Seung-Hui Cho, the mass murderer who called himself Question Mark, left a lot of questions behind him. One of them obviously speaks for itself: what motivated him to kill thirty-three strangers at Virginia Tech? Another question almost goes without saying: why do we seek refuge behind moral explanations? Like ‘the question mark kid’, the adult world has exhibited its preference for ‘one word answers’. Ducking for cover behind terms such as ‘crazy’ or ‘evil’ is perfectly understandable. Value-laden descriptions reintroduce a semblance of order into the world. Nonetheless, our tendency to mistake character assassination for moral evaluation remains questionable. The possibility for understanding is diminished when we write someone off as the personification of evil. We also question the morality of impugning the character of ‘mentally ill’ people per se.

Witness how we generally tar and feather the ‘mental’ – as either a menace or embarrassment to society. It’s bad enough that these poor souls suffer torments that ‘sane’ people can only imagine – we have to stigmatize the mentally ill by devaluing and marginalizing them even further. We’ll generalize from one illness to another, tarring different people with the same brush of fear and misunderstanding. Talk about crazy and wanton. On the one hand, we want to hold the ‘mental’ completely responsible for their actions. On the other hand, we diminish them for failing to measure up to our own standards. The double standard was readily on display in the media’s treatment of the massacre: to be mentally ill was the real moral failing. We also watched the standard conveniently double back on itself. By collapsing the medical into the moral, we were able to avoid responsibility for our own actions. As a consequence, we no longer felt obliged to ask ourselves hard questions.

People who should have known better – like author Stephen King and poet Nikki Giovanni – too conveniently drew on pat answers and irresponsible clichés. They encouraged us to take the path of least resistance. King wrote: ‘Dude was crazy. Dude was, in the memorable phrasing of Nikki Giovanni, ‘just mean.’ Essentially there’s no story here, except for a paranoid a--hole who went DEFCON-1. He may have been inspired by...
Columbine, but only because he was too dim to think up such a scenario on his own.8

Note the way King uses two separate categories interchangeably. ‘Paranoia’ might make someone an ‘a--hole’, but the implication is that someone of questionable character chooses to be paranoid. Giovanni, Cho’s former teacher, also described the killer as ‘nuts’.9 She would elsewhere deploy the same logic to impugn the character of a public official. When she had the world’s attention, Giovanni called Condoleezza Rice a ‘crazy bitch’ for her ‘disgraceful’ allegiance to the Bush administration.10 Since mental health is a character issue, everyone can be placed on the same moral continuum and devalued accordingly. Indeed, Giovanni memorably questions society’s ‘tendency to think that everybody can get counseling or have a bowl of tomato soup, [thinking] everything is going to be all right’.11 Failing to see the true import of her own lack of generosity12, Giovanni nonetheless observes the connection between ‘mean’ spiritedness and the spread of ‘evil’.

The good professor refuses to acknowledge that the shooter had been an ‘easy target’13 his whole life, or that the cruelty routinely inflicted upon him originated within...
Unfortunately, the editorial doesn’t mention the fact that Question Mark would have been amongst the first to agree. The problem was that he saw society as the malevolent force to be reckoned with. Cho even looked towards Collective Soul’s song Shine to resolve a personal dilemma. The lost soul was looking for a ‘sign’ on ‘how to speak and share’ love and understanding. The resulting massacre only manages to make his actions all the more inexplicable.

Cho tried to explain himself, of course, in what has been posthumously called a ‘multimedia manifesto’. While this notoriously non-communicative person felt that actions spoke louder than words, he nonetheless used the media to turn the volume up even louder. Suddenly Question Mark became Exclamation Point, and human tragedy was turned into a media event. Cho not only had mass murder on his mind – he also had his image to think about. Indeed, there is the suggestion that the massacre was even staged for the media, and that the victims were used as props for dramatic effect. The random slayings served a greater good by drawing attention to a malevolent society. Note that we’re not suggesting that Cho committed murder in order to be famous. Rather, infamy was part of the mass appeal. Cho clearly wanted to get his face on television and his name in the paper – if only to explain his ‘need’ to act. The only problem is that his ‘explanation’ raises even more questions. The self-portrait as media spin simply turned everything on its head. We couldn’t help but ask ourselves: what the hell is he talking about?

It was ‘You’ that stood accused here – as in you and I. Question Mark was merely the messenger, and the answer to our prayers. The mass murderer claimed to be speaking on behalf of the ‘weak’ and ‘defenseless’ and wanted to start a ‘revolution’. Like Jesus Christ, he was a saviour with a cross to bear. He died for our sins, and would heal the world through mass murder – and it was ‘you’ that pulled the trigger. Cho’s use of ‘you’ was one of his weapons of choice, and ‘you’ were deployed to inflict as much harm as possible. The accusation is particularly acute in light of Time magazine’s recent accolade. ‘You’ were recently made Person of the Year, and now ‘you’ were (allegedly) the scourge of the earth. Since you made him ‘do this’ you had ‘blood on your hands’ – your ‘time’ was now. You and I were originally given Time’s award because we had used digital media to create the world in our image. All-inclusive mediums like YouTube and MySpace gave everyone the opportunity to create their own manifestos. Cho countered this by offering a troubling mirror image: the video fragments addressed no one in particular and everyone in general. The target audience was similarly fragmented. He appeared to be simultaneously addressing the persecuted and the persecutors – people like you and I. You could have prevented him from killing you. Instead, you backed him into a corner and gave him ‘only one option’. Cho could have ‘fled’ from you, but he ran towards you instead. You made the decision for him, so spread the good word.

It wasn’t difficult to see that the person addressing us was deeply troubled. Particularly troubling is the way Cho readied himself for his close-up. The multimedia manifesto was a lovingly prepared press kit sent to us from beyond the grave. It took time to prepare and provides a snapshot of how he wanted to be remembered. Cho managed to assemble a 23-page document, forty-three photographs and twenty-eight video clips totaling twenty-five minutes. The media package confirms – if there was any doubt – that the random executions were calculated acts of violence. Cho posed for the camera and reads from a script – the message he wanted to deliver was as rehearsed as it was ‘performed’. The dead man is now pointing guns at ‘you’ whilst claiming that you also pulled the trigger. Whatever his mental state, he clearly had enough presence of mind to prepare and release a statement to the media. He even took time out to post it between murders, suggesting that once the killing started he had ‘to commit’ himself further. Never mind that its contents were reported as rambling and incomherent, or that he couldn’t even get the address right. The ‘manifesto’ nonetheless reached its intended destination and was sent around the world accordingly.

Media outlets were invariably criticized for spreading his message. The messengers ‘legitimated’ Cho’s attention seeking, and could potentially incite other psychopaths to murder. Whilst ‘sane’ society wanted to hear the psycho speak regardless, the victims’ friends and relatives were understandably (and vocally) taken aback. Nothing appears to have been said, however, about the value of selecting ‘highlights’ according to rational criteria. In deciding which bits were most relevant or newsworthy, something inevitably got lost in translation. According to the intended recipient (NBC News), ‘no two or three sentences really make sense when viewed together’. That didn’t prevent news editors from putting the pieces together for television viewers. What audiences see is a distorted picture, and the distortion is skewed towards making sense of the senseless. Editing, of course, provides a framework for understanding
– a picture may be presented through organization and correction. Despite acknowledging the manifesto’s lack of rhyme or reason, editors inadvertently introduced their own patterns of thought into ‘a uniquely sick mind’.19 Media organizations essentially ‘framed’ Cho for murder – by picturing a mental case as the embodiment of evil.

I’m not denying, of course, that Cho was guilty of murder. Nor do I want to imply that mental illness makes his actions less evil. I readily acknowledge that the acts demonstrate the existence of evil in the world, and that Cho remains responsible for their occurrence. Despite what he insisted, he was the one that pulled the trigger. No one put a gun to his head or forced his hand. The fact that Seung-Hui Cho was typically subjected to bullying, ridicule and/or rejection does not justify his actions. I question, however, the sanity of viewing the massacre through a predominately moral lens. We cannot explain or interpret it away as an instance of good versus evil. To think like that is to fall into the trap of thinking like Cho. It also makes the issue of mental health one of degree rather than kind. And whilst much has been made about the fact that Cho fit the psychological profile of a ‘shooter’, little has been said about the degree ‘profiling’ might have played in his psychological make-up. There is the suggestion that the ‘loner’ willingly took on a role that society already cast him in.

Make no mistake though – Cho knew the difference between right and wrong. The problem is that what he did was morally justified. His anger comes across loud and clear: moral outrage is generalized and displaced onto society at large. The manifesto – like the corpses – is riddled with normative terms. The morally loaded language highlights why evil remains a riddle. Many of us, of course, struggle with the question of evil: why do bad things happen to good people, and good people do bad things? The riddle is not that there is inexplicable pain and suffering in the world. The problem is that such occurrences may be explicated via moral thinking – those that inflict pain and suffering somehow think that they’re doing the right thing (see Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot as the chief offenders).

What makes Cho’s actions particularly insufferable is that he used mass murder to set ‘a good example’. The V-Tech massacre was offered as a community service and public announcement. Indeed, what ‘laces the (media) event with an ongoing menace is that Cho martyred himself in the name of disaffected youth’.20 He appeared to want to ‘create a cult of martyrdom with the images left behind’, sacrificing himself – and others – for a ‘good’ cause. Given this terrifying ‘logic’, we ‘caused’ him to commit evil because evil was the cause of his actions. If we understand Cho correctly – insofar as he can be understood – he vicariously identified with the Columbine killers in order to enter into a media pact with them. The message sent was as a wake-up call, and – most alarmingly – he appealed to other ‘sleepers’ to answer the calling. Whilst this sounds like the behaviour of a terrorist, it is worth noting that ‘normal’ high school students anticipated Cho’s descent into madness. It was almost as if they wanted to push the loner over the edge. Despite evidence to the contrary, ‘everybody’ had nothing better to do than ‘talk about’ the ‘hit list’ he was expected to prepare in response to the mistreatment.21 The speculation continued when Cho was left hanging off a precipice. University students typically joked that he was the ‘kind of guy who is going to walk into a classroom and start shooting people’.22 Cho wasn’t so much a natural born killer as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is difficult to know what was amiss with Cho. Reports have been contradictory and remain unconfirmed or speculative. The speculation ranges from autistic spectrum disorder through to Asperger’s syndrome, selective mutism, schizophrenia and psychosis. The family pastor originally suspected autism and graduated towards demonic possession. One thing is certain though: a question mark remains unasked, whether Jelly accompanied Cho and President Putin on the vacation in North Carolina. Perhaps the best way to explain the different impressions is through one of the few people kind enough to reach out to him. According to Professor Lucinda Roy (who agreed to privately tutor him), Cho was ‘extraordinarily lonely – the loneliest person I have ever met in my life’.23 And most tellingly, ‘he seemed to be running inside circles in a maze when he was talking about himself’.24

One of the questions that remains unasked, then, is whether Cho’s mental illness was related to social mistreatment. I’m not suggesting that he was literally driven mad or that society should be held directly responsible for his actions. I just wonder whether the loss of contact with reality is related to his proximity to it. If he had antecedent difficulties

So many questions

Cho, then, remains an unanswered question, and the self description suggests that even he didn’t know who he was. Presumably the delusional thinking was an attempt to answer this question or is symptomatic of further confusion. Cho even left himself faceless on his Facebook profile. A mere ‘?’ was the public face he chose to display on the online social network. It was at university that he met his supermodel girlfriend from outer space – at least ‘Jelly’ didn’t call the police when ‘Sparky’ would attempt a close encounter of the first kind. It is yet to be determined, though, whether Jelly accompanied Cho and President Putin on the vacation in North Carolina. Perhaps the best way to explain the different impressions is through one of the few people kind enough to reach out to him. According to Professor Lucinda Roy (who agreed to privately tutor him), Cho was ‘extraordinarily lonely – the loneliest person I have ever met in my life’.23 And most tellingly, ‘he seemed to be running inside circles in a maze when he was talking about himself’.24

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are well documented, the effects of antidepressants are well documented, and include paranoia and psychosis. The media has been notoriously silent about this possible connection – presumably they’re paranoid about pharmaceutical companies withdrawing advertising support. Perhaps the most important question of all, however, relates to the psychology of social behaviour. When ‘everybody’ was menacing Cho, it was considered normal behaviour and a source of entertainment. But when everyone started to perceive Cho’s behaviour as menacing, he was thought abnormal and the situation was taken (relatively) seriously. As far as we know, no student intervened on his behalf or objected to the mistreatment. An act of kindness would have been thought deviant and risked adverse attention. But as soon as a social deviant posed a threat to the wellbeing of the group, everyone was up in arms. We don’t begrudge anyone’s decision to avoid Cho or cast him further into the wilderness. We just question the logic of an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality – clearly the problem didn’t go away when he was left to his own devices.

As Anne Applebaum noted, the ‘global village’ reacted to the massacre with ‘horror, sympathy and wall-to-wall coverage’. The international media became the place for public memorials and post mortems. While Cho’s victims tended to remain anonymous or blurred into each other, a ‘superstar’ was born. His name and face were everywhere. A mentally ill person suddenly became the poster child for evil, and lives on indefinitely. Perhaps what is most interesting about the coverage is that ‘the village’ counted itself amongst his victims. People from across the globe reacted as if they were caught in the crossfire or lay mortally wounded. Surviving the massacre proved to be a narrow escape or hollow victory. Cho offered ample proof that evil lurks amongst us, and can strike at any time. It didn’t help, of course, that Cho posthumously taunted the living, or that he represented the axis of evil. Nonetheless, there were striking parallels between the forces of good and evil. Society vicariously identified itself with the weak and defenseless, and attempted to make sense of its own pain and suffering. Indeed, one critic went so far as to question the sanity of normal social behaviour. According to Christopher Hitchens, ‘the grisly events’ at Virginia Tech ‘involved no struggle, no sacrifice and no greater principle’. The murdered victims were ‘not martyrs’ and the senseless slaughter ‘raises no real issues’. A social ‘calamity’ had ‘no implications beyond itself’ and was simply a ‘blank slate on which anyone could doodle’.

If we are to understand anything, however, we must try to make sense of the senseless. And we can only do this by asking questions. Whatever Cho’s mental state, he understood one thing: pain and confusion make us question who we are. The narrative into which he inserted himself was particularly painful and confusing; mass murderer as moral exemplar. The most disturbing thing is that he reached out to other isolated people through the media, and encouraged them to follow his lead into (self) destruction. Indeed, Cho was so disturbed that he thought he could get away with mass murder – and then somehow did.

The turn of events subsequently throws everything into question – including our sense of meaning or value. It’s confusing enough that he murdered two strangers in cold blood without a motive. Cho had every reason to assume that the first two murders would be investigated, and that the police might be investigating someone answering his description. The campus was on alert, and everyone was asked to report any suspicious behaviour. Rationally speaking, it was safe to assume that no one would be crazy enough to then return and draw further attention to themselves. There was certainly little reason to suspect that the murderer would go on to massacre complete strangers in an unrelated building two hours later. As the police were pursuing another lead, Cho went to the post office to (posthumously) announce his intentions. He returned to arm himself and walked half a mile across campus – in full view of others – to impassively execute as many people as possible. The systematic executions lasted for over nine minutes. He sealed many people’s fate by chaining the main entrances shut, and left a note claiming that other doors were booby trapped with explosives. To some extent, this explains the sheer ‘nonsense’ of his actions – it doesn’t make sense that he thought he could get away with it. Their calculated nature also explains why Cho’s actions merit the appellation ‘evil’: no question about it.

The massacre challenges the way we think about the world whilst confirming our worst fears. We’d like to believe that things happen for a (good) reason, and such ‘thoughtlessness’ beggars belief. The world reacted with horror and sympathy because it took the murders personally: it could have been you and I randomly marked for execution. We also tend to think that ‘luck’ – our general circumstances or situation in life – is a moral feature of the world. We generally believe that people get what they deserve or deserve what they get. We think we have control over what happens by virtue of the choices we make. We’ll impose meaning on the order of events, and will question the purpose of seemingly random or meaningless occurrences. When something bad happens, for example, we’ll ask, ‘Why me?’ (as opposed to ‘Well, why not me?’). And when something good happens, it will be considered the answer to our prayers. A sense of entitlement finds expression in the feeling of just deserts. The current phenomenon of the ‘self-help’ film The Secret – or ‘Law of Attraction’ – exemplifies the general attitude. The arbitrariness of Cho’s actions highlights the unstable relation between moral thinking and our attraction of events. All of his victims were, of course, terribly unlucky. Minding their own business, each person was in
the wrong place at the wrong time – they could have just as conceivably escaped being slaughtered by the stranger out of his frikking mind. It was the worst life lesson in an educational setting: that no matter who you are, events remain beyond human understanding or control. Cho’s actions pushed our understanding to its limits. Even the setting put everyone to the test – universities are supposed to literally embody the faculty of reason.

**Taking the blame**

It didn’t take long for the media to lose possession of its faculties – assuming it was ever in command of them. It began looking for a ‘cause’ to explain the massacre. Media organizations attempted to find something underlying or overriding – like the media itself. Exhibiting signs of a split or multiple personality, the mass media turned on itself to explain mass murder. Talk about narcissistic or dissociative identities. The concept of causality is, of course, integral to our understanding of the world. It has been called the ‘cement of the universe’ in that it functions as a mental adhesive. As far as we understand, causes hold everything (including our concepts and minds) together. They explain the occurrence of events by establishing meaningful connections. The university is particularly cemented to such a world view. It is predicated on the notion of organizing principles. Causality provides answers to questions like: why did something happen, and what does it mean? Such explanations exhibit our faith in rationality: to find a cause is to find a reason or potential meaning. The difficulty is that the relation between events is never straightforward or self-explanatory. Causal mechanisms have various moving parts and functions: determining how everything holds together is the real question.

Witness the example of Question Mark. Despite his mental illness, Cho certainly understood the meaning of causal links. In order to explain his actions, he directly appealed to causal relations. The problem was the way he made connections. Cho moved through (and lost) the chain of command by shifting blame. The links functioned more as a transfer of responsibility and rage. We ‘caused’ him to commit mass murder, and he used hollow point bullets to cause as much damage as possible, etc. As far as he was concerned, he had good reason to be evil.

The media’s thinking was similarly disorganized and dysfunctional. Apparently it was violent videogames and movies that made him do it. Clearly a rational universe can’t be seen to blame the devil anymore, so we’ll just opt for examples of his handiwork. As Stephen Hunter of The Washington Post writes:

> The search for movie influences is part of the search for the explanation behind the frenzy: we need to understand what caused this young man to step off into the oblivion of nihilism on a massive scale. What was the mechanism - or was there even one?

Apparently the reason for the massacre can be explained thus: Cho had difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy because the victims were mere figments of his imagination. He was really playing a video game or ‘shooting a John Woo movie in his head’. It’s true, of course, that we can trace a cause-effect pathway from stage to screen. To look for the underlying cause or overriding reason in popular culture, however, is to lose contact with a mediated reality. The commentary conveniently set aside related questions like: how do we explain violence in videogames or movies in the first place? Or why is it that millions of other people manage to consume them without going on murderous rampages? We don’t deny that the media might have played a causal role here. Indeed, we have already indicated that the massacre might have even been staged for the media. We wouldn’t want to just blame the six o’clock news though – that would be akin to shooting the messenger or holding them directly responsible for the weather.

**Axis of evil?**

Speaking of the loss of contact with reality: what are we to make of the irrational connection being made between the presence of Asians and the advent of evil? It would seem that the color of one’s skin or the shape of someone’s eyes is slanting our moral point of view. Well, no real newsflash there – the tendency to view race as an indication of character is old news. This seems to be universally true: the specious connections occur across cultures. Nonetheless, recent ‘events and media coverage’ in the West ‘have swung the image of Asian males “away from the meek, passive and mild end of the spectrum toward violent, bloodthirsty and dangerous”.

Presumably Asian cinema has contributed to this change of perception. The recent popularity of horror films like Ring (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and The Grudge (Takashi Shimizu, 2003) highlight the theme of vengeance. Whilst the vengeful ghosts might be women, the Asian films have cast their own spectre in Western culture – there is clearly something dark in the water over there.

And then, of course, the violent films of famous Asian auteurs have helped bridge the cultural divide. Films like The Killer (John Woo, 1989), Bullet in the Head (John Woo, 1990), Dead or Alive (Takashi Miike, 1999) Ichi the Killer (Takashi Miike, 2001), and Park Chan-Wook’s ‘vengeance trilogy’ (Sympathy for Mr Vengeance, 2002; Oldboy, 2003; and Sympathy for Lady Vengeance, 2004) act as a corrective to depictions of Asian culture as mild-mannered and passive. They certainly aren’t populated with characters from Ozu’s films. Since the massacre, it’s therefore possible that you’ve looked twice at quiet Asian guys without wanting to risk eye contact, or experienced jokes and speculation around young males of Asian extraction.

Perhaps the most visible example was a recent episode of The Sopranos featuring an Asian in a psychiatric prison. The episode ‘Remember When’ aired in the States – and on Channel BitTorrent across the global village – a week after the massacre. Although it was made months before the event, audiences couldn’t help but be freaked by the ‘eerie coincidence’. Viewers were making connections that weren’t really there. The character barely managed a passing resemblance in a story echoing One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (Milos Forman, 1975). Observations about the episode being ‘freakily prescient’ or potentially relevant nonetheless abounded. Somewhat hilariously, there was also confusion as to whether the actor playing him had appeared in a different role the previous week – this time as the director of a violent movie called Cleaver. All Asians can now look alike to us if we make violence the connection. At least the Italian community got some time off for (relative) good behaviour. For one week only, Italian families might have escaped being associated with the Mafia.

Guilty by association also
became a prevalent theme in the media. In the massacre’s aftermath, we treated Cho’s writings as an object lesson of evil in the making. As everyone knows by now, his plays Richard McBeef and Mr. Brownstone were originally distinguished by violence and anger. Their contents scared an entire classroom, and the rest of the world found what it was looking for: a causal link between creative acts and violent actions. Everyone seemed to agree that the plays were ‘a nightmare’ waiting to happen. Never mind that the psychological insights and warning signs didn’t apply to ‘good’ people when it suited them. Popular culture, of course, is where everyone’s dreams can come true. The collective imagination caters to murder simulators and revenge fantasies by way of mediation. We’re obviously not talking about the critics of popular culture now – those spoilsports who refuse to understand the thrill of the kill in an imagined setting. We’re now talking about those consumers making specious connections themselves. People who might not otherwise question their relationship to violent movies and videogames were suddenly seeing the connection between imagination and reality. The plays, however, were not cause for concern in the way they were typically reported and discussed. A relatively sane society was guilty of hermeneutic ‘violence’ here – we retrospectively inscribed Cho’s writings with our own fears and desires. Don’t get us wrong though. If we would have known the quiet loner suddenly communicating like that, we would have been amongst the many to express disquiet.

Nonetheless, the plays are not to be written off as acts of evil. Moral outrage and a sense of violation is their distinguishing feature – anxiety, hysteria, desperation and defeatism somehow move parallel (and against) each other. Conflicting feelings aren’t so much resolved as brought out into the open and combat each other. The plays invariably become the site of a losing battle – possibly the one Cho was losing with reality. The fact that it was an imagined battle between good and evil makes the plays more alarming. Most alarmingly, the main protagonists remain victims of a cruel fate, where events conspire to bring them down. It’s true that the protagonist in Richard McBeef feels compelled to ‘kill’ his (falsely accused?) stepfather, but ‘Dick’ manages to silence the hysterical accuser with a single punch out of ‘sheer and desecrated hurt’. And whilst the protagonists of Mr. Brownstone express a desire to ‘kill’ the ‘evil’ teacher they can’t seem to escape, he emerges victorious regardless. Brownstone cheats the students of prize money they intend to use as their getaway – but apparently no one can ‘get away’ with what they are planning. Backwards causation, then, can’t be invoked as a predictor to the resulting catastrophe. Cho’s writings merely provide retrospective confirmation that there were questions that needed to be answered.

We need to be careful, though, not to jump to conclusions as we press forward. The media backlash has thrown into question the character of anyone wishing to give creative expression to violent thoughts and impulses. Indeed, we might have more violence and anger on our hands if we try to prevent someone from freely expressing themselves. The real warning sign is casting ourselves in the role of thought police. Witness the recent productions of Richard McBeef and Mr. Brownstone on YouTube. To be frank, it is difficult to know what to think of these amateur videos. The dysfunctional mind of a killer immediately became a cause for mirth, and now functions as a safety valve. It is safe to assume that the productions are coping strategies, or a ‘healthy’ way of processing the incomprehensible. The Muppet versions (amongst others) are certainly good for a laugh. The creative outlets provide causal links as coping mechanism.

YouTube is where the play’s hysteria can become hysterical. At least the videos are better than V Tech Massacre, the online video game promising ‘three levels of stealth and murder’. Nonetheless, it is bizarre watching everyone trying to wash blood off their hands with tears of laughter. Perhaps what is most telling is that we have reverted back to a default response. We’d rather make light of darkness instead of try to illuminate it. On the one hand, we have opportunists capitalizing on Seung-Hui Cho’s dubious claim to fame. On the other hand, Cho – and his many victims – have been pushed to the margins of their own experience. Mental illness and mass murder need only be entertained as an amusing media event. At least everyone can feel safer by continuing to make fun of him. Let’s hope the next person we pick on gets the message, and has the decency to only kill themselves. You have to question, however, the value of a media event when ‘evil’ merely becomes a pretext to feel ‘good’ about ourselves. The causal mechanism couldn’t be more straightforward or self explanatory – thereby begging our original questions.

Endnotes
1 The line is from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Act Two Scene 2. Cho quoted it to a female stu- dent by writing it on her door. He was trying to impress her.
3 Seung-Hui Cho is included amongst the dead – his sense of estrangement is readily appar- ent. It is also worth noting that he intended to kill as many people as possible prior to taking his own life – many others were injured and fortunate enough to survive.
5 Virtually everyone who ‘knew’ Cho – from primary school kids to university professors – uses this phrase.
6 A court ruled in December 2005 that Seung-Hui Cho was ‘mentally ill’ and an ‘an imminent danger to self or others’. Then it left him to fend for himself.
7 ‘Health’ and ‘illness’ are evaluative terms, and such terms are relative to a general frame of reference. I don’t mean to deny that these are also value-laden terms. Indeed, this article questions the nature and extent of such evaluations.
8 Stephen King, ‘On Predict- ing Violence’, Entertainment Weekly, http://www.ew.com/ ew/article/0,,20036014,00.html. Accessed 27 June 2007. To be fair to King, he was writing on the relationship between imagination and violence, and admits ‘in this sensitized day and age, my own college writing would have raised red flags, and I’m certain someone would have nabbed me as mentally ill because of them’.
According to the students who
Sean Callebs, ‘Classmates Recall
for you.
– she defiantly talks about staring
outside class after expelling him
recounts when encountering Cho
Particularly bizarre is the story she
zarrre behaviour as a battle of wills
and understanding to a student in
Teacher, the overriding impression
pretty bad to me. As Cho’s former
2007.
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number ‘multimedia manifesto’
he also coined the widely dissemi-
http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18161472/site/newsweek/
See also Fat Wingert’s Newsweek
article ‘He Was Just Off’, where
other students similarly joked
com/id/18161472/site/newsweek/
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that speaking up would risk similar
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in his immediate vicinity – it was
all hush hush of course.
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Link to Virginia Tech Killings’,
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dedicated to the episode at Televi-
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1978, p.79.
http://www.newgrounds.com/
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The game designer – and I use this
term loosely – says he’s ‘after a
dream of artistry – I want to do a
movie or animation’. Well, dream
on, dude – your game sucks
donkey’s balls. Most appallingly,
‘PiGPEN’ (a.k.a Ryan Lambourn)
attempted to exact money by saying
that he would take the game down
if offended parties helped fund his
‘aspirations’.