A convenient vagueness: A review of Elephant, directed and written by Gus Van Sant

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Elephant's general subject matter is the massacre that occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999, in which 15 people were killed and 23 wounded, and other school shootings in the US over the past several years. Filmed in an Oregon high school, Gus Van Sant's work follows several students whose paths cross on a fateful and tragic day. The film considers some of the same brief and ordinary encounters from a number of points of view.

Arbitrariness and banality rule the film. John, forced to take the car keys from his drunken father in the middle of the day, arrives late for school and receives detention for it. Another student with an enthusiasm for photography, Elias, snaps pictures of his schoolmates. The film returns several times to the encounter between Elias and John in a school hallway. A handsome athlete, Nathan, is followed by the camera for some time down sterile corridors, past a group of three admiring girls, until he meets his girlfriend, Carrie. Those same three girls chat, eat lunch in the cafeteria and retreat to the restroom to vomit up its contents. A group of students discuss homosexuality with their adviser. An awkward girl who seems something of an outcast, Michelle, is reproached by her gym teacher for not wearing shorts. She works in the library.

One of the eventual killers, Alex, is the target of spitballs in class. At home he plays Beethoven on the piano. His cohort, Eric, arrives and plays a violent video game. They watch a documentary on television about Hitler. A large box is delivered containing an automatic weapon. They try it out in the garage against a pile of logs. Dressed like commandos and armed to the teeth, they set off for school and begin their killing spree.

The "elephant" in the title has two possible meanings. Van Sant borrowed it from another film he admired, Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989) about killings in Northern Ireland, in the mistaken belief that the title of that work referred to the parable about the blind men who are asked to describe the animal by touching various parts of it; each draws quite distinct conclusions about the elephant as a whole based on his partial knowledge. In fact, Clarke's title referred to the "elephant in the living room" that cannot be ignored.

A criticism of Van Sant's film for its failure to present any historical or social context for the Columbine mass murder, indeed the work's failure to advance any coherent explanation whatsoever for the tragedy, is not rendered beside the point by the fact that the director has proceeded quite consciously.

Naturally, this quality has been widely praised. Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times* writes: "It [*Elephant*] offers no explanation for the tragedy, no insights into the psyches of the killers, no theories about teenagers or society or guns or psychopathic behavior. It simply looks at the day as it unfolds, and that is a brave and radical act; it refuses to supply reasons and assign cures, so that we can close the case and move on."

Ebert continues: "'I want the audience to make its own observations and draw its own conclusions,' Van Sant told me at Cannes. 'Who knows why those boys acted as they did?' He is honest enough to admit that he does not. Of course a movie about a tragedy that does not explain the tragedy—that provides no personal of social 'reasons' and offers no 'solutions'—is almost against the law in the American entertainment industry. When it comes to tragedy, Hollywood is in the catharsis business."

Jonathan Rosenbaum in the *Chicago Reader* comments: "[I]t's important to know that Van Sant has no better notion of why the Columbine massacre occurred than anyone else. All he has are a few wild guesses—some more plausible than others, none remotely conclusive—and most of the film's flaws can be traced back to those guesses, which take up far more of our attention than they deserve."

What does it mean to explain the Columbine tragedy? Naturally, 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. And no doubt the attempts by the American mass media, insofar as they made such, to grapple with the event were predictably shallow and empty.

But why must "explanation" equal "simplistic explanation"? It is impossible to calculate with mathematical exactness why this adolescent as opposed to that one collapses, mentally and morally, in the face of certain socio-psychological pressures. If it is an equally unmanageable task, however, to build up a picture of the social, political and cultural atmosphere in which such irrational acts committed by *some* disoriented youth become a near inevitability, then what is the use of our art or our social science? After all, the Columbine shooting was not an aberration, it came in the midst of a wave of anti-social violence, which has continued in one form or another to the present moment in America. To argue that none of this can be rationally explained is a commentary of its own.

An artistic "explanation" would naturally differ from a social-scientific one. But the "building up of a picture of the social, political and cultural atmosphere" is very much one of the responsibilities of art, although few at present seem to think so.

Ebert describes Van Sant's conscious failure to offer a serious explanation as "a brave and radical act." The sole alternative apparently is to "close the case and move on." This is entirely wrongheaded. The genuinely brave and radical act, which Van Sant did not set himself, would be to locate the source of the tragedy in the diseased and dysfunctional state of American society and deliver a stinging slap to the face of official public opinion.

A general explanation of the phenomenon is possible. A number of

pieces appeared on the *World Socialist Web Site* contributing to such an understanding. In one of them, headlined, *The Columbine High School massacre: American Pastoral ... American Berserk*, David North commented in part:

"Consider, for a moment, the social outlook of these two youth. They were admirers of Adolf Hitler, fascinated by fascism's racism, its cult of sadistic violence and death, and its general contempt for humanity. And yet, there was nothing particularly Germanic about the views of [Eric] Harris and [Dylan] Klebold. In a statement that he posted on his web site, Harris wrote: 'I am the law, if you don't like it you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die.' These sentiments, expressed with a little more polish, sum up the approach of the American government to the rest of the world. 'Do what we want or we'll destroy you.'"

It has been noted by numerous commentators, including Michael Moore in *Bowling for Columbine*, that the Littleton massacre occurred the same day as the heaviest bombing of Serbia by US-led NATO forces.

Further on North wrote: "The concentration on individual warning signs will be of little help in preventing further tragedies. Attention should be focused, rather, on the social warning signs, that is, the indications and indices of social and political dysfunction which create the climate that produces events like the Columbine HS massacre. Vital indicators of impending disaster might include: 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."

The argument that a work of art can seriously treat a phenomenon without discussing its origins or causes is an absurdity, an unfortunate byproduct of a reactionary intellectual climate. In fact, insofar as Van Sant is an honest and sensitive individual he must hint at certain contributing factors, contradicting his own arguments and those of his admirers. If he has no idea why "those boys acted as they did" then why include references to violent video games, to guns and their easy availability, to Nazi Germany, to bullies and bullying, to parental irresponsibility or neglect, to adolescent self-loathing, and not to other alleged factors—for example, the absence of religious teaching in public schools, promiscuous and "decadent" lifestyles, Satanism, MTV, Bill Clinton's immorality, contemporary "ultra-nihilism," and so forth. There is nothing "naturalistic" or spontaneous about *Elephant*. The events of the day do not simply "unfold." The film is as contrived and purposeful as any other work of art.

Indeed Van Sant told an interviewer from *eye weekly*, "As for resolution or answers or ways to fix the problem, those things exist within the film, but they do have to be arrived at by the viewer." He told *FilmForce*, "The things that inform student culture are created and controlled by the unseen culture, the sociological aspects of our climbing culture, our 'me' generation, our yuppie culture, our SUVs, or, you know, shopping culture, our war culture."

The problem is not that Van Sant has no explanation for the Columbine killings, but that his explanation or explanations are merely intuitive and impressionistic. And the repetition of various incidents, presumably allowing us to see more detail each time, do not in and of themselves strengthen his film, if no underlying grasp of the social realities is present. Vague and insubstantial, Van Sant's explanation of the event does not rise to the level of a serious social or historical perspective.

This vagueness and insubstantiality is bound up with the director's artistic-intellectual outlook and methods. The question as to which came first, an approach to art that values surface, elusiveness and ephemera or a sympathy for the philosophical notion that no distinction exists between appearance and essence, that both are the same, since everything exists on the exterior, is perhaps an academic one.

Van Sant's admiration for artist Andy Warhol is well known. The filmmaker has commented, "I want art to be like food—when you see a tomato in a store, it's a thing, you understand it, you know what it is. It's part of life. And art should be like that, it should be organic, something that isn't rarefied."

Art *should* be part of life, but life, in fact, is complicated. Social life is not transparent. Its truth does not lie on the exterior. If it were the oppressed would have far less difficulty in ending their oppression. Nor is the truth about Columbine lying about for everyone to see. It cannot be extrapolated, contrary to Van Sant, simply from images of soulless high school corridors or even certain mini-dramas that occur within its confines. The source of the Columbine shooting does not lie within that particular high school, no matter how closely or sensitively examined, but in the complex state of American social relations and the psychic reverberations it sets off.

One admiring critic suggests that what Van Sant "wants us to do" is "to see what is really present." But that is precisely what we *cannot do* merely on the basis of these slight images! Making a virtue out of the lack of context and depth, no matter what the artist's intentions, will have no positive results.

If the truth be told, the film presents a series of recognizable high school "types," albeit cleverly done "types": the athlete, the misfit, the budding artist, etc. Van Sant admits as much: "There are stereotypes within the movie, but they're played by real kids. So even though they're 'types,' the stereotype goes somewhere." Not very far actually. The most one can say is that the film avoids certain pitfalls of American studio production: cheap sentimentality, "heart-warming" characters, a crowd-pleasing catharsis, etc. That's all to the good, but it is not the same as establishing the truth about a critical social event or, for that matter, about the life of a single human being.

In fact, Van Sant's aesthetic vagueness coincides with or conceals (no doubt unwittingly) an inability to illuminate deeply either the characters or the episode itself. It is obvious to any spectator that the casual facts and incidents presented do not logically "lead up to" the eventual murderous outcome. The argument will be made: they are not intended to. Clearly. The work deliberately and self-consciously creates a discontinuity between the banal episodes and the terrible climax. This is its claim to fame, so to speak. In part this is what fascinates the critics, what strikes them as so formally innovative.

But hold on a moment. There is not a complete discontinuity—the film alludes to certain well-known aspects of the case: the complaints about being picked upon, the fascination with guns and Hitler, etc. So what then? Is there a link between the early episodes and the conclusion, or is there not? Or is it not rather the case that the elliptical and "cool" style attempts to bridge the gap, substitutes itself conveniently for the convincing explanation the filmmaker unfortunately cannot provide?

Van Sant is intelligent and perceptive, and endowed with a social conscience. He recently told an interviewer from *Film Journal* that the current "insane Republican administration is very much like the McCarthy witch-hunts" of the early 1950s. He described the Bush government as very "reactionary," and suggested that it is eager to find "scapegoats to blame things on."

I suggested in 1998, at the time of his nearly shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho*, that Van Sant seemed "too much of a chameleon." How is one to reconcile the memorable *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho* (in parts), the dreadful *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the market products *Good Will Hunting* and *Finding Forrester* and now the 'experimental' *Gerry* and *Elephant*, which he claims to be making under the influence of European art directors like Chantal Akerman and (the vastly overrated) Bela Tarr? The term "flexibility" or even "eclecticism"

does not do justice to this disparate body of work. Something elemental is missing, some intellectual and social anchor.

From the point of view of its ability to shed light on a vital and tragic event, *Elephant* is an intellectual and artistic failure.

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