

Cold-blooded

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [December 13, 2003](#) issue

Relentlessly somber, with the eruptions of teen violence rendered in a hushed style, Gus Van Sant's ***Elephant***—his response to the Columbine shootings—is an art-house version of an exploitation picture. It's very skillfully made, with warm cinematography by Harris Savides that provides a visual and tonal counterpoint to the affectless interactions of the adolescent characters, and with a restless camera that roams the halls of a monstrous glass-and-concrete high school.

The camerawork, which tracks one kid after another in a way that's meant to seem as random as the shootings, recalls *High School*, the classic 1969 documentary by Frederick Wiseman about life in a big, impersonal school. But Van Sant's approach is the opposite of Wiseman's: he lays out everything with fiendish deliberation.

Van Sant piles up impressions of each of the kids, knowing that we know what the movie is about. Will the killer be John (John McFarland), the towheaded boy with the kewpie-doll face who's late to school because he has to take care of his drunken father? Or Michelle (Kristen Hicks), who won't wear shorts to gym class and who maintains a tense inward focus as she changes clothes in the locker room without letting anyone see her body?

Handsome Nathan (Nathan Tyson) treks through the corridors, making no verbal or physical contact with anyone, so we wonder: Is this boy dangerously out of touch with his environment? But then he meets up with his pretty girlfriend, Carrie (Carrie Finklea), and he slips off our radar.

Van Sant's point: these boys and girls are unknowable. A social studies teacher leads a discussion about whether you can tell if a classmate is gay, which underscores the theme that teenagers' lives are secret and impenetrable. When Van Sant finally brings in the killers, Alex (Alex Frost) and Eric (Eric Deulen), he plays the same game with them.

In a flashback, we see Alex drawing comics at the back of the class while another boy lobs spitballs at him. Back at home, he plays Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" on the piano; Eric drops by and plays a video game on Alex's laptop, picking off figures

on the screen whose backs are conspicuously turned to the rifle that mows them down. The two boys cut classes to wait around for the delivery of the gun Alex has ordered on the Internet; as the truck pulls up, the boys are casually watching a TV documentary on Hitler.

The film supplies all the familiar objects of speculation regarding who should be blamed when benign-seeming middle-class kids turn into murderers, but it emphasizes none of them. When Eric joins Alex in the shower and they begin to make out, homosexual anomie is added to the mix—though, typically, the film doesn't indicate whether we are to view the scene as evidence of a prior sexual relationship or as a desperate reaching out for affection. As with every other character, the boys' lack of affect throws us back on idle speculation.

The movie is selling brutal honesty. A pan around Alex's bedroom reveals a drawing of an elephant on his wall, but the title really refers to the adage about the elephant in the room that no one wants to acknowledge—in this case, the violence simmering underneath the unemotional facades of American children.

However, there's a fundamental dishonesty in the film's presentation of anxiety and dread—the feelings Van Sant works up in the audience almost from the outset—and in its refusal to interpret images and events. And the self-conscious museum-piece approach that's become a trademark of recent Van Sant movies (*Psycho*, *Gerry*) makes aesthetic objects out of the corpses of the victims, who die noiselessly and impersonally, undifferentiated and dehumanized even at the moment of death.

By the last ten or 15 minutes, I began to fight instinctively against this flattening out of the violence: my mind reverted to action-thriller conventions, and I kept expecting someone to trip up one of the killers or leap onto one of them from a concealed corner and disarm him. No one does intervene, of course. Van Sant is true to his vision up to the final sadistic shot. *Elephant* is a monumentally distasteful display.