

The Fallout: A high school shooting and its aftermath

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Written and directed by Megan Park

School shootings in the US occur at an alarming rate; this year has already witnessed 30 or so such tragedies. There are no historical precedents for these phenomena, which are unknown in much of the world. Among the most horrific incidents, etched in the public's memory, include the mass killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (1999), Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia (2007), Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut (2012), Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (2018) and, most recently, Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.

What do the killings reveal about American life and society? Nothing much, according to the US media and political establishment. People doing very well are unlikely to find much wrong with the social order. By their overwhelming silence or superficiality, the film and music industries register agreement with the media and the rest of the establishment.

On the other hand, the WSWs has argued since the late 1990s that the relentless killing spree reflected a deep social sickness.

In 2019, we insisted that the “inability to guarantee the bodily and psychological safety of children goes hand in hand with official American society's inability or stubborn unwillingness to comprehend or even seriously address the root causes of these unending tragedies.”

The Fallout by Canadian-born filmmaker Megan Park focuses on the aftermath of a high school shooting in an unnamed American city. With only a handful of films (*Elephant*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *Mass*) having taken up this thorny and painful subject, the filmmakers deserve credit for addressing it. However, as is so often the case, the seriousness of the treatment does not correspond to the seriousness of the problem. The film, while sensitively made, sidesteps the social, political and psychological sources of these calamities.

The Fallout opens with a school shooting. Sixteen-year-old Vada (Jenna Ortega) and schoolmate Mia (Maddie Ziegler),

a glamorous influencer with thousands of followers, are in the school's lavatory when the piercing sound of a gun shot and all that it implies assault their senses.

Initially shocked, the girls quickly realize they must scramble to hide themselves in a toilet stall. In the distance, we hear what must be a police officer shouting: “Drop your weapon now!” A few heart-stopping moments later, Quinton (Niles Fitch) crawls into the next stall, desperately assuring the girls he is not the shooter. Quinton, however, is covered in his brother's blood. The action and rapid-fire events in this sequence are sharply chiseled.

After the shooting, Vada and Mia bond in a confusing, disoriented way, preferring to numb themselves with drugs and alcohol—unlike friend Nick (Will Ropp), who becomes a political activist. Vada: “Do you have nightmares?” Mia: “You have to be able to sleep to have nightmares.”

Both refuse to return to school. Vada becomes alienated from her supportive family, which includes her parents (Julie Bowen and John Ortiz) and precocious younger sister Amelia (Lumi Pollack). The pair of teenage girls spend most of their time isolated at Mia's luxurious house. It can function as a refuge because Mia's artist parents are abroad and, remarkably, fail to make an appearance after the mass killing.

The reaction of the school's administration is also, remarkably, entirely absent.

“I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel so empty,” is the closest Vada comes to articulating the emotional impact of the life-changing experience. There are a few pointless mother-promoted therapy sessions with Anna (Shailene Woodley), during which Vada opts for flippancy, avoiding a serious reckoning with her feelings.

Vada is made so distraught by her eventual return to school that she takes the drug ecstasy, which only accelerates her mental unraveling. Meanwhile, as noted, Nick becomes a student spokesman. Appearing on a local television newscast, he is angry and forceful: “We won't live our lives scared to go to school every day. We can't accept a world in which the federal government thinks

American students getting cut down in their classrooms isn't a priority. Our leaders have NRA [National Rifle Association] money in their pockets and our blood on their hands." This is *The Fallout*'s only overtly political moment.

Just when Vada attains a certain inner stability, a "breaking news" story confirms that 12 students have died in an Ohio shooting.

It was ambitious and commendable of Park to dramatize a school shooting and its aftermath, to represent artistically such a troubling event. However, the question remains—and it is the most important question—how successfully she does it.

Tellingly, in an interview with slashfilm, Park was asked whether she agreed with the remark of veteran director Gus Van Sant about his 2003 film *Elephant*, concerned with a school shooting, that "he [Van Sant] didn't want to try to give an answer for why this happens, because there is no satisfying answer."

Park was in "a hundred percent" agreement with Van Sant: "Although I hope that there are people who feel hope for Vada and specifically these characters, and that they will eventually find a pathway to understanding and living with their trauma and grief, I think you cannot wrap a movie [like] this up with a bow. That would feel wrong."

No one wants a movie neatly wrapped up with a bow, but perhaps looking at the broader world might be in order.

The WSWS had a different response to the Columbine-inspired Van Sant movie, which at the time of its release was praised by critics *specifically* for its failure to put forward any analysis of the shooting.

"Naturally," wrote David Walsh in 2003, "no one will ever know precisely what went through the minds of its perpetrators in the days leading up to the event. Nor can anyone can point conclusively to this or that trauma or slight as the straw that broke the camel's back. There are individually specific and inexplicable elements in such mad acts."

It was impossible to predict with scientific accuracy which particular adolescent would collapse, mentally and morally, the WSWS went on. However, *if* it was unfeasible to create a picture of the social, political, and cultural landscape in which such anti-human acts were inevitably committed by *some* disoriented youth, "then what is the use of our art or our social science?"

"Vital indicators of impending disaster might include," David North observed in a 1999 WSWS article in relation to the Columbine High School massacre, "growing polarization between wealth and poverty; atomization of working people and the suppression of their class identity; the glorification of militarism and war; the absence of serious social commentary and political debate; the debased state of

popular culture; the worship of the stock exchange; the unrestrained celebration of individual success and personal wealth; the denigration of the ideals of social progress and equality."

It is wrong and harmful to argue, as Park and many others do, that a work of art can profoundly tackle and plumb an event such as a school shooting without discussing *in any fashion* its origins or causes. This outlook, which advocates retreating from every complex, burning question, is the sign of a retrograde intellectual and cultural climate.

In fact, young people themselves are asking more searching questions, as they inevitably must. On June 11, at a national demonstration against gun violence, the WSWS interviewed high school and college students who showed considerably more insight into the ultimate sources of school violence than the makers of *The Fallout*.

One ninth-grade Chicago public school student commented eloquently: "I think it's connected to capitalism. It's getting more and more unequal, and more and more barbaric as time goes by. It's like what Rosa Luxemburg said: we are faced with a choice between socialism and barbarism. That could not be more true right now. I think capitalism has to end."

In San Diego, another high school student asserted that "Sandy Hook was the first one I remember. It happened to kids our age at the time or a year younger, and it has just gotten worse and more frequent...The US spends so much time worrying about places like the Middle East, and the names that they call them, such as 'shithole countries' and so on, and they are consistently sending troops for war, when in our country, a leading cause of death for children is gun violence. They are just not affected by it... People in Congress are *rich*, they have money, they are at the top of the food chain and are not affected like the rest of us."

A community college student from Detroit told WSWS reporters that "We can't do the 'vote blue [Democrat] no matter who' thing anymore. It does not work. The two-party system is what is killing this country. I think people fail to realize that once the workers come together and join under a common cause things will start happening. And that is what they are scared of because once it happens, they are screwed."

Some genuine understanding is beginning to sink in.



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