency and shared emotion (Ferrell et al., 2008). The pain of others is recalled in cinematic discourse as means for raising ethical issues that demand an individual and collective response (Ahmed, 2015).

The utilization of social construction as an analytic framework in this study posits an academic reality of mass shootings against a mediated reality. The three-fold nature of media accounts can: (1) misrepresent and distort the academic reality of crime, thereby perpetuating myths of the phenomenon; (2) convey academic knowledge, thereby enhancing the public’s understanding of crime and criminality; (3) and/or act as a form of popular criminology by extending ethical and philosophical issues surrounding a social problem. This research also highlights the intertextual nature of these three construction types in contributing to mass shooting films strategic web of facticity. To determine this, it is important to first assess the academic reality of mass shootings. Next, a summary of news-mediated narratives will highlight the myths currently perpetuated within a media landscape. Ultimately, this study identifies the

cinematic constructions of mass shootings and assesses their blending with news media and academic reality in contributing to myths, academic knowledge, and popular criminology.

Mass Shootings in America

A mass shooting refers to an incident of targeted gun violence, which takes place in a public or populated location, and involves multiple victims who are chosen symbolically and/or at random (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Silva & Capellan, 2018b). A key component of a mass shooting is that it takes place on a “public” stage before an “audience” (Newman et al., 2016). In other words, incidents in schools, workplaces, religious institutions, government buildings, and open-spaces (i.e. a restaurant, movie theatre, etc.) are all included within the mass shooting umbrella terminology. Additionally, a mass shooting requires that at least some of the victims are chosen at-random (i.e. they do not include instances of familicide), and this gives the perception that a mass shooting could happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime (Silva & Capellan, 2018b). As a result, the general public is concerned with information about mass shootings, as it relates to their own lives. Academic research and news outlets aim to identify the causes and prevention methods for mass shootings. Consideration is often given to the perpetrators, victims, and causal social factors. The following section documents the academic knowledge and news-mediated construction of these three underlying aspects of mass shootings.

Academic reality. Perpetrator characteristics include socio-demographic traits and psychological motivations. Research finds males make up an overwhelming majority of perpetrators (Capellan, 2015; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Mass shooters are diverse in age range, with an average perpetrator being in their early-mid-thirties (Capellan, 2015; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Additionally, racial minorities grouped together have committed anywhere from one third (Fox & DeLateur, 2014) to more than half (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016) of shootings.

These perpetrators are motivated by a complex range of psychological and personal problems (Lankford, 2016). Dominant motivations include power and revenge (Fox & Levin, 2005), perceived injustice (Palermo, 1997), strain (Levin & Madfis, 2009), narcissism (Cullen, 2009), and notoriety (Lankford, 2016).

When considering risk of victimization, the most common location for mass shootings is in the workplace. Silva and Capellan (2018b) conducted a study of all mass shootings from 1966 to 2016, finding the majority of incidents take place in business locations, and schools are the second most likely place to be targeted. Nonetheless, the chances of being injured in a mass shooting are extremely rare. For example, students are significantly more likely to be struck by lightning than killed in a school shooting (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016).

Finally, when considering larger social factors, research finds the news media can play an important role in contributing to mass shootings. Mass shootings by definition require a public stage before an audience (Krouse & Richardson, 2015), and perpetrators require news media coverage to widen the breadth of their audience (Newman et al., 2004). Additionally, research has suggested heightened news media coverage may produce a “contagion effect”, potentially contributing to increased instances of the phenomenon (Langman, 2018; Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015).

News-mediated reality. Despite recent research suggesting perpetrators age and race are diverse, Columbine presents a “signal crime” (Innes, 2004) that sets the stage for public misconceptions about mass shootings in America. Columbine constructed the public’s frame of reference for all future mass shootings and contributed to myths suggesting the quintessential perpetrator is young and White. This reflects academic knowledge of school shooters, but not the phenomenon at-large (Silva & Capellan, 2018a). When journalists are reporting on this type of

almost inexplicable crime, it is easier to present what happened (Tuchman, 1978), and much more difficult to provide the complex motivations contributing to the incident. Mass shooting coverage often diminishes before investigators have time to determine perpetrator reasoning (Schildkraut et al., 2017; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). To that end, journalists have to determine immediate thoughts, interpretations, and portrayals that suggest possible motivations or causes - whether suggested by their own observations or by those they have interviewed (Tuchman, 1978). In the immediate aftermath of Columbine, journalists scrambled to identify the motivations contributing to the massacre and were quick to report student hearsay suggesting the perpetrators were bullied youth, despite later investigations suggesting otherwise (Cullen, 2009; Mears et al., 2017).

Media accounts of risk and victimization are conveyed through victim counts that omit national data grounding incidents in a broader context (Schildkraut, 2016). Only “worthy victims” directly affected receive coverage because their position as young, White, and killed randomly conveys the message anyone can be a victim (Sorenson, Manz, & Berk, 1998). High profile mass shooting incidents produce a cultural trauma (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004) that accentuates awareness of the phenomenon, and research examining the salience of coverage devoted to mass shootings finds it has increased fear, risk of victimization, and the perception of an epidemic (Burns & Crawford, 1999, Fox & DeLateur, 2014).

Finally, the timely investigation required to decipher each perpetrator’s motivation means news media turns to framing incidents within the context of larger societal causal factors. In the aftermath of Columbine, the news media is quick to turn to the cultural image bank highlighting simplified narratives surrounding gun control and mental illness (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013).

For example, the predominant gun control frames focus on background checks, bans of assault weapons, and magazine restrictions (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013). However, the gun policies proposed in the news media are largely symbolic and would not prevent these random acts of violence (Kleck, 2009). The gun control message is often situated within a larger discussion about mental health, with the most common mediated messages being mental illness causes gun violence and psychiatric diagnosis can predict gun crimes (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). However, Rosenberg (2014) finds gun control legislation focused on persons with mental illness is not supported by research and can create barriers to treatment. Thus, it is important to consider whether cinematic constructions also contribute to the same news-mediated misconceptions surrounding the phenomenon.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative content analysis to identify the inherent characteristics and narratives in mass shooting films including the presentation of perpetrators, victims, and social factors. A comparison between the cinematic constructions and previously identified academic knowledge and news mediated constructions is used to determine the extent to which films either perpetuate myths about mass shootings, advance academic knowledge of the phenomenon, or act as a source of popular criminology. To determine this information, this study asks:

- (1) How are perpetrator characteristics constructed in film?
- (2) How are victims constructed in film?
- (3) How are social factors constructed in film?
- (4) How do film constructions compare to academic knowledge and news-mediated constructions?
- (5) How do films perpetuate myths, reflect academic knowledge, and/or act as a source of popular criminology?

Sample of Films

To ensure all mass shooting films were identified and included data was collected using the Unified Film Population Identification Methodology (UFPIM) (Wilson, 2009). The UFPIM consisted of three phases including the: (1) operationalization of a definition; (2) identification of a base film list; and (3) examination of plot summaries to determine a final sample.

For the first phase, a mass shooting film needed to include an incident of targeted violence carried out by one or more shooters, involving multiple victims chosen symbolically and/or at random, at one or more public or populated locations (Newman et al., 2004; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Silva & Capellan, 2018b). The motivation for the shooting could not involve profit-driven criminal activity, police/military action, gang violence, terroristic activity, and/or only familicide (Krouse & Richardson, 2015; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). To expand the sample size, a film involving what could be characterized as a spree shooting (involving multiple locations and/or lasting beyond a 24-hour period) was included. This is because spree shootings have many of the same characteristics (non-ideological, multiple random victims, public stage) as mass shootings (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). The film needed to receive a theatrical release between 2000 and 2015. Since this study is examining mass shootings in America, the film needed to be released in America, by an American production company, and portray an incident occurring in the United States (Stack et al., 2012; Welsh, Fleming, & Dowler, 2011). Films not considered included documentaries, made-for-TV movies, and films depicting thoughts of mass shootings, plans and unsuccessful attempts (Welsh et al., 2011; Yar & Rafter, 2014).

For the second phase, films that fell within these parameters were identified using a power search (Rafter, 2007) of keywords (mass shooting, mass murder, spree shooting) in lists within the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and Rotten Tomatoes

(www.rottentomatoes.com). The UFPIIM sampling method and mass shooting definitional criteria originally resulted in a total of 17 films that broadly fit the definitional criteria.

For the third phase, a more extensive review of the plot summaries was used to determine the appropriateness for the study. Eleven films fit the stringent definitional criteria.¹ After a film was viewed, it could still be removed from the sample if it did not meet the definition. *Bang Bang, You're Dead* (2002) and *He Was a Quiet Man* (2007) were removed from the sample once it was discovered no one dies. The final sample included nine films: *Home Room* (2002), *Zero Day* (2003), *Elephant* (2003), *April Showers* (2009), *Beautiful Boy* (2011), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), *God Bless America* (2011), *Hello Herman* (2012), and *Blue Caprice* (2013).

Analysis

A qualitative content analysis of films (see for example: Aiello, 2014, Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Welsh et al., 2011) was employed to identify the perpetrator, victim, and social factor constructions. In line with Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) outline of a qualitative content analysis, this research explores the manifest content of dialogue, as well as the latent content of relationships between characters and underlying narrative structures. First, each film was viewed and extensive notes were taken in relation to each of the initial three research questions. The first viewing was concentrated on coding: (1) the dominant narrative focus (i.e. perpetrator, victim, or social factor); (2) the characteristics, behaviors, and attributes of perpetrators, victims, and social factors; and (3) the themes and frames surrounding each of the three areas of consideration. The notes from each of the films were then compared to identify overlapping narratives, characteristics, behaviors, attributes, themes, and frames (i.e. codes) (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Welsh et al., 2011). Each film was then re-watched with the aforementioned codes in mind. Relevant dialog was transcribed and

previously missed codes were noted (Aiello, 2014). The validity of each specific code was dependent on it being in many of the analyzed films (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). After multiple viewings, the dominant cinematic constructions were determined. The coded film constructions were then compared to academic research and news media accounts to identify how mass shooting films perpetuate myths, extend academic knowledge, and/or act as a source of popular criminology.

Results

Cinematic Experience

First, it is important to acknowledge the realist and naturalist approaches used in mass shooting films to convey a sense of authenticity. According to Nelson (1997), realist depictions in art use historical context to help make sense of the flow of events (i.e. the dynamics of historical development perceived to be inherent in social reality) (Nelson, 1997). Yar (2010) extends the “parasitic” nature of films by highlighting the use of historical personalities and factual events in organizing narratives to create the notion of cinema as “Based on a True Story”. Additionally, naturalism in the arts accounts for material reality by documenting the natural world (Nelson, 1997). Bazin (2004) extends the naturalist approach in film through neo-realistic filming techniques (e.g. actual locations, nonprofessional actors, and documentary-esque cinematography). Taken together, analysis of these films finds directors utilize two primary strategies to shape the audience reception of the reality of mass shootings including: (1) “Based on a True Story” narrative cues, and (2) neorealist filming techniques.

Based on a true story. Numerous films are based on/inspired by actual mass shootings including Columbine (*April Showers, Elephant, Zero Day*), Virginia Tech (*Beautiful Boy*), and the Beltway sniper (*Blue Caprice*). Mass shooting films use subtle and overt narrative cues to

emphasize their likeness to actual events and convey the notion the film is “Based on a True Story”. These include the characters using actual perpetrators’ names, genuine news coverage and replications of iconic photographs, as well as general acknowledgements of high-profile mass shootings. First, when capturing historical personalities, the shooters in *Blue Caprice* (2013) are directly named after the Beltway sniper perpetrators. Similarly, the names in *Elephant* (2003) (Eric) and *April Showers* (2009) (Ben Harris) are nods to the Columbine shooter Eric Harris. Next, when replicating news coverage, *Blue Caprice* (2013) begins with actual news reports surrounding the Beltway sniper incident, with an inference to the culture of fear amid the hunt for the shooters’. During a fictional news report in *Beautiful Boy* (2011), images of the shooter (Sam) aiming a gun at the camera directly replicate pictures Seung-Hui Cho sent to news outlets prior to Virginia Tech. The pre-recorded video Sam sent to news outlets also has dialog that is nearly word-for-word verbatim what Cho said in his manifesto. Finally, general acknowledgements of Columbine are also used in *April Showers* (2009) and *Zero Day* (2003). After Columbine, a memorial with crosses was put up in town, representing the students, teachers and shooters killed. People believed the shooters’ crosses were offensive and they were subsequently vandalized and taken down. Crosses are shown in *April Showers* (2009) to memorialize the victims, and the students in *Zero Day* (2003) deface the shooters’ crosses in retribution.

Neorealist techniques. Directors also use neorealist filming techniques including the use of actual locations, nonprofessional actors, and documentary-esque cinematography (Bazin, 2004). For instance, *April Showers* (2009), *Elephant* (2003), and *Zero Day* (2003), were filmed in actual high schools instead of being recreated in film studios. In *Elephant* (2003) and *Zero Day* (2003) the actors did not have prior experience, their real first names were used, and scenes

were improvised to enhance legitimacy. *Zero Day* (2003) also uses the “found footage” technique to suggest the film is an accumulation of real home movies made by the perpetrators. These spliced-together clips replicate the “Basement Tapes” made by the Columbine shooters.

Narrative Focus

As shown in Table 1, mass shooting films at the turn of the century are predominantly situated within a school shooting paradigm with seven films including *April Showers* (2009), *Beautiful Boy* (2011), *Elephant* (2003), *Hello Herman* (2012), *Home Room* (2002), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), and *Zero Day* (2003). The other two films are characterized as spree shooting films including *Blue Caprice* (2013) and *God Bless America* (2011). *Zero Day* (2003), and the spree shooting films, focus almost exclusively on the perpetrators. *Hello Herman* (2012), *Elephant* (2003), and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) are divided evenly between perpetrator and victim perspectives. The rest of the films predominantly focus on the victims, particularly the indirect victims including family and friends of the perpetrator. None of the movies are geared primarily around the causal social factors.

Table 1. Film by shooting type and primary focus

Film	Shooting Type	Perpetrator	Victim	Social
<i>April Showers</i> (2009)	School		X	
<i>Beautiful Boy</i> (2011)	School		X	
<i>Blue Caprice</i> (2013)	Spree	X		
<i>Elephant</i> (2003)	School	X	X	
<i>God Bless America</i> (2011)	Spree	X		
<i>Hello Herman</i> (2012)	School	X	X	
<i>Home Room</i> (2002)	School		X	
<i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i> (2011)	School	X	X	
<i>Zero Day</i> (2003)	School	X		

The following sections consider: (1) perpetrator characteristics, including socio-demographic traits and psychological motivations; (2) victim characteristics, briefly identifying socio-demographic traits, and extensively reviewing different types of victims; and (3) the social factor attributes impacting the overall problem.

Perpetrators

Characteristics. While all films portray perpetrators and victims, differences in narrative focus means the discussion of perpetrators draws most heavily from *Blue Caprice* (2013), *God Bless America* (2011), and *Zero Day* (2003), as well as the three films *Elephant* (2003), *Hello Herman* (2012), and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), which focus on both victims and perpetrators. There were 13 perpetrators identified in the 9 films. *Blue Caprice* (2013), *Elephant* (2003), *God Bless America* (2011), and *Zero Day* (2003) involved two perpetrators working together. One of the most common characteristics of all the perpetrators in these films is at least one is young (i.e. high school and college aged). The school shooting films involve high school/college incidents perpetrated by current students. The spree shooting films involve one high school aged youth alongside one adult counterpart. Films diverge from academic reality which finds perpetrators are predominantly in their mid-30s. When considering race and gender, all of the school shooting films involve White male perpetrators. The spree shooting films offer the only divergence from this pattern. *Blue Caprice* (2013) includes two Black males, and *God Bless America* (2011) includes one young White female. The films confirm that shooters are overwhelmingly male, while reproducing the news-media misconception that perpetrators are overwhelmingly White, representing school shooters as young White men.

Motivations. Two dominant perpetrator motivation types were identified including “fame-seeking” and “defeated by society”. The fame-seeking motivation is derived from

Lankford's (2016) research on mass shooters.² Lankford (2016) states, "In America, fame is revered as the ultimate prestige-bearing success, and the distinction between fame and infamy is disappearing" (p.122). In this context, fame-seeking perpetrators are individuals that suffer from delusions of grandeur and seek fame and glory through killing. Although less common than fame-seeking, the second perpetrator motivation type in mass shooting cinema involves those defeated by society. Defeated by society perpetrators experience an accumulation of strain and alienation that eventually pushes them to engage in violence. The following sub-sections highlight the behaviors and attributes (i.e. codes) identified in the sample of films that resulted in the characterization of these two motivation types.

Fame-seeking. Fame-seeking perpetrators are exclusively represented in the school shooting films. Specifically, the films focusing on the perpetrators and perpetrators/victims including *Elephant* (2003), *Hello Herman* (2012), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), and *Zero Day* (2003). However, this motivation is such widespread common sense knowledge that it is also expressed in *Beautiful Boy* (2011), a film predominantly focused on victims. In line with Lankford's (2016) definition, the behaviors that characterize fame-seeking motivations include: (1) seeking media notoriety and (2) delusions of grandeur.

Media notoriety. Fame-seeking perpetrators pursue media notoriety by calling upon newscasters, submitting pre-recorded videos to news outlets, and offering televised interviews. For example, in *Hello Herman* (2012), the perpetrator addresses a popular journalist during the shooting through a cell phone video recording stating, "I want to tell my story on your show." The journalist then interviews the shooter while in prison, and broadcasts the interviews on his channel. In *Beautiful Boy* (2011), the perpetrator sends a pre-recorded video of himself to news outlets, so they will be broadcast after the shooting and his anticipated death. Similarly, in *Zero*

Day (2003), the perpetrators record a video-message prior to the shooting, where one of them mentions a safety deposit box that they, “bequeath... to *CNN* and Wolf Blitzer, or any media people that might want it.” This box contains a collection of home-videos they wish to be nationally broadcast.

In *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), the perpetrator (Kevin) gives a televised interview from prison following the massacre stating:

Kevin: You wake up, and you watch TV. Get in your car, and you listen to the radio. And you go to your little job or your little school, but you are not going to hear about that on the 6:00 news. Why? Because nothing is really happening. Then you go home and you watch some more TV. Or maybe, if it’s a fun night, you go out and you watch a movie. I mean, it’s got so bad that half the time the people on TV, inside the TV – they’re watching TV. And what are all these people watching? People like me. I mean what are all you doing right now, but watching me? You don’t think they would have changed the channel by now if all I did was get an A in Geometry?

Kevin’s monologue provides a particularly well suited cinematic example for illustrating the pursuit of media notoriety through mass murder. He suggests that even if he had been successful in other areas (i.e. by getting good grades), he would not have been able to garner the public and media attention he was seeking. In other words, he accurately recognizes that one of the few ways to ensure media fame is through sensationally violent actions against an unarmed public. The presentation of perpetrators in the media is also interpreted as an emphasis on the news media’s role in enabling fame-seeking behaviors. This reflects academic knowledge finding

coverage of perpetrators glorifies their actions and reinforces their motivation by providing them a platform.

Delusions of grandeur. Fame-seeking perpetrators also suffer from delusions of grandeur including megalomaniacal beliefs in one's power, a God-complex, and the expectation that others will follow their actions. In *Elephant* (2003), the perpetrators watch a video of Hitler's reign prior to engaging in the shooting. Throughout the film, the perpetrators never express ideological (i.e. far-right) motivations or views. Thus, this scene is interpreted as a linkage between Hitler's and the perpetrators' megalomaniacal pursuit of power. In *Zero Day* (2003), during the pre-recorded videos the perpetrators (Andre and Cal) send to news outlets expressing their motivation prior to the incident, they emphasize:

Cal: We will be more powerful than God.

Andre: We will be God, no mistake about that, we will be fucking God.

The perpetrators are expressing their delusions of grandeur through what is referred to as a God-complex. These perpetrators align with academic knowledge that suggests fame-seeking perpetrators aim to ensure they are viewed as more than human (Serazio, 2010).

Hello Herman (2012) explicitly highlights the perpetrator's pursuit of power, fame, and followers. In the film, the perpetrator (Herman) conducts interviews with a reporter where he explains his actions. In one instance, Herman discusses a period during the shooting when he held a gun to a young woman's head, and the power he felt in that moment. He thinks back on how she begged Herman to allow her to live, and he abides, stating, "Do you know what it's like to have that kind of power?" During another interview, the reporter asks Herman, "Would you have thought to do what you did, if they didn't do it in Columbine first?" Herman responds, "They became real famous afterwards, everyone knows who they are now." He follows this up

by suggesting, “Kids all over the country are going to start doing what I did”. In this scene, the film is first using Columbine (an incident that also involved fame-seeking shooters) to reinforce the strategic web of facticity. This is followed by Herman admitting that he is aware of the Columbine perpetrators fame, and is interpreted to suggest he is pursuing the same notoriety. Finally, the film is highlighting his delusions of grandeur by having Herman suggest that others will follow in his foot-steps.

Defeated by society. Defeated by society perpetrators are explicitly identified in the spree shooting films *Blue Caprice* (2013) and *God Bless America* (2011). The attributes that characterize defeated by society perpetrators include: (1) the inability to achieve economic/familial goals, and (2) an overall feeling of alienation from American culture.

Economic/familial strain. Three of the four perpetrators in *Blue Caprice* (2013) and *God Bless America* (2011) experience economic strain that contributes to pushing them over the edge (the young perpetrator in *God Bless America* does not experience this economic strain because she is still a student). In *Blue Caprice* (2013), both perpetrators are Jamaican-born immigrants that struggle to find economic stability after coming to America. In *God Bless America* (2011), the adult perpetrator is recently fired from his job. Additionally, all four perpetrators in these two films experience familial marginalization. In *Blue Caprice* (2013), the young perpetrator has been abandoned by his mother and is desperate for any type of parental affection. The adult perpetrator seeks to contact his children despite a restraining order from his ex-wife. In *God Bless America* (2011), the adult perpetrator (Frank) is divorced, his ex-wife is getting remarried, and his young daughter does not want to visit him. These individuals are reflecting academic knowledge of mass shooting perpetrators motivated by chronic strain (Levin & Madfis, 2009), characterized by a string of failures in trying to achieve individual objectives (i.e.

economic/familial goals). Alternatively, Roxy feels alienated from her parents because she believes they are too “normal”. She reflects this by stating:

Roxy: Maybe they didn't abuse me, but they didn't even try to understand me. Every day in normal life felt like a million years. I spent all day, every day, being told what to do and what to think, by people [her parents] I am a million times smarter than.

This is read as Roxy expressing feelings that reflect academic knowledge of uncontrolled strain (Levin & Madfis, 2009), characterized by a lack of conventional bonds with her parents. Roxy believes her parents did not understand her. This quote links the economic/familial strain with the general feelings of alienation that characterize defeated by society perpetrators.

Alienation. The four perpetrators also experience general feelings of alienation, particularly from American culture, which contributes to their defeatist attitude and eventual violence. The perpetrators in *Blue Caprice* (2013) are Jamaican-born immigrants, and the film follows their struggle to be accepted in America. For example, the young perpetrator is often shown aimlessly wandering throughout the film, trying to bond with others in his new environment, but ultimately ending up alone. However, this perpetrator alienation from American culture is explicitly expressed throughout *God Bless America* (2011). In the opening scene, the older perpetrator (Frank) watches a news report of the Reverend Artemus Goran protesting cancer victim's funerals, with children holding signs reading “God Hates Fags,” and reality television shows entitled “Tuff Gurls” [*sic*] and “American Superstar.”³ He listens to a news report announcing, “When high schoolers [*sic*] were asked what living American they would want to be, the majority of girls answered Kim Kardashian, and the majority of boys answered any male cast member on the Jersey Shore.” The film utilizes the strategic web of facticity to point out commonsense flaws in contemporary society, and illustrate both

perpetrators' plight and disgust with American news and culture. During another scene, when brain-storming targets for their spree, the perpetrators suggest targeting anyone who "pounds energy drinks," "uses the terms, energy, in your face, and extreme", and "has ever been pumped or stoked". This is interpreted as the targeting of those who contribute to ignorant masculinity or "bro-culture" in America. They feel alienated from this culture because they believe they are smarter than these "mindless" individuals. In general, these two alienated perpetrators carry out the shooting to gun down all the individuals (e.g. reporters, celebrities, "bros") they feel contribute to the mindless, mean, and ignorant American culture.

Victims

Characteristics. While all films portray perpetrators and victims, differences in narrative focus means the discussion of victims draws most heavily from *April Showers* (2009), *Beautiful Boy* (2011), and *Home Room* (2003), as well as the films *Elephant* (2003) and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), which focus on both perpetrators and victims. All victims are predominantly White individuals⁴ divided relatively evenly by gender. Since the majority of incidents take place in schools, the victims killed or injured are primarily school-aged, outside of a few teachers and administrators. These characteristics align with academic knowledge that mass shooting victims are from varying races and genders, but again, reinforces the notion that youth victimization occurs more frequently.

Types. Mass shooting films highlight cinematic constructions of three different types of victims: direct victims, indirect victims, and perpetrators as victims. Direct victims, including those killed and injured, are the victims that are routinely examined in academic knowledge, as well as sympathized with in news media accounts and public consideration of the phenomenon. However, films also allow for diverse considerations and meanings of victimhood. For example,

these films highlight the psychological trauma that occurs to direct victims that survive the incident. They also consider indirect victims, or the less commonly contemplated friends and family of perpetrators. Their victimhood is characterized by the blame they experience from the police, community, and media. This unique approach to victimhood is also illustrated when considering perpetrators' experiences being victimized, and how this may have contributed to their actions. It is important to note that all three victim-types presented in these films emphasize the psychological and emotional trauma instead of the physical injury.

Direct victims. Direct victims include those directly impacted by the perpetrators actions including portrayals of (1) death and injury, as well as the (2) psychological trauma of those who survive the incident. *Elephant* (2003), *Hello Herman* (2012), and *God Bless America* (2011) are the only films with more than a few minutes of direct victims being killed or injured. However, almost all the mass shooting films (with the exception of *Elephant*) illustrate deaths and injuries through the lens of the news media. In addition to this, the victim-centered films *April Showers* (2009) and *Home Room* (2002) provide in-depth assessments of the psychological trauma that occurs to direct victims who survive largely unscathed.

Deaths and injuries. Mass shooting films largely avoid the glorification of violence and scenes of excessive blood and gore. Instead, when the direct victims' deaths and injuries are presented, it is through news coverage. For example, in *April Showers* (2009) there is a scene with news cameras filming victims with bloody gunshot wounds crying in pain. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), cameras are shown filming students as they run out of the school screaming in fear. With these scenes, the narrative focus on direct victims illustrates the exploitative and sensational reporting of victims, instead of glorifying the act of shooting to kill

and wound. This is interpreted as an emphasis on the role of the news media in contributing the problem, instead of the films themselves aiming to glamorize the violence.

Additionally, deaths and injuries are routinely conveyed in the news media through victim-counts. *April Showers* (2009), *Beautiful Boy* (2011), *Blue Caprice* (2013), *God Bless America* (2011), *Hello Herman* (2012), *Home Room* (2002), and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) all provide newscasts with media headlines or reporters vocalizing the massive victim-toll incurred. For example, a reporter in *Hello Herman* (2012) announces “39 students, 2 teachers, and a police officer were shot,” emphasizing the severity of the incident. In *Blue Caprice* (2013), these reports are even taken from the actual coverage of the event the film is based on. These victim-counts reinforce the cultural image bank and ensure that cinematic news coverage is viewed as real. The intertextual nature of victim-counts in film reflects academic knowledge finding victim-counts are consistently used in actual media coverage as a simple method of emphasizing the severity of the problem in relation to other signal crimes. However, this practice reduces those immediately impacted by the violence to mere numbers.

Psychological trauma. Mass shooting films emphasis the long-term psychological trauma of direct victims over the immediate impact of deaths and injuries. These psychological traumas include flashbacks, post-traumatic stress, and survivor’s guilt. For example, a character in *April Showers* (2009), has reoccurring flashbacks of his actions during the shooting. During these scenes, he is being chased by the perpetrator and decides to close a set of doors in order to save himself. However, his decision to lock the door contributes to the deaths of others trapped behind him. He expresses guilt over his actions, as well as his subsequent public perception as a “hero” by the public and in the media, asking a friend, “How am I supposed to deal with that?” A character in *Home Room* (2002) also experiences flashbacks of the shooting, and decides to visit

a psychologist to help her cope with the trauma. During this visit, she is informed that she is experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. In response, the victim states:

Deanna: Is it true that there is no cure? And is it true that most people who have post-traumatic stress have to live with it for the rest of their lives?

This scene in *Home Room* (2002) is interpreted as an emphasis on the long-term impact of shootings over the immediate violence that occurs. In other words, cinema is exploring aspects of violation and mourning that are rarely considered in academic knowledge of the phenomenon. During another scene from *Home Room* (2002), one of the survivors explains her experience during / feelings after the shooting:

Victim: He aimed over here, and I closed my eyes, and he fired. When I opened them, it was Marcus who he shot instead. I was just so [long pause] glad. I never got a chance to tell him [Marcus] that I was sorry for thinking that.

In this scene, the direct victim's feelings are interpreted as a form of survivor's guilt. She feels guilt over the happiness that she survived, while her fellow classmate was not so lucky. These feelings of psychological trauma and guilt are also attributed to indirect victims.

Indirect victims. Indirect victims include the (1) friends and (2) parents of perpetrators, and their victimhood is characterized by invasive police investigations, community bullying, and media blame. Friends of perpetrators are featured in *April Showers* (2009), and *Home Room* (2002), while parents of perpetrators are featured in *Beautiful Boy* (2011) and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011). All of these films emphasize the need to blame people close to the shooter, despite their lack of knowledge of the attack.

Friends of perpetrators. In *Home Room* (2002), the central figure (Alicia) was in no way involved in the shooting, but she failed to see the warning signs of her friend, the perpetrator. As

a result, *Home Room* (2002) is largely focused on the intense police investigation she experiences because of her friendship with the shooter, as well as the potential criminal actions taken against her. Despite her lack of involvement, since the shooter is killed during the incident, the police and community aim to blame (e.g. through criminal sanctions) someone (i.e. Alicia). Similarly, in *April Showers* (2009), a friend of the shooter is bullied by surviving direct victims claiming he is in some way responsible. However, the film aims to convey the hurt that this causes, and to highlight indirect victimization. The protagonist (also a direct victim) stands up to these grieving bullies and suggests they “are trying to put the blame on somebody who is not dead.” This need to blame someone is also emphasized in both the films focusing on the parents of perpetrators.

Parents of perpetrators. In *Beautiful Boy* (2011) and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), the parents initially experience grief over their child’s death, while simultaneously dealing with the reality that they were capable of such an act. They struggle with immense feelings of guilt and responsibility. This reflects statements made by actual parents of perpetrators detailing “years of self-blame” (Brockes, 2016). For example, in *Beautiful Boy* (2011), the parents fight and place the blame on one another by pointing out possible contributing factors, including “emotional absence” and “nitpicking at mistakes.” While this highlights the psychological trauma they personally experience and induce, they are characterized as indirect victims because they experience community bullying and media blame.

Mass shooting films reflect knowledge that parents are left to blame in the aftermath (Neman et al., 2004). Throughout *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), the mother of the shooter cleans red paint off of the front of her home. This paint was thrown by members of the public that believe she has blood on her hands. In *Beautiful Boy* (2011), film cameras arrive at the

parents' front door immediately after the shooter's name is identified. They stay parked there for weeks, demanding comments from the parents, and suggesting they are "monsters" that should have "seen the warning signs." During this period, the father comes across a talking head on the news commenting on the incident:

Commenter: And I know some of you are at home thinking well, the parents are victims too. No they are not. They raised this kid. And I don't care if he's a legal adult or not. It's the parents who are ultimately responsible and we should find them, whatever rock they are hiding under, so the grieving parents can take a crack at them.

The commenter believes the parents raised their child to be a killer, and they should be punished accordingly. He suggests the direct victims' parents should be allowed to engage in physical retribution. However, the film is interpreted to suggest that the parents are already being punished emotionally, which is much more painful than any physical retribution. These films aim to convey parents' obvious feelings of mourning, guilt, and responsibility. However, they also highlight less-often considered aspects of community bullying and media blame. This sympathetic portrayal of indirect victims' is also extended to the victimization that perpetrators experience.

Perpetrators as victims. The victimization that perpetrators experience is briefly noted in *Hello Herman* (2012) and *Zero Day* (2003) and extensively detailed in *Blue Caprice* (2013). Films convey perpetrators as victims through experiences with bullies, parental neglect, and physical abuse. In *Zero Day* (2003) the perpetrator complains of being called a "faggot" by his classmates for his shirt from JC Penney. This scene reinforces news media misconceptions that revenge against bullies is a primary motivation for shooters. However, the emphasis on

previously discussed fame-seeking and defeated by society motivations suggests this reflection of commonsense understanding is largely inconsequential. Instead, this scene is interpreted as means for more generally exploring the perpetrators own experience with being a victim. This reflects academic knowledge that perpetrators encounter a culmination of negative, victimizing, and traumatizing experiences that contribute to their actions.

The bullied youth construction can also serve another purpose in cinema. Filmmakers may be drawing from the news mediated cultural image bank (i.e. the popular bullied youth construction), to ensure less commonly considered negative experiences are also viewed as real. For example, *Hello Herman* (2012) shows scenes of the perpetrator getting bullied, as well as scenes of his high school crush hurting his feelings, his father walking out on the family, and his sister being killed in a car accident. These scenes reflect academic knowledge of the multitude of precipitating crisis events that culminate in perpetrators decisions to engage in mass shootings (Lankford, 2016). However, these alternate forms of victimization are largely ignored in news media coverage and subsequent commonsense understanding of the phenomenon.

This contextualization of the perpetrators own experience of being a victim is explicitly explored in in *Blue Caprice* (2013). The film opens with the young shooter (Lee) separating from his mother in Central America when she goes off for work and never returns. He is initially a victim of parental neglect. He is then taken under the wing of a fatherly figure (John), who goes on to groom Lee for murder after relocating him to the United States. John preys upon Lee's need for love and compassion. He physically and psychologically abuses Lee throughout the film, depicting the cycle of violence attributed to Lee's violent actions. John teaches Lee love is intertwined with violence and contributes to the emotional resignation necessary to carry out the shooting. The final scene ends with Lee in prison as a lawyer questions the motivation for his

murder spree. Despite the obvious punitive repercussions for his killings, the only concern Lee has is, “Where is my father [John]?” The film illustrates the dynamics of victimization by considering the manipulation that occurs to Lee, alongside the devastation that occurs to the direct victims as a result of his actions.

Social Factor: News Media

None of the films focus primarily on the larger social factors that impact the phenomenon (e.g. gun access and mental health). Nonetheless, the news media’s contribution was briefly or explicitly identified in eight of the nine films (*Elephant* never presents the news media), and it provides the only social factor continually represented in mass shooting cinema. As previously identified, mass shooting cinema has emphasized the news media’s relationship with perpetrators and victims by portraying: (1) fame-seeking shooters using the media to gain notoriety; (2) some defeated by society shooters feeling alienated from mindless news media output; (3) direct victim’s deaths and injuries viewed through the news media lens; and (4) indirect victims blamed in the news media. These findings reflect and extend academic knowledge by emphasizing the news media’s role in glorifying fame-seeking perpetrators, contributing to perpetrators actions, exploiting direct victims, and victimizing indirect victims. Taken together, mass shooting films emphasize the negative impact of the news media in contributing to the problem. As a result, it is important to expand upon the news media’s investment in the sensational coverage provided by mass shootings.

Sensational coverage. News outlets aim to maximize the size of their audience, and therefore their profits, by catering to the public’s views on newsworthiness. The obligation to inform the public plays an equal role with the need to generate revenue, since news organizations are corporations, and their primary purpose is to make a profit (Duwe, 2000). News

organizations generate revenue by presenting news that attracts a large audience, thereby attracting more advertising dollars (Duwe, 2000; Tuchman, 1987). Audiences are attracted to sensational coverage involving unexpected events that have some inherent entrainment value (Ericson et al., 1987; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986). In an effort to make news more entertaining, and thus more appealing to consumers, the news media over-represents sensational crime news involving incidents that are tragic, dramatic, and personal (Ericson et al., 1987; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986). However, this news media focus on sensational coverage consequently produces news that is over-simplified, in-humane, exploitative, and fear-inducing (Ericson et al., 1987; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013; Tuchman, 1987). Thus, academic knowledge of sensational coverage suggests it has a largely negative impact on society at-large.

Mass shootings provide particularly newsworthy (i.e. sensational) coverage because they are rare, violent, and shocking (Duwe, 2000; Silva & Capellan, 2018b). Therefore, news outlets are invested in mass shootings, because they need to cater to the public's fascination with sensational acts of violence (Duwe, 2000; Silva & Capellan, 2018b). Mass shooting cinema reflects academic knowledge of this sensational mass shooting coverage. For example, by generally including news coverage, films mirror knowledge of mass shootings' inherent newsworthiness. More specifically, cinematic news coverage focuses on the tragic, dramatic, and personal nature of mass shootings by including victim-counts, direct victims deaths and injuries, and interviews with fame-seeking perpetrators. However, mass shooting films also emphasize the negative aspects of sensational coverage by exploring themes of media simplification and exploitation, as well as public fascination.

Films offer insight into the forces driving sensational media coverage by presenting “villainous reporters” and public demand. Reporters are portrayed as villains though their callous

and exploitative nature. Films use villainous reporters to reinforce the cinematic construction of sensational coverage, and emphasize the news media's role as a contributing social factor negatively impacting society. Films also identify the general public's contribution to sensational coverage, by highlighting their fascination with news mediated violence. The following subsections provide examples of the specific behaviors and attributes of reporters and the general public that emphasize the sensational nature of the news media.

Villainous reporters. *April Showers* (2009) and *God Bless America* (2011) move beyond the standard reporting of sensational coverage (e.g. reporting death-counts), and involve narratives that follow the actions of journalists themselves. These narratives present villainous reporters characterized by their (1) callous and (2) exploitative nature. For example, in *God Bless America* (2011), there is a scene of the perpetrators' watching a news show entitled "The Fuller Report". During the show, the host (Fuller) talks over the guest, refers to him as "pinhead", and suggests he "will give the guest a chance to respond, if he actually has anything articulate to say, after the break." This scene draws from the cultural image bank by replicating political talk shows involving hosts who are callous and don't provide their guests the opportunity to respond. The perpetrators' end up deciding to kill the "mean" political talk show host who they suggest is "spreading fear to the masses." With this narrative, the film addresses commonsense criticisms of contemporary news shows that lack informative debate and contribute to public fear.

In *April Showers* (2009), the cinematic construction of the villainous reporter is initially presented during a scene with a journalist covering the incident and hovering over direct victims crying in pain over gunshot wounds. The reporter looks into the camera and asks the cameraman, "Did you get that?" This is interpreted as an emphasis on the callousness of the reporter exploiting the victims, and the lack of humanity when responding to the pain and bloodshed.

Additionally, one of the narratives in *April Showers* (2009) follows a reporter covering the aftermath of the shooting. Throughout the film, she exploits a direct victim, and takes advantage of his experience with survivor's guilt (over his inability to help anyone during the shooting). She initially gains the trust of the survivor by suggesting other reports are "vultures", "frothing at the mouth", but suggests she prefers "honesty" and to "help". Her use of these negative terms to characterize other reporters emphasizes the news media's predatory and exploitative nature. Even her ethical persona is only a disguise, as she later coerces the student to tell an inaccurate depiction of heroism, because it works better for the story. This causes the survivor to experience even greater feelings of guilt, while the reporter is praised for her ability to capture such personalized coverage. This narrative provides a reflection of academic knowledge of news coverage, with the reporter preferring a simple and personal story of heroism, over a nuanced story of survivor's guilt. Additionally, the cinematic construction of the villainous reporter is interpreted as a means for reinforcing the exploitative nature of the news media more generally.

Public demand. *April Showers* (2009) and *Hello Herman* (2012) also consider the motivation for news media in providing sensational coverage by emphasizing the public's fascination with violence. This public demand for sensational coverage is identified during scenes of the public watching news mediated violence. For example, in *April Showers* (2009), the public is shown literally running towards television screens and newspapers describing the latest details of the shooting. The TV, newspaper, and magazine outlets⁵ use shocking headlines including, "Terror in the Classroom – Exclusive" and "High School Horror", to draw the public's attention. This reflects academic knowledge finding dramatized violence enhances newsworthiness (Duwe, 2000; Ericson et al., 1987). It is also interpreted as an extension of

academic knowledge, by emphasizing the public's fascination with violence, which is forcing the news media to report in this way.

In *Hello Herman* (2012), the public demand driving sensational coverage is particularly well captured. In the final scenes of the film, the perpetrator is going to be executed on live television. This narrative steps-outside of reality, given that executions have never been broadcast in the United States. However, the film is aware of this, and a reporter highlights, "Today's execution is the first ever live broadcast in America." Therefore, this exaggerated reality is interpreted as a narrative technique for emphasizing the reality of sensational coverage and the public's fascination with violence. This public demand is further reinforced when the reporter states, "This will be the highest viewed event in television history [with] 74% of all [television] sets tuned in." During this report, viewers across the country are shown closely watching the television and awaiting the execution. This cinematic narrative is read as a reflection of the public's fascination with violence as entertainment. In this way, the film is mirroring the sensational coverage of violence in the American news media that is ultimately demanded by the general public.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to: identify (R1) perpetrator, (R2) victim, and (R3) social factor constructions; (R4) examine the blending of cinematic constructions with academic knowledge and news constructions; (R5) and determine how these constructions perpetuate myths, extend academic knowledge, and act as a form of popular criminology. Addressing the initial three research questions, the results illustrate mass shooting films highlight perpetrator and victim constructions. Perpetrator constructions include young, White, male, school shooters with fame-seeking and defeated by society motivations. Victims are primarily White individuals, with

a diverse age-range, and victimization constructions include direct victims, indirect victims, and perpetrators own experiences with being victims. Finally, the news media - the only underlying causal social factor construction – portrays the glorification of fame-seeking perpetrators using the media to gain notoriety and the exploitation of direct victims deaths and injuries. Films emphasize the nature of sensational news coverage through constructions of villainous reporters and public demand.

The final two research questions investigate the relationships between three representations of mass shootings including the research-grounded academic picture, the portrayals provided by news reports of such events, and cinematic depictions. In general, academics regard the research-grounded picture as the most trustworthy, often speaking or writing as if reality conformed to empirical reality. For this work, news constructions are those analyzed by researchers who describe what was reported, and how those reports represented events, perpetrators, victims and pertinent social factors. Media and crime scholars find news portrayals prioritize who, what, when, where, and how of each incident, seeking to provide a sense of why it happened, while focusing on the particularities of the event. Finally, cinematic depictions are created to entertain, but work hard to encompass both characters and actions within a recognizable world of people, places, and actions, in order to create a sense of reality that lends authority to the tale being told.

Findings suggest cinematic portrayals aim to enhance depictions of realism by creating a world that is credible, familiar, and detailed. The implications of these findings suggest mass shooting films utilize a “strategic web of facticity” (Tuchman, 1978). This web includes a sense of realism shaped by “Based on a True Story” narrative cues and neorealist techniques, as well as intertextual blending with academic knowledge and news constructions. For example, film-

makers utilize features and components of actual news coverage and cinematic news reports, because those elements encourage viewers to interpret what is seen and heard in film as if it were an elaborate item of news. In doing so, film-makers create a detailed, moment-by-moment elaboration of a mass shooting, that reinforces widely held ideas about such events within the societal image bank. These strategies then confirm the reasonableness of cinematic explanations. This web influences public attitudes surrounding mass shootings, and makes social constructions into taken-for-granted views of the phenomenon. The following sub-sections highlight the blending of the three aforementioned representations, to develop an understanding of how films perpetuate myths, extend academic knowledge, and act as a source of popular criminology.

Myths

Myths refer to inaccurate beliefs surrounding mass shootings. In this study, myths are attributed to taken-for-granted news media constructions of the phenomenon. As noted, when the news media reports on a shooting they include details that locate it in time and space. In the immediate aftermath of an incident, shootings receive extensive coverage (Schildkraut et al., 2017; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013), when informants (e.g. professionals, eyewitnesses) are still struggling to make sense of the event (Tuchman, 1978). As a result, media outlets turn to signal crime (e.g. Columbine) characteristics and constructions (e.g. insane White shooter, bullied youth lashing out) that explain the event in terms that are easily digestible and relatable for audience consumption. Cinematic myths are attributed to, and reinforce, these constructions rooted in traditional lay-understanding of the phenomenon. Taken together, this work finds that while academic reality highlights the mass shooting problem at-large, cinematic constructions align with news media constructions by illustrating the mass shooting problem as an exclusively school shooting problem. These films largely mirror a few high profile incidents (i.e. Columbine,

Virginia Tech) that promote myths and stereotypes surrounding the mass shooting phenomenon. They often function as a reflection of anxieties and concern over potential perpetrators and fear of victimization. The three myths presented in films include the construction of the young bullied perpetrator, insane white perpetrator, and school as a primary target.

The first myth perpetuated in mass shooting films is that shootings are primarily carried out by young individuals that are bullied in school. The extensive coverage devoted to Columbine and subsequent school shootings has curated the societal image bank by suggesting mass shootings are an overwhelmingly youth / school based phenomenon. Films are reflecting contemporary social and cultural anxieties that emerged in the aftermath of Columbine concerning alienated youth gone wrong (Altheide, 2009; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). However, this neglects academic findings that age range is diverse, even in a school shooting setting (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). These youth-oriented films fail to consider the large number of school shootings perpetrated by adults, including school employees and those using the school as a public stage. The characterization of the bullied youth as a mass shooter stigmatizes already marginalized juveniles, and this labeling could increase incident likelihood (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). The skewed cinematic perceptions of potential perpetrators may also cause the public to over-look warning signs of actual perpetrators who do not fit this flawed criterion. This divergence between academic findings and cinematic representations can contribute to unwarranted public fears of “potential perpetrators” and ignorance in the face of an actual threat.

The next cinematic myth follows the news-mediated notion that the typical perpetrator is an insane White shooter. This neglects less traditional academic constructions suggesting mass shootings are perpetrated by individuals from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Additionally, while delusions of grandeur as a

motivating factor for fame-seeking perpetrators is an informative and progressive approach to the phenomenon, the interpretation of specifically White shooters as delusional or “insane” reinforces perceptions of perpetrators from other racial backgrounds as “thugs” and “terrorists.” This is reinforced in *Blue Caprice* (2013), which does not include delusions as a motivating factor, and is the only film with non-White perpetrators. Insanity excuses the behavior of White shooters as something beyond their control, in-turn demonizing the behavior of minority shooters as ingrained in their racial/cultural backgrounds. The cinematic construction of the insane White shooter simultaneously fails to consider the racial diversity of perpetrators, excuses the behavior of White perpetrators, and reinforces stereotypes that violent crime is a normalized feature in minorities.

Finally, Tuchman (1978) suggests news shapes cultural meanings around threats to social stability. This study extends Tuchman’s (1978) analysis to include films, and finds cinematic constructions fuel fear and anxiety surrounding common sense understanding of school shooting risk of victimization. They reflect contemporary concern over youth victimization, and “third-person fear” or “altruistic fear” (i.e. concern for those whom you love or feel responsible for) (Altheide, 2009). None of the cinematic mass shootings occurred in the workplace, despite the workplace being the most common location for incidents. Instead, seven of the nine films occurred in a school setting. By reinforcing the notion that schools are a dangerous place, films contribute to unwarranted public fear of school shootings that result in reactionary policies. Fox and Savage (2009) suggest the excessive media attention given to school shootings has resulted in ineffective security measures that intensify anxiety and may actually increase the likelihood of copycat crimes. Similarly, cinematic attention to school shootings is contributing to a

disproportionate fear of school violence.⁶ While mass shooting films risk perpetuating myths of the phenomenon, they may also contribute to extending academic knowledge.

Academic Knowledge

Nelson (1997) suggests realist and naturalist approaches make the arts an object of knowledge, through accurate observation and representation of the perceived world. All of the films examined in this study are fictionalized portrayals of the mass shooting phenomenon. Despite this, they often provide realistic examinations that reflect academic knowledge of the phenomenon. Specifically, academic knowledge is reflected in the construction of the perpetrator motivations and the news media as a contributing social factor.

Unlike the brevity of the news-medium, films provide detailed case studies of perpetrators. These cinematic portrayals - because of the level of detail and the reinforced web of facticity within which those details are presented - help convey the complexity of experiences contributing to a perpetrators motivation for an attack. Palermo (2007) suggests mass shootings are motivated by a “culmination of a continuum of experiences, perceptions, beliefs, frustrations, disappointments, hostile fantasies, and perhaps pathology” (p. 18). This is illustrated in both the fame-seeking and defeated by society motivations. The fame-seeking perpetrators match with research suggesting shooters are motivated by a desire for media notoriety and delusions of grandeur (Lankford, 2016). The defeated by society perpetrators highlight Levin and Madfis (2009) model of cumulative strain. This includes chronic strain, characterized by a string of failures in trying to achieve individual objectives, and uncontrolled strain, characterized by the lack of conventional bonds and feelings of marginalization. These films also reflect academic knowledge of perpetrators own experiences with being victimized, and precipitating crisis events that may be contributing to the attack (Lankford, 2016).

Films also highlight the news media as a larger social factor contributing to the phenomenon. The news media often turns to social factors including gun control and mental health policies, but research suggests these policies are largely symbolic and would not prevent a mass shooting (Kleck, 2009; Rosenberg 2014). Mass shooting films do not address these issues, and instead, they support academic knowledge that finds glorified coverage of the perpetrator and sensational coverage of the problem contribute to fame-seeking perpetrators' actions (Lankford, 2016). In other words, films mirror research finding mass shooters require a "public stage", and the news media provides an outlet (Newman et al., 2004). Films highlight the news media's role in contributing to the glorification of fame-seeking perpetrators through televised interviews and sensational coverage of victims' deaths and injuries. In this way, they support academic knowledge of the "contagion effect," finding glorified, excessive, and sensationalistic coverage motivates copycat criminality (Langman, 2018; Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Towers et al., 2015). This examination of the news media's influence on mass shootings also extends beyond academic knowledge, and highlights the utilization of mass shooting films as a source of popular criminology.

Popular Criminology

This work finds mass shooting films reinforce news mediated myths and academic knowledge of the phenomenon. However, cinematic portrayals also extend academic knowledge, by acting as a form of popular criminology. Popular criminology differs from academic criminology, because it does not necessarily convey empirical accuracy or theoretical validity (Rafter, 2007). Films are therefore used to explore aspects of criminology that are rarely mentioned in academic knowledge. Specifically, mass shooting films illustrate the public's fascination with sensational news coverage, as well as alternative forms of victimization.

Mass shooting films are hyper-aware of the impact of news media and offer a meta-theoretical examination of media-on-media. These films present the problems with sensational news media influencing perpetrators and victims by presenting fame-seeking shooters using the media to gain notoriety, some defeated by society shooters feeling alienated from media output, direct victim's deaths and injuries viewed through the news media lens, and indirect victims blamed in the news media. In this way, films act as a form of popular criminology by allowing viewers to confront the enormous impact of this sensational coverage that is so pervasive in American culture. Highlighting fame-seeking perpetrators offers cultural commentary on the culture of narcissism in contemporary America (Lankford, 2016). Mass shooting films also reinforce audience's awareness of sensational coverage through portrayals of villainous reporters that are callous and exploitative. The villainous reporter construction helps to ensure the media is recognized as a contributing social factor that is harming society. Additionally, cinematic narratives reflect the public's fascination with violence, thereby demanding sensational coverage. Mass shooting films raise philosophical and ethical considerations beyond the scope of academic knowledge. They act as a form of popular criminology by requiring the viewer to reflect upon how their own viewing habits may be contributing to the phenomenon. In other words, films suggest the general public should be cautious when pushing media outlets to glorify perpetrators and exploit victim violence. These films provide an interpretive framework through which viewers can organize their own experiences and perspectives surrounding news media coverage of the phenomenon (Yar & Rafter, 2014).

Finally, mass shooting films explore aspects of crime and victimization - including loss, violation, and mourning - rarely mentioned in academic criminology. This naturalist approach emotionally involves the spectator through sympathy with the characters in their plight

(Nelson, 1997). They reject simplistic news-mediated narratives of direct victims deaths and injuries, and encourage critical interpretation by highlighting the long-term psychological trauma that occurs to direct victims, the experiences of indirect victims including friends and parents of perpetrators, as well as the idea of perpetrators being victims themselves. Films extend academic knowledge by considering the flashbacks, post-traumatic stress, and survivor's guilt that occurs to direct victims. In this way, they recall on the pain others in a nuanced way that enables ethical considerations outside of direct victim-counts (Ahmed, 2015). Instead of blaming friends and parents, mass shooting films provide empathic insight into mourning and guilt, as well as the victimization that can occur through invasive police investigations, community bullying, and media blame. The capacity for film to address multiple and diverse meanings is conveyed further when constructing the perpetrator as a victim. The film-medium allows for lengthy and comprehensive character development that emphasizes the humanization of perpetrators, understanding their actions, and confronting their complexity.

Conclusion

Cinematic representations are primarily meant to entertain, and should not be held to the same standard as news media in providing accurate representations of the phenomenon. However, they often play a similar role in the public's social construction of social problems. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that although realist cinematic productions increase the likelihood of experiencing a portrayal as authentic or real, films are viewed through the audiences own experience, knowledge, and social location (Nelson, 1997). Additionally, the small number of films examining mass shootings makes it difficult to determine the extent of their influence on the public's social construction of reality. Despite this, the intertextual nature

of media narratives influencing the cultural image bank makes cinematic constructions an important area for inquiry.

This research finds cinematic constructions of mass shootings influence the social construction of the phenomenon through “Based on a True Story” narrative cues and neorealist filming techniques. The results of this study show mass shooting films at the turn of the century emphasize Columbine as the quintessential mass shooting type, and perpetuate the news-mediated myths that perpetrators are predominantly young, White, school shooters. These myths reinforce stereotypes of criminality, cause people to overlook warning signs, and contribute to increased perceptions of risk. Despite this, they present nuanced interpretations of shooter motivations that reflect academic knowledge, through the fame-seeking and defeated by society perpetrator types. Films also echo research considering the symbiotic relationship between fame-seeking perpetrators and the news media. Finally, films act as a form of popular criminology by addressing the public’s fascination with sensational coverage of the phenomenon. Additionally, films reconstruct victimization by considering the psychological trauma that occurs to direct victims, as well as the indirect victims and the perpetrators own experience with being victimized. Mass shooting cinema as a form of popular criminology contributes to audience’s reflection upon their own viewing habits driving sensational coverage, and their preconceived notions of who is the victim of this phenomenon.

Notes

1. Narrowing down the sample meant certain films were excluded despite their cultural significance including *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) (documentary), *Polytechnique* (2009) (Canadian), *Amish Grace* (2010) (made-for-TV movie), and the films by Director Uwe Boll (not filmed/released in America).
2. Each of the other phrases utilize the Authors own terminologies and definitions.
3. This is satire of American news and culture expressed sardonically, but not far from reality. The “God Hates Fags” protest led by Reverend Artemus Goran is a play on the Westboro Baptist Church protests started by Fred Phelps. “Tuff Gurls” is a satire of “Bad Girls Club” and “American Superstar” is a satire of “American Idol.”
4. Although beyond the scope of this work, it is believed the overwhelmingly number of White victims is largely attributed to “Hollywood Whitewashing”, and not a conscious decision by filmmakers to emphasize the tragedy of specifically White victimization (see for example: Tierney, 2006).
5. The media outlet fonts replicate *CNN*, *The Daily News* and *Time*.
6. Although beyond the scope of this work, it is important to recognize that these films also emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. Altheide (2009) illustrates the general concern over “otherness” and victimization that linked school shootings and terrorism as part of a broader frame of fear and national security.

Filmography

April Showers (2009) *Dir.* Andrew Robinson

Beautiful Boy (2011) *Dir.* Shawn Ku

Blue Caprice (2013) *Dir.* Alexandre Moors

Elephant (2003) *Dir.* Gus Van Sant

God Bless America (2011) *Dir.* Bobcat Goldthwait

Hello Herman (2012) *Dir.* Michelle Danner

Home Room (2002) *Dir.* Paul Ryan

We Need to Talk about Kevin (2011) *Dir.* Lynne Ramsay

Zero Day (2003) *Dir.* Ben Coccio

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