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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Schools as Stages of Trauma: Psychological Dimensions of Cinematic School Shootings Across Genres

Travmanın Sahnesi Olarak Okullar: Sinematik Okul Katliamlarının Türler Arası Psikolojik Boyutları

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the psychological representations of school shootings in cinema. The films analyzed within the scope of the study are *22 July* (2018), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Lessons from a School Shooting: Notes from Dunblane* (2018), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), *Polytechnique* (2009), *Klass* (2007), and *Elephant* (2003). Selected through purposive sampling and a maximum diversity strategy, these films comprise documentary, docudrama, and entirely fictional genres. Thematic content analysis was used in the study; analysis was conducted particularly on psychological themes such as individual psychopathology, post-traumatic stress processes, cycles of shame, identity crises, breakdowns in family-child relationships, and peer bullying. The findings show that documentary films reveal systemic dimensions such as gun culture, media discourse, and social trauma; docudrama films focus on factors such as ideology, gender inequality, and family breakdown; and fictional films highlight problems in parent-child relationships and the psychological effects of peer bullying. Consequently, school shootings are complex phenomena that can be understood not only in terms of security and sociological dimensions but also in terms of individual psychological vulnerabilities. By representing this multilayered structure, cinema contributes to developing a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of violence. The study emphasizes the need for future research to examine psychosocial support mechanisms, family-child communication, and media representations with larger samples.

Keywords: School massacres, Psychology, Trauma, Peer bullying, Family relationships, Cinema.

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Öz:

Bu çalışma, sinemada okul saldırılarının psikolojik temsillerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma kapsamında incelenen filmler şunlardır: *22 July* (2018), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Lessons from a School Shooting: Notes from Dunblane* (2018), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), *Polytechnique* (2009), *Klass* (2007) ve *Elephant* (2003). Amaçlı örnekleme ve maksimum çeşitlilik stratejisiyle seçilen bu filmler; belgesel, belgesel-dramatik (docudrama) ve tamamen kurmaca türleri kapsamaktadır. Çalışmada tematik içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılmış; analiz özellikle bireysel psikopatoloji, travma sonrası stres süreçleri, utanç döngüleri, kimlik krizleri, aile-çocuk ilişkilerindeki kopuşlar ve akran zorbalığı gibi psikolojik temalar üzerinden yürütülmüştür. Bulgular, belgesel filmlerin silah kültürü, medya söylemi ve toplumsal travma gibi sistemik boyutları görünür kıldığını; belgesel-dramatik filmlerin ise ideoloji, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliği ve aile çözülmesi gibi faktörlere odaklandığını; kurmaca filmlerin ise ebeveyn-çocuk ilişkilerindeki sorunları ve akran zorbalığının psikolojik etkilerini öne çıkardığını göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, okul saldırılarının yalnızca güvenlik ya da sosyolojik boyutlarla değil, aynı zamanda bireysel psikolojik kırılmalara çerçevesinde de ele alınması gereken karmaşık olgular olduğu ortaya konmaktadır. Bu çok katmanlı yapıyı temsil eden sinema, şiddetin nedenleri ve sonuçlarına ilişkin daha derin bir bakış açısının gelişmesine katkı sunmaktadır. Çalışma, gelecekte yapılacak araştırmalarda psikososyal destek mekanizmalarının, aile-çocuk iletişiminin ve medya temsillerinin daha geniş örneklerle incelenmesi gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul katliamları, Psikoloji, Travma, Akran zorbalığı, Aile ilişkileri, Sinema.

Introduction

School massacres have come to the fore in recent years as traumatic events that threaten much more than social security, leaving deep scars on individuals' mental health. Research indicates that such attacks cannot be explained solely by social and political factors; they are closely linked to the psychological vulnerabilities of the perpetrators, problems in family relationships, experiences of peer bullying, and psychological conflicts (Schwartz, 2023; Rohte, 2022; Zhao, 2024; Ebbrecht & Lindekilde, 2022; Hamman, 2025).

In particular, cycles of shame, feelings of rejection, and identity crises play a critical role in perpetrators' turn to violence (Hamman, 2025; Russell et al., 2025). Studies have revealed that most school attackers have a history of psychological risk factors such as bullying, exclusion, and family breakdown (Division for Emotional and Behavioral Health-CEC, 2024; Katsiyannis et al., 2023).

Media exposure has been shown to cause various psychological responses in individuals, such as stress, anxiety, and desensitization, following traumatic events (Holman, Garfin & Silver, 2020; Jetter & Walker, 2022; Emelu & Brossmann, 2025). Social media can facilitate the spread of imitative attack behaviour, known as the "contagion effect" (Liu & Dong, 2022).

The representation of school shootings in cinema, however, remains limited despite growing academic interest in recent years. Cinema reveals not only the psychopathological aspects of the perpetrators but also the post-traumatic stress disorder of the victims, the construction of collective memory within communities, and the psychological breakdowns of individuals (Kerr, 2025; Vith, 2023; Ridanpää, 2024; Aker, 2022). Research shows that exposure to violent scenes in films can cause stress responses in viewers like those experienced in real traumatic situations (Jamieson & Romer, 2021; Lapierre & Garibay, 2025; Peterson et al., 2025). Recent studies also assess the effects of school shootings on mental health at both the individual and societal levels. Exposure to

violence in childhood increases the risk of mental disorders in adulthood (Rajan et al., 2024), the psychodynamic origins of lone actor violence are deepening (Ebbrecht & Lindekilde, 2022), and parents' and children's concerns about school violence are directly linked to young people's psychological well-being (Menker & Bendelow, 2025).

However, there is a notable lack of studies in the literature that directly address the representation of school massacres in cinema from a psychological perspective. Building on this gap, this study aims to examine the cinematic portrayal of school attacks from a psychological perspective, drawing on films spanning different periods (1990–2018) and genres (documentary, docudrama, fiction). The selected time frame (1990–2018) was chosen to capture significant shifts in the social, political, and media contexts surrounding school shootings. This period encompasses the emergence of school violence as a global public issue, the transformation of media narratives following landmark cases such as Columbine, and the increasing dominance of security-oriented policy responses in public discourse. By analyzing films from different periods, the study aims to account for these contextual changes rather than treating school shootings as a historically fixed phenomenon. In this study, security-centered discourses refer to institutional and media frameworks that predominantly interpret school shootings through lenses of crime control, policing, legal accountability, and preventive security measures, often marginalizing psychological, familial, and social dimensions. Previous studies have shown that such frameworks shape both public understanding and media representations of mass violence (Holman et al., 2020; Jetter & Walker, 2022).

Method

This study is designed based on qualitative research methods. Purposeful sampling and maximum diversity sampling strategies were used to examine the

representations of school massacres in cinema from a psychological perspective (Patton, 2002). This method enabled the development of an exploratory, descriptive perspective that encompasses differences related to the subject.

Two criteria were used in selecting the films: (1) they directly address school attacks and (2) they correspond to different periods (1990-2025) and genres (documentary-docudrama-fiction). Accordingly, a total of seven films were evaluated:

Documentary: *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002), *Lessons from a School Shooting: Notes from Dunblane* (Kim A. Snyder, 2018)

Docudrama: *22 July* (Paul Greengrass, 2018), *Polytechnique* (Denis Villeneuve, 2009), *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003)

Fiction: *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011), *Klass* (Ilmar Raag, 2007)

The study does not aim to generalize; rather, it seeks to address the issue in a multidimensional way, leveraging the richness of these differences.

Data collection tools

In this study, seven films addressing school shootings were selected as data collection tools: *22 July* (2018), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Lessons from a School Shooting: Notes from Dunblane* (2018), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), *Polytechnique* (2009), *Klass* (2007), and *Elephant* (2003). These films were evaluated as visual and narrative documents that enable examination of psychological themes, consistent with the research aim. Data obtained from the films were systematically coded through scene descriptions, character analyses, and narrative structures, and analyzed through content analysis. While the films were examined as narrative texts, the study did not aim to analyze all aspects of narrative structure in a comprehensive narratological sense. Instead, selected narrative elements-such as character construction, temporal organization, causality, and point of view- were examined insofar as they contributed to the representation of psychological vulnerability, aggression, and trauma. Elements not directly related to these psychological dimensions (e.g., stylistic narration techniques or formal narrative experimentation) were deliberately excluded from the scope of analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed. The films were systematically examined for how they represented school massacres and were coded according to the following psychological themes. Aggression was conceptualized not merely as a behavioral outcome or violent act, but as a psychological process shaped by emotional regulation difficulties, accumulated frustration, experiences of social exclusion, and breakdowns in familial and peer relationships. Accordingly, the psychology of aggression was analyzed through characters' emotional states, behavioral patterns, and narrative positioning across the films.

Individual psychopathology and aggressive psychology

Trauma and post-traumatic stress processes

Cycles of shame and identity crises

Deterioration in family-child relationships

Peer bullying and social exclusion

Each film was analyzed in its own context, followed by a comparative assessment across three categories (documentary/docudrama/fictional). In this process, the reasons presented by the films and the implicit or explicit solutions they developed were highlighted.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the research, the films were watched repeatedly, and care was taken to code the themes consistently. Psychological explanations used in school massacre studies in the literature (e.g., trauma, bullying, cycle of shame) were referenced in the development of the analysis categories. Thus, the aim was to present the findings coherently, drawing on both theoretical and visual texts. Accordingly, a deductive thematic coding approach was adopted, with analysis categories informed by existing psychological literature on school violence and trauma.

Results

The analysis revealed that the psychological representations of school shootings vary significantly across cinematic genres. Documentary films predominantly emphasize systemic and social dimensions such as gun culture, media discourse, and collective trauma, while docudrama films foreground ideological, ethical, and communal responses to violence. Fictional films, by contrast, focus more intensively on individual psychological vulnerability, family dynamics, and peer bullying as contributing factors.

Table 1. Documentary films and psychological representations

Film	Causes of School Shootings in Cinema	Narrative-Implied Recommendations
<i>Bowling for Columbine</i> (2002)	- The prevalence of gun culture and the fetishization of individual gun ownership - The media's role in fuelling a climate of fear	- Restrictions on gun laws - Political accountability and social awareness
<i>Lessons from a School Shooting: Notes from Dunblane</i> (2018)	- Social and individual trauma after the attack - The psychological shock experienced by the clergy and the community - Divine and ethical reckoning	- Solidarity among communities and religious institutions - Development of post-traumatic support and recovery processes

Documentary films directly reveal the social and psychological aspects of school shootings. *Bowling for Columbine* points to the normalization of individual gun ownership and the media's production of fear-based discourse, indicating that shootings are not merely an

individual pathology but also a cultural and social problem. *Notes from a School Shooting*, on the other hand, shows how a community experiencing psychological breakdown in the mourning process after an attack attempt to cope with the trauma.

Table 2. Docudrama films and psychological representations

Film	Causes of School Shootings in Cinema	Narrative-Implied Recommendations
<i>22 July</i> (2018)	- Racism and far-right ideology - Social polarisation	- Protection of democracy and pluralism
<i>Polytechnique</i> (2009)	- Anti-feminism - Gender inequality	- Empowerment of women - Gender equality policies
<i>Elephant</i> (2003)	- Indifferent family - Disciplinary practices and confinement - Isolation and alienation	- Strengthening family ties - Inclusive environments in schools - Psychological support mechanisms

Fictional films based on real events dramatize the connections between individual psychology and the social structure of attacks. *22 July* illustrates how far-right ideologies can facilitate individual radicalization and how attacks can convey a political message. *Polytechnique* reveals how misogyny and gender inequality can have

deadly consequences in the context of school attacks. *Elephant*, meanwhile, conveys how neglect within the family, the disciplinary structure of the school, and alienation in peer relationships feed the internal dynamics that drive young people to violence.

Table 3. Fiction films and psychological representations

Film	Causes of School Shootings in Cinema	Narrative-Implied Recommendations
<i>We Need to Talk About Kevin</i> (2011)	- Disconnection in the mother-child relationship - Psychopathology/personality disorder	- Strengthening communication within the family - Early intervention in child psychology
<i>Klass</i> (2007)	- Peer bullying - Internalized violence and exclusion	- School policies to combat bullying - Guidance and psychological support programs

Fictional films address school shootings on a more symbolic and psychological level. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* brings to the fore the attacker's estranged relationship with his mother, his personality disorders, and debates about innate evil. The film powerfully conveys how parents' disregard for their child's psychological well-being can lead to long-term, destructive consequences. *Klass*, on the other hand, shows how systematic peer bullying and exclusion create an internal build-up in a young person that turns into violence. The proposed solutions emphasize the importance of individual- and school-based interventions, underscoring the critical role of counseling services and early psychological support mechanisms.

Discussion

This study was grounded in the hypothesis that cinematic representations of school massacres construct these events not solely as security-related or sociological problems, but as multi-layered psychological phenomena rooted in individual vulnerability, family dynamics, peer bullying, and collective trauma. The discussion section revisits this hypothesis by evaluating how different cinematic genres

make these psychological dimensions visible. The findings of this study show that cinematic representations of school massacres do not merely visualize the phenomenon of violence; they also reveal multi-layered dynamics such as the psychology of the perpetrator, family relationships, peer bullying, and social factors. These results are strongly consistent with the current literature explaining the causes and consequences of school attacks.

Firstly, the findings reveal that the emphasis on perpetrators' psychological fragility and individual pathologies is also prominent in cinema. In particular, the films *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Klass* show that risk factors such as parental neglect, broken family relationships, and peer bullying experienced by individuals at an early age play a decisive role in the process of turning to violence. This interpretation is also supported by empirical psychological research demonstrating that parental psychological control and difficulties in emotion regulation are significantly associated with increased relational aggression during adolescence (Erzi & Ekşi, 2021). These findings provide empirical support for the familial and emotional dynamics depicted in fictional representations of school violence.

This finding parallels the work of Schwartz (2023) and Ebbrecht and Lindekilde (2022) on the psychological profiles of school attackers. Similarly, Zhao et al.'s (2023) large-sample study found that peer bullying has long-term negative effects on individuals' mental health and paves the way for violent behaviour. At this point, Hamman's (2025) study on the "shame spiral" also emphasizes that exclusion and rejection are critical psychological processes in school attacks.

In documentary films, the focus is more on systemic issues than on individual pathology. *Bowling for Columbine* addresses the cultural dimension of individual gun ownership and the media's rhetoric that fuels violence; *Lessons from a School Shooting: Notes from Dunblane* focuses on social trauma, grief, and faith-based coping strategies. These findings are consistent with Jetter and Walker's (2022) research on how media exposure shapes perceptions of traumatic events. The media's capacity to disseminate and reproduce trauma, as highlighted in the work of Holman, Garfin, and Silver (2020), can create psychological effects in individuals ranging from anxiety to desensitization. Furthermore, Johnson's (2024) study demonstrates that school shootings intersect with violence against women and gender inequality, revealing that gendered representations in documentaries are not merely a visual choice but also a reflection of social structure.

The docudramas *22 July*, *Polytechnique*, and *Elephant*, based on real events, present the connections between individual psychology and social structure in dramatic language. *22 July* shows how far-right ideologies and social polarisation fuelled the attacker's radicalization process, while *Polytechnique* reveals how gender inequality and anti-feminist attitudes can reach deadly proportions in school shootings. *Elephant*, meanwhile, links family neglect, the disciplinary structure of the school, and the social alienation of young people to the psychological dynamics of the attack. These findings are consistent with the psychodynamic models of lone actor violence proposed by Ebbrecht and Lindekilde (2022). Furthermore, Russell, Gordon, and Thames's (2025) analytical framework for redefining the social roots of school shootings supports the multi-layered explanations presented in these films. Rencken's (2025) comprehensive compilation also maps the psychological consequences of school shootings, demonstrating that these multi-dimensional representations in cinema are consistent with academic literature.

Variations in findings across documentaries, docudramas, and fictional films are directly attributable to genre characteristics of cinema. Documentaries, progressing through direct testimony and claims of reality, tend to highlight systemic factors (gun culture, media discourse, collective grief). Docudrama productions, dramatized versions of real events, tend to relate individual psychology to the social context; they address both macro and micro levels, including ideology, gender, and family dynamics. Fictional films, on the other hand, thanks to the director's creative freedom, detail internal processes such as psychopathology, parent-child relationships, and peer bullying. These differences demonstrate that genres are not

merely aesthetic preferences but also epistemological tools for understanding violence (Nichols, 2017). Therefore, examining different genres together enhances the study's originality by enabling a multilayered analysis of school massacres.

Another important finding of the study is that the films foreground not only the causes of the attacks but also various proposed solutions. For example, while *Bowling for Columbine* advocates for the restriction of gun laws and the implementation of political accountability mechanisms, *Klass* proposes the development of school policies to combat bullying. At this point, it is possible to draw parallels with the Division for Emotional and Behavioral Health-CEC (2024) recommendations for strategies to prevent school attacks. According to them, strengthening psychological support mechanisms in school environments and creating safe, inclusive spaces play a critical role in preventing attacks. Similarly, Menker and Bendelow's (2025) research shows that parents' and students' concerns about school safety are directly linked to young people's psychological well-being. These findings demonstrate that cinema is not only a medium that represents trauma but also one that contributes to the search for solutions. Qualitative research focusing on survivor perspectives (Rencken et al., 2025) similarly emphasizes that victims' primary demands are the strengthening of psychological support mechanisms and community-based recovery.

Representations in cinema reveal not only the individual or societal aspects of attacks, but also the persistence of psychological fragility. Vith's (2023) study on Columbine emphasizes that trauma is reproduced in cinema and creates a secondary traumatic experience in viewers. This situation is consistent with the findings of Lapierre and Garibay (2025) on the psychological effects of violent scenes on viewers. Indeed, Peterson and colleagues' (2025) study revealed that individuals' exposure to mass and non-mass shootings has similarly devastating effects on mental health.

Consequently, the findings of this study strongly align with current research in the literature and reveal that cinema plays a multi-layered role in understanding school massacres. Recent work in social sciences also emphasizes that media and cultural representations of violence influence collective understanding and policy discourse on school shootings (Balkesen & Karaaziz, 2024). On the one hand, cinema makes visible the psychological causes of the attacks - peer bullying, family communication problems, cycles of shame, and identity crises - while on the other hand, it opens a discussion on post-traumatic social and individual coping strategies. In this respect, cinema enables the examination of school attacks not only in terms of their security and sociological dimensions but also within their psychological and cultural contexts. As the literature shows (Hamman, 2025; Rencken, 2025; Peterson et al., 2025), school shootings are multifaceted and complex phenomena; therefore, the search for solutions should not be limited to security policies but should also encompass psychosocial support and cultural awareness. The contribution of this study is to make this

multidimensional structure visible through cinematic representations and to offer a new basis for discussion by relating it to findings in the literature.

Recommendations for future studies and experts in the field based on the results of this study

The psychopathologies observed in school attacks (such as trauma histories, shame cycles, identity crises, and the cumulative effects of peer bullying) should be researched comparatively across cultures with larger samples, as these psychological conditions are closely related to contextual risk factors, including family dysfunction, emotional regulation difficulties, social exclusion, school climate, and access to psychosocial support. Comparative research would help to identify how these factors interact differently across cultural and institutional contexts and why certain psychological vulnerabilities escalate into violent behavior in some settings but not in others.

Family-child communication problems, such as emotional neglect, lack of open dialogue, authoritarian or inconsistent parenting styles, and difficulties in recognizing and responding to adolescents' emotional needs, often emphasized in cinema, should be addressed through early intervention in psychology and education, strengthening family therapy and parent education as prevention.

Victims' trauma should be addressed not only individually but also through community-based approaches; collective methods such as psychosocial support, solidarity, and group therapy should be developed.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a limited set of films selected through purposive and maximum-variation sampling. While this approach enables an in-depth and comparative examination of different cinematic genres, it does not aim to produce generalizable

conclusions about all cinematic representations of school shootings. Second, the study relies on qualitative thematic content analysis, which inherently involves interpretive judgment. Although the analysis was conducted systematically and grounded in established psychological frameworks, different researchers might emphasize alternative themes or interpret narrative elements differently. Third, the films analyzed originate from specific cultural and historical contexts, primarily Western societies. Therefore, the findings may not fully capture how school violence and psychological trauma are represented in non-Western cinematic traditions. Finally, the study focuses on cinematic representations themselves and does not include audience reception or empirical data on viewers' psychological responses. Future research could address this limitation by combining film analysis with audience studies or psychological impact assessments.

Declarations

Ethics Committee Approval

Not applicable.

Permission for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Financial Disclosure

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Authors' Contributions

All stages of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation, were carried out jointly by the authors.

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