Heroes

Mass Murder and Suicide

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Four Notes in Guise
of a Prologue

1

I decided to write this book in July 2012, after reading about the mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado, that had taken place at a movie theatre screening the latest Batman film. A mixture of repulsion and perverse fascination has always lured me to read voraciously about the perpetrators of this kind of mass murder, a kind that seems to be proliferating at the moment – particularly in the United States of America. But it was only when I read about James Holmes and the Aurora massacre that I decided to write about the subject. I was not spurred into action by the violence and absurdity of a country where any person, no matter whether mentally disturbed, can buy deadly weapons. We are all quite accustomed to that. What most impressed me was the metaphorical density of an act that could be interpreted as breaking the separation between spectacle and real life (or real death, which is the same). I doubt that James Holmes has ever read Guy Debord. Often, people act without reading the relevant texts. Yet Holmes's gesture carried a tang of situationism. The

whole history of the twentieth-century vanguard was reconvened there, and monstrously restaged. 'Abolish art abolish daily life abolish the separation between art and daily life', the Dadaists said. Holmes, it struck me, wanted to eliminate the separation between the spectator and the movie; he wanted to be *in* the movie.

So I began to read compulsively about the massacre at the screening of the Batman movie. My interest led me to news stories about other males (white, black, old, young, rich, poor, but only males, no women at all – who knows why?) who shoot and kill people, and to further research into previous mass murders. From these studies, I came to the realization that the current becoming of the world could be better understood if observed through this kind of horrible madness, rather than through the polite madness of economists and politicians. I saw the agony of capitalism and the dismantling of social civilization from a very peculiar point of view: crime and suicide.

The naked reality of capitalism is today on display. And it's horrible.

2

The subject of this book is not merely crime and suicide, but more broadly the establishment of a kingdom of nihilism and the suicidal drive that is permeating contemporary culture, together with a phenomenology of panic, aggression and resultant violence. This is the point of view from which I'm looking at mass murder, focusing in particular on the spectacular implications of these acts of killing, and on their suicidal dimension.

I don't care about the conventional serial killer, the

brand of secretive sadistic psychopaths who are attracted to other people's suffering and enjoy seeing people die. I'm interested in people who are suffering themselves, and who become criminals because this is their way both to express their psychopathic need for publicity and also to find a suicidal exit from their present hell. I write about young people like Seung-Hui Cho, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and Pekka-Erik Auvinen, who killed themselves after trying to attract the attention of the world by ending the lives of innocent people. I also write of James Holmes, who committed a sort of symbolic suicide without actually killing himself.

I write about spectacular murderous suicides because these killers are the extreme manifestation of one of the main trends of our age. I see them as the heroes of an age of nihilism and spectacular stupidity: the age of financial capitalism.

3

In the book *The Wretched of the Screen,* Hito Steyerl recalls David Bowie's 1977 release of the single 'Heroes'.

'He sings of a new brand of hero, just in time for the neoliberal revolution and for the digital transformation of the world. The hero is dead – long live the hero! Yet Bowie's hero is no longer a subject, but an object: a thing, an image, a splendid fetish – a commodity soaked with desire, resurrected from beyond the squalor of its own demise. Just look at a 1977 video of the song and you'll understand why: the clip shows Bowie singing to himself from three simultaneous angles, with layering

techniques tripling his image; not only has Bowie's hero been cloned, he has above all become an image that can be reproduced, multiplied, and copied, a riff that travels effortlessly through commercials for almost anything, a fetish that packages Bowie's glamorous and unfazed post-gender look as product. Bowie's hero is no longer a larger-than-life human being carrying out exemplary and sensational exploits, and he is not even an icon, but a shiny product endowed with post-human beauty: an image and nothing but an image. This hero's immortality no longer originates in the strength to survive all possible ordeals, but from its ability to be xeroxed, recycled, and reincarnated. Destruction will alter its form and appearance, yet its substance will be untouched. The immortality of the thing is its finitude, not its eternity. In 1977, the punk band The Stranglers delivers a crystal-clear analysis of the situation by stating the obvious: heroism is over. Trotsky, Lenin, and Shakespeare are dead. In 1977, as leftists flock to the funerals of RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan Carl Raspe, The Stranglers' album cover delivers its own giant wreath of red carnations and declares: NO MORE HEROES. Anymore.[1]

In the classical tradition, the hero belonged to the sphere of the epic imagination, separate from tragedy and lyrics. The hero was someone who subjugated Nature and dominated the events of history with the strength of will and of courage. He founded the city and warded off the demonic forces of chaos. This vision can still be found in the time of the Renaissance, and Machiavelli's prince can be

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1   Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, p. XX.

considered the hero of modern political narration: the man who establishes the nation state, builds the infrastructures of industry and gives shape to a common identity.

This epic form of heroism disappeared towards the end of modernity, when the complexity and speed of human events overwhelmed the force of the will. When chaos prevailed, epic heroism was replaced by gigantic machines of simulation. The space of the epic discourse was occupied by semiocorporations, apparatuses for the emanation of widely shared illusions. These games of simulation often took the shape of identities, as with popular subcultures like rock, punk, cyberculture and so on. Here lies the origin of the late-modern form of tragedy: at the threshold where illusion is mistaken for reality, and identities are perceived as authentic forms of belonging. It is often accompanied by a desperate lack of irony, as humans respond to today's state of permanent deterritorialization by enacting their craving for belonging through a chain of acts of murder, suicide, fanaticism, aggression, war.

I believe that it is only through irony and through a conscious understanding of the simulation at the heart of the heroic game, that the simulated hero of subculture still has a chance to save itself.

4

In the year 1977 human history came to a turning point. Heroes died, or, better said, they disappeared. They were not killed by the foes of heroism, rather they transferred to another dimension: they dissolved, they turned into ghosts. So the human race, misled by mock heroes made

of deceptive electromagnetic substance, lost faith in the reality of life and its pleasures, and started believing only in the infinite proliferation of images. 1977 was the year when heroes faded and transmigrated from the world of physical life and historical passion to the world of visual simulation and nervous stimulation. That year was a watershed: from the age of human evolution the world shifted to the age of de-evolution, or de-civilization.

What had been produced by labour and social solidarity in the centuries of modernity started to fall under finance's predatory process of de-realization. The conflictive alliance between industrious bourgeois and industrial workers – which had left the public education system, health care, transportation, and welfare as the material legacy of the modern age – was sacrificed to the religious dogma of the Market-God.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century the post-bourgeois dilapidation took the form of a financial black hole. This new system started to swallow and destroy the product of two hundred years of industriousness and of collective intelligence, and transformed the concrete reality of social civilization into abstraction: figures, algorithms, mathematical ferocity and accumulation of nothing in the form of money. The seductive force of simulation transformed physical forms into vanishing images, submitted visual art to spam spreading, and subjected language to the fake regime of advertising. At the end of this process, real life disappeared into the black hole of financial accumulation.

The question now is to see what's left of the human subjectivity and sensibility and of our ability to imagine, to create and to invent. Are humans still able to emerge from this black hole; to invest their energy in a new form

of solidarity and mutual help? The sensibility of a genera-
tion of children who have learned more words from
machines than from their parents appears to be unable to
develop solidarity, empathy and autonomy. History has
been replaced by the endless flowing recombination of
fragmentary images. Random recombination of frantic
precarious activity has taken the place of political aware-
ness and strategy. I really don't know if there is hope
beyond the black hole; if there lies a future beyond the
immediate future.

Where there is danger, however, salvation also grows
– said Hölderlin, the poet most loved by Heidegger, the
philosopher who foresaw the future destruction of the
future. Now, the task at hand is to map the wasteland
where social imagination has been frozen and submitted
to the recombinant corporate imaginary. Only from this
cartography can we move forward to discover a new
form of activity which, by replacing Art, politics and
therapy with a process of re-activation of sensibility,
might help humankind to recognize itself again.

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