

**Mocument**

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*Shooting Schools by way of Image*

Columbine: that one word alone evokes a mixture of fear and fascination with people around the world, most predominantly within the United States where the 1999 shootings in a Colorado high school left thirteen dead and twenty-four injured (Toppo,2009 [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-13-columbine-myths\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-13-columbine-myths_N.htm)). Since that time, the phrase “school shootings” has become part of the media mainstream. As audiences, we have come to expect that not only will there be a school shooting somewhere in America, but also that this horror will occur annually. As the website infoplease showcases in its *Time Line of Worldwide School Shootings*, since 1996, there have been school shootings, resulting in fatalities every subsequent year (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777958.html>).

What has the prevalence of school violence done to us, the reading and viewing public ? Have we, as is suggested by recent editorial cartoons, become weary of the topic? As depicted in two cartoons published in American newspapers, the answer is: yes. **This paper, therefore, examines how it is possible, given the horrific accounts of survivors of last year’s Norwegian massacre, that consumers of print media can view such cartoons and take from them a sense of satire, of entertainment.**

Consider each of the following images retrieved from the website cagle.com:



**Visual one:** (Heller, 2012, <http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/f682490a-25d5-4bcb-870c-f26f364d720e.html>)

**Visual two:** (Granlund, 2012, <http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/4d937667-e6ae-468e-a6c2-0f52e527348d.html>)



What each of these images depicts is an American public tiring of a significant issue. By considering **the elements** within each image, the reader may begin to discern why this is the case. Image one, by Joe Heller, first appeared in the *Green Bay Press Gazette* on February 28, 2012. Depicting a patient in a stereotypical scene of a physiatrist's office, it shows a middle-aged white American male with USA emblazoned on his t-shirt. **His positioning**, both in the **foreground** of the image and as the **focal point**, in terms of **balance and scale**, highlights the underlying **message** that he represents American society, formed largely of white middle class who are more concerned about the slowing economy and job cuts than they are about ongoing violence within schools.

Heller uses a number of other techniques to enhance his message. The hail of bullets criss-crossing the doctor's office shows **the application of motif**, the repetition of a pattern in a visual. Motif is intended to emphasize the significance of particular visual items; in this case, the **items are bullets** and **their trajectories**. They literally cover the small space that is the office, but **more symbolically**, represent American society itself.

Huddled behind a bullet-riddled chair is the doctor. **Heller's placing him**, an older man, in a **posture** of fear implies a number of things. In the original colour edition of this image, the doctor appears more European than American, significantly demonstrated by his skin tones. His complexion is swarthy. Add to that, his long white hair and bald pate and one is lead to think of Freudian analysts of the past centuries, predominantly trained in and often of German descent. His reaction sharply contrasts that of his patient.

Add to it, the two rhetorical questions uttered his patient: "Is it me? Or am I becoming desensitized to the news of another school shooting?" They comprise **the caption** as the satire behind Heller's image becomes clear. What the physician represents is the **normal**, natural response. His posture indicates flight; he hides behind the one piece of furniture that may save him. His patient, on the other hand, reveals the troubling reality in post-Columbine America. He continues to lie there, passively. His **facial expression** reveals no concern for his present danger. Rather, the only physical **gesture** is his one finger in the air, pointing skyward, while a bullet whizzes towards his chest. His **body language** portrays the actions of someone providing information, perhaps sharing an opinion on some matter or even lecturing, but it does not depict any of the behaviors expected of someone under attack in a life-threatening situation. The combination **of verbal and non-verbal cues** shows the **tone** of American society as represented by Joe Heller. American society, itself, has become desensitized to the dangers of school shootings.

Image two, by Dave Granlund, presents this issue in another manner. Rather than focus on adult perspective, this cartoon uses yet another cultural icon, the school bus, as the **focal point** of this issue. Like USA written on the man's t-shirt, the bus in this image, posted by Granlund on February 28, 2012, a word on it, pinpoints the issue: Schools. Within the **asymmetry** of the picture, the bus **is aligned** with its passengers, students disembarking on their way into school.

The **direction** the students are headed is implied, just as the lack of sensitivity of the patient in image one is implied by his rather relaxed pose. Granlund makes this implication by what is in the **background** (sand bags and barbed wire) and what the students and bus driver wear (combat gear). Unlike Heller's picture, there is no caption with the second one. It is unnecessary as the message is clear. In a country that has been involved in military combat for over a decade now in Afghanistan and

Iraq, school violence appears to be yet another unwinnable war. Granlund implies in this picture, that rather than address the underlying issues that affect American schools, and by extension, American society, it seems better just to prepare children to enter a war zone and presume, somehow, they will receive an adequate education.

Although it could be debated which of the two images is the more subtly drawn, the message in each is clearly connected. Image one considers school violence from the perspective of the general public, who has grown so tired of it as a news story, it seems it no longer shocks or scares. Image two relies on one word only in order to deliver its impact. With students dressed in military garb, but without any visible weaponry, *Granlund's image while initially appearing more humorous may actually represent the more distressing truth: American adults send American children unarmed into violence in the setting assumed to keep them safe.* Irony is evident in both, but for me, it is Dave Granlund's political cartoon that is the more powerful.

### Works Cited

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