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***'Dude, get a shot of this': The performance of violence in the school shooting film* Excursion**

Abstract

One of the persistent aspects of the media and general public response to campus shooting tragedies is an obsessive fascination with the motives of the killers. Our short drama *Excursion* attempts to intervene in this interest in the perpetrators of school shootings by displacing the emphasis from the killers to the victims and survivors. A central technique to achieve this was the profilmic performance of the actors portraying the killers: two characters who were designed as ciphers from the initial scripting stage and throughout rehearsal and filming. Where these acts of mass violence in real life can be regarded as performative in nature (Muschert & Ragnedda 2010) it is significant to consider the performance techniques employed by the actors themselves. In this article, we discuss the rehearsal and performance choices of the actors as well as the commentary by actors portraying victims and survivors of the shooting. In particular, we discuss our empirical research into the audience reaction to the two alternate endings which emphasize the performance of violence in different ways.

Keywords: school shooting, creative practice, performance, violence, defamiliarization, trauma

[Click to view the festival release version of *Excursion*](#)

Introduction

One of the persistent aspects of the media and general public response to campus shooting tragedies is a near obsessive fascination with the motives of the killers. Emerging research provides compelling reasoning that the media's tendency to 'pathologize' and 'demonize' the killers (Muschert 2007; Frymer 2009; Larkin 2009) often results in the public development of 'vague ideas' about the 'background causes' to the rampage (Böckler, Seeger & Heitmeyer 2010: 265). Indeed, the very allure of events such as the Columbine massacre in April 1999 is that they are so 'difficult to comprehend' (Lawrence & Birkland 2004: 1193). Analysis suggests that the model for the reportage of school shootings, established in the wake of Columbine, fits a 'disaster narrative' cycle in which 'rarely, if ever, does society get important answers to questions about these events, such as why the shootings occur' (Schilkraut & Muschert 2014: 39). However, unlike 'natural' disasters or catastrophic accidents, these events are deliberately caused by human agency. Predictable targets of public and political debate in response to these disaster narratives generally include gun control, the influence of video and computer game violence, crises of masculinity and issues of mental illness.

These concepts are also manifest in popular media representations of school shootings. This includes those produced in the documentary mode, such as *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore 2002), *Zero Hour: Massacre at Columbine High* (Cineflix Productions 2004), as well as feature narratives such as *Elephant* (Van Sant 2003) and the hybrid docudrama *The Dirties* (Johnson 2013). Gun violence and film have been closely linked in many ways throughout the history of cinema (Prince 2003), and real-life gun killings even share cinema's cause-effect narrative structure ('he bleeds because I shot him') as well as certain terminology such as 'the shot, the magazine' (Jacobs 1996). It is easy to understand then the apparent compulsion by cinema to depict young men who arm themselves with weapons, invade a school location to kill students and teachers and often suicide, and to speculate about their motivations. Our short drama *Excursion*, as a creative-practice research project, attempts to intervene in this cinematic interest in the perpetrators of campus shootings by redirecting the emphasis from the motivations of the killers towards the choices and actions of victims and survivors and potential psychological and emotional impacts (Bender & Broderick 2013b; Bender & Broderick 2014). By doing so, we align our narrative more closely with the post-trauma character study of a school murderer's mother in Lynn Ramsay's film *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011). However, *Excursion* also attempts to render some aspects of pre-trauma on innocent characters caught in the midst of a campus shooting incident, before the latency of traumatic affect becomes manifest. While on one level ours could be regarded as a companion film to *Elephant*, which also can be read as offering no clear motivations or causes behind the perpetrators' actions – though such a reading is debatable (Rich 2012) – *Excursion* is an attempt to further problematize the audience's view of the killers. *Elephant* devotes a great deal of its running time to depicting the daily life of the shooters while they brood, plan, acquire weapons via mail order, and shower together. With only a few exceptions the camera remains with them during the massacre sequence [1]. By contrast, *Excursion* does not show the killers *before* the event. Instead we focus on the violence *during* the massacre as experienced by the victims. By the end, the film gestures towards the legacy afflicting survivors *after* the rampage is over. We were also attempting to work against the structure of films like *The Dirties*, which promotes a quite clear causal correlation between bullying and school shootings, and encouraged one reviewer to see each killer as a 'flesh and blood human being' and to 'have empathy for them' (Umstead 2013).

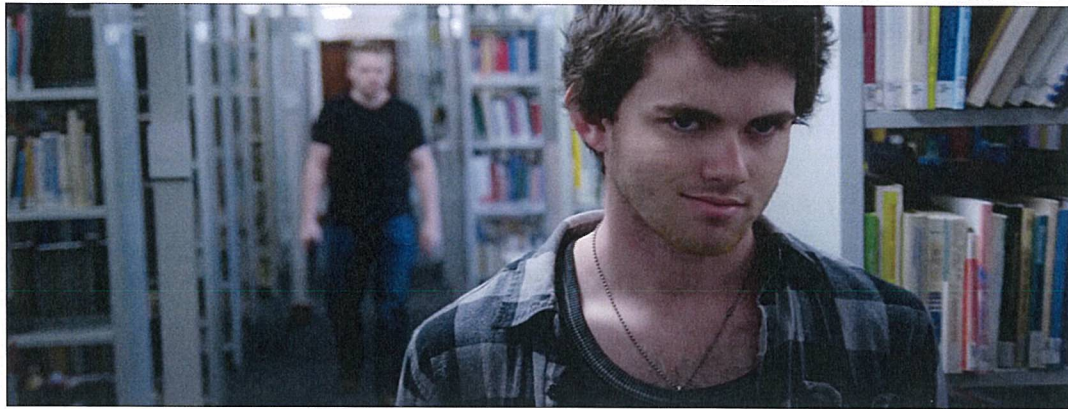


Figure 1. Killers Piers and Kurt stalk the library corridors in *Excursion*.

In this article, we reflect upon the techniques of scriptwriting and performance used to shift the focus from killer(s) to survivors in *Excursion*. The origins and psychology of campus shooters are well known and documented and are therefore anything but ambiguous in real life (McGee & DeBernardo 1999; O'Tool 2000; Verlinden, Hersen & Thomas 2000; Meloy et al 2001; Vossekuil et al 2002; Leary et al 2008). For instance, according to Peter Langman there are three very specific types of campus killer: psychotic, psychopathic, and traumatized (Langman 2009b). As we state in the associated documentary of the production of *Excursion*, the public, political and academic discussions of causes and preventative measures are indeed important, however, since they are clearly already taking place we wanted to reframe the discussion to focus on the victims and survivors (Bender & Broderick 2013a) [2]. Therefore, our film completely brackets the shooters' backstories. Rather than pinpoint any specific origin at all for their actions we wanted the audience to be able to interpret the killers' actions according to the pre-conceived cultural stereotypes they intrinsically bring to the film. From the perspective of Julia Kristeva's intertextuality (1980), if texts are both 'always already written' (Barthes 1973/1974: 21) as well as 'always already read' (Jameson 1981: 9) then we might consider the two school shooter characters in *Excursion* as 'already performed'. Against this background, later we reflect on some audience survey comments concerning the film which suggest that the minimal characterization provided by the script (characters that were already written/read culturally) and the actors' performance (inevitably already performed) was interpreted with reasonable homogeneity by the audience.

The pro-filmic performance of the actors portraying the killers was essential to depict two characters who were deliberately constructed as ciphers from script development through to rehearsal and filming (Figure 1). Thus a key research question for this project was to explore the extent to which this deliberately 'empty' characterization would facilitate audience engagement with *other characters* who were treated in a multi-dimensional way. While the direction and rehearsal of the killers was almost exclusively limited to present-tense mechanical behaviours, the two performers chose to interpret their respective character motivations in very different ways. Against this background then, we propose two further research questions as part of this post-filmmaking reflective process. First, given the freedom to prepare in their own ways, what were the rehearsal and performance choices of these two actors in portraying the killers? [3] Second, what were the reactions to their performance styles by members of the audience during our test-screening? [4]



Figure 2. The killing floor. Piers and Kurt in the library.

Excursion in medias res

Excursion is filmed in the docudrama style of Paul Greengrass (*Bloody Sunday*, 2002; *United 93*, 2006), both in terms of its raw handheld aesthetic and an editing style which is intended to suggest we are capturing the immediacy of events as they unfold, rather than in a controlled temporality [5]. The narrative depicts a small group of high school students and two teachers who are undertaking a tour of their local university campus library when two young men, Kurt (played by Blake Prosser) and Piers (Nathan Hadwiger), seemingly spontaneously begin a floor-by-floor shooting rampage. Despite a few short glimpses of the killers' violence, the camera stays predominantly with the high school group. *Excursion* also exhibits

some very clear stylistic and narrational links to *Out of the Blue* (Sarkies 2006), a New Zealand mass-shooter film (though not about school shooting incident). For Allan Cameron, both *United 93* and *Out of the Blue* gain significance because they 'spend so much time establishing [a] sense of contingent ordinariness' (Cameron 2012: 368). Our 'ordinary' school group is depicted listening to a presentation by one of the university professors in a lecture room, initially unaware of the massacre occurring in other parts of the library (Figure 2). In the Australian setting where the film takes place, the muffled banging sounds of gunfire are mistaken by the teachers to likely be the sounds of construction activity elsewhere in the library (Figure 3).



Figure 3. School students and their teachers (actors Summer Williams and Dave King).

But violence is quickly and unexpectedly thrust into their presence as the professor is murdered. The school group panics, scattering into much smaller groups who respond to the situation in various ways. In a previous paper (Bender & Broderick 2014), we discussed how in these scenes the film embeds the general advice provided in recent years by various U.S. government departments which encourage members of the public to consider their options to 'Run, Hide, or Fight' (US Department of Homeland Security 2008/2014; City of Houston Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security 2012; FBI 2013). One teacher, Clara Day (played by Summer Williams) flees with three of the students to find a fire escape. Two boys split from the group entirely and hide under a table; two girls also run off and hide between rows of library shelves. Another teacher, Miles Stephens (Dave King), attempts to barricade the killers from entering their section of the library and, when that fails, ultimately fights with Piers. During the melee Miles overpowers Piers and wrestles away his weapon, they fight and Miles shoots Piers. This event occurs in front of two school boys, one of whom is aghast at the brutal killing. By this time, Kurt has moved to another part of the library and located Clara, who blocks an exit after her students have escaped. He shoots her point-blank in the stomach and records her reaction on his mobile phone as she writhes in agony. Hearing the nearby shot Miles quickly finds them and, shaking, but with a determined resolve, attempts to disarm Kurt.

At this point we reached a creative impasse. As producers we were split between our individual narrative impulses to have Kurt, who continues to record the events on his mobile, either (a) be killed by Miles when Kurt raises his gun in challenge, or (b) have Kurt take his own life before a hesitant Miles can intervene. As we further discuss below, option (a) reinforces a generic vengeance resolution where narrative pleasure is afforded audiences by vicariously identifying with the 'hero' who dispatches the perpetrator (e.g. *Death Wish*, *Dirty Harry*). Option (b) would challenge such vicarious vengeance. This binary face-off enabled us to experiment with script and plot options interactively by surveying our test audience and making a final-cut based on a majority vote [6]. We scripted and shot both endings, screening them to a crowd-sourced test audience, who then cast votes. By a ratio of two to one, over sixty per cent of the 200 audience respondents chose the suicide scenario, which remains in the final cut (Figure 4). To view back-to-back alternative endings presented to the crowd-sourced audience, see <https://youtu.be/Fg0G3nZH0Dw?t=15m57s>.

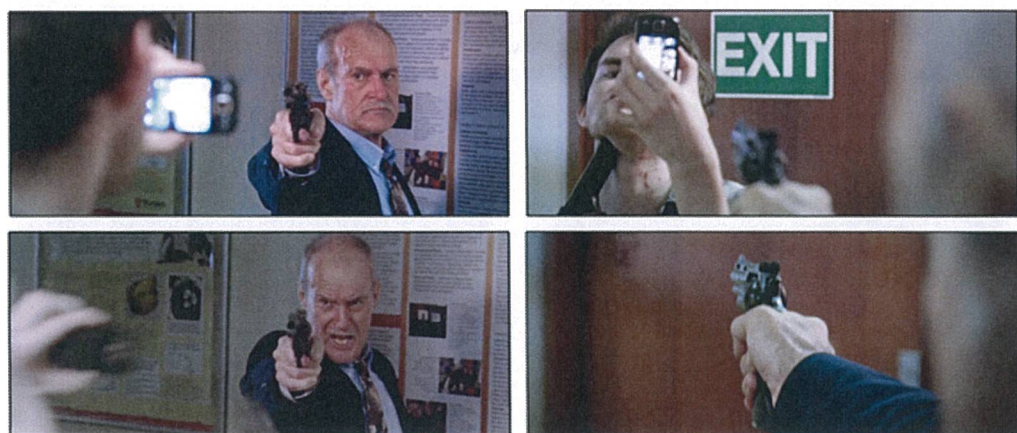


Figure 4. No exit. As Miles (Dave King) confronts the final killer, Kurt (Blake Prosser) turns both his mobile phone camera and his pistol around to shoot himself.

As with any controversial subject matter there is the risk for a drama like this to be accused of being sensationalist entertainment. Indeed, we were conscious of this concern. Importantly, we saw *Excursion* as an opportunity to combine our experiences as educators with our earlier independent research into trauma, community and representations of trauma (Broderick 2009; Broderick 2010; Traverso & Broderick 2010) as well as cinematic representations of violence and defamiliarization (Bender 2013).

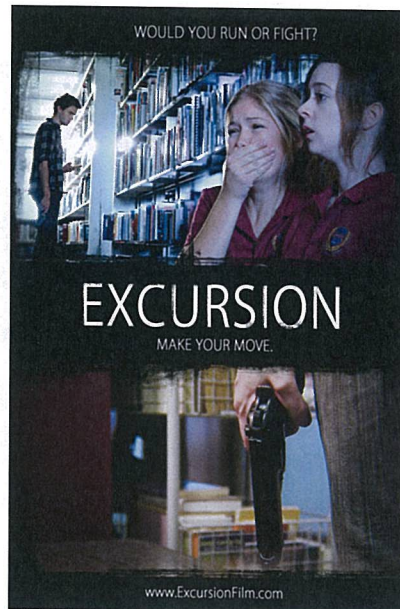


Figure 5. *Excursion* promotional image.

Cognitivist film theory argues that the human imagination is central to engagement with narrative, in that audiences run 'off-line' mental simulations of the events depicted on screen (Currie 1995; Bacon 2009; Bacon 2011; Bender 2014). For instance, Torben Grodal argues that cinematic 'hunter-and-prey scenarios' are like games of hide and seek in children's play activity, which are 'expressions of innate viewer dispositions for emotional engagements in such scenarios, emotions that were advantageous for our hunter-gatherer ancestors' (Grodal 2009: 7-8). From this perspective, there are specific sequences in *Excursion* that are designed to tap into the evolutionary aspect of human imagination involved in rehearsing plans of action during dangerous situations (Figure 5). Indeed, since a great number of campus rampages are random – as opposed to 'targeted' killers such as Robert Steinhauser in Germany who targeted mostly teachers in his 2002 attack (Langman 2012: 2-3) – part of the impact of the film is the unsettling fact that pre-planned, anticipatory responses to such events may be of no use at all [7]. Some characters run from the killers and survive, while others who run are shot. Some characters are discovered hiding but are inexplicably spared by the killer, whereas others take cover and are murdered while the killings are casually captured on mobile phone ('Dude, get a shot of this!'). Those who attempt to fight fare somewhat better. Yet, when one character fights back in order to escape he is wounded in the leg, and when the school teacher Miles fights back and kills Piers the film gestures towards this event as a trigger for his future traumatization. This trauma is echoed in the film's post-massacre interview with 'Jack,' one of the students played by Chris Northover. Framed, lit and presented in traditional documentary mode, as if in a current affairs program, Jack states ambiguously and despondently: 'He didn't have to kill him' (Figure 6). The subjects of his statement (he/him) are deliberately unclear. On the one hand it may appear to confirm the character's apparent revulsion at the death he has just witnessed ('Miles didn't have to kill Piers'), but it may also relate to any number of victims killed by either perpetrator. Thus while some lives are saved because of 'a good guy with a gun,' the film problematizes the highly controversial 'solutions' to school violence proposed by supporters of 'concealed carry' policies that suggest educators and students carry concealed weapons on campus (Van Winkle 2010; Bennet, Kraft & Grubb 2012; Cavanaugh et al 2012; Patten, Thomas & Wada 2013; Bartula & Bowen 2015).



Figure 6. Jackson (Chris Northover) in a faux current affairs interview recorded some time after surviving the shooting rampage. He remains troubled by witnessing a point-blank gun killing.

Campus shootings: the will to perform

Real life school shooting rampages, like jihad terrorist incidents of violence, are performative in nature (Juergensmeyer 2000; Muschert & Ragnedda 2010). In this regard too, as in the news media's structured reporting of these rampages, the Harris-Klebold-Columbine model is useful to understand the will to perform. At one level, the performative element of a campus rampage is quite literal. For instance, Harris and Klebold were fond of videotaping themselves and, as Jennifer Rich points out in her critique of *Elephant*: 'There is no doubt that Harris and Klebold were aware of the 'filming' of their massacre by the school's security system' (Rich 2012: 1311) [8]. Compare for instance, the iconic security camera image of Klebold with his Tec-9 submachine-gun with the pose of Sylvester Stallone in the promotional poster of George P Cosmatos' 1987 film *Cobra* (Figure 7). Even the tagline 'Crime is a disease. Meet the cure,' is refracted through Harris' distorted thinking in his diary entries (Harris 2014 [1998]). This example of the performative nature of the shootings is not to suggest any simple correlation between film violence and school rampages. After all, on the one hand studies have found vast contradictions in the research on violent media and aggression (Böckler, Seeger & Sitzer 2012; Eitzen 2014), and there are significant problems involved in attributing this extreme phenomenon to the simplistic and outdated Frankfurt School transmission model of communication. Nevertheless, in terms of the numbers of people killed per annum from gun violence school rampages are still incredibly rare occurrences (Muschert & Ragnedda 2010). While the relationship between violent films and school shootings may not be causal, there is clearly a case to be made that the perpetrators often engage in an active process of meaning-making by cultural 'poaching' – to appropriate Michel De Certeau (1983/1988) – from music, film, video games and internet videos (Kiilakoski & Oksanen 2011). Furthermore, some post-Columbine shooters have also adopted the Harris-Klebold *mise en scene* of combat-styled clothing, imitating aspects of their massacre or aiming to exceed the body-count of victims (Larkin 2009; Malkki 2014).

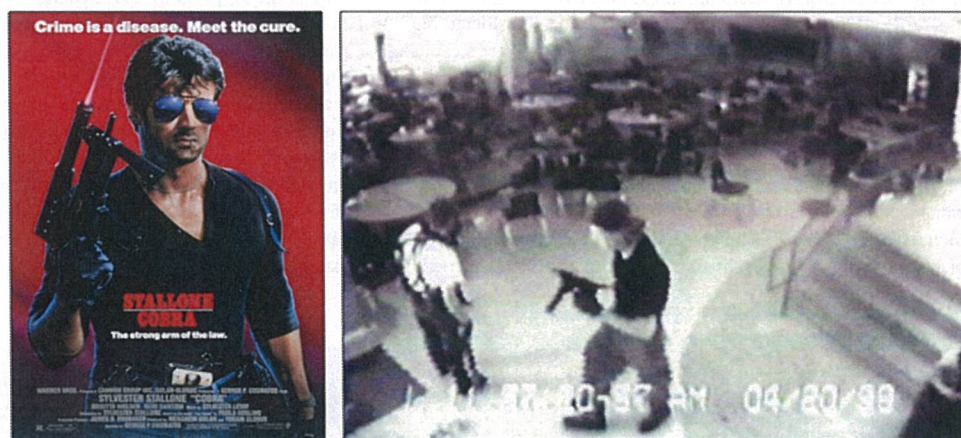


Figure 7. Stallone's action hero casual gun wielding, compared with Dylan Klebold at Columbine.

At another level, the performative element of campus rampages can be considered symbolic acts of violence in which the killings are 'expressive attacks on school institutions... that are meant as a form of communication' (Muschert & Ragnedda 2010: 347). Of course, this is related to the literal kind of performance in that many perpetrators leave written or video manifestos articulating their world views, experiences and motivations (Malkki 2014). For instance, Elliot Rodger – whose 2014 attack on Isla Vista fraternities is classifiable as a campus killing – released a video shortly before the attack in which he states his targets would be the kinds of females who had snubbed him sexually as well as the male students who were generally sexually active. In his final video uploaded to YouTube, titled 'Retribution,' he not only performs literally for the camera, staging the shot to present himself in 'magic hour' golden lighting (Figure 8), but he also makes clear the expressive component of his attack: 'You will finally see that I am in truth the superior one. The true alpha male' (Rodger 2014a;

Rodger 2014b). Thus the will to perform by school shooters is also socio-psychological in the way the killers often imagine their rampage will gain media attention and fame (Langman 2015; Muschert & Ragnedda 2010).

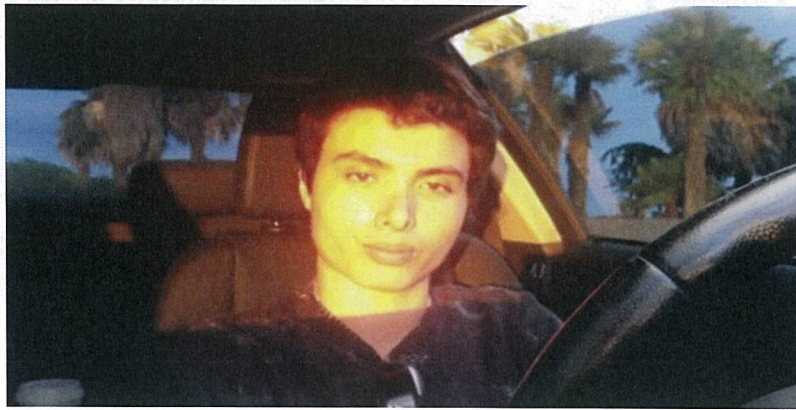


Figure 8. Elliot Rodger performs for the camera in magic hour lighting as he declares the communicative aspects of his upcoming attack.

Performing and staging death

These phenomena are deployed and problematized in *Excursion*, particularly the ways digital video recordings are used by various characters. As Ken Miller argues, following Lasch (1979), ‘younger generations of media users record nearly all of their behaviour – or at least samples of it – onto digital camera devices before uploading the material onto various social networking sites in order to create an (online) identity’ (Miller 2010: 4). Killers like Rodger, Scott or Klebold are not content to simply shoot up a school. Rather, they want to act out on video first, describe the attack, announce it and generate an ego-ideal of themselves beforehand to bequeath the world.

The killers in *Excursion* appear to be participating in this tradition. However, rather than enabling us to understand why Piers and Kurt are recording their actions the film offers no explanation. For instance, we simply do not know who the audience is that Piers is streaming his laptop webcam to when he sets it up in the library foyer prior to the initial killing, and we certainly do not know why he frames a single killing and leaves the laptop in a position which will not capture any further deaths. Perhaps he wants to stream the chaos in the foyer as the survivors escape and first-responders arrive? Likewise, consider the performance of Piers as Kurt requests: ‘Dude, get a shot of this’ and aims his gun to execute a young librarian cowering under a desk. Kurt seems excited, panting heavily, while Piers simply stops what he is doing and perfunctorily aims his phone-camera toward him and clicks record. Although the moment captured by Piers is a brutal act of cold-blooded murder, Piers’ action is nonetheless a reflex; one borne out of the everyday practice of capturing and sharing common ‘banal imagery’ (Ibrahim 2015) of activities from everyday life. Kurt’s urge to ‘perform’ the execution on video is also a reflex of the social-media generation’s evidential slogan ‘pics, or it didn’t happen’ [9]. Significantly, in all but two key instances, the film does not show the view from their killer’s camera. For example, as Piers raises his phone to film Kurt’s librarian execution there is no use of classic shot/reverse-shot editing to show Piers’ view or the image captured on his phone. Indeed, the film denies both the classic suturing of audience identification with Piers’ point of view (Silverman 1983; Persson 2003) as well as any kind of sado-masochistic pleasure in witnessing the female librarian being shot (Mulvey 1975; Studlar 1985). Rather, we cut to an omniscient angle away from the action which both denies identification while simultaneously occluding the victim’s death. This occurs also during the sequence in which Kurt captures photographs of various victims’ bodies elsewhere in the library (Figure 9). He seems to be framing each shot carefully before clicking the shutter. But why is he taking pictures of these bodies and not the other victims? The film provides no answer. Nor are the ‘objects’ of his fascination shown on screen, as expected generically in classical shot/reverse-shot editing.



Figure 9. ‘Pics, or it didn’t happen.’ Kurt snaps a still photograph of a victim’s body.

Of the two occasions in which *Excursion* reveals the perspective of Kurt's camera, the first is only a brief, indistinct view when he is filming Clara's gut wound. This over-the-shoulder shot cognitively and narratively prepares the audience for the second occasion when Kurt turns the camera and gun on himself at the climax (Figure 4 above). This four shot sequence is the closest the film comes to privileging a classic shot/reverse-shot structure with either killer's action/reaction. Hence, its usage is both deliberate as well as significant. In this moment, the audience is narratively sutured in complex ways. At a broad level, the shot/reverse-shot pattern edits from:

- a) over-the-shoulder framing from behind Kurt as Miles aims the previously captured hand-gun at him and demands surrender, to;
- b) reverse over-the-shoulder framing behind Miles as Kurt turns his already recording camera phone around in order to capture a 'selfie' angle and abruptly puts his weapon under his chin, to;
- c) a return to the original framing of Miles as Kurt pulls the trigger and disappears from the frame.

Thus by the third shot of the sequence, Kurt's suicide displaces (or de-sutures) himself from the shot/reverse-shot sequence. The fourth shot is a clarifying closer view from behind Miles, conventionally foregrounding his pistol as he lowers it slowly from frame. Thus the final view of Kurt is one of absence; a trace. Only a blood smear now visible on the wall occupies this shot.

Of particular significance here is that this final sequence is radically different from the alternate ending which we audience-tested at a cinema screening with our crowd-sourced investors [10]. In the alternate ending, Kurt does not turn the camera on himself and therefore we do not see the selfie-view in this version. The sequence uses simpler shot/reverse-shot editing that gestures towards generic conventions from classic western gunslingers to *Dirty Harry*: 'You better ask yourself a question: do I feel lucky?' (Don Siegel, 1971). In this ending, Kurt looks down as if thinking for a moment and then rapidly draws his gun up to aim at Miles. Miles shoots first, showing more resolve at this point than when he earlier, instinctively shot Piers in desperate self-defense (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Shot/reverse-shot editing in the unreleased alternate ending of *Excursion* (top row) in which Miles shoots Kurt at point-blank in a shot clearly referencing the over-the-shoulder justice of Don Siegel's 1971 film *Dirty Harry* (bottom row).

This second ending has only been viewed by the crowd-source contributors (screening attendees and online). After viewing both endings back-to-back, audiences voted for their preferred ending among two alternatives that either provided pleasure or displeasure according to the *performance* of death depicted. In the first ending, Kurt's death is performed via suicide which, though viewers described it as more 'authentic', they felt denied any sense of reprisal or justice for his shooting spree. The second ending presents Kurt's death as performed by the schoolteacher in self-defense, from which viewers reported a vicarious sense of catharsis – punishment through revenge/murder. The audience voted overwhelmingly in favour of the suicide ending, for a variety of reasons. In general, the reasons can be coded according to responses which included a sense of 'realism' (26), a greater emotional or dramatic 'impact' (32) or a sense of justification according to what the character of Kurt would most likely do (35) [11]. This third category is interesting given the deliberate strategy of providing no character motivation or background of the killers. Nevertheless, some audience members offered readings of Kurt's character such as:

The Killer was there with the intention to die, and in filming the ending as the scene played out, would be in my opinion, very inline with his motives. (Male, 25-34)

I don't believe the killers had any intentions to leave the crime scene alive. No idea what their motives or back story is but it's pretty clear they didn't have a plan to leave. (Female, 35-44)

Kurt knew that he was never going to make it out of it alive, and with him believing in his God complex that he will be the only one to take his own power away. (Male, 16-24)

The suicide gave the character of the killer more of a journey/development throughout the film. Instead of two robotic crazed killers, the suicide showed an element of humanity. (Female, 16-24)

The guy throughout seemed more crazy/internally tapped so the suicide fitted better. The other killer demonstrated more aggressive/angry so more likely to fight and shoot. (Male, 25-34)

In addition, many comments suggested that Kurt's earlier statement 'I'll see you on the other side' (which is met impassively by Piers) made sense once they saw his suicide later in the film. These typical audience responses show both a strong engagement with the characters and the narrative, and importantly, how the characters of Kurt and Piers can be regarded as simultaneously *already-written-read-and-performed*. Just as it is unlikely an audience member would be unfamiliar with these types of mass shootings, it is reasonable to assume that many audience members would also interpret Kurt's actions through their preconceived attitudes and ideas.

Although *Excursion's* events and setting are entirely fictional, they are clearly a composite of a number of significant campus rampages such as the well-known massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech. It is important to note that the film opens with on-screen text stating: 'Inspired by real events'. This contextual rubric flags to the audience that what follows is not literally a 'true story' or that it is a re-enactment of any particular massacre. Rather, it is a cue for audiences to invoke their own preconceptions and comprehension of real life campus shootings (just as we expected the performers would from the terse screenplay). It is highly unlikely that anybody watching this film would not be struck by the resonance with gun violence in America and similar discussions in Australia. As demonstrated, Kurt and Piers can be considered always-already-read-written-and-performed, but as David Bordwell argues – unlike characters in literary texts which are discursive constructions – a film character 'has a palpable body, and actions seem naturally to flow from it' (Bordwell 2008: 141). Our two actors were cast according to particular criteria of screen presence. We wanted two young adult males who could be regarded as 'normal' looking and otherwise unremarkable, though it was also essential that they perform with minimal expression (either by choice or by default). Kurt was played by Blake Prosser, an emerging young actor who had performed in a number of student short films in Perth. Piers was played by Nathan Hadwiger, a personal friend of the director, with no acting experience at all.

Although the script provided no background for the characters, both actors chose to prepare in their own ways and were encouraged to do so. Prosser's strategy was to revisit freely available material on Columbine and 'try to get inside their heads and figure out what made them do it'. Hadwiger chose to base his character on the Virginia Tech killer Seung Hui Cho, but did not review any reference material, simply relying upon his memory from the media and own interpretation of Cho's 'utter disappointment and anger at everybody around him.' Although these are quite loose preparation methods, they are both valid approaches in the Method tradition (Stanislavsky 1937; Naremore 1988). Interestingly, only Prosser's performance makes sense in terms of Langman's (2009a) typology of school shooters – Kurt quite clearly presents as a 'psychotic' shooter of the Klebold variety as evidenced by his jerky movements, excitement and other disconcerting affectations throughout the film. From Langman's analysis, Seung Hui Cho was also a psychotic shooter, and therefore it would be more true to life for Hadwiger's performance to be much less controlled and calm throughout the massacre. We would expect more frequent bursts of outward anger, rather than only in a few scenarios where he is frustrated, such as when Kurt is zoning-out in the staircase staring at the Professor's blood. Consequently, Piers presents much more closely as a 'psychopathic' shooter with more in common with Harris or the 1992 Massachusetts shooter Wayne Lo than Seung Hui Cho (Langman 2016). What is particularly interesting here is the misconceptions inherent in Hadwiger's confident assumption that his acting was inspired by Cho, despite his acting choices perhaps being already-performed by the saturation of material in the popular culture about Harris.

However, as producers we are entirely unconcerned with whichever way audiences read Kurt or Piers. We purposely opened narrative and performative space for interpretation while limiting the potential for audience identification (let alone empathy) with the killers. However, it was essential to provide some clues to suggest the killers were motivated in some way, even as that specific motivation itself would be unclear. We knew from experience on previous film projects that if audiences are provided too little information about character motivations then there is the risk they will feel disengaged. This would be quite different to the intended effect of Brechtian alienation or Formalist defamiliarization, using particular devices to challenge audience's 'routine and habitual' perception of ideas (Shklovski 1965; Thompson 1988). Based also on the cognitivist assumption that audiences use their knowledge and 'nonfilmic' experience of the real-world to mentally construct the diegesis, it is fair to expect audiences to at least try to develop a background story for Kurt and Piers (Bordwell 2005; Bacon 2011). Regardless, therefore, of how much we displace attention away from the killers, their background is nonetheless part of the overall *fabula* of *Excursion*, and we can expect audiences to attempt to recreate some coherent *fabula* from the material provided by the *synzhet*. Consider Kurt's exchange with Clara moments before he shoots her in the abdomen:

Kurt: Do you love God?
Clara: [long, careful pause] Does he love me?
Kurt: Well today's the day you're gonna find out [shoots her].

As suggested above in the sample audience responses, in reconstructing the character's motivation here, an audience member might reasonably conclude that Kurt has some religious impulse attached to the rampage (however deluded that may be), or at the very least that he believes in God. A cognizant viewer may even suspect that the film is incorporating one of the myths of Columbine, that those killers asked 'Do you believe in God?' before shooting one of the victims (Cullen 2009; Janney 2012) [12]. Perhaps Kurt has an obsession with Columbine and is deliberately imitating the quote, as other shooters have been known to copycat various elements from previous rampages. This is to say nothing of the potential inferences possible based on Clara's response ('Does he love me?') or the slow, deep breath she takes the moment Kurt appears behind her. Nonetheless, any reading of Kurt's intention behind 'Do you love God?' are problematized moments later when Miles appears in the corridor and aims his captured revolver at Kurt. Here, Kurt slightly changes his previous question and asks: 'Do you believe in God?' His performance is totally flat – both in terms of facial expression as well as vocal delivery. For Henry Bacon, drawing upon Grodal's perspective of viewer cognition, films which do not provide clarity for particular aspects of narration can 'create a meaning effect that triggers the mind to seek for a meaning ... provided that the overall narrative context supports the possibility of meaning' (Grodal 2009; Bacon 2011: 44-45). In twisting Kurt's Columbine-like dialogue, this sequence signals one of the ways in which *Excursion* suggests that the killers' motives simply do not matter or may be entirely arbitrary (as suggested in the choice of who the killers shoot or ignore) and that audiences

should look elsewhere for meaning.

However, although Kurt and Piers are performed in ways which make it deliberately difficult for viewers to apprehend their possible motives, these are still vastly different characterizations and performance styles to the performances of rampage shooters in recent public service safety films such as *Run Hide Fight* by the City of Houston (2012) and *Surviving an Active Shooter* (LA County Sheriff 2015), and even the laboratory killing spree that occurs in *The Bourne Legacy* (Gilroy 2012) [13].

Performing pre-trauma

The performance of the two shooters is not the only strategy used to defamiliarize the audience's perception of campus rampages. The Australian setting and location itself is one of the key devices used to interrupt audience's ritual expectations of these events as typically occurring in the North American context. For instance, it is common for social media users to post commentary extolling the virtues of Australia's gun management laws following any widely publicized shooting rampage in the US (Wilson 2015). This is especially significant in the lecture room when the teachers assume the off-screen sound of gunshots is simply construction work. From the perspective of the school-group (but not the audience), the sound of the gunshots here would be what Michel Chion (1990) calls 'acousmatized' in that they cannot see the source of the sound and therefore it gains mystery. On the one hand this is understandable because the sound is quite muffled, however we believe it would be difficult for an audience to accept the characters' mistaken reaction to the sound in a U.S. context. It is commonplace (though unrealistic) for characters in Hollywood dramas to recognize and react instantly to off-screen gunfire. By defamiliarizing these sounds within the Australian context, we not only enable audiences to identify more closely with the school-group, but also to reconsider the habitual beliefs about the frequency of school shootings.

The film opens with some current affairs style interviews in the expository mode (Nichols 2001) with three characters speaking (presumably to an off-screen interviewer, apparent from their eye-line) about their experience of some troubling but as yet unidentified event that has occurred in the past. For instance, the first interviewee is Katie (played by Tessa Carmody) speaking in a strained voice: 'I just keep thinking ... why not me? Why did I survive?' (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Staged interview presented in current affairs mode with 'Katie' (Tessa Carmody).

This type of delay is a classic technique of defamiliarization, 'roughening' the 'hermeneutic line' (Thompson 1988). The audience has no idea what this traumatizing event was that the interview subjects experienced. The film delays clarity of this, but by foregrounding Katie's later trauma in this way the opening sequence places unique emphasis on her character's experience during the remainder of the narrative. Thus when she and Beth (Clare Lange) come face to face with Kurt much later in the film, the intention is to invoke a sense of dread. Does Katie witness Beth get killed by Kurt? Does Kurt shoot both of them but Katie is only wounded? It is revealed, in a later scene, that after taking photographs of multiple corpses, Kurt finds the girls cowering and stares at them for a moment. No words are spoken and no expression registers on Kurt's face, before he silently walks away. The film refuses to allow for singular interpretations or provide motivations for the killer's decision, however this reveal of the earlier scene does give a context for Katie's opening line, that can now be interpreted retrospectively as post-traumatic survivor guilt: 'Why did I survive?'

The sound also gestures towards future traumatization. Extrapolating from this sequence it is possible the girls may later associate the clicking of a smart-phone camera shutter with the gunshots fired and the victims shot. As a coda to the film, *Excursion* repeats the original interview with Katie but adds an extra line: 'I see his face every night.' Thus this roughened temporal delivery acts as a central aspect of the film's *syuzhet* delaying the connection between documentary interview and pre-traumatic sequence until the film's conclusion. The implication is that there are long-term consequences in the *fabula* of Katie's (and Beth's) life where outside of the fictive drama that has just unfolded, the documentary character 'Katie' continues to experience flash-backs or nightmares as part of the symptomology of post-traumatic stress disorder (Mayo Clinic 2016) [14]. Similarly, Katie and other faux documentary interviewees manifest pathological aspects of survivor guilt that is often experienced by people after these kinds of traumatic events (Williams 1988).

Conclusion

In producing the short drama *Excursion*, we were fully aware of the tension between our knowledge and skills as artists-practitioners and our textual research methodologies as cinema academics. Such tensions were undoubtedly inherent in our desire to incorporate scholarly understandings of representations of trauma and violence into the form of a mainstream action-drama. A further layer of reflexivity exists with the location and characters in this film. Unlike a conventional professional film production of such subject matter, where it is likely that many workers (cast and crew) involved would have no personal connection to the events or settings, these had a particular resonance for the producers. For one researcher-producer, the filming location for this fictional representation of campus violence was his actual workplace, a university library. Coincidentally, the head of the library who enabled out of hours access to locations for filming had been witness to a rare Australian campus shooting at La Trobe University in 1999 (Fatal Shooting at La Trobe University 1999). The other researcher-producer, prior to his research academic career, worked as a secondary school teacher – thus the planning of the running, hiding, and fighting responses required engaging in an imaginative exercise of what he would have done in response to such an event [15]. Many of the non-professional cast, acting in the roles of senior high school students or extras, were also current university students. Conscious of the difficult subject matter we were careful to keep the filming environment friendly and open yet despite rehearsals and the standard on-set safety procedures demonstrating beforehand that the weapons were non-firing replicas and therefore totally safe, some participants commented on their unease at having a (fake) gun barrel aimed directly at them during the filming of their scenes. Other cast members recalled that they had participated in high school emergency drills for active shooter scenarios. Such feedback raises wider issues of performance, role-play and the creative-research problem of understanding the process of an artistic practice while working within it (Webb 2012).

In reflecting on both the entire production process and the empirical audience testing of the project, we feel a strong sense of the legitimacy of our defamiliarization techniques in re-presenting this topical and seemingly endemic social issue [16]. As research-led creative practice, *Excursion* has informed our on-going scholarly work on the defamiliarization of violence and, in particular, the unusual uses of sound. Although space does not permit elaboration here, one of the project's aims was to creatively adapt Maria Tumarkin's (2005) notion of 'traumascape' and to explore audio-visual techniques to render visible the auras of such places, whether fictional or real (in this case a university library, see Figure 12). Following *Excursion*, we have also been able to further collaboratively implement and develop many of these techniques in order to creatively represent affects of violence in two other co-productions: *Off The Map* (2015), a short film on domestic violence, and an immersive, hypervisualisation research project related to place, trauma, and the Australian military experience of the Atomic bombing and occupation of Japan (*Fading Lights* exhibition 2015).

In addition, our conceptual approach to *Excursion* and these other outputs show us that crowd-sourcing audience input enables innovative methods for researching audience assumptions and testing creative hypotheses that would otherwise be time consuming and resource intensive. Such crowd sourcing also comes with the inherent potential to experiment with aspects of democratic input concerning narrative or stylistic directions and heightened qualitative engagement.

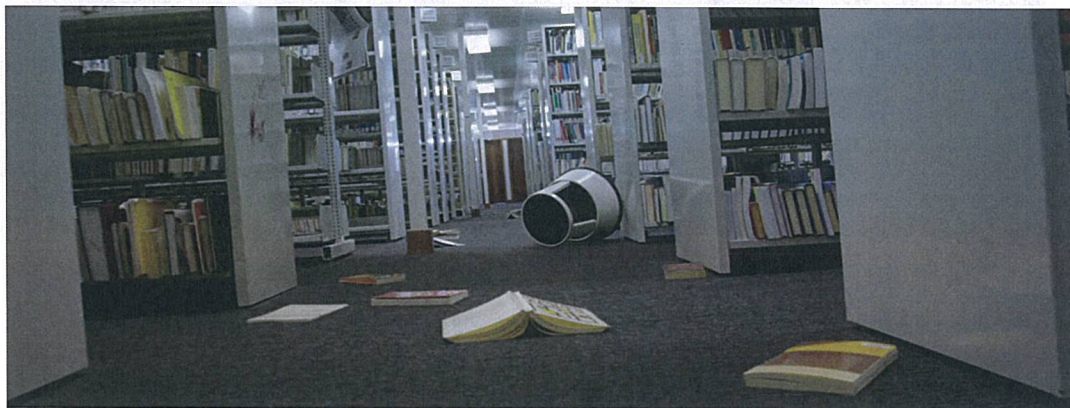


Figure 12. The closing tracking shots of *Excursion* evoke the aura and affect of 'traumascape'.

Notes

[1] In an interview conducted after the production, one of *Excursion*'s lead actors (Dave King) compared our film to *Elephant* suggesting that *Elephant* is a very 'cerebral' film whereas *Excursion* feels much more 'visceral.' This was an unused portion of the interview from the behind the scenes documentary we refer to later in this paper (Bender & Broderick 2013a). return to text

[2] The behind the scenes documentary is an associated, but entirely different, text to the pseudo-documentary interviews we have incorporated into the main film *Excursion*. We discuss these interviews with the 'characters' in a later section. return to text

[3] We did, however, arrange for a screen-test of the performers giving a faux interview as if their shooting had occurred and they survived. This was the only rehearsal of this kind, and was specifically un-directed and improvised, and the purpose was to test the on-screen chemistry between the two performers as well as to experiment with the kind of performances we might achieve by relying entirely upon the actors' own interpretations and preparation strategies from having read the script. They were free to imagine themselves as the main characters if they chose to although this was definitely not an instruction. return to text

[4] The archived page of our crowd-source campaign can be viewed at: <http://www.pozible.com/excursion> return to text

[5] The myth of hand-held camerawork signifying a documentary aesthetic is dealt with at length in *Film Style and the World War II Combat Film* (Bender 2013: 167-193). From this perspective, the cinematography of *Excursion* can be said to embody the spontaneous aesthetic, implying an 'unpolished, imprecise, non-Hollywood roughness' (177). Of course, Hollywood films frequently deploy this exact type of cinematography. return to text

- [6] The sequence also gestures to David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), where Professor Brian O'Blivion refuses to talk about television except while on television, and in *Excursion* killer Kurt shoots himself while shooting himself. return to text
- [7] Nevertheless, we were consciously embedding things in the environment/*mise-en-scene* that could have helped people get out of the situation if they considered their surroundings. The film does not mask these items (eg various alarms, emergency phones and many objects that could be used as weapons). These objects/opportunities are in the film as experimental 'triggers' for contemplation, in the hope that some viewers may pick up on these elements and question them as missed opportunities for the characters, and to possibly, subjectively, ask: 'What would I do in the circumstance?' return to text
- [8] Harris and Klebold in fact made their own film *Hitmen For Hire* in 1998 for a video production class. In this film they act out being saviours of people being bullied at school by dressing in black overcoats and killing the bullies. It is now viewable on YouTube: https://youtu.be/su_vpW3mM5w (Harris & Klebold 1998). This is clearly the inspiration behind *The Dirties*. return to text
- [9] Or, as the disenchanted chef in a Grizelda comic frets: 'Is everything ok? You haven't photographed your food yet' (Grizelda nd). Retrospectively, if the film were made today we may consider having Kurt utter, 'Witness me,' as if he is consciously invoking the Warboys of *Fury Road* (George Miller 2015). return to text
- [10] 43 contributors viewed the same version of the film online and voted digitally as they were not in Perth for the screening. return to text
- [11] Based on this coding scheme it is possible for audience comments to be coded in two categories. There are actually 6 responses which are coded as both realism and Kurt's character motivation, 5 responses coded as realism and impact, and 3 responses coded as impact and Kurt's character motivation. return to text
- [12] The myth is that Cassie Bemall said she believed in God and was then shot. In fact, Harris did not ask her this question – instead saying 'Peekaboo' before shooting her. He did ask the question of another student, Valeen Schnurr, and did not kill her. return to text
- [13] While on the surface these texts may appear to be operating in a similar register to *Excursion*, there are significant differences in the way suspense is employed, as well as the iconography and associated cold robotic performance of the shooters. In the case of the highly conventional thriller *The Bourne Legacy*, we know that the character is a mind-controlled assassin, activated like a Manchurian Candidate or an agent of the Parallax Corporation. Also, the mode of filmmaking (and therefore spectatorship) is fundamentally different in the public service videos. While *Excursion* is an immersive drama, *Run Hide Fight* and *Surviving An Active Shooter* are both operating as education videos complete with voice-over narration. Significantly, the shooters in these three texts are presented as movie villain clichés: they are either cold assassins (*Bourne Legacy*, *Run Hide Fight*) or clearly fit the stereotype of deranged weirdos (*Surviving An Active Shooter*). return to text
- [14] Nightmares, hallucinations, repetitive actions are all considered manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the Mayo Clinic such identifiable PTSD symptoms include: recurrent, unwanted, distressing memories of the traumatic event; reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks); upsetting dreams about the traumatic event; and severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the event (Mayo Clinic 2016). return to text
- [15] In addition, many of the volunteer actors playing students, although many of them were in their early 20s, seemed to identify with their character roles in interesting ways. Not only was the process of directing them similar to a teacher managing student movements and activities, but some of the actors even brought their own cut-lunch in lunch boxes despite being informed the crew would provide food. return to text
- [16] These techniques were complimented by the audience survey results rather than contradicting the producers' interventionist agenda, since option (b) – showing Kurt's suicide – neither provided audience gratification along the lines of understanding the perpetrator's motivation nor fetishized their violent acts. return to text

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