

Remaking Columbine

Johannes Vith

Abstract

High school shootings in the United States generally receive enormous amounts of journalistic coverage and thus spark a lot of public interest. However, the topic appears to be taboo for mainstream cinema, and there are barely any films about real-life school shootings. This article seeks to show that Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) is both an enlightening exception to this seeming contradiction and an interesting response to the popular narratives surrounding the Columbine High School shooting of 1999. The film is not only unique in its portrayal of a real-life school shooting but also in the way that it approaches the topic. There are three important processes that make this depiction of the Columbine High School shooting so powerful: remaking, remediating, and reflecting. First, Van Sant's film is a remake of Alan Clarke's 1989 film of the same name. Clarke's film depicts several incidents of gun violence in Northern Ireland without any commentary, and Van Sant employs the same techniques in his film about gun violence at a school. Second, the film critiques the discourse around the shooting, as it remediates video games for its filmic rhetoric. Lastly, Gus Van Sant de-narrativizes the shooting and creates a reflective space for the audience. These three aspects all influence the film's storytelling and cinematography, which aim at promoting reflection rather than providing a straightforward narrative.

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American exceptionalism usually emphasizes the ways in which the United States is superior to other nations; however, as Seymour Martin Lipset has demonstrated, American exceptionalism is a “double-edged sword”: the U.S. has an incredibly low electoral turnout rate, an absurdly unequal distribution of wealth, and (by far) the most prison inmates.¹ The United States is also the only country truly haunted by the specter of school shootings.² Despite the continuously high number of school shootings, the Columbine High School shooting of 1999 plays a particular role in their history and commemoration. Fifteen people died, including the two shooters.³ Although such tragedies are impossible to quantify, the Columbine High School shooting had the highest number of casualties for a school shooting at the time,⁴ and it also received extensive media coverage.⁵ It became the largest news story of the year in 1999, which 68 percent of Americans followed very closely.⁶ According to Glenn Muschert, it was the seventh-highest-rated media event of the 1990s.⁷ Interest was especially high among young people, as 73 percent of those under thirty years of age closely followed the events in Littleton. This is particularly striking because this age group tends to show less interest in the news in comparison with older Americans.⁸ The shooting has since become an iconic event and has had a great impact on public discourse about social problems, juvenile delinquency, and gun control in the United States.⁹

Interestingly, although both school shootings and mass shootings receive enormous amounts of media coverage,¹⁰ real-life gun violence is a taboo in mainstream cinema culture.¹¹ In general, mainstream cinema does not shy away from depicting violence in films. In fact, the portrayal of violence in PG-13 films has tripled since 1985. Today, 94 percent of all PG-13 films include segments containing violence, about half of which involve guns.¹² Nevertheless, there are barely any feature films about real-life school shootings. The scarcity of this particular subject matter, both in popular and in independent cinema, makes it even more important to examine films that, in fact, approach these shootings. Notably, the two Columbine shooters even discussed the issue of who would direct a future movie about their shooting. In a series of videotapes (the “Basement Tapes”), Eric Harris, one of the two shooters, stated that “directors will be fighting over this story” and expressed his desire for certain

narrative features of a possible film.¹³ However, few feature films have broached the Columbine High School shooting, even more than twenty years after it happened. There are some notable exceptions, though. Guy Ferland's *Bang, Bang, You're Dead* (2002) was inspired by the events in Columbine but ultimately resolves the conflict differently than the real shooting. Ben Coccio's *Zero Day* (2003) sets out to recreate the Basement Tapes, a kind of video diary of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. While not a narrative feature film, Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) interconnects the events of Columbine with a call for stricter gun laws. Gus Van Sant's 2003 film *Elephant* is one of the few critically acclaimed feature films that address the topic of school shootings generally and Columbine in particular. In this article, I will show that Van Sant's film offers enlightening and unconventional insights into the seeming contradiction that school shootings receive enormous amounts of journalistic coverage but appear to be a taboo topic for mainstream cinema. Thus, Gus Van Sant's approach to depicting the violence of the school shooting provides a particularly productive focus for investigation.

By analyzing how *Elephant* mediates the topic of school shootings, I will explore how a film can address issues that are possibly traumatic for its audience. This analysis will also shed light on how a filmmaker can dismantle a traumatic experience in a film and "promote non-judgmental observation in the film's audience."¹⁴ While *Elephant* is a response to the Columbine High School shooting, it is probably not the film Harris envisioned in the Basement Tapes. As I will demonstrate, there are three important dimensions that make Van Sant's rendering of this taboo topic unique. First, *Elephant* draws on Alan Clarke's eponymous 1989 film, which shows several incidents of gun violence in Northern Ireland without providing any narrative context or commentary. Second, Van Sant's *Elephant* critiques the public discourse that surrounded the Columbine High School shooting, in particular concerning its focus on video games as a source of, or inspiration for, the shooting. Van Sant includes aspects of video games in his film, but they are used as an aesthetic influence and filmic rhetoric rather than a narrative focus. Finally, while other films, such as *Bowling for Columbine*, have tried to provide a clear explanation for the shooting, Gus Van Sant de-narrativizes the event, thereby creating a space for reflection for the audience. These three aspects all shape the film to a point where, rather than providing a straightforward narrative, it encourages reflection. This is crucial for adapting an event as grave and traumatic as a school shooting for the screen. As Jennifer Rich has put it, *Elephant* does not provide any "ideological or interpretative clarity."¹⁵ Instead, it asks viewers to reflect on what they have seen.

Review

Like most of Van Sant's movies, *Elephant* merges art and experimentation and blends aspects of popular and independent cinema, combining his interest in subcultures with his desire to appeal to mainstream audiences.¹⁶ In 2003, *Elephant* received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival,¹⁷ which shows that *Elephant* was well-received by both independent and mainstream cinema audiences. Nevertheless, *Elephant* is generally considered an art film. Having attended art school, Van Sant's background invites such a classification.¹⁸ Because *Elephant* blurs the boundaries between mainstream cinema and independent film, it is difficult to link the film to a specific school of filmmaking or a particular theoretical approach. The film rather draws on various styles and techniques related to different traditions.

Van Sant's movies are often associated with arthouse cinema, a term that generally refers to non-mainstream films that are perceived to have particular artistic value. These films are often produced independently on a low budget and/or are not of North American origin. More importantly, Van Sant's films draw on *cinéma vérité*, which combines improvisation with distinct camera work to create a unique sense of reality in a film. Van Sant's *vérité* style owes much to Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr, the American filmmakers Frederick Wiseman and John Cassevetes, and Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kianostami. For example, the long, pensive traveling shots in *Elephant* are a direct homage to Tarr's work.¹⁹ This obsession with the beauty of walking and moving through space in real time is exemplified by Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994). In an essay on Tarr, Van Sant writes,

I have been influenced by Béla Tarr's films and after reviewing the last three works *Damnation*, *Satantango*, and *Werckmeister Harmonies*, I find myself attempting to rethink film grammar and the effect industry has had on it . . . They get so much closer to the real rhythms of life that it is like seeing the birth of a new cinema. He is one of the few genuinely visionary filmmakers.²⁰

Tarr became famous for art films with philosophical themes and cinematography defined by long takes. Even though *Sátántangó* has a runtime of over seven hours, it consists of only 150 shots.²¹ Similarly, Van Sant's *Elephant* only contains 88 cuts,²² while the average movie includes approximately 1,100 shots.²³ Tarr began his career as a filmmaker by telling mundane stories about ordinary people in what he called "social cinema"—a style of film associated with *cinéma vérité*. Tarr's "social cinema" is a film genre situated between fiction and non-fiction that tells a narrative just as it unfolds.

Similar to his creative inspiration, Van Sant's *Elephant* draws on techniques associated with *cinéma vérité*. In an interview, the director noted that the film only had an outline but no screenplay.²⁴ Without a script, the film revealed itself in real time.²⁵

For Van Sant, it was important not to cut the scene or stop the camera, but to consider the shot as one continuous piece.²⁶ He also incorporated aspects of the actors' and actresses' real lives, such as their names and hobbies, in his story and had them improvise large parts of the movie in order to create a very realistic insight into high school life.

Through the use of techniques associated with *cinéma vérité*, *Elephant* subtly introduces the audience to the reality of high schools. Some sequences in *Elephant* feel voyeuristic, others very mundane. This was important to Van Sant, as the film is as much about a school shooting as it is about youth; he wanted to portray the prosaic and undramatic character of a teenager's life in a school in the U.S. According to William G. Little, Van Sant's cinematography resembles what Vivian Sobchack calls the "accidental gaze,"²⁷ a particular form of documentary that leaves both the filmmaker and the viewer unprepared for the violence that they are about to witness.²⁸ Sobchack states that "the wonder and fascination generated by such films is that a death happens, is visible, and yet is somehow not seen, that it is attended to by the camera rather than by the filmmaker or spectator."²⁹ Little argues that the film's imitation of the accidental gaze is, in fact, "a commentary on the ethics of making death available for consumption," and, therefore, an important aspect of Van Sant's depiction of the violence inflicted in a school shooting.³⁰

Elephant's focus on the shooting itself rather than on the characters also becomes apparent in its dialogues. What appears to be everyday conversation does not support action in the film, nor does it push forward a plot. This again corroborates with Van Sant's overall vision. He has stated that the dialogues "were just sort of noises that they—the characters—made between each other. They weren't gonna tell you anything. Or like the things that they said weren't gonna inform you."³¹ In this way, the film creates a feeling of naturalism and displays its characters as if they are part of a zoo exhibit.³² Moreover, all of the characters in the film appear to be rather one-dimensional. For Van Sant, it was important to show the things that happen during a regular high school day.³³ This vision of high school was initially based on his own memories, yet further influenced by the amateur actors and actresses. The characters resemble stock characters of a typical high school drama, including a student with a camera, some "jocks," and a quiet girl who works at the library.³⁴ According to Michael Sofair, these characters are "being barely distinguished as victims and perpetrators."³⁵ The students are portrayed as dull and ordinary to foreground how disconnected they are throughout their day. These scenes of everyday life draw the audience into the world of the film, but they also make the eventual disruption a lot more impactful.³⁶

The nonspecific depiction of the high school simultaneously turns the setting

into “everywhere, U.S.A.” and “nowhere, U.S.A.” As such, the school resembles the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, a place “from which we are drawn out of ourselves, just where the erosion of our lives, our time, our history takes place, this space that wears us down and consumes us, is in itself heterogeneous . . . [It is] a set of relationships that define positions which cannot be equated or in any way superimposed.”³⁷ It could, however, also be argued that Van Sant subverts the Foucauldian notion of heterotopias. For Foucault, heterotopias are often connoted positively. By contrast, Van Sant’s high school is rather dull, meaningless, and negative. At the same time, the high school showcases utopian qualities in that it does not refer to a real place but instead serves as an analogy for high schools throughout the U.S. For Foucault, utopias are “society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and . . . spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal.”³⁸ As such, the high school in *Elephant* also evokes a “non-place,” as defined by Marc Augé. The film does not provide viewers with any history of the school. Instead, it is a place without a clear identity that creates “only solitude, and similitude.”³⁹ Not only does the location of the high school remain in question, but the film lacks temporal particularity as well. This lack of spatial and temporal specificity contributes to the dream-like atmosphere of the movie.

While the *vérité* influences showcase *Elephant*’s alternative nature, its resistance to conform to conventions of mainstream cinema regarding narrative structure and cinematography also suggest that Van Sant’s film typifies aspects of postmodern cinema. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodern film critiques consumer capitalism and is characterized by the fragmentation of both the narrative and the characters.⁴⁰ This narrative disintegration anticipates the coming of a new type of cinema. As a matter of fact, Van Sant has commented extensively on interactive movies, stating in a 2004 *Guardian* interview that “cinema will become something completely different, where you are in it, and it’s no longer theatrically based.” According to Simon Hattenstone, who interviewed Van Sant for the *Guardian*, *Elephant* is Van Sant’s version of an interactive film, as it immerses the audience by giving them clues and then allows viewers to shape the film and its meaning.⁴¹ The film’s atypical narrative structure helps negotiate *Elephant*’s possible meanings. Film critic Philip French has noted that “time is fractured and the same scenes are shown several times from different points of view.”⁴² *Elephant* presents significant parts of the two shooters’ backstory through flashbacks that are completely indistinguishable from the filmic present. According to Peter Bradshaw, “the time frame and sense of place is constructed so that we cannot even be sure when and where the shootings have begun.”⁴³ The resultant narrative fragmentation entails that *Elephant* has no real plot that develops from scene to scene: there are no connections between the alleged themes of the movie and the actions of any of the characters. Furthermore, because of the postmodern narrative structure, which shows different events from

multiple perspectives without any clear indication of time, identifying a temporal structure is difficult. As a result, *Elephant*'s pacing as well as its content are far from obvious. However, if we define an act as a story unit that ends with a character's irrevocable decision that sets the tone for the next act, it could be argued that *Elephant* is composed of two main acts. Act one focuses on the mundanity of school life and ends when the two shooters, Alex and Eric, open fire in the school library. There is one moment in the movie when Eli—the photographer—takes a picture of Alex standing in the library, holding his gun (**Illustration 1**). In this particular moment, it seems as if Alex comes to understand that there is no turning back, and he starts shooting. This combination of “opening fire” and “no turning back” sets the tone for the second act of the film, which focuses on the shooting itself.



Illustration 1: Eli taking a photo seems to unleash Alex and Eric's violent outburst.

Frame captures from *Elephant* © HBO Films, 2003. Images used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

However, this separation into two acts is only a suggestion, as the film does not have a plot that proceeds in linear fashion. This lack of narrative development corresponds with the film's use of long tracking shots that show the characters' movements in the building. These tracking shots evoke tension (because the audience knows that a shooting is about to happen) and frustration (because of the lack of typical narrative progression and the characters' entrapment in their mundane lives). Although the characters are in constant motion, they do not develop from a dramatic point of view. As a result, all characters remain flat and one-dimensional throughout the film, and the audience never fully understands their motivations. The film only shows how sudden, random, and yet horrifying a school shooting is.

Remake

Van Sant originally intended *Elephant* to be a television film about Columbine.⁴⁴ However, he was warned about engaging with this topic directly. In a 2018 interview, Van Sant recalls that Colin Callendar, president of HBO Films at the time, explicitly told him that he could not pursue a project about Columbine, but should rather do *Ele-*

phant.⁴⁵ Callendar implied that employing the narrative and filmic techniques used in Alan Clarke's 1989 film might be more suitable to showcase the recent horrors of Columbine.⁴⁶ Clarke's version of the film, a BBC production, follows several snipers in the Northern Ireland conflict. It presents eighteen seemingly pointless incidents of gun violence in a rather mundane fashion, with long takes of people walking.⁴⁷ The film strips the killings of any context and works without dialogue, discernible locations, and even characters, and thereby approaches a social problem with nothing but activity.⁴⁸ Clarke's *Elephant* does not offer any kind of justification for the arbitrary acts of violence or provide solutions to the problem, which challenges viewers to find meaning in the violence.⁴⁹

Clarke began using long walking shots in his 1982 film *Made in Britain* to establish both his characters and their environment. These shots are often long, walking soliloquies by the characters, especially in *Elephant*, as the film is devoid of both narrative and dialogue. While Van Sant's *Elephant* is considered a remake, it is the loosest possible reinterpretation of Clarke's 1989 film. Other than the pointless killings, the two films share their title and their radical style. The title of Clarke's *Elephant* was derived from a short story by Ulster author Bernard MacLaverty in which he describes the armed conflict in Northern Ireland as the "elephant in the living room" and "the taboo staring us in the face that we dare not acknowledge."⁵⁰

While this explanation could also apply to Van Sant's film, in which the elephant in the room is the issue of school shootings, the title was inspired by a Buddhist proverb about three blind monks describing an elephant. In a 2004 interview with Hattenstone, Van Sant stated,

One thinks it's a rope because he has the tail, one thinks it's a tree because he can feel the legs, one thinks it's a wall because he can feel the side of it, and nobody actually has the big picture. You can't really get to the answer, because there isn't one.⁵¹

Following this line of argument, the title suggests that nobody can explain school shootings. Each approach only offers limited insight and partial understanding. The proverb also evokes *Elephant*'s overall structure: the same event is shown from multiple perspectives and various points of view, yet none of the characters can see the whole picture. The background of the shooting is difficult to understand, and Van Sant invites viewers to uncover the truth, *their* truth, behind the shooting.

Remediate

As the media were trying to explain and ultimately frame the shooting,⁵² a number of actors in the industry blamed video games and their portrayal of violent acts.⁵³

According to Geoff King, Van Sant does not “choose to ignore conventional ‘blame’ elements such as videogames or an interest in Nazism, as would have been possible, but situates them in a less conventional mix and leaves any attempt to resolve or interpret further to the viewer.”⁵⁴

Elephant’s acknowledgment of several different possible causes returns to the Buddhist proverb: the viewers are the blind monks trying to make sense of the small amount of information that they have gathered. Notably, Van Sant incorporates video games in his film; however, he refrains from establishing the causal link to the shooting that has dominated the public discourse. In line with his tendency to deconstruct narratives, Van Sant detaches video games from their negative cultural framing and instead focuses on the remediation of their aesthetics. With his remediation of video games, Van Sant became part of a growing group of filmmakers who, beginning in the late 1990s, started using video games as a narrative and stylistic influence for their films.⁵⁵

Just as Clarke’s *Elephant*, Van Sant’s film features numerous long tracking shots, many of them in the hallway of the school, which slowly build up tension. Crucially, in Van Sant’s *Elephant*, these long tracking shots of students rambling through hallways also emulate the video game players’ third-person perspective of their gaming avatars walking through their virtual environments ([Illustration 2](#)). After the Columbine shooting, the public perception of video games changed from a new and emerging medium with immense potential to a focal point for the discussion of the deterioration of youth. People were quick to blame the video game franchise Doom and the violent nature of other first-person shooters (FPS) for the shooting at Columbine, as Eric Harris was known to be an avid player of the Doom games and a fan of the entire franchise.⁵⁶ Van Sant engages with the discourse on violent video games; however, rather than directly addressing the issue, he uses remediation strategies to incorporate some of the medium’s defining formal and aesthetic characteristics in his film. Video games thus constitute a stylistic and rhetorical influence for *Elephant*. Their incorporation seeks to inspire the viewers’ reflection. Two game franchises were particularly important for Van Sant’s remediation: the aforementioned Doom, a classic FPS, and Tomb Raider, which employs the third-person perspective.

Indeed, Van Sant has acknowledged Tomb Raider as a major stylistic influence for *Elephant*. The long Steadicam takes recreate the third-person perspective characteristic of the Tomb Raider series.⁵⁷ The idea to follow the characters from point A to point B—which is realized through long tracking shots—was, according to Van Sant, also inspired by video games. These tracking shots frame the characters as simultaneously connected and disconnected. They do not interact with their surroundings; rather, they only pass through the frame, which creates the impression of a video



Illustration 2: Numerous tracking shots follow students through the hallways.

Frame capture from *Elephant* © HBO Films, 2003. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

game avatar constantly in motion. This emphasis on motion recalls Steven Poole's assertion that a "beautifully designed video game invokes wonder as the fine arts do, only in a uniquely kinetic way."⁵⁸ Van Sant has stated that he played video games to understand the Columbine characters better and began thinking about cinema in relation to video games.⁵⁹ He thought about the possibility of showing the audience how characters move through space in real time, similar to what people would see when they play a third-person-perspective game such as *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996). Yet *Elephant's* remediation of video games goes beyond the third-person perspective in *Tomb Raider* to the first-person perspective of games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993).

The scene of the shooting in *Elephant* recalls the aesthetics of *Doom's* gameplay, as it also features a first-person perspective. Science fiction and horror films often employ the first-person point of view to introduce the audience to the "position of the 'Other.'"⁶⁰ One and a half hours into the movie, *Elephant* very briefly does the same thing: a two-second first-person perspective (**Illustration 3**). The film shows the audience the two shooters carefully planning and talking about their shooting, with several flashforwards to the actual shooting. Then, viewers see the barrel of a rifle and hear two shots fired at students running through the corridors of the school. Although this first-person scene is very brief, it confronts the audience with the shooting through the perspective of the shooters. While other films about Col-



Illustration 3: Eric plays a first-person shooter (left), whose aesthetics the film then remediates during the shooting (right).

Frame captures from *Elephant* © HBO Films, 2003. Images used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

umbine, such as *Zero Day*, tell their narratives from the shooters' perspective, only *Elephant* simulates the perspective of a person firing a gun at students of a school. The first-person perspective completely strips the shooter of his identity as viewers only see the barrel of a gun.⁶¹ In so doing, *Elephant* suggests that anybody could potentially be a shooter, even the audience members. In addition, by briefly depicting the act of killing without a villain's face linked to it, *Elephant* illustrates how horrible a school shooting is without constantly trying to make sense of it.

The direct involvement of the audience in the FPS scene also draws on the immersive potentials of video games. According to Frans Mäyrä, FPS of the late 1990s and early 2000s offer immersion not only on a sensory but also on an emotional and intellectual level.⁶² By briefly putting the audience in the position of the shooters, Van Sant does the same. Viewers can hear the shots like the shooter would hear them and can see the students running away from them as if they were the viewers' targets. As the achronological nature of the film makes it difficult for the audience to really relate to any one of the characters, the immersion produced by the first-person perspective becomes more effective. The change in perspective is emotionally and intellectually challenging; while it is difficult to watch students shoot other students, it is even more difficult if the filmmaker puts the audience into the perspective of the perpetrators.

The maze-like structure of the school is *Elephant*'s third nod to video games. With its long, dark corridors and sparse lighting, the setting evokes the visual design of various shooter games. The film's lighting and composition further support this feeling of an FPS. Cinematographer Harris Savides used one of his most celebrated techniques—lighting the set rather than the actors, with minor enhancements from time to time. The light source is usually above the actors, combined with occasional side lighting. In video games, too, lighting oftentimes highlights the surroundings rather than the characters, because the environment is more important for the players.



In a similar vein, *Elephant* emphasizes everyday life in a school, not one of the main characters' narratives. Because of Van Sant's inclusion of video games in his film, the viewers are asked to reflect on the issue and make their own judgements about the discourse on video games after the shooting at Columbine.

Reflect

Elephant is a unique response to school shootings for several reasons, but its approach to endorsing reflection is arguably the most notable one. Diane Keaton, one of the movie's producers, stated in an interview that *Elephant* focuses on making the viewers think, rather than on "hammering [them] on the head with a message."⁶³ Reflection can thus be considered the overarching theme of the film, which is supported by both cinematography and storytelling. Over the course of the film, reflection manifests itself in two different ways. On the one hand, the film urges the audience to reflect; on the other, it reflects on the shooting itself. *Elephant* features the act of killing without big-budget spectacle,⁶⁴ as opposed to a conflict between heroes and villains. The film focuses on the suddenness and apparent arbitrariness of the shooting, as well as the horror that ensues.

The unexpectedness of the outburst of violence stands in stark contrast to *Elephant*'s key narrative element, waiting: waiting for some kind of climax and, eventually, waiting for the school shooting to happen. The viewers can use the time afforded by waiting to reflect on what is currently happening in the film. By stripping the Columbine High School shooting of its drama and suspense, Van Sant highlights the sheer senselessness of the incident and creates an even more horrific reality. Importantly, while "creating" and "reality" may seem to contradict one another, the whole film is nothing but a fabrication. Moreover, the notion of "reality" becomes particularly important in the last twenty minutes of the film, in which the shooting takes place. They stand out because of the undramatic approach that characterizes most of *Elephant*.⁶⁵ The previous lack of progression⁶⁵ makes these minutes feel especially real.

Since the lives of the two killers are presented in a mundane fashion, the violence also appears prosaic. The gunshots seem boring and are not as loud as in action movies. This is all part of what Jennifer Rich has called Van Sant's "pre-emption of empathy."⁶⁶ For her, the promotion of reflection in the film is entangled with strategies of manipulation. These strategies consist of an interruption of all of the characters' interactions, temporal and spatial dislocation, as well as a rejection of interiority, with the result that viewers cannot immerse themselves in the narrative of the film.⁶⁷ According to Little, these aspects could also be interpreted as a simulation of post-traumatic stress.⁶⁸ Cathy Caruth has claimed that victims of trauma are not prepared for the experience and also unable to process the unfolding events. Trauma

is a temporal void, and the mind returns to the traumatic experience in an attempt to transform it into a meaningful event. Caruth explains that

The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the death, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known. And it is this lack of direct experience that, paradoxically, becomes the basis of the repetition of the nightmare.⁶⁹

The film's refusal to comment on the violent incidents further enhances the audience's struggle with grasping what is happening and strongly encourages viewers to reflect on what they see.

Elephant's overall encouragement of reflection is also evident in its soundtrack, which is characterized by subtle *musique concrète* that was devised by Leslie Shatz.⁷⁰ Natural sounds, such as the echo-like noises of a school, are increased to the point where they become surreal and support the ungraspable overall feeling of the movie. One sequence in the library illustrates the use of sound particularly well: when Melissa, a seemingly disturbed outsider, and Eli, the photographer, hear the sound of a rifle being cocked, the sound of the gun was edited in a way that made it recognizable, yet elusive. The *musique concrète* also aids in Van Sant's deconstruction of the narrative, as the unfolding events are not supported by a non-diegetic soundtrack and its emotionally manipulative effects. *Elephant's* soundtrack rather encourages the viewers to reflect on what they see, as the emotions derived from it are purely subjective and not deliberately shaped by the music.

The film also calls for reflection by defying expectations. After the film's famous, yet ambiguous, shower scene, which shows the two shooters kissing, the audience is left to believe that they are not only united in the desire to attack their school but romantically involved as well. Yet, at some point, Alex kills his companion Eric, shooting him without any comment, seemingly because there is no one else left to kill. This development seeks to cause confusion among the viewers, a strategy that could be considered quintessential to the whole movie: no one really knows the shooters, nor their motivation. Viewers might discover aspects of the perpetrators' personalities but, similar to the blind monks and their description of an elephant, they are unable to see the big picture.

Van Sant's decisions regarding cinematography and storytelling strongly impede immersion into the narrative drama of the film, which further encourages the audience to reflect. The film may have been inspired by the tragedy of the Columbine High School shooting, but it rather presents a study on the nature of violence and the effects of indifference. The film's distinct cinematography seems to suggest that reflection in the audience can be encouraged by long takes: the longer the take,

the more time for the viewers to contemplate what they see.

Yet the topic of reflection also takes shape on a metalevel. The character of Eli, the photographer, plays a crucial role in this context because Eli functions as a counterpart to the two shooters. When he takes photos, for instance, he is “shooting his classmates (with his camera) in a frenzy of aesthetic productivity rather than homicidal destruction” and thereby shows what he is seeing.⁷¹ However, this is not a simple reproduction of “reality.” Early in the movie, Eli takes a photo of a couple for his portfolio. While doing so, he asks them to “look a little bit happier.”⁷² This brief utterance emphasizes *Elephant*’s self-reflexivity: cinema is never neutral, but rather shapes (a) reality. While Van Sant may have tried to approach the Columbine High School shooting in an objective way, his influence as the director remains. Moreover, the character of Eli self-reflexively comments on Van Sant and his filmmaking, for “shooting a picture is an act of moving deathward.”⁷³ The camera distances its operator from the violence that is being filmed. According to Sofair, the scene in which Eli takes a picture of the shooters shortly before being killed carries a lot of meaning, as

enacting such a defense mechanism at the moment of his death, when it is exposed as ineffectual, might confirm its neurotic basis, except that Elias does not seem depressed or broken in any way. He just maintains the course he is set on when the film opens, accumulating random photos intent on building up a “portfolio” to start a career, as if, absent a unifying perspective, they—and he—will acquire coherence once they find a market.⁷⁴

Similar to Eli, Van Sant tried to illustrate different aspects of the shooting. After all, *Elephant* does convey a message: there is no discernable reason for anything. School shootings are sudden, random, and horrifying events, without any clear correlations and causes. Interestingly, the film also includes many shots of the weather that liken the haphazardness of school shootings to the unpredictability of weather patterns. In an interview, Van Sant specifies that he included clouds because the reasons for the shooting were so complex and elusive that even the weather could have driven the shooters to attack the school. Van Sant knows that this ambiguity is difficult to grasp for large parts of the audience, explaining that “it’s in our interest to identify the reason why so that we can feel safe, feel that we are not part of it, that it’s demonized and identified and controlled.”⁷⁵ Many critics addressed the film’s casualness toward violence.⁷⁶ In a 2004 interview, Van Sant claimed,

Modern-day cinema takes the form of a sermon. You don’t get to think, you only get to receive information. This film is not a sermon. The point of the film is not being delivered to you from the voice of the film-maker. Hopefully, there are as many interpretations as there are viewers.⁷⁷

According to Barone, this multitude of possible interpretations characterizes Van

Sant's approach to the Columbine High School shooting.⁷⁸ *Elephant* does not seem to manipulate the audience but rather endorses reflection. The film does not judge any of its characters, and it does not offer any explanation for their motivation to act in the ways they do. Any emotion derived from watching *Elephant*, accordingly, at least appears to be almost entirely subjective.

The film deconstructs the Columbine High School shooting and refuses to explain it in any way. *Elephant* is not a film about the shooting; it is rather a response to it. The film provides the audience with a space for reflection and spotlights the ambiguity of school shootings as the viewers are left to decide for themselves what is true. More than twenty years after Columbine, *Elephant* remains one of the few cinematic responses to the epidemic of gun violence at schools in the United States. The film's cinematography, its editing, and its unique way of telling a story highlight the relationship between school shootings and their media representations as one that "goes beyond the genesis of the shooting itself."⁷⁹ Through remaking, remediating, and reflecting, *Elephant* highlights the fictionality of school shootings in moments of social instability, making the film a truly remarkable response to Columbine.

Notes

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