Minimalism and art-cinema narration in Gus Van Sant's *Gerry, Elephant,* and *Last Days*

by

Matthew John Alberhasky

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Leland Poague, Major Professor
Laura Winkiel
Hamilton Cravens

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2006

Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Matthew John Alberhasky

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Minimalism and Narration

Though Gus Van Sant's best known films—*My Own Private Idaho* and *Good Will Hunting*—have earned critical acclaim and commercial success, the focus of this thesis is a trilogy of films made in the first decade of the twenty first century. *Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days* form a stylistic trilogy that replaces conventional filmmaking's emphasis on plot and character development in the construction of film narrative with a minimalist style of cinematography that defies viewer expectations. Working against the tradition of a plot constructed around a psychologically motivated, causal chain of events, Van Sant instead offers very little in terms of conflict and other readily identifiable components of generic plot including character motivation. Though *Elephant* won the best picture and best director awards at the Cannes Film Festival, these three films have been either largely ignored or heavily criticized as miserable failures.

For example, *Gerry* debuted at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival to a largely restless and impatient audience. Critic Jan Stuart of *The Advocate* described the scene as follows: "A few who made it as far as the end credits registered their disapproval with boos; still others tittered with disdain and clucked things like 'My eighth-grade nephew could have made a better movie'" (Stuart 51). Dennis Lim from *The Village Voice* said that *Gerry* was "[P]erhaps the most widely despised film of the festival" (Lim 100). Reportedly, even Van Sant himself, according to R. K. Bosley in *American Cinematographer*, said at the end of the film's showing to those remaining in the audience, "I'm surprised you're still here" (Bosley 92).

The negative publicity was not over after Sundance. Movie reviewers were quick to criticize the film for similar reasons. In *Variety* Todd McCarthy wrote "[I]f his shot-for-shot

remake of *Psycho* was one sort of artistic dead end for Gus Van Sant, then *Gerry* represents another" (McCarthy 36). McCarthy further described the film as an "uncommunicative picture [that] has nowhere to go" (McCarthy 36). In regards to Van Sant himself, McCarthy opines, "the filmmaker has lost his bearings--a sensation that will be shared by the few viewers this picture is likely to ever have" (McCarthy 36). Leah Rozen from *People Weekly* said "no matter how pretty *Gerry* is [in reference to the cinematography] there's not enough going on in the film to stave off tedium" (Rozen 31). Her conclusion about the film was that it was "just as pointless a stunt as Van Sant's remake of *Psycho*" (Rozen 31). Daniel Eagan from *Film Journal International* wrote: "[S]ure it [*Gerry*] features one gorgeous vista after another of majestic natural scenery…but there's a little thing called narrative--call me old-fashioned--that one wants when watching a movie" (Eagan 109). Finally, J. Hoberman from *The Village Voice* posited that the film itself "might well wonder whether its minimalist aspiration is a matter of ambitious purity or empty pretense" (Hoberman 127). In the end Hoberman sides with empty pretense, calling the film an "[E]xercise in existential tedium" (Hoberman 127). The "tedium" that both Rozen and Hoberman experienced as viewers of *Gerry* aptly describes the consensus that greeted the film upon its initial release.

The critical ridicule *Gerry* received at Sundance affected Van Sant's expectations of how his next film, *Elephant*, which would be made under similar technical and aesthetic circumstances, would be received by the critics and marketed to audiences. Van Sant's cinematographer, Harris Savides, told *American Cinematographer* that when Van Sant pitched the film to HBO, he and Savides insisted on shooting the film in the standard television aspect of 1.33:1 because they felt "Nobody's going to see this movie in theatres" (Thomson 61). Because Van Sant remained committed to his minimalist, anti-narrative style,

it seemed realistic to expect that the film would be another critical and box-office failure. However, both Van Sant and Savides were "surprised," according to an interview in *American Cinematographer*, when *Elephant* garnered not only the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, but also the award for best director. Thus *Elephant* was instantly more successful than *Gerry*. However, even after *Elephant* won the biggest awards at Cannes, many critics felt passionately that the film was not only a failure, but was blatantly irresponsible in its representations.

Reporting the news of the awards from the Cannes Film Festival, Todd McCarthy of *Variety* was less than enthusiastic about the judge's selection and the festival overall. He wrote, "In the end, the odd distribution of awards capped an unsatisfying, contentious and strangely uneventful year in Cannes that posed the difficult question of whether the selection of films was seriously amiss or was there really nothing else worth showing out there? There's no doubt that everyone was more than ready to go home" (McCarthy 13). McCarthy in another review in *Variety* is much more vitriolic towards the film, saying that providing "no insight or enlightenment would seem pointless at best, and irresponsible at worst" (McCarthy 32). His review continued to say that the film was "[A]n art film exercise" that ultimately was "gross and exploitative" and "deeply flawed" (McCarthy 32). McCarthy saw two problems. First was the "minimal" character development in the film that led to "minimal" identification with the characters on screen (McCarthy 32). The second flaw for McCarthy was in Van Sant's decision to use direct parallels to Columbine. "[I]t would probably have been a good idea for Van Sant," wrote McCarthy, "to have made a point of more conspicuously avoiding direct parallels to Columbine if he wanted to deal with the questions it raised" (McCarthy 32).

McCarthy was not the only critic to charge the film with being irresponsible. Stanley Kauffmann in *The New Republic* said the film "is a braggart piece of empty exhibitionism" that is "irresponsible" in its "cool generalization" (Kauffmann 26). Kauffmann also was unsatisfied with certain minimal aspects of the film, namely its plot, referring to the narrative as "some sixty minutes of blandness into which the massacre erupts" (Kauffmann 26). *New York* magazine critic Peter Rainer called *Elephant* "a lurid tease posing as an art film" (Rainer 81). He disliked the film for its lack of character development and psychological reasoning, writing it off as "just another example of art-house hokey-pokey" (Rainer 81). Like both McCarthy and Kauffmann, he accused the film of being "irresponsible" in the way it distanced the viewer, via cinematic technique, from the appalling violence (Rainer 81). Lewis Beale, writing in *Film Journal International*, expressed a similarly disdainful perspective on the film, declaring it to be "utterly pointless" as well as "one of the most vacuous and irresponsible films of the year" (Beale 106). Like other critics, Beale saw the film's lack of character development, plot, and intelligent analysis as significant flaws (Beale 106).

The third installment of Gus Van Sant's minimalist trilogy, *Last Days*, opened to a more lukewarm array of reviews. There were still more than a few that blasted the film, like the critics had Van Sant's other films, for being plot and character deprived. At the other end of the spectrum there was the reviewer from *Vogue* who hailed it as one of the best films at the Cannes Festival. However, most critics reviewed the film without interjecting much opinion, good or ill, regarding the success of the film. Many of the critics mentioned the two previous films, and commented on the pattern of Van Sant's minimalism. Perhaps at this

point even critics who did not necessarily like the film respected Van Sant for pursuing his vision into a third feature film, and also for nabbing two top awards at Cannes for *Elephant*.

An exception was Mark Kermode from the *New Statesman*. He thought the film was based on the flawed premise that "if you point a camera at anything for long enough, the subject will somehow become miraculously imbued with meaning" (Kermode 31). With obvious distaste for the lack of plot and character development, Kermode writes, "*Last Days* mopes around for 97 toe-curling minutes…nothing Blake (or indeed anyone) says in the entire film merits comprehension" (Kermode 31). His summary of the plot is as follows: "smelly people doing nothing of any consequence, but doing it very slowly" (Kermode 31). He describes Van Sant as "an unreliable old coot" (Kermode 31), and the film as "self-indulgent drivel," "mindless baloney," and the "worst film of the year" (Kermode 31). His essay concludes with the remark: "Stupid, pointless, fatuous, irresponsible and (worst of all) dull, dull, dull, *Last Days* is one of those movies that make you lose the will to live" (Kermode 31).

Another critic who spoke out against the film was Stephen Dalton from *Sight and Sound* who said the film was an "ultimately hollow work;" according to Dalton, "this latest experiment in exposing the tedium behind the tragedy succeeds all too well" (Dalton 66).

One key aspect of the critical discussion about Van Sant's latest three films is the critic's appropriation of the term "minimalist." I had originally thought that the application of minimalism as a genre theory might be the key in my analysis of these three films. However, after researching Minimalism as an art movement and analyzing the three films, it became apparent that what I was studying was not only minimalist theory but also some of the concepts of narration espoused by David Bordwell, which I will discuss presently.

Minimalism as an art movement occurred in New York City from roughly 1958 to 1968 as a reaction against the autobiographical excess of Abstract Expressionism. It primarily involved geometric painting and sculpture rendered with a minimum of incident or compositional maneuvering (Colpitt 1). From my research I saw many parallels not only between the critical reception of Minimal art in the early 1960s and the critical reception of Van Sant films, but also parallels in style and thematic concerns.

Many of the critics of Van Sant's films called his films boring, tedious, and monotonous. Similarly, many art critics said the exact same things regarding the Minimalist art of the 1960s. Barbara Haskell writes that the critics' first reaction to Minimal art was to claim it was "boring and monotonous" (Haskell 91). Colpitt also writes, "If, on seeing some of the new paintings, sculpture, dances or films, you are bored, probably you were intended to be. Boring the public is one way of testing its commitment" (Colpitt 116-7). Part of the critical anxiety about minimalist art is deciding precisely what is minimal about it: the means or the ends or both. Colpitt says, "Minimal art, although it has strong negative connotations, seems to be the term most commonly used. The term 'minimal' seems to imply that what is minimal in Minimal art is the art" (Colpitt 3). The question, ultimately, is whether the simplicity and silence in Minimal art is indicative of an understated strength, or is merely emptiness.

However, the critical receptions of Minimal art and Van Sant's films not only share similarities in their negativity, but the critics also discussed some of the same thematic concerns. For example, critics in both instances discuss the possibilities explored in "non-narrative and non-traditional spaces" (Haskell 12-13). Aleen Leepa in *Minimal Art and Primary Meanings* says, "the Minimal artist ignores the traditional, accepted meanings in art

to examine the dynamics of how meaning in general is developed" (Leepa 202), echoing

arguments critics have subsequently used in discussing Van Sant. We could say that in this

sense Minimalism is a negotiation between the ideas of essentialism and existentialism, the

traditional and the experimental.

Still other art critics in describing Minimal art have articulated exactly the style and

structure of Van Sant's films. Edward Strickland describes Minimal art as "static, event-free

narrative, expressionless, monochromatic, and resistant to development" (Strickland 7).

Strickland further argues that what Minimal Art does in its respective media is to explore and

expose "the building blocks of all its various media in skeletal form" (Strickland 12-13).

Concerning Minimalist fiction, Strickland writes that it "consists of bare-bones narratives

inhabited by intangible characters performing meaningless rituals and having pro forma

conversations" (Strickland 14). Strickland's analysis of Minimalist fiction so closely

resembles what is happening in Van Sant's films that it is obvious Van Sant is aware of this

Minimalist aesthetic tradition, from which Van Sant takes his tenets of rejecting convention,

aligning with reality (more correctly verisimilitude), and reductivism.

In addition to analyzing the Minimalist aesthetic of Van Sant's films, I will also use

David Bordwell's distinctions between classical Hollywood narration and art-cinema

narration as the framework for understanding the films' representations of plot and character.

In *Narration and the Fiction Film* Bordwell describes the classical Hollywood film as

representing "psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem

or attain a specific goal" (Bordwell 157). He says that in classical narration "the story ends

with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or

nonachievement of the goals" (Bordwell 157). In conventional filmmaking the "principal

causal agency is thus the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behavior" (Bordwell 157). Hollywood filmmaking relies on one or more psychologically convincing character(s) as its central agency of narrative causality. The plot then becomes the articulation of the action the character takes in attempting to achieve a specific goal, and integral to the plot is generally some sort of deadline that structures the time of the narrative (Bordwell 157).

In contrast to classical Hollywood narration, Bordwell describes art-cinema narration as relying on characters who "tend to lack clear-cut traits, motives, and goals" (Bordwell 207). In art-cinema narration characters "may act inconsistently or they may question themselves about their purposes," (Bordwell 207). Because characters in art-cinema narration lack and/or question their goals, "the narration can play down characters' causal project, keep silent about their motives, emphasize 'insignificant' actions and intervals, and never reveal effects of action" (Bordwell 207). The critics' displeasure with Van Sant's films rests precisely in this lack of clearly-defined, motivated characters from which a psychologically causal plot unfolds.

Art-cinema narration also, according to Bordwell, "maximizes ambiguity" (Bordwell 212), in an effort to open up the film's narrative structure and the possibilities of interpretation, whereas classical Hollywood narration works to bring closure and coherence to the film's narrative structure. In this sense, style is used in conventional narration to convey in the simplest fashion the plot of the film, or the syuzhet per Bordwell, with the least amount of confusion, while art-cinema narration "can build up curiosity about its own narrational procedures, thus intensifying the viewer's interest in the unfolding patterns of suyzhet and style" (Bordwell 213). Art cinema "creates curiosity about its narrational

procedures" (Bordwell 213), by deviating from classical norms and using style to thwart viewer expectation, thereby creating confusion concerning plot development, which is why it is often said of art films that nothing happens.

The following chapters will each focus on one of Van Sant's three minimalist films and use the frameworks of the minimalist aesthetic and Bordwell's distinction between classical Hollywood narration and art-cinema narration in order to analyze how Van Sant refutes viewer expectation and in doing so creates an alternative cinema reliant more upon cinematography and image rather than the extrinsic constructions of plot and character development.

Chapter 2: *Gerry*

Two characters named Gerry, played by Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, drive to an unnamed desert for no stated reason. They go walking, get lost, wonder around for four days until one of them collapses and dies, just before the other spots the highway on the horizon and is then rescued. The critics' frustration with the plot of *Gerry* is understandable since the action of nearly the entire film can be summarized in the previous two sentences. The plot is no more complicated than that. There is no intricacy, no complexity. Unlike conventional film plots as defined by Bordwell, the plot of *Gerry* is not constructed on a psychologically motivated, causal chain of events. In fact, there are very few events in the entire film. Most of the film consists of shots of the desert landscape where the two Gerrys are walking. The first part of this chapter will analyze three events in *Gerry* that illustrate the film's refusal of conventional plot construction: the Gerrys' drive to the desert, Affleck's Gerry being stranded on top of a large rock, and Affleck's Gerry's death. The next portion of this chapter will focus on the film's unconventional use of character. Finally, I will analyze Van Sant's use of cinematography to reinforce and develop thematic concerns.

Gerry begins with a five-and-a-half minute sequence of the two characters riding in a car. The entire scene is filmed in slow motion, set to the non-diegetic music of a piano and violin playing a simple and haunting melody. The first shot from behind the moving automobile continues uninterrupted for over two minutes before cutting to a shot of the front of the car in which we see the two characters. In the second shot, which lasts for almost a minute and half, there is no dialogue, and the characters are expressionless and obscured at times by light reflecting off the dirty windshield. The camera then cuts to something close to a point of view shot from the two characters' perspective for the next minute. Finally, the

camera cuts back to the second shot for another minute until they pull off the road. The camera lingers on the car for an additional half minute after the characters have left, resisting conventional cut-on-action editing.

This opening six-minute scene constitutes the set up of their desert walk. A traditional film would give at least some motivation for the characters' drive to the desert; however, in *Gerry* there is none. Also, in a traditional film there would be more attention to and development of details in regards to the location; however, in *Gerry* this does not happen. For example, the characters take a path named "Wilderness Trail." After seven-and-a-half minutes the first words of the film are spoken: "Gerry, the path." It is another two minutes before the Gerrys speak again, this time mumbling to one another about "the thing" at the end of the trail. Their banter is glib and almost sarcastic. The viewer expects them to be talking about who they are and why they are walking along the path. At this point, the viewer expects to know the set up of the plot. But defying viewer expectation, *Gerry* provides no set up, and at this point there is no discernable plot in the conventional sense.

About a half hour into the film, immediately following five consecutive minutes of the camera photographing the landscape, Affleck's Gerry is suddenly stranded on top of an enormous rock nearly fifteen to twenty feet off the ground. The camera does not capture how Affleck's Gerry arrived on top of the gigantic rock. There literally appears to be no physical way he could have managed to climb up the rock without the aid of any tools. Damon's Gerry asks, "How the fuck did you get up there?" His response genuinely reflects that of any normal person. However, Affleck's Gerry does not respond to this question, and Damon's Gerry does not pursue the reason any further. In this scene for the first time in the film there is tension and something resembling conflict in the traditional sense. In conventional

filmmaking, about half an hour into the film the viewer expects the plot to deepen and develop. In *Gerry* at this point it seems as if a plot may be finally taking shape. Damon's Gerry decides to make Afflect's Gerry a "dirt mattress" from soil "that's soft. It feels hard, but it crumbles, you know," he says. The scene unfolds over ten minutes during which most of it is filmed in a long shot which posits the two characters as miniscule, "minimal," objects next to the enormity of the rock and nature. Damon's Gerry's dirt mattress, though developed for ten minutes, turns out to be a pathetic invention. In long shot, it is entirely indistinguishable from anything else. The stranded Gerry finally jumps and lands safely. Just like that, it is over. There is no further discussion about how or why it happened, and the conflict and tension that was hinted at dissipates without being incorporated into the plot in any way that resonates on an explicit level. Again, conventional plot development is eschewed.

Finally, Affleck's Gerry's death is what would be considered the climax of a traditional film. However, here it is psychologically unmotivated. The viewer sees Affleck's Gerry hallucinate. A little while later he collapses and simply lies on the desert ground. He says to Damon's Gerry, "I'm leaving." At this point Damon's Gerry straddles Affleck's Gerry and chokes him to death. Damon's Gerry's body obscures the violence and consequently makes the death scene very anti-climatic. The viewer is left to fill in the blanks as to why Damon's Gerry choked Affleck's Gerry since he has nothing to say on the matter. In the absence of explanation, the viewer might assume that it was a mercy killing. Perhaps the Gerrys had discussed what would happen off screen, and Affleck's Gerry's final words were a predetermined cue that his time was coming to a close. The strangling might be taken as benevolent, human intervention into the torturously slow and indifferent death nature

inflicts through exposure. The terrible irony is that once Damon's Gerry recovers from his lethal efforts, he spots the highway on the horizon at what seems only a short distance from where he left his companion. It is difficult to know for certain with the obdurate silence of the film, but it seems as if Damon's Gerry's intervention might have been avoided had he waited but a little while longer. In the conventional sense, this scene hardly constitutes a climax, since the film never really establishes why the Gerrys are in the desert, why they were so idiotically unprepared for their walk, and why Damon's Gerry killed Affleck's Gerry. There are no plot twists, complications, developments, or even back-story. There is little conflict or tension in the events of the film. Even the mercy killing/murder happens almost entirely without affect. Overall, it is not simply that the film's plot is slim or minimal, but that the film deliberately avoids setting up and delivering conventional plot devices for the sake of satisfying viewer expectations.

Gerry not only lacks conventional plot construction, but it also lacks traditional character development. Traditional character development is constructed mainly through dialogue and the realization of motivation. The two characters in *Gerry* are largely devoid of both. It is documented that there was no script for the film. Matt Damon and Casey Affleck were reported to have improvised the dialogue, which is hardly surprising given the dialogue's elliptical, inane, and colloquial nature. It is far from a polished, Hollywood screenplay. There is no conflict that emerges between the two characters. They are both obviously concerned about finding the highway and surviving. However, they do not talk about, and their efforts do not reveal anything about, their characters. They both are very flat, without much personality. In one scene, while sitting around a campfire, Affleck's Gerry rambles on to no end about some bizarre game he had been playing involving a king and

serfs, vassals, etc. Like a pronoun with no antecedent, much of his story is utterly lost on the viewer as Affleck's Gerry refers to off screen events that are not explained for the viewer's benefit. His murmuring speech continues for an excruciating four-and-a-half minutes.

Similarly, when the Gerrys talk about "the thing" at the end of the trail, they speak very flippantly, not like traditional actors trying to convey the idea of something important, but more like two pompous asses being blatantly coy with an inside joke. Their tone and manner is the same when they convert their name, Gerry, into a verb, gerried, to signify a mistake or screw-up. Affleck's Gerry says to Damon's, "You gerried the rendezvous." Later, at the beginning of what cinematically seems the third day, there is a close up of the two Gerrys, as they appear to be falling apart both physically and psychologically. They are both using the invented verb, gerried, to express their mistakes, "gerried off to the animal tracks" or "gerried the scout-about," etc. There is a cut to a car driving that might represent the interior state of mind of one or both of the Gerrys, and might also function as either a flashback to the beginning car sequence or a flash-forward to the end where the same scene plays immediately before Damon's Gerry awakes and is rescued on the highway. This scene is the closest *Gerry* comes to representing any interior life of the characters. Even so, the representation is a purely cinematic one. The grainy sepia images of the car driving in fast-forward motion do not seem linkable to either particular Gerry. In fact, the images might not be applicable to the psychology, or inner thoughts, of either character, but rather as a foreshadowing device, anticipating the penultimate image of the film. All the same, the scene is one of the more effective scenes in the film, demonstrating the frustration, fear, and danger the characters are experiencing at the moment. Whether the images can be directly linked to one or both of the characters seems to matter less than in a more traditional film.

In an only mildly more interesting exchange, the two Gerry continue a discussion they had been having previously about an episode of Wheel of Fortune, in which a contestant mistook the puzzle "barreling down the road" for "burying down the road." Damon's Gerry relates the story, saying that the contestant mistook the "l" in barreling for a "y" in burying. Though the difference between the two words involves more than two letters, this exchange proves to be more interesting because at the time they are talking about these phrases the two characters themselves are barreling down the road, and at the end of the film one Gerry ends up burying the other down the road. So, the solution to the Wheel of Fortune puzzle not only self-consciously comments on the immediate action, but foreshadows the ending. At the end of Damon's Gerry's anecdote, he says that the guy with almost zero dollars ends up winning the puzzle. As in the anecdote about the game, there is a similar cruel arbitrariness in nature that the Gerrys find at the end of the trail, only with severer consequences.

Gerry is largely devoid of psychological motivation, the foundation of almost every traditional film. In conventional film the plot is generally constructed around one or more character's desire and motivation, and is, principally speaking, a way of engaging the viewer. When a viewer observes a character on screen desiring something, s/he can relate to that desiring and by extension can relate to the character on screen. If the character's desires are frustrated, then the viewer feels frustrated too, and that creates narrative tension or conflict. In most films the character's desires are continually frustrated, usually in sequence to specific plot points, until the narrative elements reach an apex at the climax and are resolved in the conclusion. However, *Gerry* intentionally resists construction on the traditional basis of psychological motivation. For example, there is no reason whatsoever given for why the two characters come to the desert. There is no back-story developed that gives any insight into

who these characters are or what they are looking for (other than a glib reference to "the thing" which could mean anything but ultimately means nothing). Unlike conventional road movies, there is no conflict that arises that they talk about other than finding the highway, but even this does not connect to anything deeper within their characters or their past. Damon's Gerry's killing of Affleck's Gerry, which would most likely be the climax of a more traditional film, is not psychologically motivated. The viewer is not privy to any previous conversation the two might have had about killing the other if circumstances necessitated it. Neither of them says anything that would explicitly indicated that this action should or is going to happen. Once it is over, Damon's Gerry is silent and fairly deadpan about the whole ordeal. The gaps are not terribly difficult to fill in. It would seem that Affleck's Gerry was slowly dying of dehydration or starvation or both, and Damon's Gerry was simply putting him out of his misery. However, it is impossible to be certain, since the film is silent on precise motivation. Thus, the narrative structure is unstable in this regard, unlike most traditional films that work diligently to reveal psychological motivation and stabilize the narrative elements.

The reduction of plot and character in *Gerry* to a type of bare-bones minimalism accounts for the critical reaction to the film as boring and meaningless. Being accustomed to traditional filmmaking, the critic-as-viewer expects certain conventions that provide a framework on which to hang meaning. *Gerry* blatantly and intentionally refuses the fundamental framework of traditional filmmaking, and in doing so risks being viewed as meaningless since there is nothing on which to construct meaning. In a way it is like trying to chart new territory in an unnamed and unexplored desert. Part of what *Gerry* aims to do is strip cinema of imposed designs such as plot and character development in an effort to

expose the fundamental building block of film itself, the image or photograph. If *Gerry* is exploring the territory of features intrinsic to film itself, it is worth noting what comprises the images of the film. In a traditional film, the great majority of screen-time is reserved for the stars or the actors/actresses of the film. They are usually featured in mostly medium or close up shots, and are usually the focal point of any given scene. However, in *Gerry* the characters are rarely shot in a medium or close up. In close to half of the film the characters are either not in the frame or are so relatively minuscule, minimal an object in the frame that they will become obscured by rocks or other natural elements to the point where they are unrecognizable. In this way the characters are less the "star" of the film (though Affleck's Gerry wears a large yellow star on his shirt as either a futile gesture or an ironic self-consciousness or both) than the desert or nature seems to be. The vast, indifferent, impersonal desert or force of nature, whose existence, like the film itself, is unquestionable and inexplicable, becomes not so much the protagonist but like an antagonistic focal point of the film out of which the themes of the film emerge and the non-minimal, technically superior aspect of the film, the cinematography, emerge. In a sort of reversal of the traditional road movie, where the road becomes a metaphor for some intrinsic quality or conflict in the character and thus a vehicle for the narrative, the characters become the backdrop or the vehicle for the "road" or rather the desert or nature that is filmed attentively and innovatively.

While it is clearly the case that *Gerry* works intentionally to disrupt viewer expectation in terms of plot and character development, and it does so on the basis of employing a minimalist aesthetic, one element of the film, the cinematography, is not used in a thoroughly minimalist fashion, but rather in a highly innovative and stylized way. The three

main ways *Gerry*'s cinematography rejects tradition and conventional, Hollywood filmmaking, thereby demonstrating an inventive style, are via the long take, the absence of the reverse or point of view shot, and by consistently avoiding the characters as the focal point of a given shot. In this sense, the conventional Hollywood film is constructed on a cinematic grammar that aids viewer comprehension through a consistent editing technique that uses relatively short takes, cut on action or dialogue exchange, and employs the shot-reverse-shot editing figure in order to affirm viewer understanding of characters' emotions and reactions. In the majority of shots in any given film, the characters are the focal point of the image. It is primarily through the characters and their reactions to events and dialogue that the viewer understands the plot and the story of the film, and the viewer understands a character and his or her reactions through the shot-reverse-shot editing style that is so commonly used that it becomes an unconscious, fundamental process that is mistaken as universal and inherent to fiction film.

Gerry is constructed primarily using what seem to be long takes as compared to traditional, Hollywood cinema. With a run time of approximately 100 minutes, there are also approximately 100 shots in the film, probably about a fifth or less of the number of shots in the average Hollywood film. For example, the first shot of the film lasts for over two minutes as the camera follows a car with the two Gerrys. Another shot of Affleck's Gerry on top of a large rock, while Damon's Gerry prepares the dirt mattress, lasts for over seven minutes. Finally, in one of the few close up shots of the film, the two Gerrys walk in profile for slightly over three and a half minutes. In each of these scenes the continuous roll of the camera draws attention to itself because the viewer is anticipating a cut that is delayed to the point, especially in the rock scene, where it almost becomes unbearable, and the viewer is

compelled to look away. The long take works at times like an uncomfortable pause in a conversation, as in the rock scene. At other times, as in the opening sequence, it has an arresting and haunting effect.

Gerry is also largely devoid of point-of-view shots. In the beginning sequence there is something vaguely compatible with the shot-reverse-shot formula. However, since each shot lasts over a minute, the effect is not immediate in the same way the quick shot-reverse-shot figure is normally utilized in Hollywood films. Then when the two Gerrys are first realizing they are lost and standing on top of opposite hills yelling to one another about which way to go, they are filmed in a long shot that views them both from a good distance. Then there is a cut to a conventional point of view shot from Damon's Gerry's perspective. The viewer anticipates seeing a cut to a point of view shot from Affleck's Gerry's point of view on the opposite hill. However, after a minute or so the camera cuts back to the long shot of the two Gerrys until the scene is over. Van Sant opts for the pan or the tracking shot instead of the point of view shot, and when he finally delivers one point of view shot he deliberately refuses the shot-reverse shot of the formula to show that the film is intentionally working to deconstruct that formula, which is not intrinsic to film, but is conventional in commercial filmmaking.

Finally, the last aspect of *Gerry's* cinematography that resists conventional, Hollywood filmmaking is the abundance of shots that feature natural objects as their focal point instead of character. For example, in the ten-minute scene where Affleck's Gerry is stranded on the giant rock, the most prominent image in that scene is the giant rock, not the characters. The scene unfolds during the seven-and-a-half minute stretch where Damon's Gerry constructs a dirt mattress, and is filmed in a long shot where the characters are dwarfed

and diminished by the size of the rock. Many moviegoers go to movies in order to see their favorite actors or actresses literally larger than life on the screen, and movies, in turn, play to this desire by filming attractive stars in close up shots after hours of makeup. Matt Damon could be considered one such star. However, anyone going to *Gerry* wanting a Damon flick would be sorely disappointed in this sense. Many of the scenes consisting of the two Gerrys walking aimlessly in the desert are filmed in long shots in which the characters are partly or sometimes entirely featureless. The characters become diminished or even obscured by their natural surroundings. The images of the desert are so beautiful that the camera at times leaves the characters to simply film footage of the desert, so at times the characters are nowhere in sight. In this way, the film deconstructs conventional cinematography that features the characters as the most significant elements in most shots. The result of featuring nature so prominently in *Gerry's* imagery is that the main theme of the film emerges with greater success: the conflict between man and nature.

Essentially, the film observes the primordial conflict between man and his environment. It does not comment explicitly on existence and meaningfulness, which is precisely why the Gerrys have no reason for coming to the desert. The desert and their presence there are facts that are simply accepted. There is no use in trying to construct arguments about where they came from or why they are here. The ostensible object of the film is to take human and natural existence as a matter of fact, not a topic of philosophical debate. What the film accomplishes is a sort of objective record of the physical and (to a lesser degree) psychological destruction of its two principal characters after four days of raw exposure to the desert environment. The characters are nearly entirely without provisions, though they manage to have a fire a couple times, but it is never shown how they made it.

They are utterly isolated from any community, and in the absence of community and technology it is demonstrated that Gerry (the everyman) can only last about four days. *Gerry* meditates on the primordial tension between the human need and instinct to survive and the world or environment that is not necessarily equipped to insure it. The forces of nature are shown in the film to be indifferent and cruel rather than benevolent, and human intervention is required in the mercy killing of Affleck's Gerry. However, the film is silent regarding whether there is meaning in our world or whether, like the anecdote of Wheel of Fortune, there is just arbitrary, nihilistic chance.

In conclusion, what *Gerry* accomplishes through its refutation of viewer expectation in its strict denial of extrinsic, traditional, Hollywood meaning-making devices of plot and character development in favor of a highly stylized cinematography that reinforces its thematic contemplation of man's existence in his harsh environment is an exploration of the space beyond the fiction film. *Gerry*'s running time and A-list actor, Matt Damon, might suggest that *Gerry* is a fiction film. However, its minimalist use of fiction film devices might also suggest that it is not a fiction film. Whether one considers this film a fiction film depends on how one defines what a fiction film is, and the nature of the film lends itself to opening up the discussion. Some of the defining features of this discussion involve, as discussed earlier, plot, character development, and establishing point of view. These devices, so foundational to the Hollywood feature film, are usually discussed in terms of how convincing they are or how well they hang together or are developed, etc. *Gerry* encourages the viewer to see these devices as extrinsic formulations, challenging Hollywood's tradition of incorporating them as intrinsic and inextricable from fiction film.

Chapter 3: *Elephant*

As with the plot *Gerry*, the plot of *Elephant* can be summarized very briefly, as a fictionalized account of the Columbine High School massacre. The film follows roughly a dozen high school students as they walk the halls and chit-chat, as any given high school student would on any given day, until two of the students skip school in anticipation of a delivery of guns which they then use to kill their fellow students. Similar to the plot of *Gerry* in terms of simplicity, the plot of *Elephant* is not more complicated than that. There is no back-story that gives any of the students any sort of developed character. However, unlike that of Van Sant's previous film, the violence in the climax of *Elephant* is far more anticipated, explosive, and graphic. So, in one sense, *Elephant* does have a more traditional climax than *Gerry*. However, there is no denouement that brings closure to the climax. Instead, the film ends a mere second before Alex, one of the gunmen, presumably claims more victims.

The first hour of *Elephant* follows the meanderings of about a dozen high school students. The opening shot of the film is a look at the sky, in which the viewer sees white clouds rolling by as s/he hears the sound of students playing outside, no one noise any more discernable than another but just the murmuring of human beings. This benign shot turns menacing as the sky darkens and a vague, distant rumbling of a storm is heard just before it fades out. The second shot of the film is shot from behind a swerving car being driven down a residential street, and is reminiscent of the opening shot of *Gerry*, which is shot from a similar distance, angle, and perspective relative to a driving car. However, the shot in *Gerry* lasts considerably longer, over two minutes, while the shot is less than forty seconds in *Elephant*. Also, in *Gerry* the shot is filmed in slow motion and set to non-diegetic music,

whereas in *Elephant* there is no camera effect or music. The most significant difference between the two in the opening sequences is that in *Gerry* we are introduced to the two characters whom the camera will follow for the remainder of the film. However, in *Elephant* the viewer is introduced to John and his drunken father, whom the camera will abandon in just under two minutes, though it does return to John periodically.

In terms of narrative time, *Elephant* follows several different characters' perspectives through the same passage in time, privileging none as focal points. There is a circular motion to the plot of *Elephant*. After John, the camera then tracks Elias through the high school campus grounds as he photographs two "punks" (per credits). Then the film cuts back to John as he pulls into school and tells his father to wait till he calls for someone to help him drive home. The camera then picks up with new characters, in the foreground boys playing a pick-up game of football and girls running in gym class, while others are seen exercising in the background. The camera position does not immediately distinguish a subject: it is motionless as the football game moves out of its image and though the girls run past, one (later named Michelle by a title card) stopping to look at the sky: it does not cut or pan to follow their action. This scene is set to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Finally, a student comes into the frame and puts on a red, lifeguard sweatshirt and the camera follows him from behind across the field and into the school. He walks past three girls who ogle at him before he reaches his girlfriend, and a title card indicates the couple, Nathan and Carrie.

The next scene cuts back to John in the principle's office, and though the scene changes the soundtrack is continuous, capturing the same murmuring conversations that echo down the tile of the corridors. Later, the film will track the three girls--Brittany, Jordan, and Nicole--after the moment in the hallway when Nathan passes, as they walk to the cafeteria

for lunch, and then into the bathroom to vomit as a group. Similarly, other students' paths cross as the camera offers varying perspectives on the same moment at different points in the film. For example, Elias takes a photograph of John, which we see (more or less) from John's perspective at the beginning of the film, and then later from Elias' perspective. Then towards the end of the film we get that same scene from a third perspective, Michelle's, as she runs by the two on her way to the library. Also, the entrance into school of Alex and Eric, the film's gunmen, is shown both from John's and also Alex's and Eric's perspective at different points in the film.

What is striking about Van Sant's use of multiple perspectives is that the variation of perspective does not bring a new understanding to the events or the plot of the film, as is the case in most films with multiple perspectives, but rather there is a consistency of perspective even in its multiplicity. The reason for this is partly because the camera is content to follow the characters, gliding along the surface of this particular day in this particular high school. But the other part is that Van Sant intentionally withholds conventional plot and character development. The traditional, Hollywood film uses the device of multiple perspectives to show different sides of the same event. However, *Elephant* uses a plurality of perspectives to show the same side of the same event. By this I mean that through a strict denial of plot points and developed, individualized characters, Van Sant creates a homogenous verisimilitude in his diversity of perspective. This verisimilitude is the mundane existence of a typical high school day.

What aids Van Sant in creating a realistic high school setting is not only the lack of conventional plot in the first hour of the film, but also the lack of character development. The characters are not only filmed on the surface, as it were, but they are hardly characters at all

in the traditional sense. The actors and actresses in the film were not professional, but rather actual high school students who (more or less) played themselves, with the exception of two who took character names. The dialogue, like that in *Gerry*, was largely improvised, and much of it is droned and echoed down the hallways. What is heard is almost entirely inconsequential in the conventional way of advancing plot or developing character. In this way, either *Elephant* or *Gerry* could be shown as a silent film and retain almost all of its integrity and impact. What would be lost from the films if there were no sound is not so much the dialogue but, rather, the noise: in *Gerry* the hollowness of the wind whipping through the desert, in *Elephant* the droning human noise echoing eerily down the halls. These sounds create an unsettling ambience to the film that reinforces the menace that lurks beneath the surface of its imagery and finally erupts at the end.

The stakes of the critical displeasure with *Elephant* were considerably higher than in the case of *Gerry*. In addition to being described as a boring or pointless film, *Elephant* was also demonized as being irresponsible in its representation of the massacre of high school students in a Columbine-style scenario without offering any insight or analysis. However, what the critics are misunderstanding in labeling the film as irresponsible is how the film works, like *Gerry*, to deconstruct conventional filmmaking tactics such as plot and character development, as meaning-making devices. *Elephant* rounds up the usual suspects in its portrayal of the two killers, Alex and Eric, in the sense that they are depicted as being the brunt of bullying, as playing violent videogames (in which Eric shoots various people walking in a desert like setting including one who wears a shirt with a yellow star like Affleck's character in *Gerry*--seemingly some sort of inside joke), as watching a documentary on Hitler, as acting out homosexual impulses (however naïve, desperate, or

transitory these may or may not be is not indicated), etc. But what *Elephant* achieves in rounding up these stereotypical scapegoats is a denial of a simple causal link to the violence. For, like its use of multiple perspectives, it shows these influences without preference for one and without developing or analyzing them in a way that a conventional film would to show a direct causal relationship. Instead, by fluidly moving from one image to the next, as the film moves fluidly from one character to the next, it constructs a verisimilitude that so closely resembles reality that critics often mistake it for reality, wanting the film to have a more conventional documentary sensibility.

However, if a critic mistakenly reads the lack of plot and character development as evidence of a meaninglessness in the film's text, then the film could be argued along those lines to be judging the massacre itself as an act of meaningless violence, which on some level it surely is. So, even in this misreading of the film, it is not that *Elephant* should be called irresponsible, since it would be seen as taking a negative stance against the violence it represents. What the critics find appalling about this stance is the implicit nihilism of the meaninglessness represented in the film. In other words, by not taking an active stance against a particular causal factor, the film could be seen in this regard as taking a strictly nihilistic stance, saying that because everything is ultimately meaningless there is no point in trying to diagnose or solve this problem; it simply exists, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Such a conclusion could be understandably frustrating as a critical and political dead-end. However, such is not the ultimate aim of the film.

The camera does not glide along the surface of these high school students' lives in order to demonstrate an indifferent, objective perspective towards their lives and fates. Rather, the minimalist use of conventional filmmaking devices lends itself to a highly

stylized cinematography that constructs a verisimilitude that operates in a way parallel to traditional uses of plot and character. *Elephant* is not a film that lacks plot and character development in the same way a poorly made Hollywood film could be said to lack those features. Instead, *Elephant* deliberately eschews these devices that are ordinarily used to create a semblance of reality wherein the viewer can identify with characters and then create meaning from the film experience. *Elephant* seeks to create a similar verisimilitude through entirely different means. Like *Gerry*, the film works to establish a highly stylized cinematography that reinforces the themes of the film through its negation of standard, conventional cinematic technique: cutting on action, establishing point of view through the shot-reverse-shot maneuver, and by framing the characters as the focal point of the shot, thereby establishing identification. These devices are the conventional entry points for viewers and critics into film. However, *Elephant*'s triumph of style over matter demonstrates an alternative to traditional filmmaking in creating verisimilitude through cinematography. Like *Gerry*, *Elephant* also charts unfamiliar territory in the space that exists between documentary and traditional, narrative film. Ultimately, *Elephant* is neither, though critics at different times want to read it as one or the other, or a combination of the two.

Elephant extends the style Van Sant developed in *Gerry* that rejects conventional filmmaking technique. He continues his use of the long take in *Elephant* as he tracks students walking across campus and down the halls of the school, whereas in *Gerry* he tracked the two characters walking through the desert. In both films the primary action of the characters is walking. The walking Van Sant films in *Gerry* is a meandering type of walking where the characters have a specific goal, to find a trail or the highway, but have no specific route to get there. The characters are unfamiliar with their environment, and so to the best of their ability

the Gerrys make every effort to look for clues or patterns. On the other hand, in *Elephant* the students walking all have very specific places they are walking to, mostly various classes, and the routes they walk are routinely familiar, so there is an unconscious flow in their walk, with the momentary exception of Michelle, who stops to stare at the sky for a moment during her run, until the violence disrupts their casualness. Once the shootings start, we see students running, afraid, and confused as to where to go. Benny, the African-American student who walks towards the sound of the firing instead of running away, helps a girl escape out the window. She is standing in a classroom where a fellow student has just been shot, and she appears to be in shock, unable to move and unsure what to do. Similarly, Nathan and Carrie, instead of running out the exterior doors in the cafeteria, decide to hide in the meat locker. In a way the scene borders on bad slasher flick territory, where the helpless teenage victims decide to run upstairs instead of out the front door. Alex hears them shutting the freezer door, and as the camera tracks him following the noise, the viewer cringes, wondering why they did not just run outside.

In *Elephant*'s tracking shots of students walking, Van Sant utilizes the long take. One of the longest shots is the one in which Nathan finishes playing football, puts on a red lifeguard sweatshirt, and walks across campus to meet his girlfriend, Carrie. This take begins with a stationary shot of an athletic field where a group of guys are playing football in the foreground, and other students are doing various exercises in the background. During this shot Michelle and a few other girls run by the camera. However, the camera does not move or establish any point of view for nearly two minutes until Nathan alone comes into the foreground to put on his sweatshirt. The camera follows Nathan from behind until he walks past the three girls who ogle him, at which point the film goes into slow motion as it

gracefully tracks past Nathan to show a point of view perspective from over Nathan's shoulder. Then the camera pauses for a moment and Nathan walks back past the camera and the tracking shot continues from behind Nathan. In a traditional film the scene would have been shot from Nathan's perspective and would have incorporated the standard shot-reverse-shot cutting as he walked past the girls. The shot-reverse-shot technique would have been a far more economical choice in showing the scene. However, in keeping consistent with his style, Van Sant opts for a complicated use of tracking, panning, and blocking. The effect generated is a lolling sensation, similar to the languid gait of the students as they walk the halls of school, going places they would rather not go, resigned to the determined nature of their path.

Compared to *Gerry, Elephant* has more point of view shots, though they are constructed more like the one described above than in the conventional way. Another example is the scene set in the classroom where the students are talking about whether or not you can tell if someone is gay by their appearance, a somewhat sub-textual theme given the boys' kiss later in the film. In this scene the camera pans slowly around the students who are all seated in a circle. The eye-level pan is steady and unmotivated by action or dialogue. That is, it does not pan to each student as s/he talks; rather, it pans to students who are not talking while others are, and some who happen to talk as it pans to them, and some who are talking as it pans but continue to talk as it pans away. So you get an arbitrary mix of action (in the sense of speaking) and reaction without any preference for anyone's perspective. The viewer knows the name of one girl in the room, Acadia, who just previously compassionately kissed a crying John on the cheek, a penetrating and touching moment. A traditional film would have shot the scene from Acadia's perspective, since the viewer was given prior knowledge

of her character, and would have used shot-revere-shot from the first word of dialogue, cutting back either at the end or in the middle to nab a reaction shot of Acadia that would help the viewer develop an understanding of her character, or possibly of another character in the room who would be important later in the film. Instead, *Elephant* denies the viewer the stability of any one perspective, insisting on de-individualized multiplicity as its verisimilitude.

Elephant also, more than *Gerry*, features characters as the dominant image in the framing of most shots, though the film still utilizes an unconventional way of framing a character. There are far fewer long takes in *Elephant* than there were in *Gerry*, but the pacing of shots is relatively similar. Though *Elephant* features characters more visibly than *Gerry*, the film frames them vastly differently than would a conventional film. For example, the first shot of Elias tracks him continually for over two minutes, during which he walks away from the camera as it remains stationary until he is obscured from vision. A conventional film would have cut the shot once he started to walk away, whereas Van Sant keeps the camera rolling for over thirty seconds before cutting. Additionally, in the initial scene with Nathan discussed previously Van Sant patiently waits two minutes before establishing a subject for the shot, meanwhile letting action come and go without cutting to follow. Finally, the camera tracks along with all the students labeled by title cards as they walk down the hall, and the majority of these tracking shots are from behind the students rather than from in front. A traditional film would have filmed the characters predominantly from the front to establish connection between character and viewer. By choosing to follow the students from behind, Van Sant demonstrates how foundational a medium shot of a principal character centered in the frame is to building viewer identification. Such editing technique and shot selection is so

conventional that it becomes unconsciously an accepted way of interpreting film, to the point

that it is naturalized as "the way" to make a film. Van Sant denies the viewer conventional

identification with his characters through consciously controlled and stylized cinematography

and shot selection.

The cinematography of *Elephant*, like that of *Gerry*, works to emphasize the theme of

the film, the negation of the individual through disconnection and violence. *Gerry*'s primary

thematic conflict was man against nature, whereas *Elephant*'s is man against man. Individual

characters are portrayed in the film with life-like realism: in fact, they are hardly characters at

all since they play themselves. Much of the screen time is devoted to isolated shots of these

characters as they walk down the hall. The one exception is the three girls who nearly

function as one unit; they are inseparable in both the image on the screen and also as

personalities. None of the characters have true connection, though they do in passing each

other in the halls demonstrate an interconnection. However, the interconnectedness of their

lives is determined more by outside force, and there is no deep emotional connection evident.

The closest the film comes to showing connection is in the compassionate kiss Acadia gives

John at the beginning of the film when he is crying. They do not talk about why John is sad.

John does not give any indication of wanting to share his feelings with her, and she in turn

either does not want to make him feel uncomfortable or she does not care. Her kiss is

unmotivated and shows a quiet concern and compassion rather than disinterest, indicating

that these characters have not fallen so deeply into isolation that they are beyond all hope of

connection. The viewer might expect a scene like this to come towards the end of the film,

perhaps even as the film's final image. However, the film ends with a much bleaker, more

hopeless scene as Alex taunts Nathan and Carrie before killing one or most likely both of them.

The film's final image is the same as its opening image and an image that is repeated throughout the film, thereby taking on metaphoric significance, the sky. The sky as a visually metaphoric image moves with fluidity from a benign to a menacing and ominous presence. In *Gerry* nature is always juxtaposed to characters in the same shot, but in *Elephant* it is used as a thread that weaves through the story. In both cases the forces of nature are impersonal and removed from human existence. The natural forces that act externally on humans are portrayed as distant yet somewhat responsive to the plight of the beings whose existence is dependant on their relative stability, as the sky in *Elephant* gradually darkens as a storm thunders in the distance, signifying the physical violence that disrupts the placid and fluid motion of the lives of the characters.

Man's struggles against his environment and against other men are elemental conflicts of existence. Both *Gerry* and *Elephant* emphasize character's disconnection with other characters amidst these primordial conflicts. Van Sant's cinematography works to establish a similar disconnection between the viewer and the characters that underlines the disconnection experienced by the characters. Van Sant accomplishes this disconnection between the viewer and the characters through his minimalist aesthetic, which is a denial of conventional filmmaking's character-identification technique discussed earlier. So in a sense, Van Sant uses disconnection to make a new type of connection: the viewer by being disconnected from traditional, filmic connection connects with the characters' disconnection from their environment. Van Sant accomplishes this critique of conventional, Hollywood narrative cinema by making the unconscious process of viewer identification with character a

conscious activity through denial of traditional formal elements. The result is that Van Sant's films have a minimalist approach to plot and character as well as editing in the sense that there are a minimal number of cuts and also that characters are featured more minimally as images in the shots of these films as compared to conventional films.

Chapter 4: *Last Days*

Last Days is Gus Van Sant's third installment of his minimalist, anti-narrative film experiment. This film, like its predecessors *Gerry* and *Elephant*, works to foreground conventional viewer-character identification techniques, analyzed previously, such as traditional plot, character development, and editing. These features of narrative, fiction film constitute the foundation of conventional filmmaking, and Van Sant's denial of such basic formulaic devices accounts for the defamiliarizing or distancing effects of these particular films, and consequently their critical disapproval. However, Van Sant proves in his third film to have sustained a consistent vision and to have created his own cinematic grammar for viewing and understanding film.

Last Days is not so loosely based on the final days and hours of Kurt Cobain's life. There are many blatant similarities between Michael Pitt's character, Blake, and Cobain, the most obvious of which is their haggard, "grunge" appearance, including unkempt, stringy blonde hair hanging down into their eyes, as well as Cobain's fashionably unfashionable apparel such as loose fitting, dirty jeans and flannel, oversized parka coat, and even cross-dressing. There are also direct parallels regarding drug abuse, which is not shown explicitly in the film but implied through pieces of conversation as well as Michael Pitt's strung out performance: and the imagery of death in the shot of Blake's sneaker as he is lying dead in the greenhouse recalls an image from the newspaper coverage of Cobain's demise. Also, both deaths are presumed to be self-inflicted, though there was plenty of speculation around Cobain's and the film never directly states that Blake's was suicide; however, in both cases the circumstantial evidence appears to point to such a conclusion.

But despite the numerous connections between Blake and Cobain, Van Sant's film is light-years from being a conventional biopic about the late rocker. In fact, as several critics and reviewers noted, anyone viewing the film in the hopes of gaining insight into the mystery surrounding Cobain's death, or for that matter, seeing a compelling portrayal of the tormented rock star, would be sorely disappointed by the film. Instead, in the same tradition of anti-tradition established in *Gerry* and *Elephant, Last Days* works to undermine conventional filmmaking technique. Though *Last Days* is like a traditional biopic in being constructed around the life of someone with notoriety or celebrity status, the film lacks the development of plot and character typical of the genre.

In terms of plot, there virtually is none. Blake stumbles around his castle-like house for what appears to be three days while various hangers-on come and go, some looking for Blake, fewer actually interacting with him, before he is found dead in a curiously empty greenhouse, presumably from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, as we see him carrying around a shotgun for a portion of the film (which relates to the Cobain story model). Indeed, *Last Days* pushes the denial of tension and conflict even further into the realm of anti-narrative than *Gerry* and *Elephant*. In *Gerry* there were coherent moments of tension and conflict, however small they may be compared to a conventional film, like the scene where Affleck's Gerry is stranded on top of a large rock. In *Elephant* the violence is foregrounded in the film's narrative when the two killers are seen from John's perspective walking into the school towards the beginning of the film. At this point, the viewer is aware that violence will erupt at any moment, and the conflict and tension is carried throughout the rest of the film as an expectation of foreboding. However, *Last Days* is thoroughly purged of any sort of conflict or tension. The closest the film comes to creating tension could be when Blake is

being pursued by several hangers-on, and he is filmed running away. However, this scene cannot truly be argued to possess tension because the viewer does not know why exactly Blake does not want to talk to them, nor why they want to talk to Blake, and ultimately, it does not seem to be of any significance, unless one could argue that had they been able to track him down, they might have been able to save him, which is such a stretch that it is hardly worth noting. Rather, in that scene the camera follows Blake as he runs down a hill seemingly on his property. As he is running away, he falls off screen and the viewer hears him tumbling; however, the camera does not pan or cut to follow his descent. Instead, it stays focused on a tree that was in its line of vision, perfectly illustrating how devoid this scene is of tension or conflict. Ultimately, the camera work indicates that it does not matter what happens to Blake, if it does not bother to cut or pan to follow his actions. Further, the camera is not present to record Blake's death, so in this instance as well it seems not to matter much how he died. Though the camera follows him around for the final days of his life, it does not pick up any clues as to why he should have killed himself, other than to make clear through its seemingly objective record how burned out Blake was.

Another instance of intentionally avoiding plot development are the visitors that come to the house, Thaddeus Thomas, the Yellow Pages advertising representative, and Andy and Adam Friberry, the Mormon missionaries. Both of the scenes featuring the visitors occur at moments when a viewer would expect a conventional film to start to develop a plot. Thaddeus Thomas arrives at the house at about the nineteen-minute mark, and the Mormons come at about the half hour mark. Up to the point where Thaddeus Thomas arrives, the film has consisted of Blake stumbling around in the woods, mumbling incoherently to himself. He pees in a river, howls a pitiful refrain from "Home on the Range" around a campfire

(reminiscent in its imagery of the campfires in *Gerry*), and back at the house he prepares a

bowl of cereal, placing the cereal box instead of the milk back into the refrigerator. In *Gerry*

there were at least two characters who attempted something like a conversation every so

often with each other. On the other hand, Blake is a loner throughout *Last Days*, and until the

Yellow Pages advertising representative shows up on the door trying to resell an ad he

mistakenly thinks Blake bought last year, there is no dialogue in the film, and no plot

developed. At this point, the nineteen-minute mark, the viewer assumes Thaddeus Thomas

might help to establish some sort of plot. However, the scene has the effect of seeming

entirely improvised from a stock sales script. Blake responds to a few of Thaddeus'

questions, but he mostly is distracted and finally nods off to sleep while sitting on the chair.

At the end of the scene there is still no plot that has been established.

Similarly, nothing plot-like is established in the scene with the Mormons. This scene

cuts back and forth between the Friberry boys talking to Scott, and Blake falling to his knees

in a different room while Boys II Men's music video "On Bended Knee" plays in the

background. The music video seems an odd selection for a grunge rock star to be listening to,

especially as Blake falls to his knees in response. But what the video establishes on one level

at least is the temporal setting of the film: the particular Boys II Men album involved was

released in 1994, the year Cobain died. Beyond that, as the two boys are telling Scott about

their religion, namely about Jesus Christ being both pure and innocent and also being killed

sacrificially, the film cuts to Blake. The editing technique of cutting between parallel actions

is generally used to establish a relationship between the two actions being filmed and shown.

The oldest example is the scenario where a distressed damsel is tied to the train tracks or

something and a hero rides to her rescue. The film cuts among the oncoming train, the lady

tied to the railroad tracks, and the hero in transit. On a superficial level, simply a plot level, a relationship is formed among these three separate but simultaneously occurring events. Ultimately, there is no speeding train rushing towards the woman. The three events were filmed at different times, and probably at different locations. However, by placing the images in alternating succession with one another, a cinematic logic and relationship is formed: the result is the effect of suspense. Juxtaposing parallel action can also create metaphoric meaning as well as simple plot meaning. For example, in the case of parallel scenes in *Last Days*, with Blake and the music video and Scott and the Mormon missionaries, there is a similarity being constructed of Blake and Jesus Christ. If the viewer reads Blake as a reference to Cobain, since there are sparse details about Blake's life, then what Cobain and Jesus Christ would share in common is an untimely ending to their lives in what would have been the prime of their existence. Beyond that, the film ventures to attribute a spiritual aspect to Blake's death, as is further evidenced in one of the final images of the film, the naked spirit of Blake ascending from his dead body up a stairway, presumably to heaven. The scene of Blake's spirit arising from his body, taken in the context of the sequence with the Mormons, reinforces the idea of there being a sacrificial, almost Christ-like aspect to Blake's death. But Blake's character is far from the pure and innocent avatar of Christ: Blake is strung out on drugs and has apparently abandoned his daughter. As one character in the film says, he's a "rock-n-roll cliché," hardly the Son of God, and what exactly he is sacrificed for is not even remotely evident, though it is arguable that culture has deified the rock star. Following this line of reasoning, the film could be seen as a depiction of the destruction of an ordinary man trying to carry the burden of the image of god imposed upon him by society. In this sense, it is not so much that Blake, the Cobain stand in, is truly similar to Jesus Christ,

but that he has been deified by his disciples, and that ultimately he is just an ordinary man unable to sustain that image. Reading the film in this way renders significant the lack of glamorous details surrounding Blake's life and Michael Pitt's deadpan, washed-up performance. He is not to be understood as an extraordinary celebrity; he is an ordinary man, a Gerry. The risk *Last Days* takes, though, is of being read as a straight-faced comparison between Blake/Cobain and a pure and holy, Christ-like rock star icon, who was too artistic and gentle for this cruel world, and as such the film would be a miserable failure.

Last Days should not be read as aligning Blake's death with some sort of transcendental sacrifice primarily because of its intentional lack of character development. Throughout the film Blake stumbles around, passes out frequently, and mumbles incoherently to himself. He proves himself incapable of carrying on a conversation and even of properly making a bowl of cereal and putting away the ingredients. His appearance and his actions throughout the film are completely disorganized. His character works like a picture, a photograph, of an isolated man in desperate trouble. His dazed and filthy appearance is evidence of an inner turmoil that never erupts above the surface. Like *Gerry* and *Elephant*, the film resists psychological motivation for the action of characters and the movement of events. Through their resistance to conventional forms of filmmaking, these films create a new way of looking at film, as primarily a visual medium, which it obviously is. Characterization is shown visually like a photograph, not developed through plot, dialogue, psychological motivation, and editing. In this way, *Last Days*, like Van Sant's previous two films, present an alternative to the Hollywood construction of narrative, feature films.

The cinematography of *Last Days* also rejects the traditional wisdom of Hollywood films' editing technique, favoring the long take and refusing the point-of-view reverse shot,

as well as decentralizing the characters as the focal points of the image. For example, the film opens with a long shot of Blake stumbling around in the woods, mumbling to himself. After a minute the camera cuts to another long shot of Blake as he stops by a river to take off his clothes, dive in, cross to the other side, and take a pee. As in *Gerry*, the size of the character on screen is minimal compared to the rest of the image. Nature takes on a greater visual emphasis, as the character is only seen from a distance. The viewer is thus removed from the character. After a two-and-a-half minute shot of Blake painfully moaning "Home on the Range" crouched next to a campfire, there is a series of tracking shots of Blake walking through the woods. Though the landscape is different, the imagery is the same; in all three films Van Sant's primary image consists of a tracking shot of characters walking: through the desert, down corridors, and through the woods and house respectively. In the establishing shots of the film Blake is shown almost entirely from a distant point of view. Even in the second shot of the film, once he crosses over the river to the side where the camera sits stationary, he stands in front of the camera with his back to it so the viewer never sees his face. It is not until about eleven minutes into the film that there is a close-up shot of Blake, and in these shots his hair hangs down, obscuring his face. One of conventional film's primary means of creating viewer-character identification is through clear, close-up shots of the characters. In avoiding this type of shot, Van Sant undermines traditional filmmaking techniques. What he offers instead are scenes that play out in real time, like the scene involving the Yellow Pages advertising salesman.

The scene with the sales representative lasts for almost six-minutes and consists of one continuous shot of the two characters, Thaddeus Thomas and Blake, as Thaddeus tries to convince Blake to repurchase the ad he, mistakenly, believes Blake bought last year. The

scene is shot from a medium distance that positions Thaddeus screen left and Blake on screen right. Neither character's facial reactions are visible from the distance and angle at which the scene is shot. However, it is apparent from Blake's swatting at a bug and continual head nodding that he is hardly paying attention, though he does answer a few of Thaddeus' questions with a clarity hereto undemonstrated. A conventional treatment of this scene would have involved a series of shot-reverse-shot editing maneuvers that would have emphasized predominately the characters' facial reactions to one another. The basic effect of the scene as Van Sant shoots it is a sense of absurdity. Blake is wearing a slip, and is falling asleep as Thaddeus continues with his sales script seemingly unaware. It is also absurd in the conventional sense because it does nothing to establish or advance a plot. Rather it merely gives a flavor for what social interaction with Blake is like. However, since the scene does not establish any point of view, the viewer does not identify either Thaddeus' s or Blake's perspective in a traditional way. It does not seem as if either characters is acting because much of acting consists in the camera capturing the subtle facial changes and expressions during scenes of dialogue. In this case, the stationary continuous camera captures none. Consequently, there is a psychological distance between the viewer and the characters. In the same vein, in a shot-reverse-shot sequence the characters occupy the majority of the screen space, their bodies being the focal point of the shots. In this scene, however, the characters look more like props for the set of the room where they are sitting.

In another exchange with Blake there is an effect of the erasure of character. Towards the end of the film one of the guys in the house sits down next to Blake as Blake strums a guitar while sitting on the seat for the drums. The guy tells Blake a story about a girl he met while on the road and with whom he had the best sexual encounter of his life. He expresses

his desire to write a song about the experience, but is having trouble with the lyrics and wants Blake's help. Another guy interrupts them and asks the boy to accompany him upstairs. The first guys apologizes to Blake and then leaves. The scene plays unedited for almost nine minutes, the culmination of which is Blake's singing a song while playing the guitar in which he sings, "It's a long, lonely journey from death to birth." Again, the scene is filmed by a continuous, stationary camera that remains a medium distance from the characters and in the poor lighting is unable to capture any facial features or expressions. Like the scene with Thaddeus, there is no point of view established. This scene emphasizes the isolation and disconnection of Blake from the people inhabiting his house and by extension from his life in general. This sense of alienation is reinforced through the lyrics of his song, and it is the only song Blake, the rock star, sings in the entire film, and at best his singing and guitar playing could be called average. The song sounds like an ad-lib jam session, not a polished, recorded song, and so keeps true to the anti-narrative elements of the film. In other words, *Last Days* is a biopic about a rock star in which there are no scenes where the rock star sings or performs (at least in a professional way), therefore making it more of an anti-biopic. Like *Gerry* and *Elephant*, *Last Days* uses its stylized cinematography as its principle vehicle for delivering its themes.

Through the cinematography's decentralization of character in the imagistic sense, and through its minimalistic aesthetic of plot and character development, *Last Days* conveys the themes of isolation and disconnection also found in *Gerry* and *Elephant*. The isolation and disconnection in each film reflects that of the individual from society. In particular, *Last Days* shows the ravages of celebrity status on the individual. As analyzed earlier, society elevates the rock star nearly to the status of a god. The great distance emphasized in the

cinematography of *Last Days* parallels the distance between Blake, the ordinary man, and the image of Blake as a cultural icon. Evident in the scene with the guy asking Blake for help writing his song is a reverence for Blake, and a misunderstanding of him. Though the guy is in direct contact with Blake, he still sees him as an ultimately unapproachable and unfathomable figure. The lapses and gaps in Blake's speech are filled in with an apology by the boy, as if the boy sees himself as simply wasting the time of a genius. Blake's countenance does not register with the boy as indicating the crumbling of his existence, of which it is obviously evidence. Instead, the wanna-be song writer writes Blake's reactions off as part of the package of a genius rock star. But the inability to communicate is symptomatic of the isolation that leads to the destruction of Blake. The characters in *Gerry* and *Elephant* have similar problems with communication that lead them down paths that end in violence.

Violence is also a thematically integral part of this trilogy of films. Whereas in *Gerry* the violence primarily stems from the conflict between man and nature, and in *Elephant* from the conflict between man and man, *Last Days* completes the triad by illustrating a violence stemming from the primordial conflict between man and self. Each of these films depicts the lives of characters who are frustrated, and in searching for release of their frustration a seemingly apparent avenue is violence. Principal characters in each of these films are brought to a violent demise at the conclusion without any sort of framework for redemption. There is no analysis of the problems inflicting these characters, and no answers for how to solve their problems or the problems subsequently caused by their violent attempt at solving their problems. The result is a darkly nihilistic view of the world and the consequence of human choice. There does not appear to be any hope of restoring connection between the individual and society.

Last Days, following in the footsteps of Van Sant's previous two films, deconstructs the traditional foundation of the narrative Hollywood film through its stylishly minimalist use of plot, character, and editing, and in doing so disrupts viewer expectations. The mediocre reviews of the films attest to critical discomfort with the deviation from these structural norms, seemingly inherent in film. However, the implication is that these meaning-making devices are less inherent to film and narrative than imposed on them. While *Gerry* focused on deconstructing film's star power, *Elephant* undermined the documentary's ability to answer complicated questions with simple answers, and now *Last Days* is a testament to the destructive machinery of celebrity status central to the biopic. In a sense *Gerry* is a Matt Damon film that is an anti-Matt Damon film; *Elephant* is a documentary that is an anti-documentary; and *Last Days* is a biopic that is an anti-biopic. In each case the common denominator is the stylistic choice to minimize the structural framework for each of these films in order to reduce them down to essential ingredients. Van Sant is successful in sustaining his artistic vision, in the face of much criticism, and has succeeded at achieving an alternative way of creating meaning through narrative, fiction film. These films are almost entirely a visual experience, assigning meaning to the image, the most basic unit of film itself, and in doing so he redeems cinema through its fundamental component of photography.

Conclusion

Gus Van Sant is a fascinating director, not only for his artistic ingenuity but also for his range of abilities and genres. His filmography includes: *Good Will Hunting*, a commercially successful, Hollywood style film; *My Own Private Idaho*, a critically successful, independent art cinema film; *Psycho*, self-described as a "plagiarized" Hitchcock film (despite its many explicit and nuanced differences); *Finding Forrester*, a gratuitously self-plagiarized critical and commercial failure; and, of course, the minimalist trilogy that is the topic of this thesis. By simply observing the breadth of Van Sant's oeuvre, his interest in the tension between the classical Hollywood narrative film and the independent art cinema narrative film is obvious. However, Van Sant is a complicated figure because, unlike a conventional auteur like Alfred Hitchcock or David Lynch, he deliberately navigates between the Hollywood and the art house film rather than residing exclusively in one or the other.

If one is only analyzing his minimalist trilogy, it might be tempting to read Van Sant as being adamantly anti-Hollywood. However, his commercial success with *Good Will Hunting*, his effort to repeat that success with *Finding Forrester*, and his homage to perhaps the greatest Hollywood director, Alfred Hitchcock, make it difficult to maintain that perspective. Accordingly, this thesis has confirmed Bordwell's elaboration of the tension between classical Hollywood narration and art cinema narration by showing how it functions in the body of Van Sant's work, even and especially in the films of his minimalist trilogy.

It is my contention that possible future avenues for Van Sant criticism could include incorporating the tension between classical Hollywood narration and art cinema narration within the entire oeuvre of Van Sant as specific evidence of the larger scale tension between the two types of narration in general. Such a subject is interesting grounds for critical debate

given the rise of cable/satellite television that has given independent and art house films an unprecedented degree of visibility via the Independent Film Channel and the Sundance Film Channel. The growth in popularity of independent and art house films has caused Hollywood to appropriate some of the same styles in Hollywood studio films, as is evidenced by *Crash*, a thoroughly Hollywood version of an art film, which won the Oscar as the best picture of 2005.

Part of what makes art cinema narration successful is its subversion and ingenuity. By appropriating the aspects of art cinema narration into Hollywood narration, the traditional Hollywood film thereby undermines the subversion and ingenuity that art cinema narration asserts. In other words, in order for art cinema narration to exist, there must be a classical Hollywood narrative tradition against which it can work, and once that tradition has incorporated its counterpart, then the art cinema must reinvent itself yet again. By definition, then, art cinema narration is consistently in flux via dialogue with its counterpart. It is not so much something that is definable in and of itself, but only in its relation to and negation of the standard.

It is impossible to anticipate what Van Sant will attempt next, whether it a fourth installment of his minimalist theme or something completely different. Whatever it is, it is bound to cause some unrest and critical controversy.

Bibliography

Abeel, Erica. *"Last Days." Film Journal International* 108.8 (Aug. 2005): 40-1.

Ansen, David. "Eye of the Beholder: Indie Visions from Two Masters and a Newcomer." *Newsweek* (8 Aug. 2005): 55.

Batchelor, David. *Minimalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Beale, Lewis. *"Elephant." Film Journal International* 106.10 (Oct. 2003): 106.

Bloom, Adi. "Not Quite an Unforgettable Film." *Times Educational Supplement* (Oct. 2004): 6.

Bordwell, David. *Narration and the Fiction Film.* Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1985.

Bosley, R.K. *"Gerry." American Cinemetographer* 83 (April 2002): 92-6.

Chang, Chris. "Guided by Voices: Gus Van Sant's *Last Days* Sound of Silence." *Film Comment* 41.4 (July/Aug. 2005): 16.

Colpitt, Frances. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective.* Seattle: Washington UP, 1990.

"Columbine Revisited." Gus Van Sant's *Elephant. Kinema* 20 (Fall 2003): 80-3.

"Come as You Are: Bill Murray Plays an Easygoing Rogue in Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*, While Michael Pitt is Kurt Cobain in Gus Van Sant's *Last Days." Vogue* (Aug. 2005): 154.

Corliss, Richard. "Evil Carries No Passport: Is *Elephant*, The High School Shooting Movie that Won the Palm d'Or at Cannes, Anti-American?" *Time* 161.23 (9 June 2003): 74.

Cunneen, Joseph. "A Farcical, Entertaining Thanksgiving in *April: Elephant* is Elegiac." *National Catholic Reporter* 40.5 (21 Nov. 2003): 20.

Dalton, S. *"Last Days." Sight and Sound* 15.9 (Sept. 2005): 65-6.

D'Angelo, Mike. "Suicidal Tendencies: *Last Days* and *Grizzly Man* Are Very Different Stories of Self-Destructive Loners with the Same Sad End." *Esquire* 144.2 (Aug. 2005): 34-5.

Dawtrey, Adam. "Van Sant, Damon in Desert." *Variety* 383.1 (21 May 2001): 61.

Denby, David. "Creep Shows." *The New Yorker* 79.32 (27 Oct 2003): 112.

Deziel, Shanda. "Kurt's Final Daze: After Eleven Years No Closure." *Maclean's* 118.33 (Aug. 2005): 52.

Eagan, D. *"Gerry." Film Journal International* 106 (March 2003): 109.

Elephant. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Fine Line-HBO, 2003.

Ellingson, A. *"Gerry." Box Office* 138 (April 2002): 171.

Felperin, Leslie. *"Last Days." Variety* 399.1 (23 May 2005): 33.

Garrett, Stephen. "Q + A: Gus Van Sant." *Esquire* 144.2 (Aug. 2005): 36.

Genhart, Irene. *"Elephant." Film Bulletin* 45.248 (Oct. 2003): 39.

Gerry. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Matt Damon, Casey Affleck. THINKfilm, 2002.

Gilbey, R. *"Gerry." Sight and Sound* 13 (Oct. 2003): 50-1.

Giltz, Michael. "Kissing for Columbine." *The Advocate* (8 July 2003): 26.

Halter, J.M. "Our Old Friend." *Village Voice* 48 (12/18 Feb. 2003): 112.

Halter, S. "Desert of the Real." *Village Voice* 48 (12/18 Feb. 2003): 43.

Haskell, Barbara. *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964.* New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984.

Hoberman, J. *"Elephant." Sight and Sound* 13 (July 2003): 16.

Hoberman, J. "Searchers." *Village Voice* 48 (12/18 Feb. 2003): 127.

Horowitz, Marc. *"Elephant." Sound and Vision* 69.7 (Sept. 2004): 109.

Hsu, Caroline. "School Daze." *U.S. New and World Report* 135.16 (10 Nov. 2003): 16.

Jones, Kent. "Corridors of Powerlessness." *Film Comment* 39.5 (Sept/Oct 2003): 28.

Kauffmann, Stanley. "On Films: Style as Meaning: *Last Days." The New Republic* (15 Aug. 2005): 22.

Kauffmann, Stanley. "Stanley Kauffmann on Films." *The New Republic* (17 Nov. 2003): 26.

Kermode, Mark. "Rock n' Roll Suicide: A Self-Indulgent Kurt Cobain Biopic Makes Brainless Viewing." *New Statesman* 134.4756 (5 Sept. 2005): 31.

Lane, Anthony. "Opting Out: *Last Days*." *The New Yorker* 81.22 (1 Aug. 2005): 90.

Last Days. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Perf. Michael Pitt, Lukas Haas, Asia Argento. Meno Film Co.-HBO, 2005.

"*Last Days: Gus Van Sant*." *Film Comment* 40.3 (May/June 2004): 8.

Leepa, Allen. "Minimal Art and Primary Meaning." *Minimal Art*. (Ed.) Gregory Battcock. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968.

Lim, D. "Search and Rescue Operations." *Village Voice* 47.100 (5 Feb. 2002).

McCarthy, T. "Cannes Crowns *Elephant*." *Variety* 391.3 (2 June 2003): 13.

McCarthy, T. "*Elephant*." *Variety* 391.3 (26 May/1 June 2003): 32.

McCarthy, T. "*Gerry*." *Variety* 385.9 (21/7 Jan. 2002): 36.

McKinny, D. "*Gerry*." *Film Quarterly* 57.2 (Winter 2003/4): 43-7.

Moore, Sophie. "*Elephant*." *Film Quarterly* 58.2 (Winter 2004): 45-8.

Nelson, R. "Not Even Movie Stars Can Go without Water." *Cinema Scope* 12 (Fall 2002): 5-10.

O'Brien, G. "Stop Shooting." *Art Forum International* 42.2 (Oct 2003): 39.

Rainer, Peter. "Cheap Shots." *New York* 36.37 (27 Oct. 2003): 81-2.

Reynard, B. "The Mud is a Space." *Cinema Scope* 10 (March 2002): 62-3.

Rozen, Leah. "Screen: *Gerry*." *People Weekly* 59.7 (24 Feb. 2003): 31.

Roy, C. "*Gerry*." *Sequences* 226 (Jul/Aug 2003): 46.

Said, S.F. and Brooks, Xan. "Shock Corridors." *Sight and Sound* 14.2 (Feb. 2004): 16-8, 42-3.

Sofair, Michael. "*Elephant*: The Physics of Violence." *Cineaction* 68 (2006): 11-17.

Staiger, Janet. "Authorship Studies and Gus Van Sant." *Film Criticism* 29.1 (Fall 2004): 1-22.

Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

Stuart, Jan. "Desert Hearts: Like His Earlier *My Own Private Idaho*, Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* Invites us to Watch Hunky Young Stars Do Mystifying Things." *The Advocate* (18 Feb. 2003): 51.

Taubin, Amy. "Blurred Exit: Gus Van Sant's *Last Days.*" *Sight and Sound* 15.9 (Sept. 2005): 16.

Taubin, Amy. "First Look: *Gerry.*" *Film Comment* 38.1 (Jan/Feb 2002): 14-5.

Taubin, Amy. "Part of the Problem." *Film Comment* 39.5 (Sept/Oct 2003): 26-7, 29, 31-3.

Termenini, Antonio LaPolla. "Overlook High School." *Cineforum* 42.430 (Dec. 2003): 2-9.

Thomson, Patricia. "Walking the Halls of Fate." *American Cinematographer* 84.10 (Oct. 2003): 60-71.

Tubrett, Dion. "Seeing Elephant." *Cineaction* 68 (2006): 65-72.

Vineberg, Steve. "Cold-Blooded: Gus Van Sant's *Elephant.*" *The Christian Century* 120.25 (13 Dec. 2003): 51.

Wollheim, Richard. "Minimal Art." *Minimal Art.* (Ed.) Gregory Battcock, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968.