

# Resurfacing Specters in the House of Media: The Ghosts of Columbine in *American Horror Story: Murder House*

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This article explores an aspect of haunting and terror that surfaced after the Columbine school shooting, a specter crafted and refined through the journalistic practice of framing. This ghost inhabits the house of media, where it still continues to surface. *American Horror Story: Murder House* presents an incarnation of this ghost, opening a new way of thinking about both journalistic framing and the specter of mass violence.

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered twelve of their fellow students and a teacher and shot 21 other students at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado. This tragedy, which they had been planning meticulously for months, came to be referred to as the worst school shooting in U.S. history and resulted in fifteen deaths when it concluded with Eric and Dylan's suicides. *American Horror Story: Murder House* occurs in Los Angeles in a mirror universe, a double of America. This doubling is subtly enforced by minute details such as a character who smokes Pell Mell cigarettes instead of Pall Malls. There is a house in this mirror that inherits the souls of all who die within the house or on the property, and the ghosts are forced to exist eternally within the constraints of the Murder House. In the fictionalized 1994 Los Angeles, Tate, a character living in the house, suffers a mental breakdown and goes to his high school, Westfield High, and murders fifteen of his fellow classmates. *Murder House* intentionally frames the Westfield High shooting to mirror key elements used in the news media's coverage of Columbine, presenting a ghostly double that occurs in 1994 instead of 1999, at a fictionalized Westfield High School in Los Angeles instead of Columbine in Colorado. The narrative in the show is non-linear, and the shooting is revealed sporadically throughout the season, emphasizing the ghostliness of the specter. Each time the event surfaces, a new frame is presented in an attempt to shed more light on the matter, but it is jarring as the viewer continues to encounter the specter of Westfield High through the progression of *Murder House*. Each frame presents a piece of the fictionalized shooting while also alluding to its internalization of Columbine. Through the intentional framing of the Westfield High massacre in *Murder House*, the show surfaces the societal ghosts of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and the essence of Columbine, illustrates the ghostly qualities of framing through employing the journalistic practice, and exposes a new thread of American horror that is created in the house of media.

Columbine startled the nation; it disrupted the everyday channel. While the tragedy itself lasted less than an hour, its presence in the news media allowed it to remain on the surface of society's attention well beyond the constraints of its placement in the nation's linear timeline. When tragedies like Columbine occur, mass media is the initial source of information, and, through framing, news media actively direct the eye of the viewer, emphasizing certain

aspects of the event. In his book *Comprehending Columbine*, Ralph W. Larkin writes, “The Columbine massacre was the most important news event in 1999. [...] Because of the magnitude of the story of the Columbine shootings, daily reportage lasted for a full month” (2). The story remained critical through the journalistic practice of framing, in which the salience, or relative importance, of a subject is kindled and perpetuated through persistent refocusing of the key details of a story. The magnitude and ambiguity of the true motives and intentions of Columbine fueled the story’s salience, and the consistent reframing of the event allowed it to remain on the surface of the nation’s attention. “During any event’s life span, the news media often reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event—consciously or unconsciously—in order to keep the story alive and fresh” (Chyi and McCombs 23). This practice is what caused daily reportage to last a month, as different perspectives were unearthed, and presented society with another piece of the mosaic. When Columbine is viewed retrospectively, the salience will forever be filtered through the framed perspectives. *Murder House* uses these tactics to ensnare the essence of this American tragedy, presenting it within a world removed from the actual incident through time and spatial progression.

Several seeds of the specific frames of Columbine were evident in the presentation of news media coverage on April 20, 1999 as the event was unfolding. While coverage was shrouded in a sense of uncertainty, several foundational projections were established in the initial reportage, such as the physical appearance of Eric and Dylan, which came to be a major identifying point of these two perpetrators of typical society. In a compilation of real-time news footage from that day, a news anchor states, “The first description, by the way, of the suspects is that they were wearing long coats, dark boots” (“1999...”). This established a physical description, which became a centrality when discussing the event. In the same compilation another anchor elaborates, “[T]hese gunmen, wearing the black trench coats may have been in a gang within the school that a lot of witnesses describe as the Trench Coat Mafia” (“1999...”). This element of framing came to embody a physical specter that society could fathom as the perpetrators.

In *Murder House*’s 1994 Los Angeles, when Tate decides to murder his fellow classmates, he disregards his typical outfit of jeans and a sweater and dons a pair of black combat boots and a long, dark coat. By dressing in this manner, Tate brings forth the physical essence of Harris and Klebold, dispossessing his actual self, inheriting the spirit of the tragedy. He provides the first physical frame of Columbine, internalizing the physicality of the horror, presenting a face of American fear. After Violet, Tate’s girlfriend, learns of the Westfield High shooting, one of the articles in her search presents the subtitle, “Westfield wasn’t about jocks, Goths, or Trenchcoat Mafia” (“Piggy Piggy”). This reference to Columbine is subtle in its approach, but it yields power to the material phantom that the news media created through this frame of Columbine, which bears an incredible power when resurfaced. It is unnecessary to know the identity of the ghost to still be affected by its visceral symbolism. When Tate inherits this corporeal ghoul, he employs the empowering nature of this particular frame.

Another outlet of the framing that was established in the initial coverage was the targeting of jocks. Shortly after reports began emerging of the event, a Columbine student was interviewed saying, “They were shooting anyone [...] wearing a white hat or playing a sport” (“1999...”). White baseball hats were worn by jocks at Columbine high school, a physical differentiation of social structure. This frame, while developed early in the news media’s coverage, helped to craft the perceived progression of events in Columbine. It was later established that Eric and Dylan were victims of bullying. In the documentary *Colum-*

*bine Killers*, Brooks Brown, a friend of Eric and Dylan, states in an interview, “They were the bottom two kids in the entire school. Not just out of the senior class—the entire school. They were the two uncoolest kids. They were the losers of the losers” (*Columbine Killers*). Later in the documentary Eric is shown in a home video taken at the school, walking with a friend through the hallways a year before the shooting. Dylan is holding the camera, and they are approached by a “wall of jocks,” who subsequently run into the boys, elbowing them, nearly knocking the camera out of Dylan’s hands. When Brooks Brown comments on this video he says, “You don’t hear them bitching, because they’re so used to it. They don’t go, ‘What the hell was that?’ They go, ‘Uh-huh’ and they just move on because it’s so commonplace” (*Columbine Killers*). While the initial frame of the targeting of jocks appears to be a repercussion of the bullying, it does not stand up to the reality of the shooting. Larkin writes, “It was clear from the outset that the target for Harris and Klebold was their peers. It did not matter whether they were innocent or guilty, jocks or nerds, males or females, or evangelicals or atheists. [...] [T]hey apparently wanted to target the entire peer structure, in which they were at the very bottom” (63). It later became evident that very few of the victims of the Columbine shooting were jocks, or those perceived as responsible for the bullying. The initial news media coverage attempted to supply a more concrete explanation behind the attack, but the actuality of the attack was much darker. This aspect of the initial framing illustrates its equal importance to the overall conception and shaping of Columbine, despite its inaccuracy; framing crafts the reality of an event.

In *Murder House*, the ghosts are allowed to leave the house every Halloween to traverse the larger world. Released from his spatial limits, Tate walks to the beach with Violet, a current resident of the house. They are approached by a group of teenagers who are covered in blood and gore. They are victims of the Westfield High massacre, and they demand answers from Tate as to why he murdered them. Kyle, a football player for the Westfield Wolverines, says to him, “You owe us an explanation. Why did you target the jocks? I never did anything to you” (“Halloween (Part 2)”). This scene occurs before the viewer is aware of the shooting, and the placement is significant as it correlates with the release of this frame in the news media. Before the event was actualized in society’s conception of the event, the intentional targeting of anyone “wearing a white hat” had already received a foundation, providing more reasoning behind the attack. However, when Kevin corrects Kyle saying, “It wasn’t just the jocks, man” (“Halloween (Part 2)”), he mirrors the news media’s inability to capture the explicit reasoning behind this particular frame of Columbine, alluding to the targeting not just of the jocks but rather the entire peer structure of the school. He alters the viewer’s understanding of the Westfield High shooting, illustrating the power of framing; the frame is just as important as the actuality of an event, as they both create reality.

Columbine inherited strong religious overtones due to the news media’s framing of Cassie Bernall. It was initially reported that when Eric and Dylan approached Cassie in the library, they asked her if she believed in God before killing her. Larkin writes, “Perhaps the most celebrated and bizarre aspect of the shootings was the beatification of Cassie Bernall as a Christian martyr who died proclaiming her faith” (39). She became immortalized within the news media. This specific frame of Columbine was continued and reinforced when her mother released the book *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*, which was a biography of Cassie highlighting her selfless act of dying to defend her faith. This frame helped to provide existential meaning to the event, as “the evangelical community sought to define the shootings in religious terms, as a Manichean struggle between good and evil” (Larkin 41). For some it provided a sense of purpose to this terrible attack.

This channel of subscription in the news media inherited further attention when it was revealed that this conversation never took place; it occurred between Klebold and Valeen Schnurr, another student who was injured in the shooting. While this revelation slightly discredited the validity of this frame, it still played a vital role in defining Columbine. The perceived martyrdom of Cassie Bernall is still strongly associated with the shooting, its roots deep despite the martyrdom having never occurred.

In *Murder House*, when the victims of the Westfield High shooting confront Tate about his actions, Stephanie says to him, “You asked me if I believed in God and you put a gun to my head. I said yes. It wasn’t even true when I said yes. And then you pulled the trigger” (“Halloween (Part 2)”). This scene aids in the representation of Columbine through the Westfield High shooting, and it internalizes the religious overtones associated with Columbine. There exists another layer of depth within this encounter. When Stephanie says, “It wasn’t even true when I said yes” she represents the ambiguity wrapped up in this conversation. The following episode in the series begins with the victims of the library killing in Westfield High hearing gunshots down the hallway. This is the most substantial physical allusion to Columbine. The worst of the Columbine shootings took place in the library, where ten students were murdered and many more were injured. The library became a centrality in the representation and memory of Columbine. When Tate enters the library at Westfield High, he stalks around until he finds where the victims are hiding. When he encounters Stephanie, there is no dialogue exchange between them, another nod to the ambiguity of the matter, as it was revealed that that conversation did not occur with Cassie Bernall, another ghostly presence housed within the news media’s framing. This further emphasizes the power of framing, as it was inaccurate when covering Cassie’s martyrdom. That aspect of Columbine still represents the shooting in a manner. The frame continues to have placement even though it is not true.

Perhaps the most surprising frame of the coverage of Columbine focused on the media’s influence on Eric and Dylan, specifically video games, music, and film. Eric and Dylan both played video games such as *Doom* and *Quake*, violent first-person shooters. The news media attributed the violence in these video games as base inspiration for the two boys, fueling their subsurface violent natures. The news media also targeted music artists such as KMFDM and Marilyn Manson, claiming that the music promoted violence and aggression. Through framing these artists in this negative light, the salience was refueled, and society had another entity in which to project reason, another face in which to project fear. By refocusing the eye, the mosaic looms larger. The representation of this frame within *Murder House* is much more subtle, and it is not revealed until the tenth episode in the season. On the morning of the Westfield High shooting, after Tate suffers his mental breakdown, he sits on his bed, awake before his alarm clock. The clock goes off briefly, blaring heavy metal music. Albeit brief, this reference directly embodies this aspect of framing. The news media would study Tate’s habits, and heavy metal music would fall under scrutiny.

When discussing the event in their journals, Eric and Dylan referred to the day as NBK, which stood for *Natural Born Killers*, a movie that both boys admired (*Columbine Killers*). The film focuses on mass murderers Mallory and Mickey Knox, who are idolized by the news media, turning them into superstars. The news media in the film glorify their actions, inherently giving them power and immortality. Eric and Dylan viewed themselves in the same Godlike limelight, foreseeing their preservation within the house of media, capable of resurfacing and disrupting the societal timeline. Peter Conrad points out that “They were looking forward, they said, to returning as ‘ghosts’ to create ‘flashbacks’ in the minds of

survivors: they expected to have an afterlife as celluloid phantoms, images flickering in the collective unconsciousness.” In their minds, the boys already existed as ghosts, immortalized in media. Also in their journals the boys wrote that if a movie was made about NBK they wanted it directed by Quentin Tarantino or Steven Spielberg (*Columbine Killers*). In *Murder House* Tate specifically tells Violet that he loves Quentin Tarantino, implying his equal fascination with similar violent media. This explicit connection progresses the viewer along the same avenue, leading eventually to the media-saturated framing of Columbine. The news media would cover the Westfield High shooting in the same light as Columbine, and the influence of media would naturally be brought into focus. Although video games wouldn’t be brought into question, violent media would be examined.

*Murder House* is a house of media, which houses a room that reflects the internalization of media framing. After Tate murders fifteen of his fellow classmates, he returns home to the Murder House, where a SWAT team surrounds him in his room. After reaching for a gun beneath his pillow, he is killed, and the house inherits his soul, therefore inheriting the media-saturated essence of Columbine. In his theoretical work *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes, “[T]hanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed. [...] Here space is everything, for time ceases to quicken memory. [...] Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (8-9). Media houses memories, fixes them within its spatial confines, solidifies the occurrence of the event within a linear timeline. Through the house of media the ghost can inhabit and remain in a perpetual spiral, flickering images in a house of images that create solidity. Bachelard dissects the house, writing, “A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house” (17). The physicality of the Murder House is created through the non-linear storytelling of the show. It is stitched together frame by frame, room by room throughout the season. The images of the house form a mosaic that constitutes stability and substance, but the actuality of the Murder House is constantly re-imagined soul by inherited soul, as its reality is reinterpreted. Similarly, the house of media is composed of a body of images, the framing of the images provide illusions of stability through providing answers and explanations. In the instance of Columbine, the house is composed of news coverage, home video footage, and documentaries, all of which provide proof of stability. When these frames are picked from the mosaic and analyzed, a clearer picture forms of the essence of the house. Tate is confined to the spatial limitations of the Murder House, just as Eric and Dylan are confined to the house of media; the specters drift within the house, continuing to resurface.

While framing revives and revitalizes a story within the moment, it also fixes the perspective of a story in linearity. “‘Space’ and ‘time’ are two of the most important dimensions pertinent to the coverage of any news events. [...] Therefore, the proposed measurement scheme for media frames is grounded in the time and space dimensions” (Chyi and McCombs 24-25). The Columbine school shooting is established and fixed in space and time within the house of media: April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado. While the frames of the event were also established in the initial coverage of the event, they inherit a ghostly quality since they constantly resurface. It is difficult to discuss a mass shooting, especially a *school* shooting without associating it with Columbine, the most-cited school shooting in the United States. It presented a new fashion by which media could produce its own haunts through framing, in which an event is solidified and grounded in a specific space and time, while the frames in which it is presented perpetuate and resurface in the linear timeline.

Both the Murder House, as well as the larger Media House are haunted by spirits that exist in resurgence. The news media still employ the same framing techniques that were established in the coverage of Columbine. Glenn W. Muschert writes, “First, journalists were unable to draw on previous media frames in covering Columbine, and therefore were forced to develop new frames of coverage for this incident” (165). The specific attributes of the ghost were fixed in the initial coverage, and it becomes impossible to view the ghost without relying upon these prescriptive attributes. Through media, and news media framing, the abstract attributes are just as powerful as viewing the physical specter; specific frames of Columbine are as much a part of the ghost as the physicality of a photo or video of one of the victims or perpetrators.

The frames, ghosts, and essence of Columbine continuously resurface within the house of media, both physically as well as through the abstract conjuring of framing. Documentaries and movies about Columbine perpetuate the presence of Eric and Dylan in the media. Home videos and footage of news coverage on April 20, 1999, consistently form the body of documentaries about Columbine, such as *The Columbine Killers* and *Zero Hour*. The boys were interested in video productions and made home movies with their friends. The documentary *The Columbine Killers* relies heavily upon media produced by Eric and Dylan, such as diary entries and home videos, revealing the darkness that lingered below the surface of the boys, using the media to create a more substantial explanation of the reasoning behind the attack. Another pivotal scene often used in coverage of Columbine is the security footage from the cafeteria, on which viewers witness Eric and Dylan, carrying their firearms, stride across the screen. This scene is one of the most visceral images related with Columbine, as it represents a raw physicality of the event itself. The most notorious videos are much darker though. In a series of videos known as the “basement videotapes,” the boys documented their plans as well as captured the means to carry out their plans, revealing the arsenal of firearms procured and homemade bombs produced with which to set the plan into motion. These particular tapes procure an overwhelming ghostly quality, as they are not available to the public. Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* takes a different approach, exploring the different frames of Columbine, and the perpetuation of those frames, rather than the shooting itself. The film explores gun control issues, as well as the media’s influence on Eric and Dylan, providing an interview with Marilyn Manson, who fell under the fire of the news media. This documentary, although not explicitly about the Columbine shooting, uses the frames attached to the news media coverage of the event, revealing their ability to conjure the spirit of Columbine.

*Murder House* is not the first fictionalized Media House to present an incarnation of Columbine. Gus van Sant’s *Elephant* presents a dramatized account in which the present manifestations of Eric and Dylan (one of whom is appropriately named Eric) are bullied by their peers and plot to bring guns to their school. In their time outside of class they are shown playing violent first-person shooter video games. The film *Zero Day* is told through the home video footage of two boys, who meticulously plan and carry out a mass shooting at their school. The shooting itself is portrayed through the perspective of the school’s security cameras, adding another ghostly layer by furthering the connection between the two events. 2005 saw the release of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, a role-playing video game that takes place on the day of the shooting, at Columbine High School. Players are presented with a more visceral manifestation of the ghosts when given the option to play as either Eric or Dylan, and carry out the shooting through a video game. The physical events of Columbine are fixed in the linear timeline on 20 April 1999; the ghosts of the event continue

to resurface within the house of media. The boys foresaw their return as “ghosts” to create “flashbacks,” and their doubled selves continue to surface through various incarnations, inheriting uncanny qualities, as they are established, familiar specters wearing new faces.

Columbine had several societal repercussions outside of the house of media, although the coverage and framing created perspective of the event, and influenced the public’s interpretation. *Murder House* is well aware of the news media coverage that Columbine received and forces the viewer to perpetuate this same coverage when examining the Westfield High massacre, which would in effect receive the same frames to continue the salience, as well as nearly identical societal repercussions. In his book *Terror Post 9/11 and the Media*, David Altheide argues, “[T]he extensive coverage and framing of the Columbine shootings contributed to the broad discourse of fear as well as a more specific context for worrying about and protecting children, legitimating the war on terror, and expanding social control” (118). This incident escalated the severity of repercussions and punishments of youth violence and disciplinary problems. It increased the drive for school security through the pursuit of more lock downs, more security surveillance systems, and stricter gun control, while increasing public support of these issues through constant news coverage. The Westfield High shooting would naturally bring all of these concerns to the surface, calling forth stronger security in schools across the nation, raising questions concerning stricter gun control, and questioning how Tate procured the guns in the first place. When Tate murdered his fellow classmates he set into motion the machine of news media coverage and framing, which would frame the attack in a manner that contributed to the discourse of fear. His actions would be viewed as an attack on class structure and religion—American pillars of structure. However, this terrifying act omits an element of Columbine that is housed specifically within the America on this side of the mirror.

Columbine presented society with a new niche of horror—that of a “new breed of killer. Armed with a gun, a camera, and a computer, they use dehumanizing technology to turn bedroom cyber fantasies into bloody reality” (Conrad). Eric and Dylan existed in an artificial world, removed from reality through technology and media: reality and fiction blurred together through extensive virtual existence through video games; they saw themselves as Mickey and Mallory Knox, already immortalized in the house of media; they blogged religiously, posting rants and fueling aggression, occasionally posting the plans and intentions of “NBK,” already creating virtual echoes of their existence; when they produced the basement tapes the camera removed them from reality. The entire essence of Columbine is documented and captured within media. It lingers and haunts the societal timeline, resurrecting and thriving in the constant resurgence and exposure. The most notable resurfacing of this particular type of specter is Seung-Hui Cho, who murdered 32 people on the Virginia Tech Campus on April 16, 2007. The rampage was broken into two concentrated attacks; in between the outbursts Cho visited a post office to send a package to NBC containing a DVD of a long, angry diatribe detailing his motives for the attack, as well as photos of himself posing with weapons. In his tirade he refers to “martyrs like Eric and Dylan” (ABC), which brings about a clear mirror of Columbine, bringing about the essence of this particular specter, which the boys foreshadowed and instigated. The video and photos immortalize Cho in the house of media, and this physicality was used in the framing of the Virginia Tech massacre. Cho’s video mirrors the basement tapes, as well as the Columbine cafeteria security footage, creating a face in which to house the atrocities that were enacted. The documentary *Virginia Tech Massacre* reveals, “At age 15 he displayed a disturbing new interest. Shortly after the Columbine shootings he wrote an essay at school that alarmed his

teachers. There was no threat against anyone, but he did talk about identifying with [Eric and Dylan]" (*Virginia Tech Massacre*). Cho was haunted by the specters of Columbine, and he perpetuated this thread of horror when he methodically planned the Virginia Tech shooting and captured his ghost in the video and photos he sent to NBC. When new events and new ghosts present themselves, it is inevitable that they will wear similar faces as those who already resided in the house, especially if the established specters have experienced as consistent resurgence as Columbine.

*Murder House* was released after the advent of this particular ghost, and it is clearly aware of the specters in the house of media. Tate does not inherently fit the American horror that he symbolizes—several studies of school shootings agree that school shootings are not spontaneous events; the perpetrator often announces his intentions. When Eric and Dylan were planning "Columbine" they drew inspiration from the Oklahoma City bombing, the Westside middle school shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and the Waco siege in Texas. The destruction discussed in the original plans of "NBK" in their journals far exceeded the fatality and destruction of the Oklahoma City bombing. Their intent was to "outdo" that event: they planted three propane bombs in the cafeteria, with a timed detonation intended to explode when the cafeteria would be at its fullest capacity. The explosion was also meant to collapse the roof of the cafeteria, causing the library to fall into the cafeteria. If successful, this plan would have killed close to 500 students. Although school shootings and acts of violence in schools had occurred in the past, none of the perpetrators "engaged in long-term planning, collected explosives and weaponry, employed diversionary tactics, reconnoitered their school, tested their weaponry, or thought about killing hundreds of students, devising ways that would maximize destruction" (Larkin 155). In *Murder House*, Tate acts impulsively, responding to his troubles and frustrations at home with outward violence. The absence of premeditation in the Westfield High shooting emphasizes the meticulousness behind the planning of both the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings. It causes the viewer to focus on the motives behind the shooting, and one is given a glimpse at a much darker picture, emphasizing that Tate is merely an incarnation of the ghost, only representing the horror on the surface. What emerges as the true horror is not found within the surface ghost, but within the absence presented in the framing, in which lurks the lingering ghoul, waiting to disrupt the channel.

The media-saturated essence of this event presented society with a new niche of terror, and the framing methods set into motion in the coverage of Columbine continue to be used as more media-saturated mass murders occur. Columbine stands as a tipping point: mass shootings after 1999 are compared to Columbine. The house of media is a haunted place, occupied by terrifying figures, entombed forever in the body of images in which the specter resides, more than capable of truly haunting this American society. *Murder House* invokes the specters of Eric and Dylan and brings them forth from the house of media in which they reside, spatial constraints exhibited through the constant framing/reframing, drawing out the salience of their actions, solidifying their presence and the repercussions caused by their actions. By creating this mirror the show causes the viewer to stumble into a specter within the societal timeline; the reflection causes the viewer to reinterpret the origin of source, as it is both foreign and familiar. Perhaps in the mirror America presented in *American Horror Story: Murder House* there exists an alternate version of *American Horror Story: Murder House*, in which events from this side of the mirror are presented. The thought is terrifying.



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