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Mass Shooting and the Spectacle of Whiteness

Lynching as spectacle

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Benjamin Balthaser — April 13, 2018



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Fredric Jameson once noted that *déjà vu* is possible for an experience one has never had: postmodernism is an amnesia of eternal returns. I remember when I witnessed the unfolding of the Columbine massacre on CNN – the event that culturally marked the beginning of an era of school shootings – it seemed familiar, something I already knew and felt to be part of the cultural logic of our era, perhaps our country. Indeed, the idea of blowing up one’s school was already something my high school friends joked about: it was one of the major plot points of the 1988 film [Heathers](#), a film my friends and I watched and re-watched with a sense of both ambivalence and subversive delight, never sure if we were cheering for the homicidal J.D. or his morally grounded girlfriend, Heather. The final image of J.D. – in which he is wearing what we would now call a suicide vest – has all the ambiguity with which we imbue that post 9/11 totem. He reminds us that who is a freedom fighter and who is a terrorist is often just another way of asking how you define your own sense of oppression.

That I encountered the idea of a school massacre first as a Hollywood film implies something about the history of violence that is harder to fit within the narrow confines of the gun control debate – that mass violence is now, and has long been, a consumer spectacle. And this life of violence as spectacle marks both a continuity and a break with what has come before.

Many [critics have noted the whiteness of mass shooters](#), as they have also noted the whiteness of gun culture and the NRA's increasingly white nationalist fervor. And yet, even as we can point to these lineages of a racist state, there is something broken with our televised ritual of carnage. The mass shooting is an act we now know by the numbers; its moves, its totals. The phrase "active shooter," the grieving parents, the presidential statements, and then finally, the cellphone footage and violent manifestos. We experience them as spectacles because, as [Guy Debord wrote](#), the spectacle is that part of consumer culture that requires nothing of you but your passivity.

And yet for all its current routine and for all of the gun's racial freight, there is still an ambiguity about the shooter, an uncertainty much like the ambiguous uncertainty about J.D. at the end of the classic 1980's film. The mass shooter poses a kind of problem of genre: he is not quite a terrorist, as he seldom belongs to a organization or even a recognizable version of society, and yet given the American intimacy with slaughter as politics by other means, he can neither be said to be just a "troubled loner," as if a mass shooter were just some kind of weaponized Smiths fan.

A History of Racialized Mass Violence

It should be noted, however, that for all the ambiguity of the mass shooter, racialized mass violence as spectacle is nothing new. As Jacqueline Goldsby argues in her book [Spectacular Secret](#), America's ur-form of mass violence, lynching, needs to be understood as part of the popular culture of the late 19th and early 20th century. Lynchings were photographed, disseminated, and even fought over by photographers for copyrights to the images. In one of the more publicized lynchings of the late 19th century, anti-lynching activist Samuel Burdett recounts how he stumbled on a crowd converging around a hastily made platform, and assumed it was for "some kind of entertainment," which in a way it was: the public murder of Henry Smith, an African American accused of raping and murdering a small white girl. It was such a large event that special trains had been arranged and the photographer made sure his images would be recorded by the Library of Congress.

Lynching, Goldsby maintains, was part of a larger cultural world in which public spectacles of violence and disaster were produced and consumed. She writes of Coney Island's disaster shows, in which one could watch the sinking of Spanish battleships during the U.S.-Spanish War or the burning of skyscrapers or moving pictures of the great San Francisco earthquake. And indeed, lynching was often met with a theatrical air – there was a certain script to be followed and set narratives of black criminality and violated white womanhood to be enacted (narratives often hiding far more mundane reasons, such as workers complaining about stolen pay or the seizure of African American land). Most of all, the lynching was a public ritual of death, maiming, and the final dismemberment of the black body. Like all rituals, this one also had a determined choreographed chronology – so much so that on more than one occasion lynchers rented opera theaters to display the dead body of the victim and charged admission. Lynching was anything

but secret; they were publicly and popularly organized spectacles: events that objectify and turn into a material force a particular world view.

In that sense, lynching should be seen as part of the mass consumer culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Lynching shared with the lantern shows of [Jacob Riis](#), for example, the performance of looking at the other. Riis would invite middle class viewers to watch his scientific portraits of the poor, often far removed from the urban neighborhoods in which they were shot. While Riis did not openly advocate violence against the impoverished residents of New York City, such forms of looking could not be separated from the police mug shots and criminal gazettes from which Riis often borrowed for his own image-making – his [How the Other Half Lives](#) was as much an invitation for sympathy as it was surveillance. Equally, the immense popularity of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows were often spectacular performances of ethnic cleansing: the re-enacting of battles, the shooting of buffalo, and the deploying Native American actors, including Sitting Bull, in "primitive" garb, made the actual violence of Westward expansion into a set piece spectacle fit for consumption. The Wild West Shows were so popular by the late 19th century that Buffalo Bill employed 500 actors and stage hands, renting entire train cars to move his performance from city to city. The popularity of these violent acts, to say nothing of the rise of minstrelsy, are America's original form of popular music, the events to which both Hollywood and rock 'n' roll can trace their roots.

We can think of such spectacles as the cultural expression of the very material origins of gun-culture. Arguing against liberal critics such as [Richard Hofstadter](#), and more recently [Pamela Haag](#), who suggest that "gun culture" is a contemporary phenomenon, [Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us](#) that U.S. settlers arrived the Americas armed to the teeth, mandating guns to white citizens for the sole purpose of seizing and holding land that belonged to Native Americans. It's not that she argues the "new right" and its professed love of guns is not real so much as that it's not "new" at all. The Second Amendment, often regarded by gun control advocates as a public right to create "well regulated militias," was indeed a private right too, as the militias were the responsibility of all abled bodied white men. [Mark Ames](#) poses the question another way, asking why there weren't more slave revolts in the 18th and 19th centuries in the U.S. Like Dunbar-Ortiz, he concludes that a well-armed white citizenry acted as a militia ready and willing to put down rebelling slaves. The second amendment, far from being an anachronism, acted as a "sacred covenant" ensuring that white men were mobilized to keep slaves, hold land, and ultimately keep order through an ever-increasing number of social crises – including the Indian wars, workers' revolts, and challenges to the Jim Crow order.

Lynching, gun culture, and popular spectacle functioned in the 19th and 20th centuries as a means to create cross-class communities of whiteness. The late 19th century was a time of immense cultural and economic upheaval in the United States, as small farmers and small manufacturers were wiped out during the consolidation of the "gilded age." Even economically secure Americans could witness such events as the nationwide [1877 Great Railroad Strike](#) that brought in federal troops to gun down often interracial crowds of striking workers; "Coxey's Army," a ragtag movement of the unemployed and landless farmers set to march on Washington; or the expansion of the "Great White Fleet" to annex lands far away from the continental U.S., and come away thinking modernity a destructive, alienating force. The West, rather than a place

to absorb class tensions, was now bursting with them, foisting its angry farmers and railroad workers into the center of public life.

“Spectacle lynching,” [writes Dora Apel](#), emerged out of this cauldron of class conflict and modernity at just the moment “when wealthy white landowners began to fear an association between poor whites and blacks.” And it emerged, she demonstrates, in order “to consolidate white supremacy at a time when the wealth gap between rich and poor whites was growing.” The racial spectacle – whether the lantern show of the racially liminal immigrant poor, or the Wild West Show, or lynching – allowed white men and women to enter modernity on the sure footing of white power. It enabled a form of mastery over the very tools – the cinematic image and the new forms of mobility – that threatened to displace them culturally and economically.

[Mark Seltzer writes of a “pathological public sphere”](#) to theorize the celebrity of serial killers, the way private and public tear at each other and reveal each other. Lynching does something similar: it creates a public sphere in which white people can recognize each other’s whiteness; make public a once hidden, private state of feeling. It is lynching photos that often did this work. Looking at them reminded viewers of the way the observing white crowd is the subject of the photo even more than is the mangled black corpse. This is why, when one says that lynching *produces whiteness*, it is meant with a material literality. It is through the manifestation of crowds, the cross-class and regional alliances of white people joined in a common purpose, that whiteness is produced. “Blackness” creating “whiteness” is not theoretical – and the memorialization through photography and souvenir hunting that accompanies lynching only reinforce this truth. In response to the subversive, multiethnic and democratic counter-public spheres created by the Great Railroad Strike or Fusion Populists, the coordinated and ritualized act of lynching could impose a reproducible, immediately transferrable, and spectacular event to remake a “whites only” public sphere.

Mass Shootings and the Privatization of Whiteness

The parallels between mass shootings and lynching seem at first glance to be striking: both are ritualized spectacles of violence, often enacted by white men, men who have racist and sexual grievances that they imagine justifies their radical act. There is also the theatricality of the massacre and the formalized manner in which they occur: the duffle bag, the thousands of rounds of ammunition, the manifestos, the monologues spoken straight into the camera. And like lynching, photos circulate after the fact surreptitiously, not quite in private, but not exactly in public either. [Websites devoted to Klebold and Harris](#) and white nationalist subcultures, such as the Atomwaffen and militia movements, take credit for having inspired Nicholas Cruz or Timothy McVey. “White nationalists,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “are the irregular forces – the volunteer militias – of the actually existing economic order.” It is tempting to see a society armed to the teeth, in desperate fear of one another, as a symbol for our neoliberal times.

And yet as tempting as this analogy is there remains a singular problem – the mass shooter attacks the very formation the lynching was designed to generate: the white public. If lynching was constructed to allow the entrance of whites into modernity on the ontological surety of collective violence, the mass shooting, inversely, makes such a collectivity impossible. Whether by accident or design, mass shootings occur only in places where a public can construct itself as

a community: worksites, concert halls, dance clubs, and of course, schools. Mass shootings are a perverse map of our own public institutions, the more democratic and the more open, the more likely they are to be a target. If the culture of lynching marked the beginnings of whiteness as a project of modernity, then surely we are witnessing that project's end.

Which is not to say we've witnessed the end of white supremacy. Rather, whiteness has been remade for the post-modern, neoliberal era. Rather than experiencing whiteness through the collective projects of state funded suburbs, or job protection by racially exclusive craft unions, or immigration quotas, the neoliberal era places the onus on the individual. As Margaret Thatcher famously said, there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families. Individuals and families which are now heavily armed. As Patrick Blanchfield remarks in a recent [interview](#), gun culture is a form of security in a society in which security is not social, but privatized. HBO's massive hit show *The Walking Dead* may be instructive here – rather than the Western hero who protects the community from bandit cattle ranchers in *Shane* or Native Americans in *Stagecoach*, we have a war of all against all.

Mass shootings strike a national sense of horror precisely because they reveal an uncanny and barely suppressed truth about the collapse of a certain kind of white collectivity that marked the height of the Fordist era. The many indicators of health for white working-class people do not look good. Life expectancy for [white men has declined](#) for the first time in many decades, and for entirely different reasons than usual – disease epidemics such as HIV/AIDS or Spanish Flu or war. Unlike those, this decline is mostly attributable to a [declining standard of living for working class white men](#). While in aggregate white people continue to hold more wealth and earn higher pay, the blue collar “labor aristocracy” that relied on [high wages from union jobs](#) has steadily diminished.

One way to pose the question that emerges from this not-quite-analogical situation might be this: who is it that the mass shooter is lynching? If Mark Ames sees the mass shooter as a kind of rebellion against Reaganomics, and Dunbar-Ortiz sees the mass shooter as a kind of right-wing white vigilante, I might suggest that the mass shooter is in fact both. After all, in many of their [manifestos](#) these shooters perceive themselves to be targeting a world of feminists, liberals, and people of color – Elliot Rodger, Dylan Roof, Anders Behring Breivik, and Jim David Adkisson can all be describe this way. They strike against a world in which whiteness, rather than being a source of power, has become something unattainable for them. In [Greg Palast's tragic tribute to his former classmate](#), Stephen Paddock, he makes a similar point: Paddock was a working class “math whiz” who should have gone to “Stanford or UCLA” but instead got a job drafting at Lockheed Martin – until Lockheed Martin closed its doors in the great outsourcing and job flight of the late 1980's. If one listens to the [speeches of Richard Spencer](#), this is the point he makes over and over: in the privatized, atomized world of neoliberal capitalism, there is no collectivity for whiteness. Remembering that, in the 1920's, the Klan boasted 4 million members and dozens upon dozens of elected representatives, I might offer that Spencer has a kind of point. The mass shooter is blowing up a public sphere that can no longer provide the collective violence or collective security necessary to reproduce his identity.

Debord insists that we think of the spectacle as wielding a kind of totalitarian power. The spectacle is the final victory of the commodity over democracy. For Debord, this totalitarian

power comes from the separation of the consumer from the making of the image: “The spectacle’s estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual’s gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him.” The innovation, one could say, of spectacle lynching was to produce a mass culture of popular participation, quite literally on the bodies of black men. The Alt Right proposes something similar: they can gather collectively and reclaim an unalienated identity by forms of direct action. In an era in which we are individualized, in which collective solutions to problems are thrown back upon the anomic self, we should not be surprised that white supremacy is informed by the same trends. We ought not be surprised that the mass shooter is structurally analogous to the entrepreneur, [an individualistic “high achiever“](#) who sets out to solve a collective problem on his own. That the mass shooter should blow up the very public they wish to master suggests the extent to which neoliberalism can no longer sustain the very subjects who are supposed to be its beneficiaries: the Paddocks, Cruzes, and Rodgers. It is a system in crisis.

In the years after the Columbine massacre, I can reflect now that both the ambivalence I felt toward *Heathers*’ J.D. as well as the sense of *déjà vu* suggest the same thing: I am victim and accomplice of whiteness at the same time, and whiteness, like history, is a process without a subject.

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