

# Elephant (2003)

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



On Tuesday, April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School near Denver, Colorado, two senior students embarked on a massacre, killing twelve students, one teacher, and injuring over twenty more students. The two troubled students then committed suicide. It is the fourth deadliest school massacre in United States history. The phrase “elephant in the room” is used as a metaphor to describe an obvious truth that goes unaddressed, or simply ignored. Everyone knows it is there, but no one will say what needs to be said, or acknowledge the problem that is in front of them.

Gus Van Sant's, *Elephant*, is a cinematic response to the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. Van Sant's open-ended treatment of the Columbine event is one example of how his creative strategy is able to focus the social complexity behind the incident, and stimulate curiosity from the audience. This style of film steps far past the traditional boundaries to the point, demonstrating that this is only scratching the surface, suggesting that there is much more depth than what is shown in plain view.

*Elephant* refuses to adjust to conventional views of cause and effect, and instead weaves an inescapable spell on its audience with its distinctive long takes, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, and an interweaving, realistic narrative structure, all contributing to its remarkable visual harmony and an everlasting emotional affect on those who witness it. One creative strategy that Van Sant employs throughout the movie's entirety is its distinctive, but unique long takes. This unconventional way of filming helps determine the atmosphere of the film as a whole.

Van Sant takes the audience on a trance-like journey as the camera follows each character around the school. The action is moved along by the <https://assignbuster.com/elephant-2003/>

continual course of the camera tracking behind different students as they navigate the school halls, cafeteria, library, and football field. During these long takes, the audience is given the perspective of a passive witness to the action as it unfolds unavoidably. As a result, it becomes a slow-moving film with a snowballing and powerful impact. As Van Sant puts it, “ No cutting is better than cutting.

A fabricated story isn't as good as something that's more organic”(Van Sant). These long scenes are repeated, but through the eyes of different characters each revealing a new perspective of the scene, which increases the sympathy for these students who have no idea what is coming, but was already revealed to the audience. With these distinctive and realistic long takes, the scenes become preserved in the audiences memory due to what seems like a first hand experience of the traumatic event.

Another key component to this movies inescapable spell that it places on its viewers is the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Throughout the movie there is always a constant sound, whether it is the echoes of voices in the hallways and locker room, or the sound of Beethoven playing beneath the diegetic sounds. The use of these diegetic sounds help create a more realistic perspective for the audiences. As they follow behind each character closely, Van Sant makes sure to add every little detail he can to ensure that the audience gets as raw and as authentic of a view as possible.

For example, the group of young girls in the cafeteria or in the locker room, there are no sound affects added, what you see is what you hear, creating a naturalistic atmosphere. As another way to increase the tension, Van Sant strategically places the non-diegetic sound of a piano playing

classical music to create an ominous mood in the selected scenes. There are only a few scenes at which the piano is played, and it easily goes unnoticed. The sounds of classical music playing beneath the diegetic sounds places the audiences in a dreamlike state, as all they can do is sit back and watch as the story unfolds.

The interweaving and realistic narrative structure of this film helps show the multiple points of views of this tragedy, giving the audience the ability to become “ the ideal imaginary observer” and feel as close to the real thing as possible. After reviewing the film, Manohla Dargis of the LA Times states, “ Every so often, Van Sant repeats a scene from another perspective, as if he were winding back time, and decelerates the bustling to put the film into slow motion so we can pay witness to this heartbreaking animation, to the aliveness of these children.

I think this is why Van Sant made “ Elephant” — he wants to honor the lives of the Columbine dead, to remember all the kids in their radiant, burning life.”(Dargis). The same scenes are replayed multiple times from different perspectives to show the magnitude of the situation, and just how powerful what is taking place really is. Instead of casting big name actors, Van Sant casts regular high school teenagers, who improvise their dialogue to make it seem as realistic as he could.

By keeping this narrative structure away from the glamour and artificiality of classic Hollywood films, Van Sant allows the story to unfold naturally and is able to preserve the film's true meaning, which is to focus on the traumatic event that is right in plain view, but yet no one wants to address. Throughout the film, the audience is given an in depth look at what took place that tragic

day. As far as authenticity, this film is as realistic of an interpretation as there can be without dipping into the glamour of Hollywood, and distortion for the sake of a better script.

This film is as real as it gets, and it is because of the creative, non-traditional style that Van Sant employs throughout it. There are several different elements that go into creating this film, such as an interweaving narrative structure, or the use of creative and unique shots that help make it extremely impactful. Some elements can be seen with the naked eye; others require a little bit more intellect. Regardless of whether or not the audience can see why this film is more creative and spell bounding than the next, they at least know something is there like the elephant in the room.