



ELIAS (ELIAS MCCONNELL)
HANGS HIS NEGATIVES IN THE
SCHOOL FILM LAB.

As Real As Can Be

High school shootings

ELEPHANT: Written, directed and edited by Gus Van Sant. Producer, Dany Wolf. Executive producers, Diane Keaton, Bill Robinson. Cinematography, Harris Savides. Sound design, Leslie Shatz. Ensemble cast: Alex Frost, Eric Deulen, John Robinson, Elias McConnell, Jordan Taylor, Carrie Finklea, Nicole George, Brittany Mountain, Alicia Miles, Kristen Hicks, Bennie Dixon, Nathan Tyson, Matt Malloy and Timothy Bottoms. HBO Films, Fine Line Features, 2003. R. 81 minutes.

Portlander Gus Van Sant's film about American high school shootings is patterned on the killings at Columbine, but the director takes reasonable creative liberties. Designed to look like a documentary, the film almost lulls the viewer into boredom as the camera follows various students through a typical school day. But we know a senseless massacre is coming, so the tension between dread and the daily grind builds. Anyone looking for answers to the inevitable "Why?" will not find them here.

Van Sant's choice of title refers to the parable of the blind men. Each examines a different part of an elephant and then imagines he understands the whole beast. The film is not theoretical. Instead, it is naturalistic, un-scripted and basically improvisational, with real high school students playing characters much like themselves. It was filmed in 20 days in November 2002 in a recently decommissioned high school in northeast Portland.

When we see (from the back) two boys in camouflage combat fatigues approaching the school, we expect the shooting to start in the next scene. But the sighting is a false lead. Van Sant takes his time to show the almost invisible web that connects the victims. While he shoots the same scene from the angle of each participant, as editor he does not show the scenes sequentially. The killing, when it comes, is brief, brutal and surprising — cold but personal.

The picture begins with a car weaving down the street that turns out to be driven by a drunk father (Timothy Bottoms) taking his son, John (John Robinson), to school. Thanks a lot, Dad. It's Van Sant's first red herring, because we expect John, this tall kid with fly-away hair to be a rebel. But no. John spends an hour with the principal, Mr. Luce (Matt Malloy), who stares at him silently. John looks back, clear-eyed and unapologetic. Later we realize John takes care of his dad.

Elias (Elias McConnell) walks to school with a camera. He asks permission from a couple of lovebirds to take their pictures in the woods. He works in the school darkroom with a girl who may be his girlfriend. Van Sant uses Elias to introduce other characters, whose pictures he takes.

Long tracking shots distance us from the impending tragedy by emphasizing the relative emptiness of the long hallways and the daunting size of the school. We are subject to the everydayness of school life, which is deceptive. Van Sant made this movie because eight fatal student shooting sprees happened in schools between 1997 and 1999, including Thurston High School's.

This film is unsuitable for anyone personally affected by the Thurston shootings. The film is fictional, but it cannot avoid the showing some graphic (but not gratuitous) images. Other viewers may be moved to compassion and shaken from the stupor of mass-media induced voyeurism by Van Sant's respect for the individuality of the young people he worked with. He creates a bridge into their world, an environment much more complicated than most of us remember from our school days.

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The killers, Alex (Alex Frost) and Eric (Eric Deulen), seem as ordinary and average as any other kids. We don't see them as monsters until they are in the car, dressed and armed for the occasion, coolly discussing plans to pick off students in the hallways, cafeteria and school library.

Elephant refuses to fit into a narrative framework. But when it's over, you may wonder if we can ever truly understand the casual violence of the world our children have inherited. Now playing at the Bijou, *Elephant* is highly recommended for some viewers.

EW

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