School shootings in the USA: Popular culture as risk, teen marginality, and violence against peers

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School shootings in the USA: Popular culture as risk, teen marginality, and violence against peers

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Abstract
This article offers a critical appraisal of the widespread argument that violent media content is to blame for deadly school violence. The departing premise of this study is that, because of its reliance on sophisticated technologies, popular culture productions represent manufactured risks. The implications of this approach are three: the ‘impact’ of popular culture will depend on the social risk positions students occupy within the social mapping of the school; there will be risks associated to the observational shortcomings of popular culture as a self-referent system; and the risks implied in controlling deviance in schools, including policies destined to cope with popular culture’s presumed adverse effect on students’ behaviors, must be explored. The risk approach allows us to understand school shooting events as the end result of a series of interrelated social, cultural, and political processes. The point at which these factors intersect tends to produce the conditions under which school shooters may emerge.

Keywords
manufactured risks, popular culture, school shootings, teen marginality

Introduction
Violent behaviors have become commonplace within US schools and colleges. Such violence expresses in many forms ranging from the traditional bullying of frail students and hazing, to threats with deadly weapons such as guns and knives, and razor blades, to the most extreme – but fewer cases – of school shootings with multiple victims. Although the number of violent episodes at school has decreased since the early 1990s, the fact is that this type of incident, along with students’ fears of being attacked at school, has continued to be usual in the United States (Newman, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

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Moore, Petrie, Braga, and McLaughlin (2003) have estimated that between 1992 and 2001, 35 incidents of lethal violence occurred in which students showed up at their school or at a school-sponsored event and started firing at their schoolmates and teachers. In order to obtain a fuller view of the extent of violence in schools, we must also look at the number of school-related shootings not resulting in death. According to the National School Safety and Security Services (2010), 445 school shootings of this type occurred in the US between 2000 and 2010; the figure does not include the number of firearms confiscated at school that were not used in shootings.

Fox and Savage (2009) estimates that between 1990 and 2008, 14 incidents of multiple fatality shootings occurred on college campuses in the US. The Virginia Tech incident alone produced 32 fatalities and 25 wounded. Additionally, 70 college students have received non-fatal wounds in rampage school shooting incidents. It is noteworthy that since 1999 serious cases of school shootings have shifted from the inner city to the suburbs. This geographical shift has been accompanied by a change in the character of school shootings: from vengeance against individual students in the inner city, to indiscriminate retribution in the suburbs. Still, Larkin (2009) suggests that some of the causes behind these incidents remain unchanged: revenge against bullying and the negative influence of the mass media on youths. Even though school-related homicides represent a very small percentage of all homicides that occur among school-age children, these deaths jointly with different forms of school violence continue to pose an important social problem for children, parents, and communities (Logue, 2008).

In this article I will examine one of the most pervasive theses among those presented to explain the genesis of school shooting events: the alleged relationship between fantasy media violence and real everyday violence. The key theoretical premise driving this investigation is that the creations of popular culture represent an element of risk in late-modern society. Without doubt, society has not only developed a substantial number of lay and scientific discourses regarding the risks implied in the broadcasting of popular culture, but has also proceeded to define practical guidelines and polices aimed at dealing with the perceived hazards implied in its productions. Certainly, popular culture has frequently been presented as an artifice of deception and manipulation: a collection of transitory codes and manipulated and titillating images destined to influence and exploit the identity and tastes of the young (Turnau, 2004). Such manipulation has acquired an exceptional degree of intensity as a result of the post-Fordist economy’s strategy to fully integrate culture into commodity production. Consequently, the economy has become increasingly dependent on constant aesthetic innovation and manipulation (Jameson, 1990).

The violent messages and images contained in TV series, movies, and video games have been blamed by parents, politicians, and segments of the academic community for producing a detrimental effect on teens’ psychological wellbeing, even offered as direct causal variables in the explanation of rampage school shootings. The fact is that violent movies and video games, together with the sophisticated audio-visual technologies that go into their making, have been converted into objects of fear. As a result, the diffusion of these creations has prompted a bitter controversy regarding their potential harmful side-effects on society, a controversy as intense as that surrounding the perceived risks implied in other advanced technologies.

Thinking about school violence through risk theory will allow me to present a more comprehensive view of the nature of school shooting events than previously available. Rather than attempting to verify the existence of a direct causal link between violent media content and youth deviance, I will aim to show how the convergence of factors such as the prevailing culture of
narcissism, the suburban location of schools, school administrators’ preference for zero tolerance policies, and the self-referent nature of the popular culture system, tend to generate a propitious social niche for the occurrence of rampage school shootings.

I contend that the strong narcissist content of contemporary popular culture, not violence itself, should be employed as the analytical framework within which several hostile types of social relationships at school can be best understood. It must be noted, however, that the influence of this much larger cultural framework on teens is likely to be mediated by their respective social risk positions (Beck, 1992). Within the context of the present study, a social risk position, or the likelihood of being involved in a school shooting either as victim or perpetrator, refers both to the geographic location of schools (inner city versus suburban) and to the place teens occupy within the status hierarchy of the school.

The first section of this paper offers a summary exposition of the main streams of risk theory and the ways in which each points to important issues regarding the nature of school shooting events: society’s narcissistic culture; consumption and social stratification in teens; the micro-politics of educational institutions; and the treatment of the “un-cool” by the system of popular culture. The second section examines the cultural context within which school rampage shootings should be understood. Following Luhmann’s (2008) writings on risk, I contend that popular culture represents a self-referent system that operates by recourse to the binary code cool/un-cool. The essence of coolness, says Milner (2004), consists of taking on an air of seeming indifference, of being able to control emotionally induced body states, and showing a self-conscious aplomb in overall behavior. To this cultural standard we must add contemporary society’s strong command to enjoy (Lipovetsky, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The third section explores the question of the ways in which the culture of narcissism is experienced within the school environment. Special attention is given to how the messages and symbols contained in popular culture contribute to the formation of prestigious in-groups alongside the creation of marginalized out-groups, and their self-defeating behaviors. The next section identifies the risks emanating from school administrators’ growing inclination to adopt “governmentality” approaches to control students’ unruly and violent behaviors. Some of these control strategies seek to curb anti-social behaviors that teachers blame on popular culture content itself. The following section identifies the risks involved in the self-referential nature of the popular culture system. I investigate the ways in which, by means of its own operations, popular culture becomes opaque to the negative end of its binary code, giving way to ominous forms of peer marginalization and suffering the everyday experience of school. In the conclusion I bring together the different findings produced by exploring the potential of risk theory in clarifying the nature of school shooting events.

**Theorizing Risk**

Lupton (1999) has identified three different ways in which the risk perspective appears in the scientific literature: objectivist, constructionist, and governmentality.

**The objectivist approach**

The objectivist approach contends that risks are objective hazards, which can be scientifically measured by experts. Experimental studies of the effects of violent media content on teens can be
used to illustrate such an approach. A significant number of these studies aim to show the existence of a positive correlation between fantasy violence and real violence. It is argued that media violence harms children’s health and wellbeing: it can trigger aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and abnormal fear of being harmed (see, e.g., Gerbner and Gross, 1994; Cornell, 2006; Williams, 2009).

However, Ferguson (2007, 2008) has expressed the position that experimental studies are not able to capture how teens exposed to violent media content will behave in real-life situations. Further criticism of the objectivist approach to popular culture resides in the fact that media messages have a tendency to be oblique: they will be mediated by a wide diversity of factors and can, thus, be understood differently by different people (Melucci, 1989). Next, we must reckon with differences in the way people cope with adverse environments. Henry (2009) remarks in this connection that not all marginalized kids resort to spectacular violence as an answer to their oppressive and subordinate condition at school; some are able to cope with the abuse, whereas others withdraw and experience diminished self-esteem and a low sense of self-efficacy.

Two conclusions emerge out of the previous considerations. First, even though most social relationships in contemporary society are mediated by images (Dubord, 2010), the nature and extent of violent imagery’s influence on youth remains difficult to determine. Second, the impact of popular culture on society must be understood within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts within which its messages are conveyed (Brown, 2007).

The constructionist approach
Beck’s (1992) *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* is surely the most comprehensive exposition of the constructionist approach. Beck is concerned with the risks and potential side-effects which are inherent in the exploitation of advanced technological systems such as atomic energy, the genetic manipulation of foodstuffs, cloning, and the complex architecture of modern financial systems. Beck (1992) maintains that the sense of risk stemming out of novel technological processes – whose ecological side-effects are to a large extent unknown and occasionally imperceptible to the victims – has produced a strong political concern regarding the issue of how these threats could be prevented or minimized. Since science can at best produce a framework of probabilities of statements for dealing with late-modern risks, society finds itself engaged in a bitter controversy whereby risk arguments bounce back between scientists, politicians, and the public.

Risk discourses and narratives vis-a-vis the potential negative effect of popular culture on society have proliferated since the Columbine shooting of 1999. For instance, parents’ fear of “inappropriate” media content has translated into calls for the official censorship of violence and explicit sex in television and movies. Video games pose a distinctive problem for parents, especially after it became known that the Columbine school shooters were avid video-game players (Hoffman, 2005; Cornell, 2006; Jagodzinski, 2006). The Columbine massacre sent shock waves through the political system, triggering the most intense period ever of congressional legislative action concerning school violence. Political actors looked for culprits in those areas they could influence through policy-making activity: gun control, new school programs, and security measures. Ultimately, toying with freedom of speech was perceived to pose more risks to society than regulating content in popular culture (Lawrence and Birkland, 2004). Scharrer, Weidman, and Bissell (2003) and Hsiang and McCombs (2004) have noted that the media procured a “popular
“culture” definition of how school shootings could happen. In the case of Columbine, the media blamed violence in movies and individual pathologies for being at the center of such an event. The popular culture system itself countered the calls for media censorship following the Columbine massacre by arguing in favor of self-regulation (Hoy and Andrews, 2006).

Beck (1992) also argues that risks are inevitably mediated through social and cultural processes and that the potential adverse effects of modern technology will depend on the risk position individuals occupy in society. This premise suggests, as was expressed earlier, that students’ divergent social risk positions must be considered when coming to grips with victimization in schools.

Also writing within the constructionist perspective, Luhmann (2008) contends that the self-referent nature of modern functional systems tends to pose various types of risks for society. The risks signaled by Luhmann (2008: 74) originate in faults pertaining to the observational-cognitive capacities of functional systems: “The first is in the choice of distinction … of an already specified two-sided form, of exclusion of other distinctions … The second risk is in indicating the one (and not the other) side of the distinction.” Thus, there is always an observational risk of using one distinction to the exclusion of the other. I argue that popular culture represents a self-referent system: In line with the operation of other closed systems, it works by recourse to a binary code (cool/un-cool), and is able to refer to itself. As a self-referent system, the popular culture system is exposed to the same cognitive limitations afflicting other closed systems: As it becomes more complex and self-referential, it becomes more opaque to itself. In this paper I will explore the risks emerging out of the trivialization of the negative end of popular culture’s binary code.

The governmentality approach
Finally, the governmentality approach poses that risks can be only understood with reference to specific social, political, and historical contexts and purposes. Adopting this approach transforms policy issues not conventionally understood as risks into risk problems (Rothstein, 2006). In referring to school violence, Newman (2004) suggests that many administrators have accepted the principle that it is more productive to prevent school shootings through the implementation of strict security measures than to predict when and where these incidents are likely to occur. The natural consequence of this approach is a strong predilection for zero tolerance policies as a means to avoid problematic behaviors in schools. In so doing, administrators intensify the oppressive environment in schools, thus increasing the hostile behaviors they are trying to bring under control (Milner, 2004).

The Culture of Narcissism
Lipovetsky’s (1992, 2006) analyses of the evolution of consumer capitalism offer valuable clues relating to the ways in which acute narcissism has become embedded in the culture of contemporary society. Such evolution comprises three principal stages. The first stage began in the 1880s and ended with the Second World War. This is a period of democratization of consumption made possible by the application of machine technology and the precepts of scientific management. The second stage of consumer capitalism goes from the Second World War to the end of the 1970s. Fordism is taken to its very limits and consumption became a marker of prestige and social standing. The creation of artificial needs, the intense exploitation of youth sub-cultures, and the
merchandizing of a fun morality translated into a cultural mutation of significant proportions: the de-legitimation of Victorian morality and most ideals of duty and self-sacrifice. Stage III of consumer capitalism starts in the early 1980s and prevails until today. In this third stage, narcissism becomes a consumer product: the power to make choices and to achieve self-fulfillment are seen as goods and services in themselves. For Lipovetsky (1992) the new era is one dominated by the mandates of a painless ethic that rearranges the way people relate to social institutions, to each other, and to themselves. This is an era organized around desire and hyper-consumption, hedonism, and a far-reaching command to enjoy.

One dimension of existence where the new narcissistic demands are being imposed upon individuals is that of the body, including personal care, image, and physical wellbeing. Melucci (1989) claims that the body has invaded the social sphere; it is now perceived as a subject of needs, a secret realm to which only the individual holds the key, and which is used as a vehicle to seek a definition of the self.

The practice of sports stands at the very center of this trend whereby individuals try to approach the physical and aesthetic stereotypes imposed by popular culture. Burstyn (2001: 11–14) notes that “the embodied athlete has become, on a social scale, the living mythic symbol-bearer... the rites of sport create value-bearing mythologies around particular kinds of heroic figures large, strong, often violent, record-setting champions.” Furthermore, in the US physicality has acquired a disquieting meaning: the alleged equivalence between fitness and toughness. According to Mrozek (1980) many coaches who were combatants in the Second World War and the Korean War are to blame for introducing a highly Darwinist ideology of competition and toughness into the playing fields of America; such ideology has been perpetuated by newer generations of children and adults involved with the practice of sports. It comes as no surprise, then, that in US schools and colleges, athletes have naturally come to associate sports with certain abusive and violent behaviors towards physically weaker peers.

A number of scholars have identified the potential risks associated to the present culture of narcissism. In their view, the widespread circulation of ideologies which praise rampant individualism and call for extreme forms of ego-building foster vicious social relationships and prove detrimental to the physical and mental wellbeing of individuals. For instance, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) consider that the present “civilization of desire” and the much-advertized liberalization of morality offer precarious freedoms at best. On the one hand, individuals are required to become the center of their own lives, whereas on the other, they are forced to strive for self-building under conditions which are generally beyond their control. Lipovetsky (2006) remarks that, even though society celebrates the deregulation of existence, most individuals tend to express the feeling of living under excruciating stress, of not being well understood nor recognized by others, of living on the margins of the joyful life society has to offer. Lipovetsky (1992, 2006) points out that the process of institutional erosion of family, class, and state has produced a social void with a proclivity to be filled by extreme forms of status stratification and overconsumption: narcissism, individualism, and consumerism are inextricable interwoven. Finally, Bauman (2004) argues that the unregulated freedoms of “liquid modernity” bring novel forms of insecurity and violence, as evidenced by the millions of marginalized individuals who do not fit into the social categories by which the privileged define their own humanity. These are the “interstitial creatures” that disrupt the tranquility of the law-abiding citizen. Bauman (2004) includes among the ranks of the marginalized the so-called illegal immigrants, the asylum seekers, the chronically unemployed, and the
homeless. Yet, it is justifiable to include in this list the millions of kids who are unable to comply with the unyielding narcissistic and aesthetic demands imposed on them by contemporary popular culture. It is out of their ranks that a new variety of monster, the suburban teen-killer, is born.

Zizek (2008) has offered a number of insights on both narcissism and violence that are valuable for understanding the vicious and cruel social relationships and practices occurring within social institutions. Zizek (2008: 87) poses that critics who complain how in today's hedonistic society true values are lacking, totally miss the point; that the true opposite of egotistic self-love is not altruism but resentment. “The problem with desire is that it is always the desire of the other.” This notion signifies that children are driven by analogous narcissistic desires, nevertheless only some will be perceived as meeting the standards of the related culture and engage in the shaming of others. Narcissism, says Zizek (2008), can be experienced as self-enhancement but also as a constant vulnerability to many potential risks. Indeed, despite the heterogeneity found in individual manifestations of narcissism, scholars have come to recognize two focal categories of the pathology. Grandiose narcissism implies arrogant behaviors, a strong desire for respect and admiration, aggression, feelings of entitlement, and willingness to exploit others. On the other hand, vulnerable narcissism comprises feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and excessive feelings of self-devaluation. In both cases narcissism acts as a mask that conceals underlying feelings of low self-esteem (less conscious in the case of grandiose types), which tends to translate into chronic consumerism and aggressive behaviors (Walach, 2008).

By overemphasizing the values of material comfort and psychological wellbeing, narcissism and consumerism have exacerbated feelings of resentment, hatred, and jealousy towards other people’s real or imagined success. Such frustration can be readily identified in the social imaginaries of school shooters. Some of the texts posted by Eric Harris point to the close relationship between shame, narcissism, and revenge. Larkin (2009: 1311) collected the following passage from Harris's webpage:

I will rig up explosives all over town and detonate each one of them at will after I mow down a whole [expletive] high strung area full of you snotty rich ass rich [expletive] high strung god-like attitude having worthless pieces of [expletive] whores.

For his part, Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, told his roommates about having a supermodel girlfriend called Jelly who lived in outer space, traveled around in a spaceship, and called him Spanky.

Narcissism has turned into a contemporary social malaise of epidemic proportions. Aside from the condition of overconsumption, extreme individualism, and decline of community noted by cultural analysts during the 1970s (see Lasch, 1991, also Sennett, 1992), it has come to include new symptoms such as anxiety, a pervasive loss of meaning, and a constant sense of dissatisfaction. In conclusion, the massive diffusion of narcissist images, values, and messages by popular culture and the media represents one important piece of the complex puzzle posed by lethal school violence.

Popular Culture Goes to School
Lash (1993) suggests that under the regime of “disorganized capitalism,” reflexivity not only involves rational self-monitoring but also comprises an important aesthetic dimension.
This aesthetic dimension is embodied in aspects of life such as style, consumption, leisure, and membership in sub-cultural groups. Now, teens represent an essential part of the consumerist trend in contemporary society. It is estimated that the teen market will amount to $200 billion in 2012. The most popular consumer items among teens are clothes and accessories, music, and entertainment, in that order. In view of these figures, there can be no doubt that marketing and selling to teenagers is a way of shaping their lifestyles. The fact is that children and young adults draw on popular culture and consumer goods in their construction of subjectivities and social relations at school; participation in popular culture is imbued with meanings about who one is and might become (Saltmarsh, 2009).

Boden (2006) contends that two aspects of popular culture influence the attempts of children in trying to construct a “fashioned body”: sports, including physical activity and the associated brands and logos, and pop music and its stars, including their outfits and lifestyles. In both cases we find that children actively seek to develop and sustain a sense of the “cool.” In Boden’s view (2006) children have the capacity to imagine an idealized version of themselves, which they tend to realize through consumerist practices. Hence the ownership and display of sports goods and the imitation of celebrity lifestyles are closely connected to the processes creating social inclusion/exclusion at school.

Thompson and Kyle (2005) have argued that in white suburban schools, where neither race nor ethnicity serve as critical reference points for the construction of difference, issues of sub-cultural identification become crucial in the development of in-groups and out-groups. Sub-cultures and cliques revolving around family prestige, academic success, sports, and fashion, as they develop in such schools, are as real and divisive for students as those based on demographic differences. These are cliques formed by students with similar lifestyles and interests who are drawn together into relatively homogeneous groups, producing a stratification system that ranks peer groups hierarchically by prestige and popularity (Demuth, 2004). Students at the top of the school status hierarchy represent role models and exemplars of the cool. Their judgment about who and what best represents coolness dominates the school environment, much more so than competing definitions stemming from teachers and school administrators. Popular kids will establish the social normative of the in-group and be ready to enforce it.

Milner (2004) argues that because teen cliques are mainly status groups they are prone to express significant concern with issues of style. Within the disciplinarian context of the suburban school, kids cannot change their everyday reality except in one aspect where their power is supreme: the control and evaluation of one another. The real and only power teens have, states Milner (2004), is status power to create their own prestige system based on their own criteria. Carnes (2003) provides evidence for the relevance of sub-cultural differences within suburban and rural schools. Here many kids describe their schools as places that readily put people into categories; but more importantly for the present paper students expressed the opinion that the top three factors producing strong group boundaries are style (60%), athletic achievement (53%), and appearance (52%). It must be emphasized that during the 1950s and 1960s athletes, not fashionable kids, occupied the first place in schools’ and colleges’ status hierarchies. Further, when asked about crossing status boundaries, students in the sample rated those of appearance and style as the most difficult to get over. What these figures show is that the school status system thrives on popular culture symbols and consumerist practices, and that consumer culture is inextricable linked with the social life of teenagers (Milner, 2004).
Breaching the implied teen status hierarchies usually brings with it retaliation in the form of physical disciplining. In fact, students rejected by peers tend to be targets of harassment and bullying, generally in the presence of other students (Bishop et al., 2004). Victims of bullying and different forms of shaming become alienated from social relations at school; they have no opportunity to mingle with their high-status peers and be seen as cool (Staff and Kreager, 2008). They are viewed as being extremely un-cool, and tend to be referred to by means of demeaning and humiliating terms such as geeks, dirt-bags, nerds, ghettoes, faggots, freaks, dorks, losers, goths, trash, rednecks, or farmers. In order to circumvent the risk of being abused, these marginalized kids resort to a number of avoidance strategies such as skipping school, cutting class, and staying away from certain school spaces where bullying may occur such as locker rooms, car parks, and the gym.

Bender, Shubert, and McLaughlin (2001) argue that school shooters are invisible kids: they are overall quiet and shy; they tend to be victims of bullies; and they fail to connect with teachers and administrators. Nevertheless, socially excluded individuals may respond to their plight with extreme violence even towards innocent targets, and engage in self-defeating behaviors such as unreasonable risk-taking and procrastination (Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister, 2002; Barry et al., 2007).

Phillips (2005) has pointed to a critical aspect of peer marginalization in schools: the normative masculinity discourse that traverses the life of these institutions. Such a discourse is inherent in competitive activities such as sport, exhibits a remarkable degree of intensity when it penetrates the educational environment, and often converts schools into a harsh environment for boys. Indeed, members of in-groups are usually involved in athletics or are trendily dressed youths who marginalize other students for not being able to approximate to the narcissistic ideals imposed by popular culture. Malaby (2007) observes that school authorities find ways to privilege male athletes by funneling a range of leadership school positions in their direction, including a subdued message to impose discipline in the classroom and hallways. One result of such empowerment is that schools are validating some of the violent ordering processes that go along with hegemonic masculine identity performances. In school-related venues, these athletes tend to develop a defiant identity whereby they maintain their elite position by recourse to violence or threat of physical violence.

Masculinity at school is constructed around dominant cultural discourses and ideologies including “physical strength and bravado; suppression of certain feminized feelings such as remorse, empathy, and uncertainty; strict heterosexuality … economic power; and authority over women and other men, and capacity for violence and aggression” (Malaby, 2007: 158). Males placed in non-masculine categories are subject to a variety of disciplinary procedures whose purpose is to maintain them on the margins. The case of high-school student M. Carneal illustrates the point: he was shamed when the school newspaper spread the gossip that he was gay. He arrived at school with a shotgun, killing three people and wounding five. According to a student enrolled in Columbine High School: “Harris and Klebold would walk with their heads down, because if they looked up they would get thrown into lockers and get called a fag” (Bender, Shubert, and McLaughlin, 2001: 106).

Larkin (2007) notes that, in defending their own social privileges, peer-elite groups such as athletes perpetuate much of the abuse and humiliation as that suffered by Harris and Klebold. In Malaby’s (2007) view, standards of hegemonic masculinity are embedded in multiple cultural forms, so much so that even marginalized and subordinate groups also come to recognize and validate them. A scarcely popular school kid in Malaby’s (2007: 159) study reported:
The football ideology is so glorious. I always wondered what it would have been like if I had been a football player. I think it would be great to be in the limelight and be part of a team, have a geisha girl bring me candy three times a day.

The cruelty that pervades social relationships at school, says Milner (2004), is the result of an elitist peer-status systems and the competition resulting from a largely inexpansible resource such as prestige. Such a competitive environment, continues Milner (2004), tends to perpetuate a sense of insecurity among students: it makes teens feel anxious if they do not wear the rights clothes or drive the right cars. The final outcome of such dynamic is the development of self-defeating behaviors and negative self-labeling.

The Micro-Politics of Educational Institutions

Milner (2004) views schools as the ultimate site of disciplinarian control. As such, schools represent the very negation of the widespread “civilization of desire” theorized by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Schools are, indeed, authoritarian institutions managed upon rigid rules and regulations where students have to endure a disciplinary order without receiving any legitimate reasons for having to do so.

Nonetheless, the dominant status hierarchies and the disciplinarian character of schools are always under dispute by students. Wilkins’ (2008) ethnographic study of marginalized youth sub-cultures identified different claims to coolness by outcast kids at school. Most of these claims involved inchoate rebellions against the social hierarchies of adolescence. Wilkins (2008) says that resistance to authority and to high-ranking peers may occasionally adopt well-defined forms that serve as an outlet for kids to be seen as cooler. In certain cases, marginalized kids join subordinate sub-cultures, such as the Goth sub-culture, where they may share their feelings of oppression (Burgess, Garbarino, and Carlson, 2006; Murray, 2006). However, the continous search for identity without freedom is, as Bauman (2001) observes, “full of sound and fury.” Losers, states Bauman (2001: 16), “will seek pegs on which they can hang their shared misgivings and carry out the exorcism rites in the company of other similarly and anxious individuals.” Hence, diverse manifestations of narcissism may act as a subversive force able to undermine and disrupt the functioning of educational institutions.

It is important to emphasize that schools are increasingly defining and managing problems of discipline posed by teens through a prism of crime control. School criminalization has accelerated since the early 1990s across the socio-economic and geographic spectrum. Rule-breaking and mischievous students are more likely to be treated like criminals symbolically if not legally. Many infractions committed on school premises must now be reported to the police; students are subjected to checks, video surveillance, and personal searches by armed guards, police dogs or metal detectors (Hirschfield, 2008). Furthermore, corporal punishment is still applied in many states as a means to keep school discipline. Dupper and Montgomery (2008) note that more than a million cases of this type of punishment are annually reported in the US, but the number may be as high as three million cases. The authors also argue that this manner of punishment tends to make kids more violent and oppositional.

Contrary to general belief, zero tolerance policies toward drugs, alcohol, guns, and violence are not only the norm in inner-city schools. They also prevail in white suburban schools although
tailored to an audience that is cautious of the prospect of criminalizing valued students. In such schools 60% of teachers work alongside armed police. Moreover, drug-sniffing dogs are more common in suburban, rural, and predominantly white schools than in any other type of educational institution (Hirschfield, 2008).

In adhering to the governmentality approach, schools have turned behavioral risks as objects of management in their own right (Rothstein, 2006). Such trend includes treating behaviors directly influenced by popular culture as risks. Willet (2005: 142) notes that “a limited view of children’s peer culture assumes that children’s identities, partially defined through interactions around media, can be left behind when children walk through the school door.” By adopting this view school administrators embark upon a permanent defensive position toward an essential field of experience for children and adolescents. The drafting of meticulous ground rules to control the Pokemon game craze of the 1990s illustrates the point (see also Murray, 2008).

Writing in the same connection, Lambirth (2003) expresses the view that there is a significant level of aversion to popular culture in schools. In his analysis it is pleasure, understood as jouissance or pleasure of non-conformity, which stands at the root of adults’ fear of the interaction between popular culture and the supervised child at school. Lambirth (2003: 11) observes that, among teachers, there is a vast concern about popular culture texts, as these are perceived to invite children to transgress and subvert adult codes of behavior. Further, such texts may work to disrupt school discipline as they tend to present school as “old fashioned, puritanical, and over-disciplined … where dreadfully or ridiculously, children must be governed by others or self-restrained.”

The paradox of zero tolerance policies within schools is revealed in Arcus’ (2002: 180) finding that “children and youth are more likely to die in school shootings in states permitting schools to practice corporal punishment than in states in which this practice has been prohibited.” Dupper and Montgomery (2008: 246) add, in relation to the unintended consequences of such harsh policies, that “states with high rates of corporal punishment also tend to have higher rates of violence, aggression, and homicide committed by children.”

Newman’s (2004) examination of the administrative routines of schools where deadly shooting incidents took place concludes by stating that rampage shootings represent not only acts of revenge against bullies but also symbolic attacks upon schools’ organizational structures. Similarly, Larkin (2009) poses that school shootings are much more than mere acts of retribution; they represent, in his view, political events aimed at questioning the legitimacy of school authority and to condemn the vicious styles of social interaction that occur within school walls: rituals of humiliation, predatory behavior of elite students, and punishment of losers. Stein (2004) states that the thrill of hate and violence, such as were expressed by Harris and Klebod at Columbine, stands for protection against underlying vulnerability and despair. According to Stein (2004) these shooters understood the anguish and humiliation shared by millions of teens and conducted their attack in the name of a larger collectivity.

**Risks Deriving from the Self-Referential Nature of the Popular Culture System**

The literature of school shootings offers numerous discrete observations that, taken in their entirety, justify treating popular culture as a self-referent system. For instance, Brown (2007: 2)
notes that events and images “portraying violent acts of children circulate across media, replicate from the real to the news to prime time drama to movie-theater to video-game and back again.” For his part, Larkin (2009) suggests that the Columbine shooting represented a cultural watershed for many of the school shootings to come: a ready-made template that angered marginalized kids have replicated as to their spectacular staging. Hence, teens will not act in anger simply as a response to fantasy violence, but they may copy the templates offered by the media as a resource. These templates have been encoded in such a way as to promote the public understanding of the underlying meanings behind the shootings: a student seeking revenge via school shootings. As Stein (2004: 23) puts it: “the interpretation is already embedded in the folklore, in the language, in the bestselling books about Columbine.”

Frymer (2009: 1388–1389) states that, in covering the Columbine tragedy, the media went to great lengths in trying to portray the event in terms meaningful to its own operations and distinctions:

Following the shootings, media accounts … generated a full-blown postmodern spectacle of alien youth. That is the whole constellation of elements that fed into the shootings at Columbine were drawn into an ongoing series of entertaining, enticing, dramatic narratives and images that turned Harris and Klebold into the celebrities they ostensibly hoped to become and turned America’s suburban youth into an exotic new species to be observed, feared, and controlled.

Finally, in referring to the Virginia Tech massacre, Kolenic (2009: 1034) remarks:

Cho understood the power of brand establishment, evidenced by his sending between the attacks a packet to NBC, which contained twenty-five minutes of video, forty-three photographs in a number of violent and armed poses, as well as twenty-three pages of writing… It becomes clear that at least in his mind, this attack was built for reproduction, staged-to-be-seen… His attack was… staged for TV because that is what authenticity to Cho, looked like.

The self-referent nature of the popular culture system emphasizes the positive value of its code (the cool), while it devalues and trivializes its negative value (un-cool). In so doing, the system contributes to constructing the in-groups and the out-groups, which populate the social geography of the school. Trivialization is mostly articulated through comedies where subordinate groups take revenge on their oppressors (films such as The Revenge of the Nerds) or get a chance to be seen as cooler (TV shows such as The Big Bang Theory).

Nonetheless, the construction of the American "anti-hero" by popular culture comprises deeply troubling connotations regarding the whole range of tactics and rationales at the disposal of individuals in their quest to resist oppression and marginalization. Grixti (1994) suggests that some popular culture characters may well serve marginalized and subordinate individuals as they construct and sustain an alternative and idealized sense of themselves. This would be particularly true when individuals’ place in the social order is a matter of perception and often the product of diligently assembled illusions.

Moreover, Schwartz (2008) contends that many movies stress that we live in a world of dog-eats-dog where extreme forms of individualism thrive under cultural Darwinian styles of survival. Schwartz contends that many Hollywood anti-heroes epitomize the alienated male whose
behavior is a direct consequence of exposure to repressive institutions. The overall message of this kind of film genre is that, in spite of all the talk of government, justice, and the law, it is up to us to “clean up the muck.”

For his part, Zizek (2008) observes that there is a suicidal dimension to some marginalized movie characters as they come to perceive themselves as part of the degenerate population who should ultimately be removed from the streets. In *Taxi Driver*, for instance, De Niro’s aggressive-condescending “You talking to me?” encapsulates, in Zizek’s (2008) view, the meaning that Travis’s aggression is also aimed at himself. Such a theme reappears later in the film when after rescuing the abducted girl Travis mimics with the forefinger of his right hand a gun aimed at his bloodstained head and mockingly triggers it.

At the core of Zizek’s and Schwartz’s movie analyses lies a representation of the outcast and marginalized as being trapped in the double dynamic of victim and victimizer. Nevertheless, when it comes to drawing some parallels between their interpretations of the plight of the marginalized, we are again confronted by the “mediated” and “objectivist” model divide in analyzing popular culture. Grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Zizek’s (2008) appraisal suggests that the forces of the *Real* drive both everyday violence and popular culture fantasy violence: the inexorable unconscious forces that determine what goes on in social reality. In contrast, by adopting an objectivist approach, Schwartz (2008) expresses a great deal of concern about manifestations of vengeance as shown in popular culture productions, and fears they may provide operational models for the marginalized and outcast to follow. In line with Schwartz, Powers (2002: 69) proposes that the “post-apocalyptic heroes” of popular culture epitomize aggressive and suicidal individuals who are “preparing themselves for what happens when everything ends.” These are heroes who see themselves drifting in an alien and hostile landscape, and are willing to impart justice to anyone who violates their (real or perceived) basic freedoms.

In Zizek’s, Schwartz’s, and Powers’ reading of popular culture anti-heroes, we come across a definite emphasis on the victim-victimizer theme. Even though their analyses concerning the causes of violence – including violence against the self – part, we cannot avoid pointing to the existence of an analogy between these imaginary anti-heroes and school shooters as the latter have shown a predisposition to commit suicide. It is a well-known fact that the shooters at Columbine and Virginia Tech killed themselves after the event. But other victim-victimizer cases have been recorded. On March 2, 1987, N. Ferris, age 12, got tired of being teased: he brought a pistol to school and, when a classmate made fun of him, he killed the other boy. Then he turned the gun at himself. On May 21, 1998, K. Kinkel, 15, went into school with a semi-automatic rifle, walked into the cafeteria, and began shooting. He killed one student and wounded eight others. He later claimed that he wanted to die. On March 21, 2005, J. Weise, 16, went to his school where he killed a security guard, a teacher, and five students, and wounded seven others before killing himself. On May 20, 1999, A. Solomon opened fire on schoolmates, injuring six. Witnesses said that he had placed the revolver in his mouth as if to shoot himself although he did not finally pull the trigger (Cornell, 2006).

In spite of society’s strong negative reactions toward “unsuitable” media content, the system of popular culture seems committed to the positive value of its code. By emphasizing the cool the popular culture system weights the mostly inconclusive assumptions about the risks implied in violent or “inappropriate” content against the more tangible risk of sustaining economic loss. Hence, the popular culture system is likely to treat the critiques thrown at it by other functional
systems such as the family, politics, and a divided scientific community, simply as accidents which it must minimize in order to carry on with its self-referential operations.

Conclusions
In this article I have critically examined the widely accepted proposition that fantasy violence constitutes a key causal variable in the genesis of teen violence, especially deadly school violence. Rather than beginning my inquiry by wrestling with the intricacies of the objectivist approach to the influence of media on youth, I opted to take up different streams of risk theory and observe what their application could reveal about the nature of such troubling events. This epistemological election stemmed from my initial conjecture whereby the growing sophistication of digital and virtual technologies in use by popular culture and the media represent important elements of manufactured risks.

I hope to have established that many of the anti-social behaviors found in schools are, to a significant extent, the result of popular culture narcissistic content, not violent content per se. Hitherto, even the strong circulation of the narcissistic messages emblematic of contemporary popular culture are mediated by the divergent social risk positions teens occupy within the social mapping of the school: suburban schools would be riskier than inner-city schools, and low-status students more likely to become rampage school shooters than high-status students.

My inquiry into popular culture and peer marginalization further found that it is at the intersection of factors such as (a) society’s narcissistic culture, (b) schools’ suburban locations and their punitive style of decision-making, (c) the idiosyncratic nature of status hierarchies in schools; and (d) popular culture’s trivialization of the negative end of its code, where we can identify a social niche appropriate for the high incidence of school shooting events.

Besides the narcissistic culture permeating the whole of society, we have to look also at the specificity of suburban schools. These are places where high expectations for success prevail, not only academically but also in relation to sports and other curricular and extracurricular activities. Additionally, in suburban schools class and race do not play a key role in shaping the social stratification of teens: in-groups wrought by certain attributes commonly recognized as ‘cool’, and out-groups marginalized for failing to comply with these standards, come to feel these differences as being as real and divisive as those based on demographic differences (Milner, 2004). In such cases popular culture’s messages and symbols tend to play a fundamental role in constructing the status hierarchies that produce peer marginalization in schools. Grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic types often engage in antagonistic social interactions, thus producing a considerable level of physical and psychological abuse against weaker peers (Walach, 2008; Zizek, 2008).

There is also reason to contend that vulnerable types may be especially drawn to the trivialized and/or distorted popular culture treatment of the un-cool. Indeed, the theme of the alienated male whose aggression is justified because of his direct exposure to authoritarian institutions (the school, in the case at hand) may be extremely appealing to students for whom school is a constant source of frustration and pain (Phillips, 2005; Malaby, 2007; Schwartz, 2008; Miller et al., 2009). The marginalized groups and sub-cultures that originate from the barriers of living the illusions offered by the new “civilization of desire” leave those attracted to them defenseless in the face of external social pressures (Melucci, 1989). Yet, as Henry (2009) observes, most kids are able to cope with the abuse, whereas others withdraw and experience diminished self-esteem.
Further, the increasing propensity of school authorities to implement zero tolerance policies as means to control the unruly behaviors of teens may act to amplify the stressful and hostile social climate prevalent within many educational institutions (Newman, 2004). As previously discussed, harsh discipline drives students to be more oppositional to authority (Dupper and Montgomery, 2008), and empirical evidence suggests that, in the US, states where schools resort to corporal punishment report higher rates of anti-social behavior by teens (Arcus, 2002).

By and large, the risk approach allows us to observe and understand those particular expressions of violence not as isolated or “freak” events but as occurrences that are deeply embedded into the very fabric of late-modern society: issues concerning major cultural trends and overconsumption, emergent forms of teen social stratification, the micro politics of school administration, and the self-referent nature of the popular culture system. Hence, peer marginalization and the bizarre forms of violence that usually go with it are the end result of the normal and routine operation of society’s systems.

A further conclusion of the present study follows from Beck’s (1992) general premise that science faces important difficulties in determining the actual “effects” of manufactured risks on late-modern society: with the increasing power of new audio and video technologies grows the incalculability of their consequences on society.

Finally, the risk approach opens up prospects for engaging in further research into the complex nature of rampage school shootings. It may be valuable to continue the investigation into the link between narcissism as a broad cultural phenomenon and narcissism as a psychological disorder situated within the individual. Associated to this line of inquiry is the issue concerning the risky and counterproductive behaviors teens may engage in to cope with the realities of day-to-day oppression and marginalization. A further theme for study is that of the risks emanating from the self-referent nature of the popular culture system. According to Luhmann (2008), systems have a preference for risk aversion, which displaces the inclination to engage in alternative decision-making. Yet, on the other hand, if systems are to survive, they require relentless self-referential operations. Thus, the popular culture as a system is forced to continuously scrutinize its environment and produce communications that define an evolving sense of the cool. The social sciences should aim to discover the new directions in which the popular culture system is moving and, in so doing, bring to the fore new emerging perceptions of risk and the ways in which these are acted upon by individuals and groups in society.

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References


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