Approaching the unapproachable: The cinema of mass shootings & the limits of classical form

I. Walking the line

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel 'bad,' that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? […]. Do they actually teach us anything?

(Sontag 2004: 91-2)

I think it is necessary to begin with a personal admission. As an American millennial, I grew up in a milieu saturated by the presence of mass shootings. As such, my interest in cinematic depictions of mass shootings, the focus of this paper, is in no small part ethico-political. This does not, however, render my aesthetic interest secondary. Rather, these commitments are intrinsically bound up, as films *qua* films articulate themselves, ethically and politically, through their aesthetics[1]. Yet films that take mass shootings as their subjects must walk a delicate line. There is a certain *gravity* that the subject matter imposes, a gravity that threatens to pull films down into a moral abyss if they step carelessly. As such, the particular ways that films approach these subjects must be carefully considered.

Films about mass shootings have much to benefit from employing an elucidating narrative structure. At minimum, it is hard to deny that when watching any such film, basic questions such as 'what is happening?' or 'what happened?' are irreducible and demand response. Importantly, the ability of the film to be definitive in its response has political consequence. Just as Susan Sontag worried that the narrative ambiguity of war photographs allowed propaganda machines to easily mobilise and re-contextualise these images for any purpose, we too should be wary of mass shooting films that remain open to re-inscription by virtue of an indefinite stance towards its subject (Sontag 2004). The last thing one would want is for a potential mass shooter to encounter or read the film in such a way that it inspires, motivates, or justifies precisely that act.

Yet these events evade simple narrative structuring, in particular the kind of narrative structuring practised in the classical mode. Whereas these classically formed narratives (as articulated by, e.g. Bordwell [1985], Branigan [1992]) rely on causal logic and a general principle of closure, the traumatic event (analysed along a Caruthian-Freudian line)[2], is defined precisely by the absence of the cause, by its *illogic*, by disassociation and openness. The traumatic event exists beyond the understanding that causal reasoning and logical comprehension let us penetrate.

Additionally, there are ethical concerns about ascribing a causal system on these events, as this risks rationalising the actions depicted. These concerns are articulated by Hayden White when he writes that by making these events the 'subject matter of a narrative, it becomes a story which, by its possible "humanization" of the perpetrators, might "enfable" the event – render it fit therefore for investment by fantasies of "intactness," "wholeness," and "health"' (2013: 31). Instead, he urges us to pursue 'anti-narrative non-stories' that transcend the 'narrative fetishism' of classical narratives (2013: 31-2)[3].

However, a non-narrative approach, perhaps approaches associated with avant-garde and spectacle-based genres – those contemporary heirs to Tom Gunning's early 'cinema of attractions' – also encounter challenges when broaching these events (2006: 382). For instance, an avant-garde approach, while articulating an experience which is, perhaps, phenomenal-affective, or contemplative, or subjective, may struggle to engage with the 'what happened' that is constitutive of our response. Equally, a more carnivalesque approach premised on visual spectacle risks divorcing real death and trauma from the gravity the subject demands by reducing it to stimuli[4].

There exists, however, a corpus of films that formally and aesthetically respond to the difficulties noted above by attempting to circumvent or challenge these more traditional modes (in particular the causal, closed classical structure). I find it interesting to note that analogous strategies are often found in both documentary and fictional re-enactment films, as this signals that it is the *subjects* of these films, rather than the film's particular epistemological commitments, that largely motivate these responses; subjects which embed these films, in Vivian Sobchack's terminology, with the 'charge of the real', which 'calls forth not only response but also responsibility' (2004: 284). In short, gravity.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on two films: Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and Tim Sutton's *Dark Night* (2016). These films, both fictional re-enactments of major mass shootings in America, offer snapshots of a culture continuing to reckon with a form of violence, horrifying in its cruelty, yet increasingly endemic to its society. In their own ways, both films use a system of causal narrative logic as a point of departure for their interrogations, co-opting, subverting, or offering alternatives to central elements of this system in order to manoeuvre through the challenges presented by their charged subjects. In doing so, these films use their narrative form to respond to challenges in the ethical, ontological, political, and cultural domains.

II. *Elephant* and its initial system

A key interest in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* – the director's fictive reckoning with Columbine – is in exploring the limits of a traditional narrative logic when seeking to understand these events. Shot with a mostly non-professional cast, most of the film takes place over a single day at a school campus, the day of a shooting, and follows a number of characters as they weave through the maze of the American high school.

The film, at its outset, establishes a formal system that stands at odds with a more classical logic. Temporally, the film sticks to the bounds of the day of the shooting, but within

this limit articulates itself recursively rather than linearly. It skips around varying times as it follows different characters, weaving various temporal threads that exist for the most part in indeterminate relation to the others, but which unify at key moments. These unifying moments – often physical intersections between various characters / bodies – are then experienced from various perspectives and angles, as if revisiting them to signal or attribute a significance which nevertheless remains elusive. Beyond these moments, however, the dominant time of this formal system is 'dead time', a time that resists narrative impulse by refusing to become eventful or narratively productive (Little 2013: 117). The film often lingers on in-between moments, those banal actions, conversations, and commutes that amount to nothing meaningful, but which constitute the forgotten majority of these characters' lives.

Spatially, Van Sant eschews the kind of establishing shots that would clearly render the space and the relations between spaces. Instead, the space of the school is largely constructed through the lines of movement and intersections that occur through and within it, as the audience traverses the school 'leashed' to various characters (Rich 2012: 1318). Often, the viewer has the sense that they are in a labyrinth that they could not navigate were they not being led by these students. The camera meanders between teens, leashing itself to different subjects for seemingly no reason (or for a reason inaccessible to us), tracing their lines of movement and intersections with an ethereal, ghostly detachment.

Yet, these lines of movement and intersections reveal relatively little about the space we are in, or the characters we are following, and the film consistently denies us this knowledge. Instead, these characters are often rendered flatly, falling into generic high school movie archetypes. Moments in which deeper character psychology could spring forth fizzle out before they begin, while the disembodied camera's movements largely resist the psychologising techniques (e.g. shot / reverse shots, POVs) that would give us insight into the characters in a more classical formulation (Said 2004: 18). Meanwhile, the moments when characters look out of frame make us acutely aware of how spatially limited our view is.

These formal elements become visible early on, and we can already see them working in a much-discussed sequence

towards the beginning of the film. The sequence starts with a shot of an athletic field as Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* begins to play. In the foreground, we see figures run past, and behind them, a group playing a game of pick-up football. Yet the camera does not follow any of them, as if wholly uninterested, slight adjustments betraying that it *could move* (it is not, for example, fixed on a tripod) but is *choosing* not to. Then, a trio of girls run past, followed by another, Michelle (Kristen Hicks), who pauses in front of the camera. The camera adjusts

its focus slightly, acknowledging her, as she dreamily gazes at the sky, but the camera remains fixed and we are kept from seeing what she sees. She then continues her run, but the camera does not follow, her intersection with the camera rendered seemingly accidental, contingent, and yet also significant nonetheless in its sublime invocation of the sky to the music of Beethoven. The scene progresses for almost another minute before someone emerges from the pick-up game and walks into centre frame. The focus adjusts once again as he puts on a bright red lifeguard hoodie. As he walks away from the game, the camera pans, following him, and then begins to glide along behind him, following the cross on his back like a target. The camera has found its subject, and yet there is no clear reason given *why* it has chosen him. We follow him as he walks towards the school, perhaps waiting for a 'meaningful' event to occur that would render its interest justified, but it does not. The camera then stops on its approach to the building and watches from a distance.

The film cuts to the inside of the school, and the camera follows the same figure closely, rendering the space around him largely obscure, off-screen, out of focus. Meanwhile, the *Moonlight Sonata* becomes layered with Hildegard Westerkamp's track *Doors of Perception*, which acts almost as a diegetic soundtrack. Yet, as Randolph Jordan has noted, in this soundtrack the character's 'footsteps are not audible; his movement does not reflect within the environment' and

the soundtrack here becomes spatially disorienting rather than enlightening, as the sounds we should hear (e.g. break-dancers) become divorced from what we *do* hear (e.g. the screech of trains) (2012: 254). The shot continues until the figure passes by a trio of girls, who 'shoot' him a glance – a moment of intersection emphasised via slow motion – and the character, Nathan (Nathan Tyson), eventually meets up with his girlfriend.

In this sequence, we already see the core tenets of Van Sant's initial system emerging. Its temporal emphasis on non-eventful dead time, its focus on intersections (of bodies with the camera or people with each other) both seemingly accidental and intentional, on a logic of tracing and following rather than explanation, on a de-psychologising mode (e.g. we aren't shown the object of Michelle's gaze), and the use of misleading sonic and visual cues to challenge the viewer's sense of spatial orientation.

III. *Elephant*'s secondary system

A quarter of the way into the film, Van Sant establishes another formal system – one that is far more narratively driven and determinately rendered. Importantly, this occurs with the film's treatment of the two shooters. This departure begins immediately after John passes by the two shooters about to enter the school in full tactical gear. The film cuts to a title card that reads 'Eric & Alex' (Eric Duelen & Alex Frost, respectively) and then cuts back to a science classroom. As the teacher up front answers questions, the camera pans back to reveal Nathan (clearly in a different outfit) throwing something behind him. The camera continues its motion and reveals Alex as the recipient of these spitballs. It then becomes clear that we have been taken out of the day of the shooting. In doing so, Van Sant chooses to give us a biographical per-spective on these shooters that he has largely denied for the victims. Whereas we are only able to make conjectures about the life circumstances and experiences of the victims lead-ing up to that fateful day, Van Sant gives us this information directly with regard to the shooters.

As the film progresses, this system increasingly distances itself from the one initially established. Temporally, not only are we taken out of the day of the shooting for the shooters' scenes, but their narrative strand is rendered linearly around key events, rather than recursively around moments of inter-section: Alex takes notes on the school, Alex and Eric buy a gun, the gun is delivered, etc. This system also takes us out of the spatial bounds of the school, as we follow Alex into his home, and see him interact with his parents. Moreover, Van Sant renders this space more thoroughly than he does the

school, a move that comes out clearly in a sequence in which Alex plays the piano. Notably the piece, *Für Elise*, another Beethoven composition, associates the film's own soundtrack with Alex's. As he plays, we are given a 360 pan of the space around him, giving us a kind of grounding that is distinctly lacking within the school, a total rendering of his personal space.

This secondary system is one that is far more attached to its subject, and is far less de-psychologising than its counterpart. These elements emerge clearly when Alex is in the cafeteria, taking notes on the layout of the room. Throughout, the camera tracks and pans in a way that keeps him largely centre frame, focusing on him as the subject rather than employing the more inter-subjective logic of the first system. This difference becomes salient if we compare this sequence to the one in which the trio of girls go to the same cafeteria, in which the camera follows them as they get their food, but then moves beyond them, picking up and following a series of cafeteria employees before returning to the trio. As Alex walks and writes in his notebook, he suddenly pauses and as if in response, the camera moves back slightly. Then, the sound of the cafeteria begins to grow into a cavernous cacophony, and Alex looks around, somewhat panicked. The shot ends as he grabs his head with his hands to drown out the noise.

In concluding this scene in such a way, the film gives us a *direct phenomenal rendering* of Alex's experience as he is overwhelmed by sound. It expresses his subjective experience in a way that it largely does not for the other characters. As the film progresses, this second system's association with Alex and Eric's subjectivity grows, culminating at one point with a POV of one of them during the massacre. Unlike the initial system, this secondary system is presented as far more character oriented, temporally linear, clear and unambiguous in its rendering of spaces, 'event' based, and subjective.

IV. *Elephant*'s fatal intersection

Van Sant develops these formal systems in parallel until they come together in the final, fatal intersection – the shooting. The use of this secondary formal system, however, is dangerous. In associating itself so closely with the shooters in this system, the film risks what Hebard (writing about *Nuit et brouillard* [Alain Resnais, 1956]) calls 'moral contamination': of *becoming* the gaze of the killers, and consequently flattening and aestheticising the victims of the massacre (1997: 94).

That is, by spotlighting the shooters via the secondary system and positioning them as the narrative agents in the film, Van Sant risks painting the victims as characters that exist only to service the shooters' narrative, like so many bowling pins set up just to be knocked down. In doing so, he risks perpetuating and amplifying precisely the dehumanising views that contributed to these actual atrocities. The danger seems amplified for mass shootings given the intimate relationships these shootings have with media and film. After all, the Columbine shooters, in their home videos, spoke about the movie that would eventually be made of their massacre (Rich 2012: 1310-11).

Yet, *Elephant* appears conscious of the risks in this project. As William Little observes, in a scene in which the to-be-killers watch a documentary on Nazi film propaganda, Van Sant's own camera appears to self-consciously mirror the movement of a Nazi operated camera shown on screen (2013: 127). With this move, Van Sant seems to formally acknowledges the dangers of his project – how he might romanticise and reproduce evil in his own gaze. Why then take this risk?

To make sense of this move, it helps to bring in Hebard's analysis of *Nuit et brouillard*. This film, like *Elephant*, initially structures itself around two formal systems (one past, one present), but eventually merges the two together – or more specifically, turns the formal system of the present *into* the one of the past – in order to show that the past is not really past, and that the dangers of the Holocaust remain alive in the present (Hebard 1997).

I believe we can read *Elephant*'s structure similarly. Of course, the overarching concern is not the same here as it was for Resnais' film. As such, it will be helpful for us to contextualise *Elephant* in the discursive world of its present. Columbine represented a kind of signal event in the US. In its wake, commentators sought explanations for the event that were, in Van Sant's mind (and I am inclined to agree), reductive: these kids were Nazis, they were insane, they were homosexually repressed, they listened to Marilyn Manson, etc[5]. That is, in its wake, commentators applied a broadly causal-explanatory framework to the event.

It is precisely this mode of understanding that Van Sant is working against, and this much has been well documented in the filmic literature[6]. Yet, while most have attributed this causal-explanatory opacity solely to Van Sant's obscure

system – a view articulated by, for example, Damon Young when he writes that it is the film's 'refusal to give us the narrative information' that makes it opaque (2005: 500) – I think that to do so would simplify what is in reality, a more complex move. Van Sant achieves this explanatory opacity not simply by establishing an alternative formal system (the initial, obscure system), but by *simultaneously* establishing a secondary formal system that seems precisely causal-explanatory, and then collapsing these two systems such that they become indistinguishable. The film breaks down the narratively clear and transparent system into the obscure, opaque one.

V. Blurred lines

One instructive instance in which this deconstruction occurs requires us to return to the sequence in the athletic field discussed above. In it, Michelle is seemingly accidentally shot by the camera, in a moment rendered significant despite its contingency, before the camera chooses to follow Nathan – yet, it gives us no real *reason* why Nathan should be followed, the decision to follow him feels inexplicable, an arbitrary choice made on a whim (perhaps it is because he is good looking, perhaps it is because his sweater is so identifiable …). This mirrors the shooting itself, in which Michelle is the first victim because she happens to be in the wrong place (in the library) at the wrong time, and in which Alex later 'tracks' down Nathan into a meat locker.

The similarities here establish a parallel between the camera's 'shooting' and Alex's shooting – yet in doing so, it foregrounds the inexplicability of the latter when we otherwise might be tempted to understand it through a causal explanation[7]. Michelle is shot in an almost accident, a contingent moment rendered fatally significant. As for Nathan, we realise that we have as little reason to 'understand' why Alex hunted him down as we did the camera's initial decision to follow him. While we might initially think it is because he is a 'jock' or threw spitballs at Alex, the parallels here emphasise the ways in which any attempt to make sense of the 'why' becomes as muddied as attempts to rationalise Van Sant's camera. As Said writes, 'the motives of Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris seem as enigmatic as those of Van Sant's protagonists: they too were picked on in school and

had a taste for violent videogames, but these aren't *conclusive motivators*' [my italics] (2004: 16). In this way, the camera, in associating itself with the shooters, begins to obscure rather than illuminate. The causal-explanatory seams of the secondary system begin to come apart.

Another instructive deconstruction is the way that the shooters' sense of spatial orientation is disrupted as the two systems meet. Before the shooting, we are given a scene in which Alex and Eric crouch over a map of the school to plan their routes. We get a view of the map from an over the

shoulder (almost POV) shot – as close to a spatially orienting 'establishing shot' of that space as we are given – and Van Sant emphasises that in their system, space is clearly rendered. Yet, when they enter the school, they quickly become disoriented by the maze of the school. Where they thought they would be like gods, looking down at the school, they instead become spatially dislocated. This comes to a head when Alex moves into the hallway where he plans to have a 'field day', but finds it empty. The camera revolves around Alex, unmooring him from the background, emphasising his disorientation,

as the spatial coherence of this secondary system becomes subsumed by the labyrinthine confusion of the initial system. As the second system dissolves into the initial one, it becomes clear that this pretension of spatial understanding, this 'god like view', was little more than an ego-maniacal delusion.

When these systems intersect, the elements of the secondary system that *seemed* explanatory, determinate are revealed to be as opaque as those of the initial system. Space once again becomes unnavigable, as do the motivations and psychologies of the characters. Moreover, this breakdown reveals the ways in which this secondary system was opaque *at heart* from the start, endowed with credibility simply by the coherence of the form. What felt like determinate 'clues' are revealed to be paper thin, a mirage of meaning. Van Sant cuts through the illusory meaningfulness of this secondary system and returns us to a state of unknowing. This is not to say that no critiques

of elements that could have contributed to this event are offered. However, by formally collapsing these two systems, Van Sant works against the closed, clear understanding of the event promised by news outlets, and more broadly, the causal-explanatory logic of the classical system. He acknowledges and reckons with the inability of causal, closed narratives to properly explain these traumatic events, to render them sane, sensible. Instead he leaves us with various factors that never get us to a full understanding, that fail to cohere and illuminate, forcing us to reckon with something much more unsettling: the sheer *inexplicability* of the act.

VI. Ethical notes on *Elephant*

Ultimately, I would contend that this film feels like a response particular to the early 2000s, when these shootings felt so new (so novel) that the gaze towards them bordered on curious. Van Sant's overwhelming preoccupation with the shooters, even if pushing back against a more reductive explanation of the shooting, does so at the risk of sympathising with these characters and flattening the victims. One may feel that the shooters are, in many ways, rendered more humanely than the victims since we are witness to their moments of familial life, intimacy, and play. Though this observational stance makes sense given the design of the film, a viewer could be wary of a perceived imbalance. Whether this is the case or not is certainly up for debate, but the decision to focus on these shooters is one that has been challenged.

VII. *Dark Night* & database logic

With *Dark Night*, we find a film preoccupied less with the individual shooter itself, and more with the milieu in which such violence spawns. On the surface, Sutton's film feels similar to Van Sant's. Like *Elephant*, it follows a number of characters on the day of a shooting and importantly, one of them is the shooter himself. However, while *Elephant* reveals its violent telos a quarter of the way into its runtime, and offers the semblance of structure (both narratively via its secondary system, and through its relational logic of tracing and intersections

between characters), *Dark Night* maintains a fog of uncertainty until its last moments, crafting a narrative that feels fractured, atomic, isolated. Even the relationships between its characters are rendered largely indeterminate, as Sutton refuses to show characters in the same frame even when it is clear they are occupying the same space.

This atomic, fractured system behind the film's narrative can helpfully be read as running on a 'database' logic. For Lev Manovich, who theorised the concept, a database narrative is one that is created when an 'algorithm' goes through a set of items (a database) and structures /orders the materials (1999). Importantly, the algorithm can operate along any ordering system it wants – it does not, for example, need to be causally, spatially, or temporally unified – and is only one of many that can be applied to the database. As such, the result of algorithm / database pair, i.e. the narrative, is always contingent, never necessary or final. Instead, it gestures towards the other ways it could have manifested, towards the wider field of possibilities. While elements of this logic can be meaningfully applied to *Elephant* (Van Sant certainly does not want his account to be definitive, and so gestures to other stories untold, perspectives it could have manifested), this database logic is particularly helpful in understanding *Dark Night* given the vast epistemic canyon it contains. We know even less in *Dark Night* than we do in *Elephant*, and the film's eschewal of an overt structure or narrative not only makes the arbitrariness of the structuring 'algorithm' salient, but simultaneously encourages the viewer to apply a similar database logic in order to interpret the film. It is this combination of narrative fracture and an unwillingness to reveal the event that connects these fractured strands that positions *Dark Night* apart from *Elephant*[8]. If *Elephant* tells us what will happen, and challenges our ability to find out why, *Dark Night* forces the viewer to attempt to make sense of the film at a more fundamental level. It is exactly this experience, of trying to figure out what is happening, what will go wrong, and who will be responsible for it, that critics have latched onto as central to the film[9]. This experience, however, is not simply a result of the radical opacity just mentioned, but stems from Sutton's ability to craft an underlying sense of violence that always feels just over the horizon.

This ambiance is a result of several factors, which include the employment of certain archetypes that signal potentially violent individuals (e.g., the silent veteran, the withdrawn teenager), the lack of psychologising formal / narrative techniques (similar to *Elephant*) rendering these characters opaque, and the ominous musical motif, in which a sole female voice, electronically modulated and reverberating as if in a cavernous room, sings against a minimal musical backdrop.

This sinister energy bubbles to the surface at certain moments, rupturing the narrative with sudden breaks. Consider, for example, the sequence in which a would-be social media influencer poses as her own agent on a call. The camera has slowly been moving towards the car in which the character is sitting, a steady, but claustrophobic motion – the lighting emphasising the dull beige hues of the surrounding parking lot, while in the distance we hear thunder. As we listen to her desperately try to get an audition, we suddenly hear a blood-curdling scream. The camera pans quickly to the right, and we see a trio of girls, in extreme close up, rush past. Before we can make sense of what's going on, we hear one of them say 'Sophia, you're such a bitch' and we realise that it was nothing serious. As if nothing happened, the camera returns to the car.

These moments litter the film – in another example, a person's speech on growing up while feeling isolated is interrupted by a sudden cut to a dart hitting a wall – and imbue the film with a certain violent energy. Yet, rather than manifest in anything concrete, each jolt dissolves into the background as soon as it is experienced, returning the viewer to a sense of general anxiety. This anxiety – and here I mean to recall the Heideggerian distinction between anxiety and fear, wherein the latter has a particular intentional object whereas the former does not (1929) – places the viewer in a certain state of anticipation, but by refusing to resolve, forces the viewer to keep on *searching* for something to make it concrete.

Put another way, the opacity of the film (i.e. that the viewer does not know *what's* going on) combined with the film's ambiance (i.e. that the viewer *senses* that something's wrong) leads the viewer to continually try to figure out the underlying logic of the film, to construct *their own*
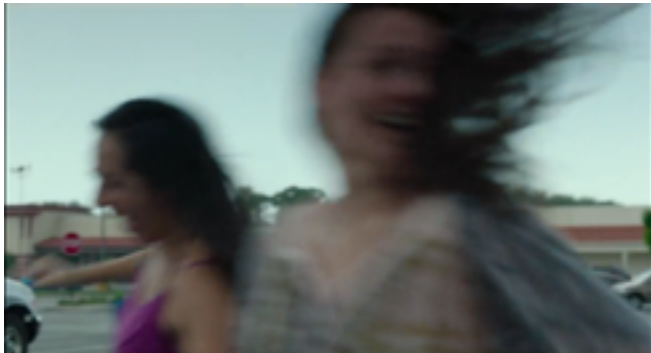
algorithm that would help them make sense of the film and its tonality. This process of trying to interpret the film through different frameworks for maximal clarity is something latent in most experiences of filmic comprehension – Branigan, for example, calls it the application of a 'top-down' schema, which he considers an essential part o f any narrative viewing experience (1992: 37-9). But *Dark Night* draws it out to the extreme through its radical narrative fracturing and obfuscation, bringing that latent experience to the fore as we actively try to interpret the characters, and the violence we sense is hovering just beyond[10]. Yet importantly, this project is ultimately futile. Unlike most narratives, in which the viewer is guided towards a top-down schema that elucidates the film, *Dark Night* seems to consciously embed false leads and red herrings such that this process becomes confused. It is not until the end, until it is too late, that we confidently realise what will happen, and who will be responsible.

VIII. Implications of *Dark Night*'s structure

The film's ability to draw out what is normally latent in viewing experience – namely, this top-down schema or database logic – and its subsequent complication of the predictive viability of this process is notable for several reasons, but I want to expand here on its more political, social implications. Manovich, in his original discussion, re-iterates the fact that database narratives rely on a particular database logic that is dominant in a computerised society (1999). In challenging the applicability of this logic to the film, *Dark Night* can be read as challenging a general *approach* to understanding mass shootings and its milieu. This logical system, beginning with individuals considered atomically – opposed to the relational mode of *Elephant*, *Dark Night* renders each narrative strand in far more fragmented terms – seems unable to capture what is important, as the film thwarts the viewer's understanding of what is to come; that is, the affective *sense* that something is wrong fails to be explained by this mode of reasoning.

This move becomes broader reaching when we note that this logical mode is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the dominant logic applied to gun control in the United States, wherein an algorithm crawls through various databases in order to identify various at-risk owners. Much discussion around increased gun control has revolved around *what* the algorithm should capture, but this fundamental logic has often remained unchallenged (Elinson 2019). Yet, I think what Sutton does in this film is *precisely* challenge such a logic's ability to understand and prevent violence, and it does so by having the *viewer* act as this algorithmic program, but rendering the film in such opaque terms that it seems that there is *no* algorithm that can safely capture what is necessary until it is too late.

My claim here is not that Sutton consciously wedded the logic of his film to the logic of gun control in the US, which would be an empirical claim. Rather, it is that the film's approach to the origins of violence can be read as operating along a particular logical system that is dominant in a particular society; and that in exploring the limits of that logic, it is a *fortiori* exploring the limits of other systems that utilise that same logic. Now, this would characterise this film as a negative, or deconstructive project, and I think that would be half right (in this respect, I think it is similar to *Elephant* and the challenge it issued to classical causal-narrative reasoning); but this film has a positive aspect as well. For this, we need to re-orient ourselves and read this film through another lens: an ecological lens.

IX. *Dark Night*'s ecological stance

Sutton's broader, ecological interest arises early in the film. As the film cuts from the title card, we are given an aerial shot of a suburban landscape. Looking straight down at the ground, our view becomes divorced from a normal 'human' perspective; instead of houses and trees standing before us, we see plains of green intercut with estuaries of concrete and banks of symmetrical roofs, miniscule cars appearing here and there as if to emphasise the non-anthropocentric view. The treetops, houses, and roads roll together as if entwined – proportioned, symbiotic. Throughout, we hear an ambient calm, as birds chirp in the background.

This interest in the broader ecosystem, and in the relationship between it and humans, recurs throughout *Dark Night*. Most explicitly, it comes out within the narrative by the withdrawn teenager (Aaron Purvis), as he tells the interviewer:

The environment is not a person, it's not a human with a brain trying to resonate ideas throughout the universe. Nature is true, nature is real. Humans are not real.

This, of course, shouldn't be conflated with the *film's* articulation of this distinction, but I think we can read it as signalling a general interest in interrogating this divide. This interrogation occurs subtly, and proceeds in a way that begins to complicate this division. At multiple points, for example, we get shots of the sky accompanied by the hum of electricity, which then cuts to a different scene dominated by the buzz of cicadas – the sound of electricity and cicadas blurring in this transition, as if it were a sonic match cut, emphasising the similarities of these sounds. This motif culminates in the parking lot of the theatre shortly before the shooting, as the hum of insects and electricity blend together, becoming nearly indistinguishable. Visually, human figures are often shot in such a way that they seem to emerge from, and blend back into the natural world around them.

There is a sequence in which one of the characters goes swimming in a lake. The camera, in close-up, pans slowly across a tree, as if tracing its outgrowth of branches. As it does so, it encounters various bits of body – a waist here, a leg there – but the camera does not zoom out or linger on these body parts in a way that acknowledges their difference. Rather, it treats these body parts as if they too were part of the tree, passing over them, emphasising the textural and formal

similarities between them. Tree limbs and human limbs merge with each other, the camera treating both identically.

This human / natural thematic critically emerges again at the scene of violence. As the film cuts between the various characters getting ready for the evening, we get a shot of a turtle associated with the withdrawn teen lying in the grass
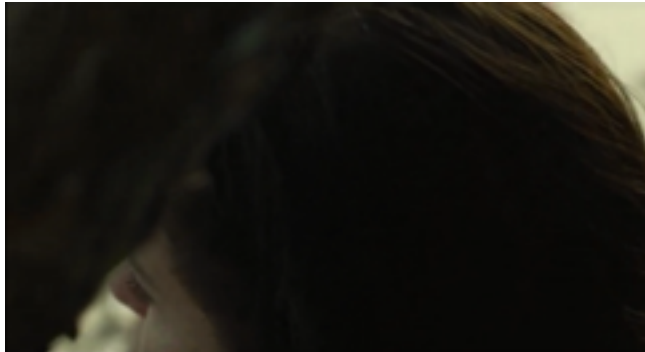

at dusk, cicadas roaring in the background. The camera pans up, but it does not adjust focus initially, so that when the teen walks into frame, he is blurred into the environment around him. As the camera begins to focus, he materialises from the world and we see that he is holding a hammer. The film then cuts, prohibiting a view of the violence implied, to a shot of a glowing lamppost, a false moon in the sky, as the voice of the would-be influencer asks us if we 'feel like we're dying'. It is only a short while later that the shooting occurs, as the shooter, likewise, walks towards the camera, and the film cuts, similarly ending on a red light hovering above the door through which he entered.

Sutton here seems interested in drawing out some connection between these two violent acts, between this violence set in nature and between the violence set in the manmade theatre. The question is: why? What is the point of complicating
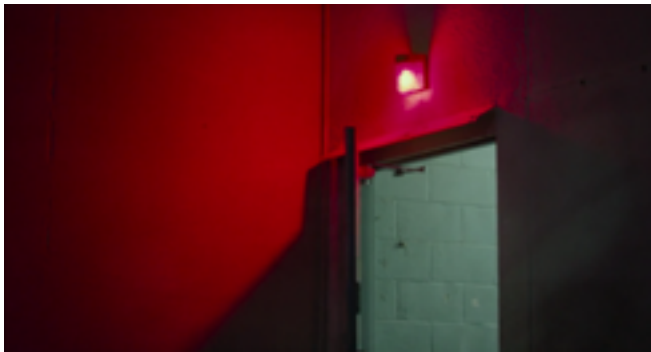
the distinction between the human and the natural, in making salient the ways in which the natural / human mirror and blend into each other, particularly in the final act(s) of violence?

X. A shift in orientation

The answer to this question becomes clearer if we compare this eco-logic to the database logic described above. Recall that the database approach was, among other things, a way the viewer attempted to understand what was happening, and make sense of the ambient violence that lingers throughout the film. It was a logic wherein one began with individuals and tried to find some relations / distinctions between them – find the right algorithm – that would identify the source of this affect. It is an anthropocentric approach, where one took in the information one could gather about the individuals and tried to arrive at a correct reading of the milieu. Yet, this approach proved nearly impossible. The film was structured,

and the characters rendered, in such a way that finding the correct schema that would elucidate the narrative before the ending was difficult.

We can conceive of the ecological stance as inverting its focus in an effort to offer a new way of approaching this same problem. Rather than begin with the individual, this reading begins with the environment, and has individuals emerge from this milieu in a quasi-Simondonian fashion (Simondon 1992). By re-orienting its focus, it gestures towards an understanding of violence that begins with the environment, with the illness that is latent in this Anywhere, USA. I do not think that it goes as far as diagnosing exactly *what* is wrong; this would be far too massive an undertaking. But I do think that it urges us to begin looking differently. Grounding this stance in the discursive world of the film's present, I think it is notable insofar as it aligns itself with increasing calls to address the gun violence epidemic as a public health issue; that is, as an issue not understood in localised, individual terms, but through a broader systemic / environmental approach (Kinscherff & Block 2018). It is through the tension between these two competing logical systems – one picking up where the other left off – that I believe we can read this film in a productive, dialectic light.

XI. Ethical notes on *Dark Night*

Now, one may say that this ecological approach takes away from the distinctly human gravity that its subject demands, and that we ought to mourn the human loss incurred here. Yet if we look closer, we can see how the film is not only preoccupied with the environment's relation to the origins of violence, but with the way that violence inscribes the environment. There is a moment in which the would-be shooter is marking the paces from his car to the theatre, although as viewers we do not quite know what he is doing. The sequence begins with the camera slowly moving in a circular motion around the car as the shooter gets out of the vehicle and fiddles around in the trunk. As he begins walking and counting, the camera tracks, appearing to initially follow him, but then comes to a stop a moment later as the base of a lamppost takes centre frame, shifting the attention away from the shooter onto the architectural elements of the parking lot. Slowly, at the base of this lamppost, a symbol materialises – the 'logo' of the

film, a crudely drawn three eyed face, or perhaps a face with a bullet hole in its forehead – and then, just as quickly, dissolves. The violence to come literally marks the environment, underscoring the ways in which violence and loss irrevocably alter the spaces in which they occur. Places – Sandy Hook, Parkland, Aurora, Columbine – become inseparable from the human loss that occurred there, and *Dark Night*'s ecological

stance allows the film to acknowledge the inextricable relation between the two. It mourns the human loss by recognising the missingness that fills up a space in its wake, that remains long after those lives have passed, after individual names have been forgotten.

In this way, *Dark Night* urges a reorienting shift in cinematic reckonings of mass shootings. Its gaze wanders beyond the humans towards the world behind them. While some may characterise this as cold or dehumanising, one may think that this environmental way of looking is exactly the radical, 'Copernican' shift needed to truly *see* a subject that is becoming increasingly endemic, etched into our landscapes and collective psyches.

XII. Conclusion

In approaching their subjects, both films interrogate the limits of a classical mode. Whether it is the limits of a causal-explanatory logic (*Elephant*) or an anthropomorphic stance (*Dark Night*) both films mark paths forward by turning *away* from the well-worn routes available to them. The films share family resemblances – a fracturing of narrative, opaque characters, a movement away from the classical paradigm. But it is in their differences that we can begin to trace the progression of this disease, as *Elephant*'s focus on the shooters and inexplicability of the 'why' gives way to *Dark Night*'s vision of an America in which these tragedies are not an anomaly, but something endemic to the air we breathe, beaches we visit, the movie theatres we frequent. After more than a decade of unrelenting mass shootings between *Elephant* and *Dark Night*, the curiosity about the shooters found in *Elephant* gives way to an urgent focus on the world in which these killings seem to grow and thrive, an ecosystem out of balance.

Now, perhaps one thinks such films shouldn't be made at all. One may fear that any film will inevitably play into the desire for notoriety that these shooters crave, and in that case, perhaps the best way to combat this phenomenon is to suffocate it of attention and deprive the fire of the oxygen it needs to spread. Others may feel that the act of fictionalising these events is inherently demeaning, that using real people and real death to give weight to a fictional story

is opportunistic. But insofar as these films *will* be made, understanding the ways in which they can articulate themselves will be critical, particularly as the climate around these events continue to change. As E. Ann Kaplan writes, 'telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may […] permit a kind of empathic "sharing" that moves us forward, if only by inches' (2005: 37). In interrogating new forms, these films explore ways they can engage with ethically and politically charged subjects, contribute to discourse, and perhaps move us forward, 'if only by inches' – and they do so precisely through their aesthetics. Perhaps it is overly optimistic, but one can hope that one day the inches will begin to add up.

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[1] See, e.g. Robert Sinnerbrink (2016).

[2] See Cathy Caruth (1996) Chapter 1.

[3] While White was specifically referring to the Holocaust, I think we can draw on his statements productively for the subject at hand.

[4] This is not to say that these approaches have not been taken, and that they have been categorically unsuccessful. The immensely popular 'true crime' genre, for example, largely draws upon a classical narrative mode (Murley 2009: 4).

[5] See, e.g. Jennifer Rich (2012: 1326).

[6] See, e.g. William Little (2013: 116).

[7] This association between the camera and the gun is further manifest in Elias, the photographer who in many ways serves as a photo-negative of the shooters. For more, see Rich (2012: 1320-1322).

[8] Notably, it also positions it apart from a film like Michael Haneke's *71 Fragments* (1995), which uses its fractured form to gesture poetically towards the manifold stories that were senselessly cut short by its shooting, but at no point keeps us in the dark about the event connecting these fragments.

[9] See, e.g. Douglas Greenwood (2017).

[10] In this regard, *Dark Night* resembles the phenomenal-affective mode of the avant-garde. What is interesting about *Dark Night* is that it simultaneously retains just enough structure within each character's narrative in order to communicate the sense that these disparate stories are building to some final destination. In this way, *Dark Night* draws on these filmic modes to craft a layered experience that plays affect and structure off of one another.