

# Reality on circulation – School shootings, ritualised communication, and the dark side of the sacred

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**Abstract :** In this article, we will examine the ritualised dynamics of communication that emerged around the killer material on YouTube produced in four school shootings in the United States and in Finland: Columbine in 1999, Virginia Tech in 2007, Jokela in 2007, and Kauhajoki in 2008. The scope of the article is media anthropological. The dynamics of the dark digital encounters celebrating violence and misanthropy are discussed through the ideas of French social theorist Georges Bataille (1897–1962) on the constitution of the social through ritualised use of visual representations of violence and torture.

**Keywords :** school shootings, YouTube, Bataille, ritual communication, sacred

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*La réalité en circulation.  
Fusillades à l'école, communication ritualisée et la face noire du sacré*

**Résumé:** Dans cet article nous examinerons les dynamiques ritualisées de communication apparues autour du tueur sur You Tube et produites dans les quatre fusillades à l'école aux Etats-Unis et en Finlande : Columbine en 1999, Virginia Tech en 2007, Jokela en 2007 et Kauhajoki en 2008. Cet article relève de l'anthropologie des médias. Les dynamiques des sombres rencontres digitales célébrant la violence et la misanthropie sont discutées contre les idées du théoricien social français Georges Bataille (1897-1962) sur la constitution du social à travers l'usage ritualisé de la représentation visuelle de la violence et de la torture.

**Mots-clés:** fusillades à l'école, You Tube, Bataille, communication rituelle, sacré

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“All profound life is heavy with the impossible” (Bataille, 1988/1943, p. 58).

## 1. Introduction

School shootings as public, heavily media-related events of dramatic violence are a paradigmatic example of a media event in a disruptive register (cf. Katz & Liebes, 2007; Kellner, 2008; Liebes & Blondheim, 2005; Sumiala & Tikka, 2010). As theatrical spectacles of terror, school shootings depend heavily on mediation in their communication (Kellner, 2008; cf. Juergensmeyer, 2003). Rampage shootings, another name for this type violence, are typically organised by a very small number of individuals. But with ritualised communication performed in and via the news media and social networks, these tragic events have the potential to have an impact on an enormous worldwide media audience (see, e.g., Kellner, 2008; Muschert, 2007; Newman et al., 2004). Moreover, school shootings have the power to influence social imaginaries: how belonging is imagined, performed, and acted out in the present age. In his book *Fear of small numbers*, Arjun Appadurai (2006) argued that, in the contemporary era, communities are not only organised around communications that foster positive imaginaries, but they also circulate violence, fear, destruction, and hate. By copying, repeating, remixing, and “recycling” violent material—by keeping communication on death on the move, in other words—social imaginaries of violence and death are spread, not only on a national scale, but also globally. In this sense, such materials arguably become distinctly significant cultural and social phenomena (Sumiala, 2011a).

In this article, our purpose is to examine the social dynamics of four school shootings—Columbine (1999), Virginia Tech (2007), Jokela (2007), and Kauhajoki (2008)—by identifying certain ritualised elements in communication carried out on YouTube. Our scope is media anthropological and the study is based on our virtual fieldwork on YouTube conducted over different periods between 2007 and 2011 (see, e.g., Sumiala & Tikka, 2010, 2011). In our theoretical discussion, we wish to analyse ritualised communication related to these school shootings through the ideas of French social theorist Georges Bataille. We will show how Bataille’s framework offers an intriguing perspective on the relationship between ritualised communication on death and violence and the dynamics of the social and the sacred in today’s world of mediatized sociality (Sumiala, 2008a).

Our definition of ritualised communication draws on Eric Rothenbuher’s (1998, 2010) work on ritual communication. According to Rothenbuhler (2010), rituals are “communicative performances of value commitments, intended to influence the world toward those valued ideals” (p. 39). In this article, we focus mainly on three ritualised features of communication, as identified through our YouTube fieldwork: (i) circulation, (ii) remediation, and (iii) sharing of value commitments entangled with the visual performance of violence and destruction.

First, by “circulation,” we mean the communicative performance of endless distribution and flow of media texts and images on YouTube and their dissemination from YouTube to other media. The same violent texts and images re-appear on YouTube publicity time and time again (Appadurai, 2006; Lee & LiPuma, 2002; Spitulnik, 1997; Sumiala, 2008b, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). Second, by “remediation,” we mean the communicative performance of the representation of one medium in another (see Bolter & Grusin, 1999). On YouTube, remediation often happens in close connection to circulation. For example, the circulation of the material uploaded by the Jokela gunman on YouTube “travels” in mainstream media, television, newspapers, and on other websites and it remediates both within and across different media types. Third, by “sharing,” we mean the communicative performance of exchanging media materials (images, texts, and links) to establish and maintain social relationships on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009; Halvey & Keane, 2007). It is through these three elements that communication on these school shootings becomes ritualised and, hence, part of the social life of media (cf. Latour, 2005; Appadurai, 2006).

## **2. Theory**

Georges Bataille (1897–1962) is regarded as one of the most original twentieth-century scholars of the relationship between ritual communication, the sacred, and forms of social life. There are two crucial elements in Bataille’s theory of the social that allow us to argue for similarities between Bataillean dynamics and

ritualised communication evoked by the circulation, remediation, and sharing of the videos of the four school shootings on YouTube. The first element is Bataille's fundamental understanding of the nature of the social. Drawing on Émile Durkheim's (1995/1912) distinction between the sacred and the profane, Bataille divides the forces of social life into two categories: heterogeneous and homogeneous.

Bataille had borrowed from Durkheim the idea that the world was organized into two social realms, sacred and profane. Both Durkheim and Bataille maintained that these two realms were antithetically opposed to each other and that the community was held together by the cohesive force of the sacred. Bataille's understanding was that Durkheim viewed the sacred as something essentially good that created community. Being wholly unquestionable, it gives a regular shape to community: by means of god, sacred symbols and rituals, sacred provides community with an identity, its ideal self-image. Bataille does not reject Durkheim's idea out of hand, but argues that the ultimate core of community does not lie in the "right", pure and beautiful side of the sacred, but rather in its 'left' side, its dark centre. (See e.g. Arppe, 2009a, 2009b; Heinämäki, 2008; Hollier, 1988.)

Bataille calls the dark side of sacred heterogeneous as opposed to the profane homogeneous, which corresponds to Durkheim's idea of the profane. Homogeneous society is based on the goal of integration and compatibility. Since perfect integration in society is impossible, some residue is always left over from the process. This is the element that homogeneous society is unable to absorb in itself; and that is what Bataille calls the heterogeneous element. It is not the homogeneous dimension, which is based on a coherent system of exchange, but rather the heterogeneous force – capable of evoking excess or emotions of attraction and/or repulsion – that establishes the bond between individuals. Humanity does not exist without the forbidden and excluded sacred, which is the object of both disgust and desire (Bataille, 2001/1973, pp. 43–52).

For Bataille, death is one such excluded sacred. The ritualisation of its communication makes it possible to recognise the heterogeneous sacred. In Bataille's view, what is most essential in the ritualised communication of death is that it involves a temporary dissolution of identities and the transgression of prohibitions. Death, violent death in particular, is always connected to ritual communication and thus to breakage and destruction – the breakdown of the border between (sacrificial) victim and (sacrificing) victimiser. Crime, especially, breaks the prohibition to kill and murder and thereby unleashes the destructive sacred. In Bataille's framework, participants in ritualised communication are very much repulsed by the act, but at the same time, they are strangely attracted to it. However, it should be acknowledged that, for Bataille, the breaking of a prohibition does not mean that it is overturned. On the contrary, such transgression serves to reinforce the

boundary between the homogeneous and heterogeneous elements in society, between exchange and waste, light and dark, and life and death (Arppe, 2009a, 2009b; Heinämäki, 2008; Hollier, 1988; Hollywood, 2002; Sumiala, 2008a).

The second element that permits us to claim parallels between Bataille's thinking and ritualised communication is that Bataille (e.g., 1988/1943) affords special attention to the ritualised practice of *gazing* at visual representations of violence to construct the heterogeneous social. It is the ritualised practice of gazing that activates certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience, and, most importantly, certain *relations* among participants of the visual event. The gaze relates the one seeing and the one to be seen, and it relates conventions and structures of seeing to physical, historical, and ritual contexts of seeing. Following John Dovey (2000), there is, indeed, a voyeuristic pleasure in gazing at "real" beatings, crimes, and other exposures through the mediated lens or screen. In Dovey's Freudian reading, this has to do with our drive to feel connected to reality through desire and repulsion, both of which, as we have pointed out, are crucial for the existence of heterogeneous social life in Bataille's framework (see also Bataille 1988/1961, 1986/1957).

### 3. Methods

In this article, we analyse the power dynamics of ritualised communication by drawing on media anthropology (e.g., Rothenbuhler & Coman, 2005). Our study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted on YouTube over different periods in 2007 and 2011. In our virtual ethnography, we gathered approximately 900 videos and other online materials, such as screenshots, on four school shootings: Columbine in 1999, Virginia Tech in 2007, Jokela in 2007, and Kauhajoki in 2008. The largest amount of visual material concerns the two Finnish school shootings, Jokela and Kauhajoki. This material is complemented by the material on the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings. We searched for this material by using certain keywords, such as "school shootings" or "school massacre" and/or the name of the place of the massacre (Jokela, Kauhajoki, Virginia Tech, or Columbine). We also entered some of the names used by the killers when signing in to YouTube to activate its search engine. Material was also collected by searching for the killers' names (Auvinen, Saari, Harris, Klebold, and Seung-Hui Cho). In the modus operandi of YouTube, when a topic is chosen using a certain keyword, the platform offers the user new material related to the topic. This is how one shooting video is associated with another. It is also customary with YouTube for the producer of a video to write a short description of it. Keywords within these descriptions are then recognised by YouTube in order to link the clip to "related" videos. Through this logic of communication, it is also possible to follow how certain images travel from one video or media site to another (see Burgess & Green, 2009).

This analysis of ritualised communication regarding the four school shootings on YouTube is an application of what George Marcus (1995, 1998) called “multi-sited ethnography,” a set of research strategies in which certain defined objects of study are followed across a variety of sites – here, the virtual sites of the YouTube platform (see Wittel, 2000; Kozinets, 2010). In our view, the core of this craft is to stimulate more nuanced interplay between the conceptual and analytical work of ritualised communication, on the one hand, and the representational work of media anthropology conducted in an online environment (YouTube), on the other (Bird, 2010; Boyer, 2010, 2011; Hine, 2000). Moreover, in our virtual fieldwork on YouTube, we have attempted to “tease out layers of meanings,” as Mihai Coman and Eric Rothenbuhler (2005, p. 2) described it, “through observation of and engagement with the everyday situations” in which YouTube is consumed, the practices by which the school shooting videos are interpreted, and the uses to which YouTube is put in terms of circulating, remediating, and sharing school shooting videos. In other words, in this fieldwork on YouTube, we turn our attention to the anthropology of modernity and our “own” media culture by exploring some rather new corners of it (see Augé, 1994).

#### 4. Fieldwork

In the world of YouTube, looking at the moving images is not the only thing that matters if social dynamics are to be established. Affective energies, crucial for the constitution of the Batailleian social, are also stimulated by those *actively involved in circulating, remediating, and sharing images*. Thus, the Batailleian community of “crime companions” on YouTube emerges primarily through the *active performance and visual representation of violence*, i.e., through transgression by violating the prohibition to kill. The communities established in these encounters can best be described as imaginary communities. As de-territorialised forms of belonging, they cannot be physically perceived, but they do have social momentum. (Sumiala & Tikka, 2011, 264; Sumiala, 2011a.)

All five school shooters – Harris and Klebold, Seung-Hui Cho, and Auvinen and Saari – were active in making and producing media materials in which they manifested their hate toward mankind, celebrated guns, and boasted about killing. Much of that material has ended up on YouTube, either produced by the killers themselves or by other users who were active in the social media. Of these five young men, the first gunman to use social networks, YouTube, Internet discussion groups, and chat rooms actively to express his thoughts and needs was the Jokela shooter (Raittila, Koljonen, & Väliverronen, 2010, p. 33). However, those who can be seen as iconic characters in terms of school shooters are the Columbine killers. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold produced a rich amount of media materials: journals, diaries, and home videos in which they boasted about killing, proclaimed their aggression towards the world around them, and documented their gun arsenal. Part

of this material is available on YouTube. However, it was not uploaded by the killers themselves (YouTube did not exist at the time), but by other actors who had discovered the material later and uploaded it. In one of these videos, the Columbine shooters are firing guns in the woods. Another video is a film made by the shooters as a school project, entitled *Hitman for hire*. In this video, the killers are playing hit men, wearing black trench coats, carrying guns, and yelling threats at the camera. The video was filmed at Columbine High School and it has become a central piece in the YouTube circulation surrounding the Columbine school massacre.

The most prominent images circulating on YouTube about the Virginia Tech School shooting depict the killer with a gun pointing at the viewer. These videos were made by the shooter and they, too, manifest hatred and destruction. Between his shooting sprees, the Virginia Tech killer took the time to mail a media package to NBC news. This material contained a manifesto, 27 videos, and 43 photographs, as well as a reference to “martyrs like Eric and Dylan.” NBC released part of this material, which was soon rebroadcasted on other news networks and which resulted in its fast dissemination on YouTube as well (see Kellner, 2008).

The Jokela shooter had registered with various online communities under the usernames *Sturmgeist* and *NaturalSelceter89*. He voiced his political and ideological opinions in YouTube’s “Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold” community, named after the shooters in the Columbine school massacre, and produced various videos on YouTube. Right before setting out to the school on 7 November 2007, the shooter uploaded a video entitled *Jokela High School massacre* onto YouTube and included a link to a package containing extra material. He also posted the message *Today history is made* in IRC-Gallery (a Finnish social networking site). After sending these messages, he switched his computer off and set out to the school to begin his shooting rampage. The visual material produced by the Jokela killer was particularly rich both in the number of videos he uploaded and the professional level of their visual image. He used, for instance, aggressive metal music and strong colour contrasts, such as red and black, to illustrate his message of misanthropy. His texts were produced in English and in Finnish, which emphasised his role as an international actor who aimed to circulate his message of hate and violence on the Internet (see also Sumiala, 2011a, 2011b; Sumiala & Tikka, 2010).

The Kauhajoki shooter, too, was active in uploading violent material on the web before committing his crimes. He had also registered with IRC-Gallery and YouTube, and he took, for example, the username *Wumpscut86* as his online identification. Over the course of 2008, images of a young man smiling at the camera changed into profile photos taken at a shooting range and eventually into a video where the man shoots at the camera. The shooter posted the first photos, hinting at the impending massacre, in the IRC-Gallery in August 2008, about one month before he committed his crime. Soon after the first posting, the Kauhajoki

shooter downloaded a picture of his weapon onto the IRC-Gallery, entitled *Pity for the majority?* Moreover, pictures also appeared on the IRC-Gallery featuring the man firing his weapon at a shooting range and posing for the camera with his weapon. Two weeks later, he again added two more gunman photos of himself to his gallery. In September, the month of the massacre, the killer downloaded four shooting videos onto YouTube – the last ones only a week before the shooting – featuring him firing his weapon at what appears to be a shooting range. On the day of the shooting, Tuesday, 23 September 2008, he included a link to his *Massacre in Kauhajoki* file package, which contained the videos *You will die next*, *Goodbye*, and *Me and my Walther*, to proclaim his fascination for guns (“Walther” is the very make of gun that he used in the massacre), as well as an aerial shot of the school centre and photos of him aiming the weapon at the camera (see also Sumiala, 2011a, 2011b; Sumiala & Tikka, 2011).

We argue that many similarities exist between circulating, remediating, and sharing the visual self-communication of the five school shooters, thus creating a ritualised pattern. A significant characteristic of these killer videos as ritualised communication is that they were amateur efforts produced by the killers themselves about themselves and their violent visions. The shooters built up their online identities and participation by circulating, remediating, and sharing certain materials, sought out contact with likeminded users, and engaged in social relationships in virtual communities of hate and destruction (see Turkle, 1995; Rheingold, 2003). In the Bataillean lexicon, we may consider this a community of “crime companions,” an implication of heterogeneous social, as all the shooters were to cross the boundary between life and death through a transgressive act of mass murder.

Notably, the killers are not the only ones who actively engage with hate, violence, and death on YouTube. Such diversity in participant types fosters the heterogeneous social. Also, ordinary users on YouTube have employed the killer’s material, which consists of collections of images of the five school shooters, to reproduce messages of misanthropy. The sense of community is thus established through looking at ritualised communication on violence and participating in circulating, remediating, and sharing this material.

Many of the videos produced by amateur YouTube users are constructed from photos and material already circulating on YouTube, such as surveillance camera (CCTV) footage from the Columbine high school dining hall that shows the killers in action. Moreover, there is an image of the Columbine killers themselves lying dead on the school floor after the building was secured, an image of suicide which is circulating on YouTube and elsewhere on the Internet in different forms and through different users. One illustrative example of a user video is *Murder Redrum Columbine High, Virginia Tech, Winnenden, Jokela school, Northern Illinois*. This video is a collage of five different school-shooting events, made up of materials produced by the killers as well as CCTV material and news images from



professional news agencies. Portraits of young men with guns appear one after another. Overall, this video has many of the aesthetic and acoustic qualities of music videos, to the extent that the killers are portrayed as artists rapping their message of violence. Another video that utilises images of the shooters, produced and uploaded by active YouTube user *KaerichiX*, is entitled *School shootings–Sharing my disease*. Through this activity, *KaerichiX* participated in the circulation of Columbine, Virginia Tech, Jokela, Kauhajoki, and two German school shooters. He also employed movies made about school shootings, such as *Elephant*, *Bang bang you're dead*, *Zero day*, and *Zero hour*. This type of circulation, remediation, and sharing of violent material, typical of user videos, is again an example of the phenomenon of ritualised communication around these four school shootings.

Following Bataille's theory, the YouTube videos related to the four school shootings and the virtual communities established around these videos by the killers and their followers can be interpreted as transgressive expressions of the heterogeneous social among the participants. These participants include not only the killers who uploaded the videos, but also the users who take that material and further remix it to ritualise this violent material through circulation, remediation, and sharing. In these communities, people scattered around the world come together through a visual discourse of violence, hatred, and destruction; in the spirit of Bataille, we may consider these ephemeral encounters of stranger sociability *sacred communities of destruction*. These are virtual communities held together by a social imaginary constructed around the visualisation of texts of death and violence that emanate from specific nations (in this case, the USA and Finland), but almost instantly transcend the national level. These communities, fostered by the dark side of the social, cancel the distance between "the real" and "the virtual" and cohere around the endless circulation, remediation, and sharing of visual discourses of hate and destruction.

In Bataillean terminology, this constant flow of videos is embracing the heterogeneous social, the world of dark desires and instincts that are hidden from daylight – in this case, they lie beneath what is covered in mainstream news media. However, as we will discuss in the conclusion, this is anything but an innocent, let alone inconsequential cultural phenomenon. The emergence of the heterogeneous social and the logic of its expansion on YouTube challenges the classical interpretation offered by Bataille. The question is this: If the dynamics of mutual rejection between the social elements (homogeneous and heterogeneous) has become biased e.g. the dynamics between homogeneous and heterogeneous are put imbalance by the overflow of the heterogeneous, how does this shift in theoretical positioning affect the interpretation of the social dynamics between the two in present-day social dynamics acted out on YouTube?

## 5. Conclusions

One possible scenario can be formulated by applying the logic of the orgy, a concept that in its late modern formulation was originally introduced by Jean Baudrillard (1986) when he described the libidinal social dynamics of late modern society. In a situation in which heterogeneous elements (e.g., violent videos related to school shootings) are first seduced into the domain of the homogeneous and then begin to dominate a social scene (e.g., YouTube), the dynamics between the two (heterogeneous and homogeneous) become imbalanced. The logic of the mediated orgy described by Baudrillard is about this imbalance. It is about turning death into a spectacle, playing with desire and lust, expenditure and excess, and the wounds and the inconsistency of the individual. There is a strong emotional element included in this type of mediated orgy, which is established around affective communities of violence and destruction. But it is precisely the affectivity itself that makes this type of community so unstable and vague. It lasts only as long as the affective energies (repulsion and attraction) stimulated by the heterogeneous are in circulation, such that viewers and users making and looking at the videos on YouTube are scopophilically and contagiously affected (see Maffesoli, 1993.) The Batailleian community ceases to exist as soon as no affectual stimulus remains. In order to flourish again, it needs new videos of torture, killing, and abuse. The social dynamics in the mediated orgy both enforce the cruelty and banalise it. Consequently, the idea of transgression, in Batailleian terms, obviously begins to lose its social function. After the banalisation of the prohibition to kill, there is nothing to be completed, no social dynamics to be activated.

To follow Baudrillard's (1988) argumentation again, the ritualised communication on violence and death related to the four school shootings ultimately ends up breaking down the dynamics between chaos and order, between heterogeneous and homogeneous, thus banalising the ritualised communication on death into empty repetition. Consequently, the tie between ritualised communication (circulation, remediation and sharing of violent videos) and the dark core of the community (heterogeneous social) established around this type of ritualisation is broken and withers into nothing.

In the end, we are inclined to believe that the never-ending ritualised communication on the shootings will feed not only cruelty and banalisation of evil embedded in decline of community, but also fear and insecurity that may well make the social dynamics impotent in an unexpected manner. To draw on sociologist Frank Furedi (2006), a characteristic of present-day culture of fear is that it fosters a feeling of threat, but also of incompetence and impotence. For Furedi and many other cultural and social analysts, today's culture of fear may be perceived as an expression of misanthropy that alienates people from one another and that prevents us from establishing and maintaining social relationships (Furedi, 2006, xiv-xxi; see

also Altheide, 2002; Appadurai, 2006; Bauman, 2006; Butler, 2003; Furedi, 2006; Žižek, 2008). Following Bataille's insight, we argue that the sacred constituted in this type of ritualised practice of visual communication around the school shootings is, indeed, absence—an individually experienced but collectively shared wound. In a cultural condition in which the dynamics between the heterogeneous and homogeneous become perverted, as they do in the case of the four school shootings, this absence will be even more profound. On YouTube, the overflow of heterogeneous social continues to banalise and diminish the power of the sacred as the core of social life. This, we believe, will have deep implications for the sacred as a vital category of collective life. What is nurtured in this condition of diminished sacred is social impotence and, perhaps, even the death of the social.

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