American mayhem: School shootings

by David Heim in the June 3, 1998 issue

When did teenagers start gunning down their classmates and teachers? Over the past two years, nine different schools have become scenes of murder. Twenty-one people have been killed and 46 injured at the hands of high school or middle school students. Adolescence has always been a time when alienation, uncertainty, aggression and aimlessness mix in volatile ways. Acts of teenage nihilism are not new. But at some point aggression started being acted out not with words or fists but semiautomatic weapons. And the target now may well be not one person but a cafeteria full of fellow students.

“We’ve transitioned from single-victim shootings to multiple shootings--indiscriminate shootings of large numbers of people who had little or nothing to do with the events that led to the problem,”noted Ronald Stephens of the National School Safety Center in California. “There’s more firepower, more victims, and a greater sense of callousness,” said Stephens, who spoke to newspapers after high school freshman Kip Kinkel opened fire at his school in Springfield, Oregon, on May 21, killing two students (he had already killed his parents) and wounding 23.

Something new is going on, but what and why? We search for the lesson to be learned, but there is no single one. Is the problem the easy availability of guns? We do need tougher gun laws--but guns have been available for years and we haven’t seen this kind of schoolyard violence.

Is the problem a lack of parental involvement? In Kip Kinkel’s case, it appears the parents were thoughtful and devoted and showed more patience and stamina in dealing with a troubled son than most parents are likely to possess. William and Faith Kinkel rearranged their work schedules in order to be home after school. They limited Kip’s TV watching. They took him to counselors. And, in a gesture that seems straight from a psychologist’s handbook, William Kinkel signed up for lessons in target shooting with his son in an effort to channel his son’s fascination with guns in a constructive way.

In the end, we may be able to say about Kip Kinkel only that he was beset by demons that no one could uncover or exorcise. Perhaps the same might be said about the youths in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and West Paducah, Kentucky, and the other towns that are now symbols of middle American mayhem. No one's acts can ever be fully summed up by a sociological explanation. Social science has never been good at providing that kind of explanation anyway.

But because there is not a straightforward explanation for any one incident does not mean we have no clues about what lies behind this surge in violence. The shootings in Springfield and elsewhere cannot be shrugged off as aberrations. The statistics don't allow us to do that. The rate of murders committed by teenagers 14 to 17 more than doubled from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Something is going on. Kids' appetite for violence is increasing at the same time that they are becoming more calloused toward it.

One of the virtues of Sissela Bok's recent book on media violence, *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*, is that she does not contend that the amount of violence on TV and in movies and video games is the sole or even a prime cause of aggressive behavior. Poverty, family breakdown and the availability of guns all play a role. She simply argues that media violence is one factor that cannot be dismissed, and to that extent we should try to address it. Does anyone really think it is a good thing that the average TV-watching kid has witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence by the time he leaves elementary school?

Bok seeks to counter a sense of resignation about media violence, a resignation that says, "Of course TV fare is corrupt, movies are mindlessly violent, and video games are gruesome, but what can you do? That's what sells, and the producers are, after all, aiming to make money. And we don't want to impinge on the First Amendment."

To be concerned about the moral effects of being exposed to dramatized violence--especially when designed only to provide an aesthetic thrill--is not the province of right-wing ideologues or left-wing do-gooders, Bok contends. Nor did this concern originate with modern psychologists. (The American Psychological Association does say that "there is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increasing acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior.")

Concern about what witnessing violence does to the soul has been part of Western philosophy and aesthetics since Plato and Seneca. Bok cites a classic account of the moral effects of “entertainment violence” in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he comments on a friend’s fascination with the gladiators in the Roman Colosseum. “Instead of turning away, he fixed his eyes upon the scene and drank in all its frenzy, unaware of what he was doing. He reveled in the wickedness of the fighting and was drunk with the fascination of bloodshed.”

In an interview conducted on the “Salon” Web site, Bok tells of a debate she had with filmmaker Oliver Stone, the director of *Natural Born Killers*, in which Stone repeatedly insisted that “parents have got to teach their children that movies are not real.” Bok replied that “small children simply cannot make that distinction. It’s not something that parents can just ‘teach’ their children. In fact, a lot of adolescents--and a lot of adults--have trouble sometimes distinguishing movies and reality.”

It is curious that directors like Stone and other artists who otherwise champion the power of the imagination and the power of images to shape our visions of the world are so quick, when criticized on moral grounds, to evade the question and insist that they just make movies, or just make TV shows, or just tell stories--and that these are not real. Anyone who loves art and who has been deeply engaged by films and literature knows that there is no such thing as “just” a story or “just” an image.

Augustine said that when his friend eagerly drank in the scene of the slaying of the gladiator, “his soul was stabbed with a wound more deadly than any which the gladiator

. . . had received in his body.” Augustine took seriously the soul-changing power of the Colosseum spectacle--more seriously than we take the soul-changing power of the media spectacles of our time. And perhaps Augustine cared more for his friend’s soul than we care for our children.