

# Every Five Seconds an Inkjet Printer Dies Somewhere

A little potpourri by Johannes Grenzfurthner/Guenther Friesinger

Every day, the snuff picture sites on the internet display pictures of people, and sometimes animals, who died in the most unusual circumstances. In this gigantic photo depot I also discovered an image of the remains of the head of an American who, after a short morning visit to his office, left his workplace in order to leave a trail of carnage at a nearby supermarket and finally to kill himself. Somehow the police photo landed on the website, and below it was a commentary unobtrusively written in Times New Roman font: "Maybe his inkjet printer had a paper jam." Who knows? In office space no one can hear you scream.

The first album by the German punk group Abwärts, released in 1980, carried the wonderful palindrome *KOMA/AMOK* as its title. This antithetical pair outlined two approaches for the punk movement's reaction to the capitalist system and its pressure to succeed: either against oneself, or against others. The alternative culture magazine *Slam* writes: "Maybe the world seemed and seems no longer to be changeable, save that one withdraw fully into a depressive waking coma or that one let out – in the extreme case – all of one's pent up aggressions in a hypertrophic burst of violence." If one opts for one of these two alternatives, the solution of passive autoaggression is far more common. The probability that a man in Germany will run amok is around 1 million to 1, while for women the probability is 20 million to 1. Running amok is a male-hegemonial problem. [note: In the German-speaking world, the expression *amoklaufen* (to run amok) is used exclusively in the context of violent incidents like the one described above. Interestingly, English usage has diluted the impact of the Malay word for a "murderous frenzy" by applying it metaphorically in a host of everyday situations. This text uses the term in its original context of extreme outbursts of violence.]

It was on 11 September 2001, of all days. On the day that more than 3,000

people died in New York as the result of a terrorist attack, a young man in Erfurt (Germany) finally received his long awaited sport shooting license. His name: Robert Steinhäuser. Only a few months later the nineteen-year-old would achieve woeful fame: on 26 April 2002 he shot dead twelve teachers, two pupils and a police officer at his former school in Erfurt. This was the worst shooting rampage in Germany since 1945.

Joseph Vogl, professor at the University of Weimar's media department and known for his translations of Deleuze into German, has been studying the amok phenomenon for years. The Germanist recognizes a number of familiar patterns in the Erfurt rampage. Overall, Vogl seeks to differentiate between two forms of amok, that which is spontaneous and that which has been planned over a longer period of time. Erfurt is of the second type.

Since the tragedy in Erfurt – which here will be used as an example – many attempts at providing an explanation have been made. But can such acts really be explained at all? Interestingly, one quickly finds many possible explanations for the Erfurt incident and others like it – the media, expulsion from school etc. – but just as quickly comes to the conclusion that none of them are sufficient. It is also highly apparent that these explanations very quickly proceed into vague generalizations addressing things like conditions in schools or the anomie of modern life. Explanations of a more concrete nature – e.g. the unusual final exam regulations of the German state in which Erfurt is located – are ignored. The punch line of every generalized inference, like the one about videos featuring extreme acts of violence, remains the same: It cannot be verified.

Is the Erfurt incident the insane act of an individual, or is a problem involving the entire society behind it? There arises the question of what answers the act itself supplies. The shooting rampage in Erfurt was not an irrational or insane act. It was rationally planned and set in a strongly symbolic framework, as is shown by the perpetrator's Ninja warrior costume and self-stylization as an avenger. The perpetrator staged his act with considerable precision. Furthermore, he represents a specific type, that of the warrior, and his victims are also completely

deindividualized. The act does not strike the victims merely as individuals, but also as members of certain categories. That means that no personal exchange takes place.

In the moment of the Erfurt incident at which one of the school's teachers advanced toward the perpetrator and spoke directly to him, thus establishing personal contact, the whole thing was over. In this incident, as in many others, a certain milieu becomes the stage upon which the deed is acted out. Here it was a school. Civic spaces are often among those selected for such warlike rampages, which apparently are the manifestation of an enmity to the point of life and death. Of course the question arises as to why these perpetrators always use public or civic spaces as the setting for their acts. Public spaces are spaces where not only actions are carried out, but also where symbolic actions are carried out, in which each person takes on a certain role. The perpetrator is concerned with creating a public setting, and he is also making a desperate attempt to attain fame through infamy. Here at an exemplary location, the perpetrator declares himself to be the unconditional enemy of everyone, an enemy of the entire society.

The amok runner lives in disturbed contact to a world that doesn't fit him. "Reality, as it presents itself to others, in other words a normal day in a normal world," says psychiatrist Lothar Adler, "is something that he never really experiences." Thus the perpetrators do not stage their expanded suicides in remote places, but in the midst of peaceful everyday life, in the place where the break with reality appears most glaringly: in schools, businesses, pedestrian zones, libraries, office buildings or churches. It is here, in the zones of public order, that the amok runner can take on and play out his final role as the negative instance. He alone designates where and when his sudden theater of cruelty will begin and whom it will strike. Just as with regular theater, his theater only works with an audience. When the media report live from the scene of the crime, the amok runner momentarily becomes completely unified with his image. As the protagonist of his own fiction, he transfers his inner scenario onto the victims. Analogously, many survivors describe their experience of such massacres with

the total loss of their sense of reality. After the shooting rampage in a Fort Worth church, a youth said that he had at first felt like he was in a “sort of theater.” It is precisely with this “sort of theater” that the perpetrators are reckoning.

In the correlation between society and amok, the homicidal rampage gives rise to a problem of attribution in that one is dealing with a generality of affronts, attacks and reproaches, while at the same time it becomes increasingly difficult to assign blame to particular people. It remains somehow abstract. Erfurt, for example, demonstrates the perpetrator’s feelings of being subjected to manifest antagonization and exclusion. It also shows that he found it difficult to hold particular individuals or structures accountable. This may well give rise to a climate of general, almost arbitrary animosity.

It is an attitude that the lives of others and even one’s own life are in the end not of any great value, while killing as a means of dealing with the situation is accepted and maybe even glorified as heroic – and the same goes for being killed. The amok incidents in the Western world that have been analyzed seem to be more or less equally motivated and triggered by (seemingly) antagonizing, insulting or humiliating conflicts with authorities (e.g. the amok incident in the cantonal council of the Swiss Canton of Zug), by relationships, and by interpersonal, material or ideal situations of loss. Few incidents are evidently the result of serious psychological disturbance (i.e. the perpetrator is clearly psychotic or suffers from a mental illness) or are completely unexplainable and unmotivated.

Joseph Vogl would like to compile a typology of amok. However, this is not intended to be a typology of the individual perpetrators’ psychological profiles: the diagnoses always branch out in highly divergent directions. The psychology of the individual is very soon up against its limits. It cannot explain the act’s origin, and frequently a gap remains with regard to a clearly definable motivation. Thus Vogl’s typology does not apply to the perpetrator. Instead Vogl is much more interested in what the observer would like to recognize in such incidents. His theory is that because these murders can neither be categorized as purely

criminal or purely insane acts, one would like to recognize a certain critical and maybe even catastrophic condition in our society. All of the commentaries on the subject indicate that cultural diagnosis is continually being practiced here.

In this respect, the shooting rampage in Erfurt is a typical case: less on account of the particular individuality of the perpetrator or the crime, but because the incident was accorded a representative role from the very beginning. The execution of the act and the media's reporting of it complement one another. Together they represent a certain type of phenomenon clearly demonstrating that in the midst of peaceful everyday life a potential threat is lurking at key points in society – a sudden eruption of war. The amok runner is in motion; he redefines space. He leaves a psychogeographical trail of blood. Wherever amok runners act out a total break with normality, they leave behind sites of devastation that endure for years.

The amok runner appears as an outlandish phenomenon from another world, quasi an *alien*. It is precisely the arbitrary senselessness of these acts that gives rise to the dark fascination surrounding them. The amok runner leads an average, faceless life. It is in hindsight, after the deed, that one first begins to believe that small deviations were recognizable: a certain reclusiveness, a special predilection for guns, maybe a little outburst at a family gathering, etc. Because he suddenly kills, anonymously and without any real motive, the amok runner embodies the absolute negation of peaceful everyday life. In his blind rage he is a caricature of Justitia, of the democratic principle. Where every passerby could be a perpetrator, everyone can become a victim, at any time. As randomly as an anonymous glance, the bullet can suddenly and groundlessly hit any and every person. In an era that meets destiny with statistics and fear with prevention, the amok runner condenses the characteristics of an evil, which, as risk, probability and eventuality, is permanently present and nevertheless only potential.

In the societies of the twentieth century, it is possible trace the development of a new form of evil, of a new economy of evil, which is closely related to claims

settlement: statistics, the development of insurance companies and the role of probability calculation make it somehow clear that evil has taken on the form of the accident, the case of loss or damage, where it is less personifiable, less individualizable, being instead a possible eventuality. Risk is the name that we have given to such eventualities. Vogl perceives a new question here: "Can this case of loss or damage, this radical, most extreme case of loss or damage, be envisaged? If it could, I think that its face would be that of the amok runner – a strangely pallid, strangely impersonal, strangely unindividual face."

### **Boomtown Rats – I Don't Like Mondays**

*The silicon chip inside her head.  
Gets switched to overload,  
And nobody's gonna go to school today,  
She's going to make them stay at home,  
And daddy doesn't understand it,  
He always said she was as good as gold,  
And he can see no reason.  
Cos there are no reasons.  
What reason do you need to be shown.  
Tell me why.  
I don't like Mondays.  
I want to shoot.  
The whole day down.  
The Telex machine is kept so clean.  
As it types to a waiting world,  
And Mother feels so shocked,  
Father's world is rocked,  
And their thoughts turn to.  
Their own little girl.  
Sweet 16 ain't that peachy keen,  
No, it ain't so neat to admit defeat,  
They can see no reasons.  
Cos there are no reasons.  
What reason do you need to be shown  
Tell me why.  
I don't like Mondays.  
I want to shoot.  
The whole day down.  
All the playing's stopped in the playground now  
She wants to play with her toys a while  
And school's out early and soon we'll be learning  
And the lesson today is how to die,  
And then the bullhorn crackles,  
And the captain crackles,*

*With the problems and the how's and why's  
And he can see no reasons  
Cos there are no reasons  
What reason do you need to die  
The silicon chip inside her head.  
Gets switched to overload,  
And nobody's gonna go to school today,  
She's going to make them stay at home,  
And daddy doesn't understand it,  
He always said she was as good as gold,  
And he can see no reason.  
Cos there are no reasons.  
What reason do you need to be shown.  
Tell me why.  
I don't like Mondays.  
I want to shoot.  
The whole day down.*

In their agitated participation in the bloody terror, the news media stylize their negative hero, the amok runner, into a symbol for the blindness of fate in today's technology-driven world. He is the dark side of everyday life. Everyone is equal in his sights.

And yet amok is not an invention of modernity. Through the origin of the concept *amok* from the "exotic" Malay language – there are hardly any other Malay words in common use in English – the mass murder appears as something exotic and puzzling. Blind violence has always existed, more or less everywhere, one would assume. But the fact that precisely this phenomenon could become a code-word for latent terror has a complex history. It begins with the meeting of two cultures in the era of European colonization in Southeast Asia.

The Malay word *amok* means "rage" or "frenzy" and it originally referred to a special tactic in the struggles between the region's warlords and kings. It was practiced by special suicide commandos that were ritually sworn to victory or death. It took only a few of these elite soldiers to put whole armies into a state of panic when they threw themselves against the enemy lines with no regard for casualties. Fallen amok warriors were held to be favorites of the gods. Those who survived were dishonored. "They are considered maniacal, amocous, and view themselves as dead men. They spread out among the people of Calcutta, fearlessly ravaging among them. Like people in desperation they comported

themselves as devils before they were slain, and they killed many people, among them women and children,” wrote the Portuguese Gaspar Correa in 1503 about the amok warrior in the war against Calcutta. Anthropologists report similar phenomenon among the aborigines of the Americas and Africa. Among Filipinos, Polynesians and the Germanic tribes, the kamikaze death is also said to have been considered a measure of honor. And yet in contrast to these examples, a “private” culture of blind killing off the battlefield arose in Southern India, Java and Malaysia. Reports make reference to the complex religious and ritual background of such acts. On Java these people are referred to as being amucous. “And as soon as one sees that they have begun their work, the cry of ‘Amouco! Amouco!’ goes up, so that everyone can run for safety.” It is not until they have achieved their death that the religious murderers have achieved their goal.

There are few sources of information dealing with the many-layered ritual economy of the individual amok incident. It is known, for example, that the Dutch occupiers used the most ghastly means in torturing surviving amok runners to death in order to deny them the nimbus of invincible heroes. When in the nineteenth century the collective, military variant of amok had completely ceased to have any strategic purpose in view of the Europeans’ superior strength, the figure of the amok runner slowly began to be given a new interpretation. In the eyes of Dutch, Portuguese and British police, colonial administrators and physicians, the amok runner appeared as a pathological disturbance of the normal. Thus the West evolved a complex cultural figuration for interpreting the contrast of civilization and primitivism, order and chaos, humanity and barbarity. The unmotivated murderous wild man became a symbol of the dark and hidden sides of an alien culture. And yet even the Asians saw this both probable and indeterminate break with the continuum of everyday life as a danger that could strike any person, but that could also be perpetrated by any person. Here the colonized peoples had at their disposal a complete system of concepts describing the usual course taken by these outbreaks of rage. Everyone knew that amok was preceded by *sakit hati*, a phase of withdrawal, of brooding. It is suspected that the later deeds were set in motion in this earlier stage by

psychological motives such as shame, hate or desperation. The actual act, the eruption of violence, was and is named *mata gelap* by the Malaysians: “the darkened eyes,” the clouded gaze. It occurs without warning. Initially it strikes relatives, then neighbors, and finally passers-by and strangers. The farther his path leads him, the less connection the perpetrator has to his victims.

In this role of a person in desperation blindly acting out his psychological drama, the amok runner also makes his appearance in the psychology-laden media setting. One of the cases that has survived in records is that of Hadji Ibrahim, a merchant around the age of forty. His run amok cost three people their lives, and five others were seriously injured. In 1888 he was examined by W. Gilmore Ellis, head of the State Psychiatric Hospital of Singapore. “There is not much to say about him,” is how the physician described his interned patient. “He was a tall, haggard man with pock scars; his heart function was accelerated and irregular; his gaze was wild and staring. When no one talked to him, he hardly spoke; however, his replies were fully rational and coherent. He was cleanly and industrious, slept and ate well.” Only the deed itself remained veiled from the British psychiatrist. His ability to diagnose failed with regard to the motive’s secret. Where medicine, anthropology and in the end also penal discipline fail, the amok runner emerges as the personification of an evil that is as unexplainable as it is fascinating. After his psychiatric discovery in the East, he then experienced an astounding mythological boom in European media and mass culture.

Nowhere is the transfer – and with it the transformation – of this figure from the Orient to the Occident clearer than in Stefan Zweig’s 1922 novella *The Amokläufer* (The Amok Runner). However, the title hero of this story is not a wild dagger wielding Asian, but a cultured German physician. He lives somewhere in a “cursed nest” in the Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia. His frenzy is not one of violence: instead he is driven by a fatal passion for a woman. His journey’s fatal end signifies the start of a wide-reaching cultural appropriation, of a fundamentally new interpretation of the “alien wild man” stereotype. Subsequently the amok runner would not mean something distant, but something very near: the excess of that era’s illness, of hysteria, and in this case of its male

variant.

The teacher Ernst Wagner had already presented Europe with its real *Ur*-image of nerves run amok in 1913. One night the unsuccessful dramatist and Nietzsche disciple started off by killing his family and then went out on the street to randomly shoot down passers-by as well as “two pieces of livestock.” His shooting rampage left fourteen dead and twelve seriously injured. “And I will laugh so clearly and beautifully that everyone who hears it will later say that it was the laughter of an angel,” wrote Wagner before the massacre. “I will be the angel of death in the house, the angel of merciful death. I want to perforate my hate into your guts, and the flame of my hate shall devour your houses and my house and my father’s house and the public house as well.” Then he began his massacre.

Wagner’s significance for cultural history is that he – and with him all the mass murderers and serial killers in the literature of the following decades – marks a turn in the way that unfettered evil is dealt with. Both Robert Musil’s Moosbrugger and the hero in Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927), who wildly opens fire on innocent motorists, appear as something more than pathological exceptions. In the amok runner’s visage, bourgeois society glimpses the reflection of its own face. In Hesse’s novella *Klein and Wagner* (1919), Friedrich Klein, “a civil servant of almost forty years’ age with scholarly tendencies, the father of lovely children,” is made to look into this mirror as a surrogate for his epoch. What he sees is “his face, the face of (Ernst Wagner), an insane, contorted face with deep shady crevices and demolished, detonated features.”

Andre Breton was more affirmative – and also more aggressive – in dealing with the recurrence of that which had been repressed: “The simplest Surrealist action,” wrote the leader of the Surrealists in 1930, “is to go out on the street with two revolvers in one’s fists and blindly shoot down as many as possible in the crowd.” The absolute revolt expressed in Breton’s sentence is not directed against the measurable wrongs of bourgeois society, but against life itself, against the unacceptable conditions down here. The revolver-laden sentence makes manifest an existential desperation, the dark side of desire and the death wish resulting from it. The blind violence described by Breton is that of a

desperate individual who has discovered the hopeless situation in which he is entrapped, the impossibility of escaping from being controlled by external forces through ideas or interaction. Thus he has named something similar to what the murderers of Columbine High School in Littleton also had in mind: the radically empty *acte gratuit* as a final answer to the pressures of reality. They looked their victims in the eye, shouted “cuckoo” and opened fire.

But amok is not simply amok, and its perpetrators are not all of the same mold: in frenzied rage, one sort slash and slay their children and partners in an expression of the highest psychological desperation. But the form of indiscriminate killing that is becoming increasingly frequent has little in common with their “terrible gaze straight on.” At least the uncomfortably numerous American amok runners seem to see themselves in the role of warriors, as coolly calculating executors of a message signifying nothing. They develop their lethal scenarios strategically; they use long-range weapons. Thus their “cold amok” is not really the eruption, but its carefully planned setting and staging. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harns, who rampaged through Columbine High School, tinkered around with their bombs for months, did extensive target practice and wrote in their websites “I will shoot to kill.”

The terminology used in describing such violent excesses, as molded by science and public usage, has an influence that should not be underestimated, states the Berlin psychologist Gerhard Hafner. Specialist have proposed that the term in frequent use around the world be used only for the typical Malay amok.

Otherwise a term like SMASH (Sudden Mass Assault Syndrome with Homicide; an acronym that stems from U.S. police reports) would be more appropriate and less commingled with the romanticizing connotations of something exotic and irrational. Massive cultural differences are evidenced by the use of long-range firearms and the highly rational approach to marksmanship training taken by many of the perpetrators in Western incidents.

The carefully staged amok turns the perspectives of reality around, as Joachim Neubauer asserts. In the Peter Bogdanovich film *Targets*, a sniper nests down in a drive-in movie theater. He takes aim at the audience of a horror film through the screen. His scope makes the viewers in their cars into the ones being

watched: it is as if the film were watching its audience.

The unsuspecting viewer of fictional terror is transformed into its real victim when the bullets smash through his windshield. As long as the murderer continues to kill, he is the observer and the (invisible) observed at the same time. Not only in film does this short circuit of gazes, a fatal feedback system of *autofiction* and reality, belong to the essence of the act. The man with the gun watches himself as if he were standing on a stage. It is in the sight of the fleeing and dying victims that the effect of his pose completely unfolds. In his attack against hated reality, he enters a theater with no exit. He does not appear to himself as real in the act. It is only for fleeting moments that he stands on the other side of fear, feeling the power of his final role. Maybe it is the perpetrator's innermost impulse to experience just this transformation, for once and for all to step out before the world with darkened eyes. Cynically and calculatingly he stages his deadly drama, becoming fully his gaze, the eye and weapon of emptiness.