



SEE FOR YOURSELF

A RHETORIC OF AMBIGUITY IN
GUS VAN SANT'S DEATH TRILOGY

MASTER THESIS FILM- & TELEVISIEWETENSCHAP
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A new subject matter demands new form, and as good a way as any towards understanding what a film is trying to say to us is to know how it is saying it.

- André Bazin, 1967

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Preface

In conducting research for this thesis I came across the citation from André Bazin that now serves as an epigraph. I believe that it does not only suit the contents of this thesis, but that it also constitutes the core of Film and Television Studies, or at least how I have mainly enjoyed it. When I started with my Bachelor program in Theatre, Film and Television Studies back in 2004, I was eager to scrutinize my fascination for audiovisual media in general, and film in particular. Although am I now surely aware of the fact that there are also other pressing issues to be discussed within this field of study, I have always found it most interesting and fundamental to somehow concentrate on the question how film 'works'.

Retroactively, Bazin's quote can therefore be seen as referring to the very essence of my years of study. In order to understand what a movie wants to say, I have often considered how it is saying it. As a pictorial medium that constitutes an illusion of reality, this is the way to come closer to understanding film: analyzing its specific interaction between form, structure and content. This exercise is obviously most fruitful with regard to 'new' subject matters of film, that is: not yet explored or even unnoticed cinematic trends. Having stumbled upon the films of Gus van Sant and the books of Zygmunt Bauman, it was roughly one and a half years ago when I decided that it would be useful to embark on such an extensive analysis for my Master dissertation. I wanted to understand how certain films can make it clear to us that there is nothing to be made clear. It turned out to consume a bit more time than I expected.

While I completed my Bachelor program within the three years that were prescribed, my Masters started to get stuck in some form of delay from the moment that I started with my internship. This was just before I initially had to start with writing this thesis. As I was offered a job at the place where I was doing my internship, I walked into an old trap. A nice one, but still a trap. Hopping between my first full-time job on the one hand, and writing my end thesis on the other, has cost me a lot of effort. Writing requires concentration and this was all but too often interrupted by the new rhythm of the week that had become part of my life.

There are some people I am indebted to. First, I like to thank my supervisor Frank Kessler for his critical guidance and encouragement. Of course, I also like to thank my parents for their support and refuge. If it weren't for those two weeks in which I spend my precious holiday hours back home again, the finishing of this thesis would have taken at least another year. I like to thank Maaike for the fact that she managed to back me up all the way from Senegal and Anoeek for her patience, her listening ear and fresh insights. Finally, I like to thank my friends and family that have often worked on my nerves by asking me if I had already finished my thesis. Well now, rest assure: it has been a long time coming, but here it is. At last.

Introduction

As we are more and more removed from grand narratives, our conceptions of reality and truth are constantly redefined by a wide variety of means. Film, as an art form with the ability to communicate an illusion of reality, still occupies an important position within these processes. Although it has had a complex relation with reality ever since its inception, cinema's partaking in the ongoing creative developments within art and communication continue to challenge our perspectives upon reality and truth. Together with the documentary film, the most interesting examples of these filmic challenges are found within the hybrid form of the docudrama.

As a type of film that operates in-between the documentary and the drama, the docudrama inevitably presents an interpretation of, as well as an argument upon the actual events it depicts. In doing so, most conventional docudramas impose a special kind of suspension of disbelief. For an audience to make use and meaning out of the film, they are asked to accept that, as put by film scholar Steve Lipkin: "re-creation is a necessary mode of representation."¹ The filmic interpretation of 'reality' must be depicted in such a way that its audience accepts it as the closest approach to truth that is possible. Although this kind of representation still accounts for the gross of docudramas released today, there has been a notable shift within this kind of cinema in the past decade. A shift in which overtly fictionalised, non-truthful, ambiguous and open-ended representations of actual events much rather question our notions of reality and truth instead of trying to supply us with it.²

With the release of his self-proclaimed 'death-trilogy', which included the films *GERRY* (2003), *ELEPHANT* (2005) and *LAST DAYS* (2006), American film director Gus van Sant delivered a significant contribution to this phenomenon.³ Although all three of these films depict events that took place within our historical world, Van Sant refuses to offer any explanations or answers. In rejecting explicable renderings of reality, the three films seem to challenge any form of closure or consensus on the historical matters they depict. Whether this is on the not so commonly known desert straying of two friends in *GERRY*⁴, the heavily debated Columbine high school killings in *ELEPHANT*, or the much-speculated death of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain in *LAST DAYS*.

The fact that the films do not offer "the comfort of traditional closure", as Sophie Moore put it in reference to *ELEPHANT*,⁵ did not go unnoticed with the release of each film. In his review for 'Film Quarterly' for example, Devin McKinney wrote that *GERRY* "delivers its audience into vast uncertainty."⁶ In 'Sight & Sound', S.F. Saïd described *ELEPHANT* as a "complex rendering of reality that refuses easy, tabloid-style explanations."⁷ And with the release of *LAST DAYS*, Chris Chang warned the readers of 'Film Comment' that this "biopic with zero details" fully denied any narrative satisfaction.⁸ In short: most critics agreed that all three of the films are marked by a rather unconventional take on the construction of both meaning and truth. Instead of picturing 'the' or 'a' truth as conventional docudramas do, the films seem to propose that definitive truths concerning the depicted events will never be found, let alone be grasped within a medium as film.

In his elaborate works on post-, and currently liquid-modernity⁹, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman elucidates upon the disputation of meaning and truth as an important characteristic of

¹ Steve Lipkin, "Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama" *Cinema Journal*, vol. 38, (1999): 68.

² Directors such as Michael Winterbottom, especially with his films *IN THIS WORLD* (2002) and *24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE* (2002), Hany Abu-Assad with *PARADISE NOW* (2005), Steve McQueen with *HUNGER* (2008) and Steven Soderbergh with *CHE* (2008), all chose a new approach towards the form of the docudrama. In their own specific way, each of these directors question cinema's ability to represent 'truth' or 'reality'.

³ Amy Taubin, "Blurred Exit" *Sight & Sound*, vol. 15, (2005): 17. Although Gus van Sant did not plan his 'death trilogy', he defined the three films this way in hindsight after the release of *LAST DAYS* in 2005. Van Sant: "They were pretty much made independently, but all had the death and youth similarities [...] Since there have been three films, then so far it's a trilogy. But not planned that way."

⁴ Taubin, 18: "A news story about a young man who was arrested for murdering his best friend after he told cops a story about how they had got lost together in the desert was the starting point for *GERRY*."

⁵ Moore, S. "Elephant" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 58, (2004): 48.

⁶ Devin McKenny, "Gerry" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 57, (2003): 47.

⁷ S.F. Saïd, S.F. "Shock Corridors" *Sight & Sound*, vol. 2, (2004): 16.

⁸ Chris Chang, C. "Guided by Voices" *Film Comment*, vol. 41, (2005): 16.

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, Keith Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001): 75-96. The continuing confusions surrounding the concept of postmodernity made Bauman introduce his own term, liquid-modernity, at the dawn of 2000. The most substantial confusion was intrinsic to the word *postmodernity* itself, since it inherently suggested that modernity is over. For Bauman, postmodernity never was a period after modernity, but a new stage within it. In postmodernity, modernity became aware of its project as not just "unfinished", but "unfinishable." In other words, modernity became continuous, thus liquid, as opposed to its discontinuous, and thus solid period.

contemporary art and fiction. According to Bauman, today's art is marked by a great tendency to manifest plurality, ambiguity and contingency as opposed to single meanings and definitive truths.¹⁰ In their growing attempts to give voice and shape to the ineffable, artistic expressions increasingly demonstrate that voices and shapes are actually infinite. Such an artwork "brings into the open the perpetual incompleteness of meanings and thus the essential inexhaustibility of the realm of the possible."¹¹ Its ambiguous shape, structure and substance offer a standing invitation to endless processes of interpretation. Hence, Bauman states that the meaning of these artworks is "to stimulate the process of meaning making, and guard it against the danger of ever grinding to a halt".¹²

By analysing Gus van Sant's 'death trilogy' in conjunction with Bauman's theory on post-, or liquid-modern art, this study aims to provide insight into the consequences of the films' specific utilisation of those filmic principles that affect their overall construction of both meaning and truth.¹³ In accordance with David Bordwell's precise method of film analysis that he expressed in his *Poetics of Cinema*, these filmic principles must be understood as underlying concepts that govern the means by which the films are formed.¹⁴ From this perspective, this study will inquire into those principles that constitute and regulate the films' expression of ambiguity and contingency by analysing their uses and functions as well as the effects they have on the construction of both meaning and truth.

At the basis of this analysis lies the notion that it is an important asset of the docudrama to propose a particular view or argument upon the historical events it depicts.¹⁵ As such, an approach within the perspective of rhetoric as a compositional principle is most appropriate. Aptly dubbed by narratologist Seymour Chatman as the art of *suasion* instead of *persuasion*, such an analysis of rhetoric concerns the urgings and means by which a film is trying to get its point across, instead of its level of success with an audience.¹⁶ In utilising this perspective, the analysis shall focus upon those three elements of the ancient rhetorical divisions originated by Marcus Tullius Cicero that still show much value in relation to cinema today. These are: invention, style and arrangement.¹⁷ Rhetoric is thereby not only useful as a practical tool of analysis; it is also of great essence to the very idea of truth itself, since many would agree today that truth only exists by virtue of a rhetoric through which it is formulated and presented.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997): 105.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 107.

¹² *Ibidem*, 107.

¹³ Although there is a discourse on Gus van Sant as an auteur filmmaker, especially within the French journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, this study does not aim to argue in favour of this position, nor does it aim to contest it. It is not a specific goal of this study to position the 'death trilogy' films within the total oeuvre of Van Sant.

¹⁴ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*. (New York: Routledge, 2007): 15.

¹⁵ Lipkin, "Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama", 68.

¹⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Coming To Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 186.

¹⁷ The fourth and fifth rhetorical elements originated by Cicero, which respectively are 'memory' and 'delivery', are not directly considered in this study. Memory is not considered for the simple reason that film, as a recorded medium, does not need to rely upon any physical memory such as this element originally refers to. Delivery is not considered because the medium film, and more specifically the docudrama, already decide upon the way in which the rhetorical address is 'delivered'. Everything that is there to analyse, remains within their ontological barriers.

Invention: proving that there is nothing to be proved

In Cicero's subdivision of rhetoric, the first division termed invention traditionally concerns the evidence or proof an orator delivers in support of his or her position towards an aspect of our historical world. Although films and orations certainly differ from each other in many respects, it is inherent to the nature of both that they radiate ideology. Whether it does this in an explicit or an implicit manner, with strength or deliberate inconspicuousness, any film, documentary or fiction, always tells us something about the world at large.¹⁸ As such, a filmmaker presents us with a certain 'proof' to back up his point. However, since it is intrinsic to rhetoric to treat those issues on which general agreement does not exist, issues on which scientific certainty is unavailable, the definition of such 'proof' has to be taken with a grain of salt. It does not refer to something conclusive as the scientific method, but rather rests on values and beliefs.¹⁹

In his influential *Rhetorica*, Aristotle proposed to divide these 'proofs' into non-artificial and artificial, or invented 'proofs'.²⁰ The non-artificial 'proofs' originally involve the facts that lie beyond dispute and outside the reach of the orator to create. The artificial 'proofs' on the other hand concern the disputable products of his or her creativity.²¹ While documentary critic Bill Nichols endorses such a differentiation of 'proofs' in his definition of rhetoric within the documentary film, he inadvertently admits that the distinction is hard to make in practice. For even though documentary filmmakers are generally not in a position to create 'non-artificial proofs', Nichols admits they do have the power to use, evaluate or interpret them with a wide array of cinematic means.²²

Although it lies outside the scope of this study to decide whether the classic distinction between these two kinds of 'proofs' is thus manageable at all in documentary film, it can postulate that it is impracticable with regard to the form of the docudrama. Apart from the exception in which archival or statistical footage is used in-between the fictionalised narrative²³, it is intrinsic to the docudrama, as a recreation of actuality, that it is solely able to present artificial proof. After all, everything we see in the docudrama is already the result of the creativity of the filmmaker. Therefore, reason has it that it is of no use to separate 'non-artificial' from 'artificial proofs' within this type of film.

Nevertheless, since most conventional docudramas are marked by their great effort to represent their artificial 'proof' as non-artificially as possible, the distinction does remain of value. As Steven Lipkin pointed out, a docudrama generally undertakes much effort to create an illusion of indexicality and factuality though it actually is iconic and fictional in relation to the historical reality it depicts.²⁴ By constantly indicating its narrational, photographic and dramatical links to this historical reality, the conventional docudrama is out to warrant its position on actuality with the weight of a factual document instead of that of a fictional drama.²⁵ Lipkin pointed out three strategies by which docudrama's generally accomplish this. These are; modelling, in which referents are modelled to historical reality; sequencing, in which actual footage is used; and interactions, in which actual elements are used in between the re-creation.²⁶

Although the three 'death trilogy' films certainly refer to historical events, they principally avoid giving the impression that they would somehow present non-artificial, or indexical proofs. In each of the three films, the strategies of sequencing and interactions find no use at all. Furthermore, modelling is only used in a very broad and limited sense. While it is of course true that the films do model their main events after what is known about their actuality, they are only based loosely on such notions. This same looseness also applies to their locations and lead actors. Although they might show a basic resemblance with actuality, most elements are openly altered to fit the films. As such, the most basic and simple facts that could be easily copied from actuality to feign a sense of indexicality in relation to the films' historical

¹⁸ Chatman, 188.

¹⁹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 49.

²⁰ Aristotle, "Rhetorica" In *The Works Of Aristotle*, edited by W.D. Ross, translated by W. Rhys Roberts (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1924): 1355b. "Of the modes of persuasion some belong strictly to the art of rhetoric and some do not. By the latter I mean such things as are not supplied by the speaker but are there at the outset witnesses, evidence given under torture, written contracts, and so on. By the former I mean such as we can ourselves construct by means of the principles of rhetoric. The one kind has merely to be used, the other has to be invented."

²¹ Nichols, 50.

²² *Ibidem*, 50.

²³ Lipkin, "Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama", 81.

²⁴ Steve Lipkin, "Defining Docudrama: In the Name of the Father, Schindler's List, and JFK" In *Why Docudrama: Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*, edited by A. Rosenthal (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999): 372. Of course, this denial of indexicality does not attribute the photographic indexicality that is part of cinema in itself.

²⁵ Lipkin, "Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama", 81-82.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 69.

realities, such as the actors, their names, their individual actions and the site-specific locations, are all openly altered.

In *GERRY*, all that is modelled after historical reality is the simple notion that two young men got lost in the desert and that one of them must have somehow died. While *ELEPHANT* is based on the Columbine high school shooting that took place in Colorado, Van Sant uses a school that is located in Portland, Oregon. Moreover, except for the notion that two adolescent boys executed this tragic deed, all of the other characters are openly fictional, using their own names instead of those of the real victims. Finally, in *LAST DAYS*, a character named Blake impersonates former Nirvana lead-singer Kurt Cobain. And even though Blake does resemble Cobain with his long blond hair, scruffy clothes and musicality, not a single Nirvana song is heard throughout the movie, let alone any reference to the band itself.²⁷

By altering and/or denying such simple and easy to copy facts that could stimulate a sense of non-artificiality, Van Sant makes it clear from the start that he cut the umbilical cord between his films and historical reality. The connection between the films and the events they are based upon is actually solely expressed directly in the paratexts that surround the films.²⁸ Near the end of *LAST DAYS*, just before the end credits start, the following message is shown:

Although this film is inspired in part by the last days of Kurt Cobain, the film is a work of fiction and the characters and events portrayed in the film are also fictional.

In both *GERRY* and *ELEPHANT*, messages with the same, albeit more rigid, inclinations can be read after the end credits.²⁹ While these messages are probably shown because of legal reasons, they also emphasize that the films might be based on actual events, but are not, and do not aim to be, exact re-creations of them. As such, the films stress once more that they are not concerned with re-creating or re-presenting at all. Instead, they much rather concentrate on the very essences of the phenomena they depict.

For Zygmunt Bauman, this kind of indifference towards representation is a profound characteristic of the post- or liquid-modern art experiment.³⁰ While the modern experiment continuously strives for a form of representation that is better than before, one that comes closer to non-artificiality and absolute truth, the post-, or liquid-modern experiment accepts at forehand that this goal is not only unfruitful, but also downright impossible. According to Bauman, the postmodern artist: “assumes no more that the truth which needs to be captured by the work of art lies in hiding ‘out there’ – in the non-artistic and pre-artistic reality – waiting to be found and given artistic expression”.³¹ Thus liberated from the burden and authority of factuality that lays heavy upon a conventional docudrama, the ‘death trilogy’ films overtly enjoy the endless alterations and adjustments they can make to reality’s non-artificiality in order to make their point. As such, the films do not so much reflect upon life by trying to copy it in all its exact appearances, but they rather add to its contents by altering reality in order to create new meanings and insights.³² Eventually, it is these alterations and adjustments that comprise the ‘artificial proofs’ that are presented to us within the three films, and which thus comprise their only substance.

Next to his proposed distinction between two kinds of evidence, Aristotle also identified three modes or strategies within the overall art of rhetoric. Each of these strategies helps the orator, or filmmaker for that matter, to proffer his or her position in the best manner as possible.³³ First, there is the ethical strategy, in which the impression of good moral value and responsibility is generated. Second, there is the emotional strategy, in which our emotions are appealed in order to get us into a certain frame

²⁷ Though there are two cues in *LAST DAYS* that refer to Kurt Cobain, these are quite implicit, and it is most probable that only well informed insiders understand them. First, Kim Gordon, a member of the band ‘Sonic Youth’ and former friend of Kurt Cobain, plays the record executive that visits Blake. Second, in one scene a video of the song “On Bended Knee” by R&B group ‘Boyz II Men’ is airing on MTV. This song was high in the charts in 1994. The same year that Kurt took his own life.

²⁸ Connections to historical realities are made in their synopses, reviews and DVD covers. Yet even here it can be noted that the films’ titles do not have any reference whatsoever to the specific events. As such, too obvious references are even avoided in the paratexts.

²⁹ In *GERRY* the message says: “The characters and incidents portrayed and the names herein are fictitious, and any similarity to the name, character or history of any person is entirely coincidental and unintentional.” In *ELEPHANT* the message says: “The characters and events depicted in this motion picture are fictional and any similarity to actual person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.”

³⁰ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 106.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 106.

³² *Ibidem*, 106.

³³ Aristotle, 1356a: “Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.”

of mind by setting the right mood at the right time. And third, there is the demonstrative strategy, in which the orator proofs, or creates the impression of proving his or her point.³⁴

Although these strategies also find their expression in the remaining rhetorical elements of arrangement and style, it is useful here, with regard to the element of invention, to consider the particular 'point of view' of the three films. Through, by or with whom does Gus van Sant present which proofs to us? But most importantly, to put it in the same words as Nichols did in his reference to the personalised documentary: how does this amount to the fact that the films are "credible, convincing and compelling without being definitive or conclusive"?³⁵ As a wide metaphorical term that can either concern the visual vantage point of a character, the narrator's or characters' attitudes towards the events depicted, or the main attitude of a film's overall discourse, point of view has raised much criticism and various suggestions for replacement terms over the past decades.³⁶

Of these suggestions, the proposition made by film and literary critic Seymour Chatman offers most clarity for analytic use. According to Chatman, point of view can only make clear how certain issues like perception and empathy function in a book or film if each of its narrative agents is approached separately.³⁷ For Chatman, it makes no sense that one term should cover all the mental acts of different narrative agents or instruments. Therefore, he proposed to divide the term into *slant*, *filter*, *interest-focus* and *center*. Each of these four terms represents a different locus of point of view, and thus a different transmitter of artificial proofs such as perceptions, positions and attitudes.³⁸ Such a distinction can thus reveal the choices made by Gus van Sant to dose and dedicate certain information to certain narrative agents in order to enhance his rhetoric.

The first two terms proposed by Chatman are used to distinguish the most basic loci of point of view, namely that of the narrator and that of the character. While slant concerns the major attitudes of the narrator, filter concerns the wide range of mental activities of the character.³⁹ As such, the distinction between slant and filter can also identify who *tells* the story and who *sees* it. Because a narrator inevitably refers to the 'there and then' of a story from a post in the discourse at large and outside the story world, slant always concerns who *tells*. Filter, on the other hand, always concerns who *sees*.⁴⁰ Only a character resides in the 'here and now' of the constructed story world, which make him or her experience the story events as if they unfold before his or her very eyes.

In applying this separation of slant and filter to the 'death trilogy' films, it first becomes clear that all three of the films are predominantly *told* to us through the slant of Van Sant.⁴¹ But before this dominance of slant is due to any feature that is particular to the three films, it is first of all a result of the very nature of fiction film itself. Where a literary narrator tells a story with the sole use of written words, a cinematic narrator tells the story by actualising it with audiovisual imagery. As such, both slant and filter heavily hinge upon film style. Everything that we see on the screen is in the first place a selection of 'favoured' or 'privileged' views of the director which the cinematic narrator is delegated to present.⁴² As Van Sant is both in each the 'death trilogy' films, he chose the shot-compositions, mise-en-scene, lighting, sound, editing, etc. As such, his audiovisual slant is omnipresent and a character's filtration can only be additional to it. It can only mediate between the slant of the image and the audience's reception of that image.⁴³

It is here however that we touch upon the reason of slant's dominance over filter that is more specific to the three films. In each film, hardly anything gets mediated through a character's mind. As a result, Gus van Sant's slant inevitably takes up a more prominent position than filter. Again, up to a certain point, this is intrinsic to cinema itself. As a photographic medium, logic has it that film cannot express a character's thoughts and feelings with the same ease and precision as literature can.⁴⁴ While it is true that film can show us characters that are thinking and feeling, and we can empathise with them, it can

³⁴ Nichols, 50.

³⁵ Ibidem, 51.

³⁶ Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 98-99.

³⁷ Chatman, 141.

³⁸ Ibidem, 143.

³⁹ Ibidem, 143.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 145.

⁴¹ It has to be clear that this 'slant of Van Sant' operates as a labelling institution, instead of that it refers Van Sant in first person, as the real author or filmmaker. It refers to a part of his implied authorship, namely that part that took care for the actualisation of the narrative in audiovisual imagery.

⁴² Chatman, 156.

⁴³ Ibidem, 157.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 39-40.

only directly present us these thoughts and feelings with voice-overs or specific ‘mindscreen’ effects.⁴⁵ But in the three ‘death trilogy’ films, voice-overs are absent and filtration by means of mindscreen effects only occurs twice in GERRY and once in ELEPHANT.

When the two leading characters of GERRY, which are both named Gerry, try to reconstruct their route into the desert, their conversation gets intercut with various speeded up driving images. By means of point-of-view-photography we look through the front window of a car that makes turns and u-turns on abandoned desert roads. These shots enable us to see the puzzlement of the two Gerries: they are lost. The second appearance of direct filter is even clearer. When the Gerry that is played by Casey Affleck sits at a ditch, Matt Damon’s Gerry walks into the frame to sit next to him. Shot from up front, Affleck’s Gerry tells Damon’s Gerry that he found water and knows exactly where the car is (Image 1.1). When this front shot is traded for a shot from behind the two Gerries, a silhouette slowly emerges in the distance (Image 1.2). As it comes closer, and the camera slightly pans to remove the sitting Damon out of the frame, the silhouette turns out to be Damon’s Gerry once more (Image 1.3). Affleck’s Gerry actually sat at the ditch alone. The Damon’s Gerry he sat next to was merely his own hallucination. Here, through a clever combination of slant and direct filter, it is thus not only *shown* to us that Affleck’s character is suffering from delusions, but we also get to *see* the very delusion itself.



1.1. Frontal shot of both Gerries at the ditch.



1.2. Rear shot with a silhouette emerging in the distance.



1.3. The silhouette appears to be Damon's Gerry once again.

In ELEPHANT direct filtration occurs very brief in a sequence near the end of the film. When Alex is going over the final plan of the high school shooting with Eric, there are brief intersections that present previews of how the events they discuss will go through. One of these previews is a very brief point-of-view-shot of around two seconds in which we look through the eyes of someone who is firing down a school hallway. Although this shot certainly enables us to witness the horror of the characters deeds, it is too short to ascent into the characters mind. Moreover, as the shot could represent either Alex or Eric, the filter lacks concretion. Withal, the main purpose of the shot seems to be of referential nature. In an earlier sequence, Eric plays a point-and-shoot videogame. The point-of-view-shot we see later, with a gun barrel at the bottom of the frame, visually matches the image of this game.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, these three isolated exceptions of direct filter notwithstanding, the films are most remarkable in their refusal to make use of the convention that images can be filtered through a character’s perceptual consciousness. Within classic Hollywood montage, simple devices such as the 180-degree rule, shot-countershot, eyeline matches or plot logic are generally used to lock an audience into a character’s perception.⁴⁷ In the ‘death trilogy’ films however, exactly these conventional devices seem to be avoided as much as possible. In each film, the 180-degree line is often crossed, not one conversation is presented with a shot-countershot, eyeline matches are scarce and plot causality is most often far to be found.⁴⁸ And even at those rare moments when perceptual filter does occur, it is certainly less obvious and decisive than usual.

An example of this is can be found in a long tracking-shot in ELEPHANT in which the camera follows the popular Nathan in his walk from the football field into the school where he meets his girlfriend. When Nathan walks past three girls that stare at him (Image 1.4), he turns his head to look at them. At this moment, the sequence slows down and the camera pans along with Nathan’s gaze, removing him out of the frame (Image 1.5). The image then stays with the girls for several seconds, as

⁴⁵ Chatman, 159.

⁴⁶ The videogame is also a referential joke to GERRY, as the shot is visually modelled on one of its final scenes in which the two Gerries walk over a salt flat.

⁴⁷ Chatman, 157.

⁴⁸ These various stylistic and formal characteristics will be discussed more elaborately with regard to the rhetorical elements of style (for the formal feature) and arrangement (for features that concern the plot).

they make their adoring remarks. When the camera pans back slowly, the image has become a reverse tracking shot that slightly crossed the 180 degree line, holding Nathan from up front (Image 1.6). In this sequence, the camera panned to the girls because Nathan wanted to see them. It is his perception of that very moment that filters what we see. Nathan is interested in girls and his own popularity. Although more examples like these can be found throughout the three films, they must be considered exceptions.



1.4. Tracking shot of Nathan passing a group of three girls.



1.5. As the girls ogle him, the camera follows Nathan's gaze. Removing him out of the frame.



1.6. The camera has now turned around, being a reverse tracking shot.

The main consequence of the films' lack in direct and perceptual filter is that we never really get to know what goes on inside the character's heads. Their attitudes, perceptions, fantasies, emotions and memories all mostly remain blank. Even though it is shown to us that the two Gerrys become desperate, we do not learn why one Gerry decided to kill the other. While *ELEPHANT* presents us with the fact that Eric and Alex organise and execute a high school shooting, their motivations remain unclear. And although we get confronted with Blake's unusual way of living in *LAST DAYS*, we can still only guess what made him decide to commit suicide. If Van Sant allowed more to be filtered, he could have given us answers to these and other questions. But instead of demonstrating us such 'proofs', he prefers to operate on a more emotional and tacit level in order to leave more for us to reconstruct. Here, the films' expression of interest-focus is of paramount importance.

As the one locus of point of view that is most dependent upon acts of interpretation, empathy and identification, it is not surprising that most of the presented proofs within the three films are mediated by means of interest-focus. Operating in much the same way as filter, interest-focus also occupies a space between the slant of the audiovisual image and the viewer's perception of that image.⁴⁹ But where filter presents the thoughts and perspectives of a character, interest-focus presents a wide range of contextual signals through which certain images, sequences or scenes can be read as statements of a character's interests.⁵⁰ Although Chatman himself mainly elaborate on the more larger and more metaphorical subjects that can be inferred through interest focus, reason has it can comprise both small and concrete matters. These can occur separately, but they most often occur in support of each other.⁵¹

In order to illustrate this, let us take a shot out of *LAST DAYS* that appears early on in the film. As the camera follows Blake during his walks outside, he only wears a t-shirt and thin trousers. In a concrete and quite obvious interpretation of the shot, his slight shivers, the rushing wind, the shaking trees and the cold colour temperature of the image make us imply first that he is dressed too thinly to be outside. Seen in a more metaphorical or symbolic manner however, the sequence could also imply that Blake has already given up on himself. Moreover, as Gilberto Perez proposed in his description of cinematic rhetoric as a force of identification, we can even identify Blake with his surrounding.⁵² The brown and

⁴⁹ Chatman, 157.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 158.

⁵¹ Bordwell, 93. In his proposition for an inferential model of narration, or a mentalistic framework of film analysis, Bordwell admits that these rather concrete and inferential matters operate in support of larger metaphorical pictures. Nevertheless, he stresses once more that the latter must not be the major concern of film analyses.

⁵² Gilberto Perez, "Toward a Rhetoric of Film, Identification and the Spectator" *Society for Cinema Studies Conference* (2000) – 06-11-2009 – <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/rhetoric2.html> According to Perez, it lays within the strength of film that characters can be identified with their surroundings. However, Perez admits, that it is often hard for a director to impose this kind of interpretation because different spectators 'read' different ideological meanings in these identifications.

falling leaves, the muddy road and the giant house all represent a state of decay. A state that can be read as a reflection of Blake's condition.

What is essential to note here however is that such specific, and often emotion-related interpretations are our own in the end and they can certainly differ from each other. It leaves no doubt that different people can read different things into such a shot. Throughout *LAST DAYS*, it is never made explicit why Blake is taking so little care of himself in and around that big old house, let alone that it is his deliberate choice. Although Van Sant provides us with the moment, space and stylistic cues for a reading of Blake's interests, the ascription of the precise meaning still rests upon our own will, attention and ideas.⁵³ As such, this kind of metaphorical interest-focus does not carry one clear and overt meaning, but merely provides us with the options to make meaning.

Throughout the three films, these options come in large numbers. Together with their lacking in filter, and their specific style to which we will turn later, this is also instigated by the fact that each film makes only little use of illustrative dialogue. Where a conventional docudrama would avoid many undesired interpretations by making a character's interests explicit by means of clever dialogue, the 'death trilogy' films do the exact opposite. As dialogue is already sparse in each film, it is also never used to explain the major interests of a character. Even at those rare moments when motivations or interests are explicitly expressed in a conversation, they remain vague and ambiguous. The clearest example of this can be found in *GERRY*, in which we learn through its dialogue that the two Gerrys embarked on their venture because they were looking for "just a thing".

Moreover, the intense presence of interest-focus in the three films is also strongly accentuated by the fourth and final narrative function of point of view termed center. Following Chatman, center concerns the particular presentation of a story through which it is made clear which characters are of principal importance to the narrative.⁵⁴ Although it is the one narrative function that differs most between the three films because of their dissimilarities concerning the number of characters and their specific plot structures⁵⁵, all of the films seem to employ center in quite a literal way. In each film, all of the main characters that get presented to us are directly involved with the depicted events in both time and space. Whether these characters are two men who are lost in the desert in *GERRY*, a selection of adolescents who are at school when a shooting occurs in *ELEPHANT* or a rock star who takes his own life in *LAST DAYS*, they are all at the very center of the depicted historical events.⁵⁶

But even though these center characters thus literally constitute the core of the films, it is essential to note that we still remain excluded from their consciousness. As indicated by Chatman, such a method of centering characters without making much or no use of filter is a useful technique to depict enigmatic characters.⁵⁷ Because we learn which characters are of particular importance to the historical events as protagonists or antagonists, our interest in what inspires or moves them grows. But as we fail to get access to their thoughts and feelings, we are once again led to infer the possible contextual signals that surround them. Consequently, centering without filtration does not only create strong enigmatic characters as Chatman indicates. It also accentuates the presence of interest-focus.

As we have thus far considered Van Sant's specific utilisation and combination of filter, interest-focus and center, we have still to consider the specifics of his slant. Even though we have already seen that this slant is omnipresent in all three of the films, it is crucial to note that its overall expression is highly implicit and its attitude fairly neutral. With the use of title captions to present the names of the center characters in *ELEPHANT* as the only exception of explicit narration, Van Sant's storytelling solely rests in the presentation of his 'privileged' views. As the films' narrator, he refuses to give himself a prominent position.

Though it is true that such implicit slant could still carry highly charged attitudes through basic cinematic devices such as editing and cinematography, this is not the case in the 'death trilogy' films. In

⁵³ The precise construction of these ambiguous character revelations will be discussed more elaborately with regards to the rhetorical element of style.

⁵⁴ Chatman, 147-148.

⁵⁵ This will be demonstrated more elaborately within the rhetorical element of arrangement.

⁵⁶ Although this is most clear in *GERRY* as we only get presented with the two people that experience the event of 'being lost in the dessert' and *LAST DAYS* is quite similar to it, *ELEPHANT* does seem to raise an important issue in this respect. Evidently, the large amount of people that are involved in the event of a high-school shooting significantly forced Van Sant to make a stronger choice in his center characters than in the other two films. And though the film still only centers those characters that are directly involved in the event in time and space, whether these are the killers or victims, Van Sant only centers a selected group of adolescent characters. Certain eminent adults such as the teachers only have small parts. As such, Van Sant thus deliberately chose to principally approach the historical event from an adolescent perspective.

⁵⁷ Chatman, 153.

all three of the films, Van Sant does not seem to force his meanings upon the events he depicts, but rather reveals them for us to make use and meaning out of them. However, since a privileged view rests in the actualisation of a story by means of audiovisual imagery, it is this notion that constitutes the very core around which the rhetorical elements of style and arrangement will evolve. But before we proceed to the analyses of these elements, it is important to note here, with regard to the element of invention, that Van Sant almost makes it seem as if he merely *shows* or *presents* the stories to us instead of actually *telling* and *explaining* them.

While this is first and foremost a result of his omnipresent, but implicit and fairly neutral slant, we have also seen that this effect is heavily reinforced through his specific employment of the other three narrative agents. Where filter could have offered us more clear and obvious explanations by enabling us to see what goes on inside the heads of the characters, Van Sant makes only very little use of it. Instead, he prefers to dedicate most information to the more interpretive and implicit interest-focus, which he in turn strengthens through a rather literal use of center. In other words: Van Sant seems to put most emphasis on the emotional and ethical strategies in each film, and only little on the demonstrative ones. He simply doesn't seem to 'proof', or give the impression of 'proving' any point.

But, as Wayne Booth aptly noted in his influential *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: everything that is shown, eventually always serves to tell.⁵⁸ According to Booth, an author's judgements are always present in a text, even if this doesn't appear to be the case. He put this as follows: "though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear."⁵⁹ What makes the 'death trilogy' films so interesting, then, is that these disguises basically *are* the films' very arguments. The meaninglessness that is expressed because of the films lack in demonstration is their very demonstration in itself. Though it thus might seem that Van Sant hardly demonstrates any 'proof' to us, this is quite the contrary. What he is 'proving' to us is not *his* or *a* truth with regard to the depicted historical events, but much rather that he, nor anybody else for that matter, will ever be able to offer such truths.

In this respect, it is useful to briefly consider Chatman's definitions of 'ideological rhetoric' as opposed to 'aesthetic rhetoric' in fictional narratives. Whereas aesthetic rhetoric suades us of something internal to the film to make us accept its unfolding form, ideological rhetoric suades us of something that is external to the film, something about the world at large.⁶⁰ Thereby, it is generally understood that a film's aesthetic rhetoric always enforces its ideological counterpart.⁶¹ Simply by strengthening the effect of the fiction, a film's unfolding form adds prominence to its ideology. But this is not to say that each narrative technique always supports the same end at the same time. In fact, it is generally considered more rule than exception that a certain technique simultaneously supports an aesthetic end that is quite different from its ideological counterpart.⁶² When a technique may work to suade us of the unfolding of the narrative, it often proposes a certain attitude with regard to the real world that carries over quite another attitude.⁶³

However, although this may be the case conventionally, we have thus far seen that it mostly works the other way around in the 'death trilogy' films. On those many instances in which ambiguity and tacitness seem to prevail, its aesthetic rhetoric is simultaneously operating in support of an ideological end that is similar. In directly affecting the construction of meaning and truth, the suasion to accept ambiguity instead of closure within the unfolding narrative is at the same time a suasion to accept this very notion with regard to the world at large. This is of course first and foremost a result of the contexts in which both rhetorics operate.⁶⁴ As actualisations of historical events, the three films inherently raise expectations that they offer a certain degree of answers or explanations. Docudramas, film scholar Henry Richard Asam wrote, "attract audiences by their promise to untangle the events."⁶⁵ When they deliberately refuse to do this, and suade us of this deliberateness by means of their aesthetic rhetoric, their instances of meaninglessness automatically shift to become the very substance of their ideological reference.

It is on this very basis that Van Sant presents us with Damon's Gerry killing the other without

⁵⁸ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961):

20.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 20.

⁶⁰ Chatman, 197.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 196-197.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 198.

⁶³ Richard Henry Asam, *A Genre Analysis of Television Docudrama*. (Athens (USA): PhD Dissertation University of Georgia, 1986): 73.

⁶⁴ Chatman, 199.

⁶⁵ Asam, 74.

ever explaining or reflecting upon his deed. Or that he shows us that Alex, who is one of the two killers in *ELEPHANT*, gets bullied in class but avoids to filter his thoughts or feelings. And that he does show that some of Blake's friends try to take advantage of him, but refuses to explain if or how this might have ever contributed to Blake's decision to take his own life. To put it in short: seen together, the films' omnipresent, but implicit and seemingly neutral slant, their little use of filter, their heavy reliance on interest-focus and their literal use of center, does not constitute poor story telling, but rather strong cinematic demonstrations of ambiguity that work to both aesthetic as well as ideological ends.

In his renowned essay 'The Postmodern Explained', Jean Francois Lyotard defined the postmodern as that which in the modern would be the unrepresentable in its presentation. According to Lyotard, the postmodern is "that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."⁶⁶ Eventually, it was this definition of postmodernity that formed the very foundation for Zygmunt Bauman's elaborations on the concept.⁶⁷ In breaking open old conventions and mannerisms, an experimental work of art produced within a post- or liquid-modern condition does not aim to come closer to absolute truth, but rather aims to indicate that this project is unfinishable in itself.⁶⁸ Where the modern condition is described by Bauman as a "fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence"⁶⁹, the post- or liquid-modern condition is signified by the exact opposite. It's job is not to deliver the certainty of full proof answers, but to offer a focus upon the infinite possibilities that are inherent to the subjective ground of reality.

With regard to the rhetorical element of invention we have thus far seen that it is exactly this conception that constitutes the very point that Van Sant is 'proving' to us in his 'death trilogy' films. By refusing to feign a sense of non-artificiality and by expressing and combining the four narrative functions of slant, filter, interest-focus and center in rather unconventional ways, Van Sant does not search for a laden form of representation that is better than before, or which comes closer to absolute truth, but rather aims to stress that such a venture is unfruitful in itself. As such, the films are not credible, convincing and compelling *without* being conclusive, but they are credible, convincing and compelling *thanks to* being inconclusive, contingent and ambiguous. But of course, as we have already touched upon numerous times, such ambiguity still needs a shape and structure.

⁶⁶ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979, translated by G.Bennington and B.Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984): 81.

⁶⁷ Tony Blackshaw, *Zygmunt Bauman* (London: Routledge, 2005): 7.

⁶⁸ Bauman, *Tester*: 75.

⁶⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, "Modernity and Ambivalence" *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 7, (1990): 164.

Style: expressing infinite possibilities with the long-take

Traditionally, the rhetorical element of style concerns the tones and manners of speech that best suit the end of a rhetorical address.⁷⁰ Since it is no coincidence that film style is often regarded as the very ‘language’ or ‘essence’ of cinema,⁷¹ the rhetorical element of style in film refers to the specific way in which ‘proof’ is put into expression by means of audiovisual imagery. In considering the ‘death trilogy’ films’ utilisation of editing, mise-en-scène, cinematography and sound, we can thus point out the stylistic choices made by Gus van Sant in order to support the delivery of ambiguity. As we have already seen with regard to the element of invention, the created sense of *showing* over *telling* that signifies the films’ slant finds an important part of its origin here, just as much as their specific use of filter, interest-focus and even center.⁷²

Although the three ‘death trilogy’ films certainly differ from each other in several stylistic respects, it is obvious that they are all quite serious and sober in their cinematic expression.⁷³ It is not for nothing that, in his study concerning the cultural position of *ELEPHANT* and *GERRY*, film scholar Geoff King notes that both films “entail the denial rather than the heightening of familiar-conventional cinematic pleasures”.⁷⁴ And even though he did not include *LAST DAYS* in his study, he does state correctly that it embodies the same characteristics.⁷⁵ Moreover, while King does not offer a thorough analysis of this notion, and he fails to make a connection between the soberness and the intended ambiguity⁷⁶, he is correct in noticing that this denial of conventional cinematic pleasure is especially the result of Van Sant’s elaborate use of the long-take.

As a determining factor for each of the four stylistic categories, Van Sant’s extensive use of long-takes is without doubt most crucial and fundamental for the cinematic expression of ambiguity in all three of the ‘death trilogy’ films. Instead of splicing sequences or scenes up into a series of shots, Van Sant clearly prefers to use long and uninterrupted shots during which only very little happens. In all three of the films, long-takes are more rule than exception and so-called plan-séquences, or sequence shots, in which an entire scene is built with only one shot,⁷⁷ are plentiful. Significantly enough, *GERRY* only consists of around a hundred shots⁷⁸, where a conventional fiction film is built out of a 1000 to 2000.⁷⁹ To put it in the same words that André Bazin used to describe the sober and long-take film styles of Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau or Robert Flaherty, Van Sant “does not exhaust the possibilities.”⁸⁰ As a result, the films only seem to make occasional use of the wide range of tools that cinema has at its disposal to impose its interpretation of an event upon the spectator.

While this most certainly affects the films’ cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound, this is first and foremost the result of the way in which Van Sant utilises, or refuses to utilise, basic principles of editing.⁸¹ As the three films cut significantly less than conventional fiction films, a very powerful tool to guide our comprehension of a scene or sequence finds only little use within them. Conventionally, a wide array of techniques within continuity editing ensure us that much of what we ‘get’ out of a filmic

⁷⁰ Nichols, 53. Although style is actually the third element within Cicero’s subdivision of rhetoric, I find it more useful here to first consider the way in which the ‘proofs’ of ambiguity are expressed before turning to the way in which they are ordered. Just like slant, style is omnipresent in film. As a pictorial medium, style in film does not only depend on tones and manners of speech, but on the audiovisual actualisation of a story. As such, it is the very expression. Also see: Chatman, 157.

⁷¹ David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001): 175.

⁷² It has to be noted here however that all four loci of point of view, but especially center, also rest heavily within the films’ arrangements of the plot and will also be discussed with regard to this element.

⁷³ Although it is true that all three films make use of the same cinematic devices, one makes more use of a certain device as the other. *GERRY* makes the most use of long shots or extreme long shots, whether static or somewhat mobile. *ELEPHANT* is especially marked by its use of tracking, or reverse-tracking shots. And *LAST DAYS* is typified by its use of many static or slightly mobile medium or long shots. In referring to a general notion of how these devices contribute to the expression of ambiguity, these specifications can be pretty much neglected. What counts the most here is that they are all used extensively in each of the three films.

⁷⁴ Geoff King “Following in the Footsteps” *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 4, (2006): 78.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 88.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 84.

⁷⁷ Bordwell, Thompson, 285.

⁷⁸ Taubin, 18.

⁷⁹ Bordwell, Thompson, 294.

⁸⁰ André Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol. 1*, 1967, edited by Hugh Gray (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005): 27.

⁸¹ Though I refer here to Van Sant as the filmmaker, it is nice to note that he himself is also responsible for the editing of all three of the films. Van Sant himself is credited for editing all three of the ‘death trilogy’ films.

narrative is not directly presented to us, but merely rests within suggestions that are created by the cut.⁸² On this basis, Bazin noted that it is part of the very nature of editing to rule out ambiguity of expression.⁸³ The well-known experiment of Lev Kuleshov, in which the expression of a face changes according to the image that precedes it, is undoubtedly the clearest demonstration of this effect. From such a perspective, it is not very remarkable that long-takes are widespread within the three films.

Yet it would be too easy to forget that conventional techniques are still present in all three of the films. Although long-takes and sequence shots do constitute the general rule, it is just as much true that there are plenty of examples throughout the ‘death trilogy’ films in which editing techniques do still guide our views and perspectives. After all, *GERRY* still consists of around a hundred shots, shots that are combined with each other by the cut. What is important to recognise however, is that the predominant function of most of these instances of editing is to strengthen our story comprehension instead of overtly suggesting certain ideological positions upon the depicted events. As such, these cuts constitute important but rare instances in which the aesthetic ends differ from their ideological counterpart. It is through their deliverance of context that the spectator can better grasp the proposed ambiguity.

Consider a scene from *LAST DAYS* that contains both the conventional techniques of editing that work to aesthetic ends as well as the avoidance of this particular effect on an ideological level. Still only comprising as little as three shots, the scene entails the subplot of a sales representative that visits Blake’s house in order to sell ad space for the Yellow Pages. In the first shot, which lasts about eight seconds and is framed as a fixed medium shot, Blake is bumping down a staircase with a hunting rifle in his hands while he is wearing a women’s dress, a long winter jacket and a hat. When the doorbell rings, he holds still for a while and points his rifle down the stairs (Image 2.1). Though he mumbles something unintelligible, we can tell by his expression that he is uncomfortable with being interrupted. Then, a cut is made. Composed as a fixed long shot that lasts for about twelve seconds, the following shot holds an elegantly dressed man who is standing in front of a door (Image 2.2). When Blake opens the door slightly, and asks who it is, the man introduces himself as Thadeus Thomas, a representative for the Yellow Pages. In his response, Blake opens the door further.



2.1. Blake points his rifle down the stairs as he hears the sound of a doorbell.



2.2. Thadeus Thomas is standing in front of a door. Just before Blake opens it.



2.3. The long-take depicting the living room encounter between Blake and Thadeus.

Within the juxtaposition of these first two shots of the scene, two conventional uses of continuity editing that help the advancement and plausibility of the plot can be pointed out. The first relies on the construction of time and space. When Blake opens the door in the second shot of the scene, our expectation is confirmed that the man was standing in front of Blake’s house. They are both at the same place, albeit that Blake is inside and Thadeus outside. Thereby, the cut already demonstrated their relation in time and space.⁸⁴ The second effect originates from the first and concerns dramatic heightening; it enforces the uneasiness of the situation. Since we already saw Blake’s confused reaction to the doorbell in the previous shot, we are signalled that Thadeus isn’t visiting the house at a good time. Consequently,

⁸² Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol.1*, 294.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 136.

⁸⁴ Indeed, this effect would be even more remarkable and striking if it turned out that Thadeus was standing in front of another house. Nevertheless, although most spectators probably fail to notice it in this conventional modality, the effect this cut has on the construction of time and space is the same.

we are led to believe that a strange and uncomfortable encounter is about to follow.⁸⁵

In a long-take that lasts a little over six and a half minutes, the final part of the scene shows this encounter between Thadeus and Blake from start to finish (Image 2.3). Framed in a static long shot with deep focus, the shot presents a rather strange talk in which Thadeus asks if Blake wants to continue an advertisement he ran last year. Considering that this is an ad to promote the sales of locomotive parts, it is most probable that Thadeus mistakes Blake for somebody else. Yet as the instable, confused and distracted Blake fails to make this clear, and remains to talk in vague murmur, this is not clarified. Moreover, when Thadeus leaves the room, the shot lasts, showing that Blake is dozing off in his chair. A few seconds after this, Thadeus returns to the room to pick up his copy of the Yellow Pages that he forgot, only to witness that Blake has fallen asleep in such a brief moment. Despite his effort to wake him up, Blake continues to sleep and Thadeus sneaks away silently. The shot lasts for another twenty seconds.

Other than the first two shots of this scene demonstrated, this last segment does not construct any direct or concrete allusions to meaning by means of editing. While the slant of Van Sant could have altered between close-ups and medium shots to enforce the discomfort that is part of Thadeus, or the confusion and instability that is part of Blake, he leaves the camera in one single position, observing the total situation from a steady distance. As we have already seen with regard to the element of invention, one important result of such neutral slant is that the presence of interest-focus is given more weight. It is as if Van Sant puts the audience in the seat of the director. We don't have to 'see it this way', but rather have to 'see it for ourselves'. By not guiding our view, there are more opportunities for ourselves to decide which part of the image has our interest and which meaning we would like to read into it.⁸⁶

Furthermore, as this final shot constitutes the (anti-)climax of both the scene as well as the subplot, it is important to note that its principal purpose is to offer suggestions about Blake's condition. Other than the first two shots of the scene demonstrated, its main function is not to provide us with a plausible context for this strange encounter, but with the very encounter itself. As such, it is all the more typical that this segment of the scene doesn't force its meaning upon us, but that it invites us to do this job ourselves. The issue of the shot is therefore not that it is devoid of meanings and possible implications, but rather that it doesn't spell out a single one of them in big and bright letters.⁸⁷

It is on this basis that the long-take functions as clever rhetoric working to ideological ends. As Bazin already indicated within his elaborations on long-take cinema, simply by not cutting, a more active mental attitude is demanded from the spectator. In being confronted with a long-take, especially one that is shot in deep focus, the spectator, Bazin wrote, "is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives."⁸⁸ So, instead of utilising editing techniques to construct or strengthen its ideological rhetoric by imposing his truth upon the spectator, Van Sant cuts as little as possible in order to achieve the same goal. After all, as we have seen thus far, the very end of his rhetoric is ambiguity in itself.

But what about those other stylistic devices that are available to the director? Although a long-take might not allude to any meaning by means of editing, a filmmaker still presents us with his privileged view by means of cinematography, mise-en-scène and sound. Moreover, because of its duration and implicitness, it is intrinsic to the long-take that it puts an even greater emphasis on these cinematic devices than is usually the case with conventional editing techniques. The ambiguity that prevails in a long-take is therefore not so much an assurance, but rather a possibility and we must be cautious in solely attributing its expression to Van Sant's limited use of the cut. After all, he still has at its disposal a wide variety of means to guide the spectator's perception of a shot, scene or sequence simply by deciding on its physical appearance.⁸⁹

With regard to the element of invention, we have already seen that the three films are not so much out to feign a sense of non-artificiality as most docudramas do, but that they rather concentrate on the very essences of the events they depict. In this respect, two essential notes need to be made here with regard to the content of the images. First, it must not be neglected that Van Sant's slant still presents us with concrete pictorial presentations of locations, events, actors, actions and the likes. However loose and

⁸⁵ Of course, the information that was shown to us in the shots before the first shot of this scene also contributed to the transition and enforcement of this dramatic effect. As spectators, we are already equipped with the knowledge that Blake is not in the best condition.

⁸⁶ Bordwell, Thompson, 286.

⁸⁷ For example, it could indicate the contrast between the 'normal' outside world of the salesman and the 'abnormal' inside world of Blake for instance. It could entail Blake's fatigue with life on the one hand and his strength in still being able to confront it on the other. Or it could represent Blake's good will despite his severe psychological state.

⁸⁸ Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol. 1*, 36.

⁸⁹ Bordwell, Thompson, 286.

random these elements might be modelled upon aspects of historical reality, the films still present us with their very basics. GERRY still presents two casually dressed young men moving through a wide variety of desert-like surroundings. ELEPHANT still presents a suburban American high school compound on a seemingly random morning. And LAST DAYS still shows an old house in and around which its lead character Blake spends his final hours.

The second note however, is that it must also not be neglected that the three film make all the alterations and adjustments to their historical realities they want. As such, they mainly construct their own fictional worlds. As the elements of the *mise-en-scène* are in no way indexical in relation to their historical realities, and are thus only modelled after them in loose and basic manners, all three of the films do rely upon an indexical quality that stands on its own. One that isn't inherently forced to refer to the historical reality in all of its assets, but rather operates in favour of the more general cinematic illusion of reality.⁹⁰ This illusory reality is not necessarily out to make us experience that what is presented to us as if it were historical reality itself, but rather as if it is a fully realized world on its own, one that is full with actual possibilities and possible actualities. Once again, the films do not reflect upon reality, but rather add to its contents. While Blake lives together with four friends in LAST DAYS, Kurt Cobain supposedly lived his last days as a hermit and it is generally known that nobody had seen him the days prior to his death, let alone a sales representative from the Yellow Pages.⁹¹

In line with Van Sant's implicit and neutral slant, the cinematic illusion of this reality is strongly emphasised by the fact that all of the elements of the *mise-en-scène* seem to put a transparent emphasis on the physical reality of the image. The surroundings, props, characters and their expressions all come as they are, or how you might expect them to be. As such, it can even be put that Van Sant's *mise-en-scène* tries hard to negate itself. The mountains, salt flats, sand dunes, rocks and ever-changing skies in GERRY all just seem to 'be' the very fate of both Gerries just as much as the ordinary high school halls and classrooms of ELEPHANT 'are' fate for the students that move through them. What Bazin noted in relation to the films of Vittorio De Sica, also attributes Van Sant. Both try hard to make it seem as if "not a single object in the film is given a prior significance derived from the ideology of the director."⁹² However, although Van Sant might succeed in this illusion, his slant is of course still responsible for all we see.⁹³ Something that is just as true for his use of cinematography.

One of the most significant devices of cinematography that has to be considered in this respect is without doubt Van Sant's extensive use of the mobile frame. While we have so far considered a static long-take in deep focus that steers our perception as little as possible, each of the three films is also marked by their mobile shots with varying depths-of-fields that steer our perception quite literally. This is most evident in the numerous tracking or dolly shots that characterise GERRY, ELEPHANT, and, albeit to a lesser extend, LAST DAYS. In all three of the films, Van Sant's slant of the camera frequently shows the trajectories of certain characters by following them in the side, back or front. During these shots, he often pulls his focus within the same take, switching emphasis between various elements within the image. In presenting these ever changing vantage points, it couldn't be made more evident that, as Bazin noted, even the long-take makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to present.⁹⁴

But what is it, then, that Van Sant is out to present to us with these ever changing vantage points? Although the answers to such a question are of course dependent on the context in which they appear and the event or action they depict, there is one important notion that is inherent to all of the mobile shots within the three films. Before presenting us anything that is part of what the image depicts, the mobile shots in the 'death trilogy' films confront us with the contingency of being. After all, apart from his notions of the 'realistic' value of the long-take, there is little to refute Bazin's statement that the actual

⁹⁰ Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 83-88. Following Allen, cinematic representations offer us projective illusions of reality. The cinematic spectator experiences a film "as if it were a fully realized world and not a representation." Of course, the film has to offer representative images: "The minimum condition for a picture or drama to be experienced as a projective illusion is simply that the form be representational, that is, it must contain pictorial elements that a spectator can recognize as standing for individuals or types of things."

⁹¹ In the 'making of' that is included on the LAST DAYS DVD, Gus van Sant even explains that the scene with Thadeus was not even in the script until Thadeus, who turns out to be a sales representative in real life, turned up at the a fitting session in the town in which they were shooting the film in order to try to sell add space.

⁹² André Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol. 2*, 1971, edited by Hugh Gray (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005): 68.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 68. In describing the *mise-en-scène* of De Sica, Bazin noted the following: "Though this *mise-en-scène* aims at negating itself, at being transparent to the reality it reveals, it would be naive to conclude that it does not exist."

⁹⁴ Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol. 1*, 27.

length of a long-take automatically constitutes an important object of its image.⁹⁵ Because it moves through both time and space, this principle is most ‘visible’ in the mobile frame. In this sense, it is not only important what these images depict, or the way in which they depict it, but also the time they consume in depicting it.

This effect is pretty straightforward in *GERRY*. Ever walking, the mobile frame of the camera frequently follows the two Gerries from the side, back or front in close-up, medium or medium long shots. Most often, both Gerries are in deep focus together with their desert surrounding. On other instances, depth-of-field isolates one of the two, or switches between them. All in all, in continuously presenting the same repetitive action of walking, albeit in different compositions with different depths-of-fields, the main purpose of these mobile long-takes is not so much to present us with the action itself anymore, but much rather to force us to become aware of their duration. Mediated by interest-focus, these mobile long-takes therefore put a strong emphasis on the very experience of being lost. As King noted, the shots “help to create an impression of the experience involved for the characters [...] one that is very much about duration and the seemingly endless nature of the ordeal faced by the protagonists.”⁹⁶

With its many actors who mostly experience ordinary situations, this effect of the mobile long-take has even more applications in *ELEPHANT*. It especially puts a strong focus on the randomness of events. Consider a five-minute take that presents the lunch routine of three girls. The shot starts with an action that is shown earlier in the film, and that is described in a previously cited example: the ogling of three girls towards Nathan. This time, the camera doesn’t follow Nathan but starts with framing the girls. After Nathan has passed by, the camera sticks with the girls on their way to the cafeteria (Image 2.4). As they walk along the food counter, the camera places itself behind it to parallel them (Image 2.5). Quite suddenly however, the camera starts to track an employee who walks into the kitchen to have a secret smoke with a colleague (Image 2.6). As the camera glides along, it then switches to yet another employee who carries a tray of clean dishes back into the cafeteria. There, it locates the three girls again who are now looking for seats. Once seated, the camera circles the girls as they have an idle discussion about friendship. When they are finished, it follows them making their exit, only to briefly linger around another girl who is in a discussion. The shot ends when the three girls enter a restroom.



2.4. *After their ogling towards Nathan, the camera tracks the girls in their walk to the cafeteria.*



2.5. *The camera gets behind the food counter, just before tracking an employee into the kitchen.*



2.6. *In the kitchen, it is briefly shown that this employee has a secret smoke with a colleague.*

Though this mobile long-take mainly seems to direct our attention upon the lunch routine of the three teenage girls, it is striking that Van Sant’s slant also shows a rather random interest in other things that simultaneously happen in and around the cafeteria. On this basis, he emphasizes the infinity of possible subjective perspectives as well as the contingency of being. It becomes less the girls’ teenage insecurities that form the most important subject of the image and more the simultaneity and equality of all actors, actions and events. People who will all be involved in the shooting that will soon follow upon this moment. In creating such a strong focus on the concurrence of being, these mobile long-takes also function as important structuring principles for cinematic time and space. Through its seemingly random depiction, we are constantly made aware of where we are in or around the school and at what time this is within the narrative. As we shall discuss with regard to the element of arrangement, this effect is crucial

⁹⁵ Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol. 1*, 27.

⁹⁶ King, 77.

for the puzzling structure that characterises both *ELEPHANT* as well as *LAST DAYS*.⁹⁷

What is more important to finally note here however, with regard to the element of style, is that in each of the three films, several mobile long-takes are accompanied with non-diegetic soundscapes that add an incomprehensible dimension to the images that are depicted. In *GERRY*, the most obvious example of this is the nine-minute mobile tracking shot that holds both Gerries making their final and most disastrous walk together. This walk is accompanied by a strong and unsettling soundscape full of dense and icy sounds. Sounds that would better suit images of sequence that took place underwater. In *ELEPHANT*, less dark, but still estranging soundscapes occasionally accompany the regular everyday walks of certain characters, but also Eric's horrifying killing spree. Of all three of the films, the use of these kinds of weird and incomprehensible soundscapes is probably most evident in *LAST DAYS*. In almost all of the scenes in which the camera tracks Blake, a strange mix of non-diegetic sounds often confronts us with a totally different dimension to the images that are presented.

While it would lie outside the scope of this study to analyze the realm of psychological modalities regarding our specific responses to sound, it can postulate that the atmospheric soundtracks of the 'death trilogy' films mainly serve to encourage ambiguity over single meanings. As it is aptly described by film scholar Randolph Jordan in his elaboration upon these soundscapes, what we hear often becomes a surface upon the images, one that "frustrates a coherent understanding of the spaces given to us on the image track."⁹⁸ In many instances, the sounds we hear and the images we see remain two separate entities. Where cinematic conventions have it that non-diegetic soundtracks immerse with the images in order to strengthen their meaning, they remain to operate on top of each other in each of the 'death trilogy' films. As a result, they break yet another realm of possible interpretations. Van Sant is not out to directly support the images he depicts, but rather to do the reverse: to challenge their meaning. For him, this once again suits his goal.

In analysing those stylistic principles of the three 'death trilogy' films that are accountable for the prevalence of ambiguity, we have seen that Van Sant's extensive use of the long-take is most crucial. Although Bazin correctly stated that ambiguity in the long-take is not so much an assurance, but rather a possibility⁹⁹, it is evident that Van Sant makes the most of these possibilities by deploying all aspects of film style in favour of a slant that is as neutral as possible. Together, Van Sant's limited use of editing, his self-negating *mise-en-scène*, his seemingly random cinematography and his use of alienating non-diegetic soundscapes, all make sure that singular meanings and definitive truths are ruled out as much as possible. On this basis, the cinematic expression of ambiguity basically boils down to the fact that we, as spectators, are openly invited to join the endless process of interpretation that is sparked by a neutral and implicit slant which in turn emphasises the presence of interest-focus. This is where the created sense of showing over telling finds its origin. Instead of telling us to 'see it this way', all three of the films rather keep encouraging us to 'see it for ourselves'.

Together with these encouragements, the films give free rein to the infinite production of meanings. While a conventional docudrama tries hard to hide the fact that everything that it presents is already an interpretation of 'the facts', the 'death trilogy' films not only openly admit that they are solely capable to offer such interpretations, but they simultaneously invite the spectator to partake in this process. According to Zygmunt Bauman, it is a significant asset of post- or liquid-modern art that it no longer tries to deny or disguise the 'secret' of meaning¹⁰⁰. Where the modern artwork often tried hard to hide or belie the fact that its meaning solely 'exists' in the ongoing process of interpretation, the post- or liquid-modern artwork is eager to reveal this fact by actively inviting the spectator to engage in this process.¹⁰¹ As a result, Bauman states, the artwork "inevitably brings together the questions of objective truth and the subjective grounds of reality."¹⁰²

It needs to be clear however that, in bringing together such questions, this artwork does not offer us any truth at all, or is a denial of truth. In fact, this is quite the contrary. Following Bauman, it is the

⁹⁷ In following the girls taking their seats, the camera shows a glimpse of John who is walking outside. From an earlier enactment of this moment in the film, we already know that this is the moment that the killers enter the school. But as this mostly relies on the way in which the plot is structured, this will be explained more elaborately with regard to the element of arrangement.

⁹⁸ Randolph Jordan, "The Work of Hildegard Westerkamp in the Films of Gus Van Sant: An Interview with the Soundscape Composer (and some added thoughts of my own)" *Offscreen*, vol.11, (2007) – 04-12-2009 - www.offscreen.com/Sound_Issue/jordan_westerkamp.pdf

⁹⁹ Bazin, *What is Cinema Vol. 1*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 107.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 109.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, 111.

strength of contemporary art, and especially to its fictitious forms of the novel, play or film, that it offers a simplifying overview of our historical reality. A focus that cuts the baffling complexity and infinite chaos that is inherent to our post- or liquid-modern world down into somewhat manageable, and more comprehensible portions.¹⁰³ Based upon the notions of fiction that are formulated by Umberto Eco, Bauman states that it is up to the post- or liquid-modern fiction to provide us with a world that can somehow be grasped and comprehended. As it is put by Eco himself, such narratives “allow us to concentrate on a finite, enclosed world, very similar to ours but ontologically poorer. Since we cannot wander outside its boundaries, we are led to explore it in depth.”¹⁰⁴

It is here, within this highly inferential and interpretative state that the truth of the three films resides. Yet as Bauman emphasizes, this truth must be seen from a post- or liquid-modern perspective, one that radically differs from the modern conception of truth. It is a truth without consensus, without any endorsing function and with only little disputational use.¹⁰⁵ A truth that will continue to change in our minds, even when the films are finished. As such, it is a truth that is just as much a part of our individual selves as it is Van Sant’s or the films’. In invoking the company of other truths from the start, it is a truth that is plural *an sich*, and it flourishes by adding to its multitude.¹⁰⁶ Of course, such truths do not only come into virtue through cinematic expression. They are just as much a part of the way in which a plot is arranged. After all, as Bordwell points out: it is the interaction between the stylistic pattering of a film and its formal arrangement that constitutes its very narration.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 124.

¹⁰⁴ Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994): 85.

¹⁰⁵ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 125.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 124-125.

¹⁰⁷ Bordwell, 110.

Arrangement: structuring the contingency of being

As we have thus far considered the invention and expression of ‘proofs’ of ambiguity in the ‘death trilogy’ films, it is key that these ‘proofs’ are ordered in a way that best suit its delivery. Although it is already indicated that the films are quite different from each other in this respect because of their dissimilarities in characters and plot events, they do share the same underlying perspective. Where issues are typically placed within a ‘black or white’ frame within traditional rhetoric,¹⁰⁸ the ‘death trilogy’ films do the exact opposite. Instead of opposing what is ‘right’ to what is ‘wrong’ with regard to conventional notions of cause and effect, each film rather proposes open-ended and indecisive perspectives upon the matters it depicts. In order to fully understand the way in which the films accomplish this, the specific arrangement of their ‘proofs’ has to be examined in more detail.

With regard to fiction film, such an analysis must not so much concern the story that we as an audience are led to comprehend, but rather the specific structure of the plot that forms the very foundation for our story-comprehension. To put it in the same Russian formalist terms as David Bordwell: in order to grasp the *fabula* of a film, our attention needs to go out to the specific patterning of its *syuzhet*.¹⁰⁹ Where *fabula* concerns the large and broad state of the story affairs and events that we are led to infer, *syuzhet* concerns the way in which the plot actions are organized within the narrative that is presented to us. As these plot actions constitute the ‘proofs’ of any rhetoric in fiction film, both aesthetic as well as ideological, a film’s plot structure can best be understood as its abstract layout. An arrangement scheme in which the various ‘proofs’ are managed and dosed.

Throughout the history of cinema, many theorists, filmmakers and screenwriters have proposed a wide variety of models to make our comprehension of plot structures more precise. Of these models, Bordwell prefers to think in terms of the four-part structure which is proposed by Kristin Thompson.¹¹⁰ According to this model, every plot of a feature film tends to be constructed in four parts that each take up a distinct stage within the plot’s development. These are: a Setup, a Complicating Action, a Development and a Climax.¹¹¹ In addition to these four sections, a fifth part might be identified, if present, in the form of an Epilogue. Next to their average duration of 20 to 30 minutes within a two-hour film, the four or five parts are primarily defined by the definitions, redefinitions and accomplishments of a protagonist’s goals.

According to Bordwell, Thompson’s account can be considered functionalist because it is based on major changes within the plot action, instead of external factors such as reel length, exact minute measurement or page numbers. In this respect, the model allows itself to be somewhat flexible, as it agrees that not all parts of a plot take up the same proportion in each and every film.¹¹² Another advantage of Thompson’s model that Bordwell mentions is that it is far more specific than the classic three-act structure, which is most commonly used within the film industry. Not only does it distinguish a fourth and even a fifth part, it is also more specific in describing the ‘plot twists’ on which these parts are based.¹¹³ Furthermore, Bordwell stresses that even though the model is mainly based on traditional Hollywood filmmaking, it can also apply to films that operate outside of this tradition.¹¹⁴

These benefits notwithstanding, Thompson’s account of plot structure does raise some intriguing issues when we try to apply it to the ‘death trilogy’ films. Each in their own way, not one of the three films seems to fit the model in a neat and perfect manner. This even goes for GERRY, which is the only one of the three with a clear linear plot structure and lead characters that are driven by a fixed goal. GERRY’s issue with regard to Thompson model is mainly the proportioning of each section. Even though the four plot sections of Thompson’s model can be identified in GERRY, the film clearly follows its own rules in deciding each section’s share of its total running time of 103 minutes.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ Nichols, 56.

¹⁰⁹ Bordwell, 98.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, 105.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, 105-106.

¹¹² Ibidem, 106.

¹¹³ Ibidem, 106. Bordwell puts this as follows: “Instead of describing the events that lead into the next act as incidents that ‘spin the action in a new direction’, the most common formula for a ‘plot point’, [Kristin Thompson] is able to specify that the principal character will define or change the relevant goals.”

¹¹⁴ Ibidem, 110. First, Bordwell suggests that if Francis Vanoye could trace the classic three-act structure to the films of Francois Truffaut, André Téchiné or Claude Autant-Lara, the four-act structure could just as easily apply to these films. Second, he demonstrates that even an experimental film such as MEMENTO (Christopher Nolan, 2000), which makes use of a reversed *syuzhet*, obeys the four-part template. To this he adds: “Odd as it sounds, even telling the story backward can respect canonical plot architecture.”

¹¹⁵ DVD *Gerry* (2002), Buena Vista Home Entertainment, Inc, 2003. Total running time is taken from DVD and includes leaders, both blue title screens and end credits.

The first part of *GERRY* only takes around nine minutes where it generally consumes around twenty to thirty.¹¹⁶ Termed the Setup by Thompson, the section constitutes the part of the film in which its main characters and their initial goal gets introduced. Since *GERRY*'s story is essentially very minimalistic and straightforward, reason has it that its Setup does not comprise much information or action. Two young and unequipped men who call one another Gerry drive into the desert to embark on a small afternoon hike in order to have a look at "a thing". As such, the section already ends after the two men have a very brief encounter with a mother with two kids. In order to avoid any more of such signs of civilisation, they decide to trade the tourist trail for an alternative route. Here, the film changes over into the second plot section.

Merely consuming eleven instead of the usual forty to sixty minutes¹¹⁷, the relative shortness of *GERRY*'s Complicating Action section can be seen as even more remarkable than the short duration of the Setup. As Bordwell characterizes the Complicating Action as a 'counter-setup', it is the part of the film in which the initial goals and circumstances get frustrated and redefined.¹¹⁸ Again, this is quite simple for *GERRY*. The section starts at the first moment that the two men get a hunch they might have gotten lost. When this hunch changes into certainty a few moments later, their initial plan must be altered. After the two Geries have to spend the night out in the open desert, it is not 'the thing' anymore that they will have to look for, but rather their way out of the desert.

Their attempts to do this constitute the Development section, which thus already starts at 22 minutes, where it generally starts at a film's midpoint.¹¹⁹ A film's Development keeps the newly defined goal from being achieved. In the days that follow on the moment they got lost, the two men undertake great efforts to survive and find their way out of the desert. Unfortunately, this is without any success. Besides their incessant walks, the two men split up, to join each other later. They trace animal tracks, but walk the wrong direction. And they try to reconstruct their route, but fail. Next to keeping such efforts unfruitful, the Development is also characterised for its emphasis on subplots, character revelations and delays.¹²⁰ An example of such a subplot is when Affleck's character is faced with the challenge of being rock marooned. Furthermore, the characters' frustration with the situation steadily grows. Typically, the Development ends with an action that puts the goal's achievement into a final crisis. In *GERRY*, this constitutes a walking sequence over a salt flat that lasts for nine minutes. With great pain, slowly putting one foot in front of the other, it can't get any darker for the two men.

In the final section of the film termed the Climax, the protagonists finally achieve, or fail to achieve, their goal. Generally taking about fifteen to twenty minutes, this section is once again much shorter than usual as it only lasts for eight minutes before the end titles begin. When the two worn-out men are lying on their backs on the salt flat, unable to go any further, they have a small talk in which they joke about the failure of their hike. As Affleck's Gerry reaches out to Damon's Gerry, whispering something unintelligible, Damon's character suddenly starts to strangle Affleck's Gerry to death. As he falls to sleep after this, speeded up sequences of clouds that hover over desert landscapes follow. When he wakes up again, he slowly continues his hike, only to discover that a road is not far from the spot where he just murdered his friend. Speeding up his pace, a cut is made to the last shot of the film that holds him in the backseat of a car. A passerby has picked him up. There is no Epilogue.

Since *GERRY*'s Development section consumes more than two thirds of the film, it is clear that it cannot match Thompson's model without making some claim to its flexibility. Though this might seem like a minor stretch, this unconventionality is of particular importance to the film's rhetoric. It signifies that it is not Van Sant's aim to reveal or explain the 'how' and 'why' of this historical event, but to rather stick with the experience of 'being lost in the desert' itself. Spending nearly its entire total running time to the Development, the film uses most of its time to stress the characters' experiences with being astray. As such, its Setup, Complicating Action and Climax encapsulate only that which is most important for our comprehension of the fabula. They solely present us with the start of the hike, the act of becoming lost, the death and the escape. Any more explanations, intentions or feelings that took place before and after the historical event are left untouched.

While *GERRY* can still rely on the flexibility of Thompson's model, *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS* ask for a far more radical departure from her account. Both films give rise to more complicated issues with regard to conventional plot structures than it is the case with *GERRY*. What does remain however, is

¹¹⁶ This running time includes the leaders and the blue title screen.

¹¹⁷ Bordwell, 106-107. In his analysis of *YOU'VE GOT MAIL* (1998), Bordwell defines the traditional Complicating Action section as lasting until the midpoint, or 60-minute mark of a two-hour film.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 105.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 106-107.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, 105.

that both of these films do seem to follow the same basic principle that can also be pointed out in *GERRY*. In both *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS*, most of the plot time is consumed by the presentation of acts of ‘being’ instead of ‘becoming’, ‘redefining’ or ‘achieving’. But where *GERRY* still evolves around the four major plot changes on which the sections of Thompson’s model are based, *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS* each follow a different trail.

Let us first consider *LAST DAYS*. Its main difference from *GERRY* resides in the fact that its protagonist Blake does not have one main or fixed goal. Together with many small and random actions that stand alone such as wandering, swimming, sleeping, preparing food, eating, getting dressed, making music or mumbling to a salesman, there are only a few actions that seem to evolve around one and the same purpose. These concern that Blake is hiding for the people that he doesn’t want to confront, whether this is on the phone, in or around his house, or during a face-to-face conversation. But as these actions fail to develop or evolve, they do not comprise a fixed goal for Blake, but much rather another revelation about his condition and status. He doesn’t want to be bothered, but there are a lot of people that seem to want something from him.

All in all, Blake’s main purpose or goal throughout the biggest part of *LAST DAYS* basically boils down to ‘being alive’, albeit in a particular state of frenzy. In this respect, it is hard to even identify a Setup or Complicating Action as there simply is nothing more to set up than the character itself, let alone that there is any goal that can be redefined, countered or reversed. Consequently, both of these sections actually merge together into one major Development section. The only exception to this is the brief Climax of the films, in which it is shown that Blake has taken his own life. Everything that is presented to us in *LAST DAYS* evolves around various revelations about Blake’s last living days on earth.

In constituting a network narrative, such a heavy reliance on revelations is even more radical in *ELEPHANT*.¹²¹ Instead of depicting one or two protagonists with or without fixed goals, *ELEPHANT* introduces and follows twelve characters that are in or around a high school on the day of the shooting. Bound together within the frame of this location, the time span of a morning, and the tragic event with which it ends, all that is presented to us is a selection of random high school experiences. Notwithstanding their possible deaths at the end of the film, not one of these characters has a fixed goal that is countered, let alone achieved after that. Most of these subplots merely evolve around their daily routines. Eli simply takes pictures, develops them and receives some compliments. Though John seems to have a tough time in handling the burden of a drinking dad, we fail to learn if or how he will overcome this. And even though we learn of Eric’s and Alex’ plan to carry out a high school shooting, the structure of their subplot lacks any redefinition or frustration. The whole preparation and execution of their plan simply proceeds as they had wished.

As we have already briefly touched upon with regards to the element of style, an important distraction from such absences of character goals in *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS* are the films’ clever uses of repetitions of moments. Here, an important aspect of art cinema as Bordwell defines it plays an important role. According to Bordwell, many art films are characterised by their creation of what he terms a “game of form.”¹²² In this ‘game’, the structure of the film not only invites the spectator to construct the fabula through what is presented in its syuzhet, but it also challenges us to make sense of the ongoing narration.¹²³ While there are many ways to construct such an effect, both *LAST DAYS* and *ELEPHANT* do this by creating temporal jigsaw puzzles.

Again, as a network narrative, this is most evident in *ELEPHANT*. Here, much of our interest in the development of the film’s plot is raised by the challenge to grasp and uncover its complex network of characters, spaces and time frames. As a result, it is not so much the developments of characters’ goals that keep us locked to the screen, but much more the specific unfolding of its characters’ paths. By following their trajectories through time and space and by registering, matching, and comparing the repeated moments and scenes with one another, we are compelled to unravel the narrative’s web.¹²⁴ Which characters are connected to what other characters? At what point in time are they located? And who will cross whose path?

Consider *ELEPHANT*’s three repeating corridor scenes that feature Eli, John and Michelle. At around nineteen minutes into the film, there is a scene in which Eli walks through a long and empty

¹²¹ Bordwell, 191. Bordwell speaks of a network narrative if its “characters, however they’re knit together, have strong diverging purposes and projects, and these intersect only occasionally – often accidentally.”

¹²² *Ibidem*, 165.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 165.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, 20. Bordwell also describes this effect in relation to a basic network narrative: “Goal driven or not, characters follow discrete trajectories, often acting in ignorance of their counterparts. The intersections of the strangers will provide the drama, and the network.”

corridor inside the school. As the camera follows him in a reverse tracking shot, he meets John halfway. They greet, have a small chat and Eli takes John's picture (Image 3.1). At this moment, a girl in a red sweater rushes by. After the picture is taken, John and Eli each go their separate ways. But instead of continuing to follow Eli, the camera switches to John and follows him outside the school. Here, John plays with a dog and witnesses that the two killers, Eric and Alex, enter the school (Image 3.2). At around 35 minutes into film, the same meeting between John and Eli is shown again, albeit from exactly the reverse angle (Image 3.3). Since we have been introduced to Michelle by now, we can recognise her as the girl in the red sweater. When the boys split up again, the camera now sticks with Eli, who is on his way to the library (Image 3.4). At around 53 minutes the meeting between John and Eli is shown a third and final time (Image 3.5). As the camera tracks Michelle this time, we learn that she rushes by so she would be on time for her library job (Image 3.6).



3.1. At around 19 minutes into the film. The first corridor scene shows that Eli takes John's picture.



3.2. After this, the camera follows John outside, where he witnesses that Eric and Alex enter the school.



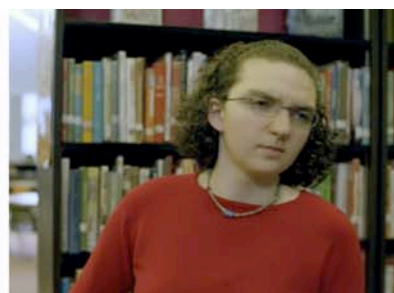
3.3. 35 minutes into the film. The second corridor scene shows the same meeting.



3.4. Now, the camera sticks with Eli, who goes to the library.



3.5. 53 minutes into the film, the meeting between John and Eli is shown a third and final time.



3.6. This time, the camera follows Michelle into the library. Where she hears the sound of a loading gun.

As these scenes illustrate, the witted division of knowledge within *ELEPHANT*'s plot, challenges us to actively join the construction of the day of the shootings. Presented early within the film's plot, as it actually takes place late within its story, the presentation of John witnessing the two killers entering the school in the first scene is most crucial. From this scene, we do not only become aware of the fact *that* killers enter the school, but we also learn *where* and *when* this takes place in cinematic time and space. As this moment is shown various times throughout the film, and also connects to other scenes and instances, for example to the lunch scene that was cited earlier with regard to the element of style¹²⁵, the moment functions as a temporal and spatial beacon throughout the film. It allows us to identify the space and moment in which the killers enter the school.

Consequently, when Eli is on his way to the library in the second corridor scene, we are already aware of the potential danger that surrounds him. Around the time he has reached the library, we already know that the killers will not be far away. This also applies to the final corridor scene from which we

¹²⁵ The moment that John witnesses the killers entering the school is also shown in the earlier described scene in which the camera follows the three girls on their lunch routine. As the camera circles them when they take their seats, the girls witness through the window that John is walking outside, greeting his dog. Since this lunch scene takes place later within the plot, we are once again signalled that the killers have already entered the school by the time that the girls have finished their lunch.

learn that Michelle is also on her way to the library. Moreover, at the end of this scene, this potential danger gets affirmed by an off screen sound effect of a loading gun. As Michelle looks around, a cut is made to a scene that holds an earlier place within the narrative. It depicts Eric and Alex at home, making their final arrangements. While we already know that Michelle and Eli are both going to be among their victims, they are still in the phase of perpetration, offering a precursor to the events that are about to follow that operates somewhat subsequent to a certain extent.

Although *LAST DAYS* does not constitute such a complex network narrative as *ELEPHANT*, its use of repetitions in time and space has a similar effect. In presenting moments out of Blake's final days at a random order, we are triggered to figure out most of the fabula's linearity and coherence ourselves. The first time that we get confronted with this is when one of Blake's friends hears a 'Boyz II Men' song coming from a room in the house. As she opens the door, Blake, who is dressed in a women's dress, falls onto the floor like a lifeless puppet (Image 3.7). Apparently, he leaned against the other side of the door, but because the scene ends here, this is not explained. In the scene that follows, another friend of Blake invites two Mormon boys inside to talk about their religion. This encounter is briefly intersected in the middle, in which it is presented that Blake switches on a television while he is wearing the same women's dress. Returning to Blake once more in between the Mormon scene, he slowly settles himself on the floor. On the television set, the same 'Boyz II Men' song plays. Just after Blake has fallen asleep with his back against the door, the door opens and he drops to his side. It is the same action that we have seen before, only from another position (Image 3.9).



3.7. *As Blake's friend opens the door from which she hears loud music. Blake falls to the floor.*



3.8. *After this shot. A scene is presented in which another friend of Blake gets a visit by two Mormons*



3.9. *In between the Mormon scene, we get presented with another angle on Blake's door incident.*

Thanks to this final scene, we have not only learned how the situation that we saw earlier originated, but also how it was resolved. After Blake has fallen to the floor, his friend checks his pulse and puts him back into his position. Furthermore, we learn that the Mormon encounter and Blake's door incident actually took place within totally different timeframes. This becomes even more evident in a later scene in which Blake's friend waves the two Mormon boys goodbye. In this scene it is shown to us that Blake is already outside when this happens, undertaking great effort to not get seen. And instead of wearing a women's dress, he wears a hooded winter jacket, ripped jeans and a vest. An outfit we see him put on in yet another scene, which again has a connection with still another one.

In total, from this first repetition of a presented action, we are made aware of the fact that *LAST DAYS* is structured as if it were a collage. One that we can figure out by giving great care to Blake's appearances, the situations he is in and the locations he is at. But this is where *LAST DAYS* significantly differs from *ELEPHANT*. Where all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place at the end of *ELEPHANT* as we learn who is where before and after the shooting, the puzzle presented in *LAST DAYS* never really fits. We are never really sure when certain plot events occur within the linearity of the fabula. This is mostly a result of the fact that there are no clear beacons in each shot or scene, leaving multiple options open. As a result, it is quite crucial that it is still left uncertain which of the depicted events actually was Blake's last. Not surprisingly, with regard to the death of Kurt Cobain, it is this information that is most debated out in the discourse at large.

Having thus far primarily described the aesthetic ends of the repetitions of moments in time and space throughout *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS*, it is crucial to note that they simultaneously present us with two rather obvious references that seem to work directly in support of the films' ideological ends. Next to arousing our interest to infer and interpret the network of the narrative as well as its linearity and coherence, the various repetitions in time and space in *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS* also quite literally

emphasize the many different sides and angles to an event or action.¹²⁶ Instead of depicting an event from one angle, in a single order within a single sequence, Van Sant presents certain events from different angles within different sequences and positions in the plot. As such, he quite obviously accentuates that what Bauman would define as the “inexhaustibility of the realm of the possible”.¹²⁷

The second ideological reference once more refers to the contingency that is inherent to life. In depicting characters that fail to be goal-driven, and who seem to meet each other rather randomly, with or without knowing each other, the coincidences that are a part of life are overtly emphasized. Throughout both films, it is as if any form of plot causality is replaced by contingency.¹²⁸ In *ELEPHANT* for example, it is merely good fortune that John happens to be outside when the two killers enter the school, just as much as it is bad luck that Eli or Michelle happen to be inside. Such is the randomness of life. Some people simply end up being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Within all of the plot structure principles that we have discussed with regard to the element of arrangement, we can identify a basic principle that is emphasized by Zygmunt Bauman as an important aspect of the post- or liquid-modern art of drama. All three of the films refuse to play by the rules of catharsis.¹²⁹ As proposed within the Aristotelian theories of drama, catharsis represents the solving, or ‘cleaning’, of a protagonist’s problems. Conventional narratives generally show us characters that are stuck in some form of abnormality that they will somehow overcome in the end. Only after lots of struggle and suffering, the character’s problems get resolved and his or her status returns to the normal condition. The moral rule gets restored. According to Bauman however, this is not the case in the post- or liquid-modern narratives for the very simple reason that it’s creators do not believe in a ‘normal’ as opposed to an ‘abnormal’ situation:

What we experience as a difficult situation, uncertainty, is not abnormality, but a permanent human condition. Everything is ambiguous, there is no authoritative solution in the end of the postmodern drama, novel and film. Instead, people are told that if they were seeking certainty and full proof answers, this search was in vain.¹³⁰

In referring to the three films’ plot structures as frameworks of accidental happenings, it is evident that this lack of catharsis applies to all of them. Significantly enough, the one section with the best capacity to restore all moral rules is absent in all three of them. According to Bordwell, it is especially an Epilogue that can assure us that a stable or normal situation has been achieved.¹³¹ But not one of the three films returns to the ‘stable’ or ‘normal’ situation with which it began, nor do they restore any moral rule. At the end of *GERRY*, we do not learn how Damon’s character will resume his life after such a traumatic experience. In *LAST DAYS*, we do not learn what pushed Blake over the edge or how and if his acquaintances will find peace with it. And at the end of *ELEPHANT*, an image of clouds passing by leaves us without knowing the killers’ intentions, let alone how everyone involved dealt with this tragedy. While these are all aspects on which lots of knowledge exists out in the discourse at large, the films’ Climaxes once again leave us in uncertainty. It is not the solution, or normality, that remains at the end of each film, but ambiguity.

Again, this is the suasion of the ‘death trilogy’ films. By emphasizing the infinite possibilities that are inherent to the contingent nature of life, the films liberate the notion of truth from the tyranny of consensus by making it clear that absolute truth simply does not exist. In primarily presenting a seemingly random selection of moments of events that all somehow prelude an historical event that ends with death, each of the three films does not supply us with answers, but rather tries to engage us in the endless process of interpretation. While the films do supply us with reference points by presenting a basic sense of what these experiences might have been like, their structures also simultaneously encourage us to answer this question ourselves. Secluded and cut loose from any additional and superfluous meanings from the outside world, the films’ offer a focus to subjectively explore the contingency of being.

¹²⁶ Here, ‘angle’ or ‘side’ are not meant as metaphors for the total point-of-view, but rather as the narrator’s slant.

¹²⁷ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 106.

¹²⁸ Bordwell, 204. This effect is also described by Bordwell. When characters are not goal driven and mostly act as strangers to each other, Bordwell states that any causality is replaced by contingency.

¹²⁹ Timo Cantell, Poul Poder Pedersen, “Modernity, Postmodernity and Ethics: An interview with Zygmunt Bauman” *Telos*, nr. 93, (1992): 139.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, 139.

¹³¹ Bordwell, 106.

Conclusion: a rhetoric of ambiguity

By analysing Gus van Sant's 'death trilogy' with regard to the rhetorical divisions of invention, style and arrangement, this study has created extensive insights into those filmic principles that govern the films' construction of both meaning and truth. In utilizing David Bordwell's precise method of analysis in conjunction with Zygmunt Bauman's theory on ambiguous post-, or liquid-modern art and fiction, the analysis has explained how ambiguity is constituted and regulated in all three of the films. Departing from the notion that docudramas offer a particular view or position upon the historical events they depict, it has been made evident that the prevalence of this ambiguity in each of the three films constitutes the very end of their rhetorical address. On this basis, GERRY, ELEPHANT and LAST DAYS can all be seen to function as a rhetoric of ambiguity.

Having reached the end of the analysis, it can be stated with certainty that this rhetoric of ambiguity constitutes the core essence of the films' unconventional take on the docudrama. While a conventional docudrama is out to suade its audience of particular answers and explanations with regard to the actuality it depicts, the 'death trilogy' films subtly propose that such answers will never be found, let alone be grasped within a medium as film. Throughout the course of this analysis, it has become clear that those basic strategies of conventional docudrama filmmaking that are generally responsible for the success of its rhetorical address, are all somehow reversed in each of the 'death trilogy' films. Evidently, these strategies refer to those very filmic principles that are responsible for the construction of both meaning and truth.

First, it has been made clear that the 'death trilogy' films do not try to feign a sense of non-artificiality or indexicality like conventional docudramas do, but that they have cut the umbilical cord between them and the historical realities they depict. Although all three of the films do rely upon cinema's illusion of reality, this illusion solely operates in favour of their own, mostly self-sufficient, fictional and enclosed worlds. Worlds that are certainly based upon actuality, but are not, and do not aim to be, exact re-creations of them. As such, the films overtly enjoy the alterations they can make to historical reality. While a conventional docudrama is thus marked by its effort to feign a world that resembles actuality, the 'death trilogy' films present us with simulated worlds that are filled with actual possibilities and possible actualities.

Next to freeing themselves from the burden of factuality, the three films overtly allow ambiguity to prosper within their very presentation. While a conventional docudrama is generally keen to rule out as much ambiguity as possible in order to strengthen the construction of meaning which in turn supports its argument, the 'death trilogy' films operate in the exact opposite manner in order to achieve the same goal. Through a seemingly impartial point of view that is heavily dependent upon Van Sant's extensive use of the long-take, the films merely seem to *show* or *present* their narratives to us instead of actually *telling* them. As a result, we keep getting invited to join the process of interpretation. These invitations also derive from the ways in which the films' plots are structured. Each in their own way, the films' plot structures encourage us to subjectively explore the contingent and ambiguous states of being. Put together, all these filmic principles make sure that the 'death trilogy' films do not tell us to 'see it this way' like conventional docudramas do, but to 'see it for ourselves'.

In accordance with Bauman's theory on post-, or liquid modern art, we have seen that it is here, within this highly interpretative and tacit state that the truth of the films resides. But this truth radically differs from its modern counterpart. It is a truth that is free of consensus and plural *an sich* as it inherently invokes the company of other truths. These truths arise from the films' revelation of those devices that are generally responsible for the construction of truth. In reversing those strategies that constitute the rhetoric of most conventional docudramas, the films also uncover those principles that usually conceal the very construction of meaning and truth. As we are actively engaged in the endless process of interpretation, the films reveal that meaning and truth have always solely 'existed' within this process, and that it dies together with it. As a result, they do exactly that which Bauman noted as essential to the ambiguous artwork: they bring together questions of objective truth and the subjective grounds of reality.¹³²

From this perspective, it can be put that all three of the 'death trilogy' films do not demand or impose that special kind of suspension of disbelief that Steve Lipkin pointed out as essential to the docudrama, but that they rather prefer an opposite attitude. If we, as spectators, want to make use out of the films, we are not at all requested to accept that everything that is presented to us is the closest approach to truth. Instead, we are asked to question such truth in itself. In stimulating the process of meaning making, each of the three 'death trilogy' films not only allows us to formulate our own answers

¹³² Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 106.

with regard to the historical events they depict, but also makes it clear to us that these are in fact the most true answers that there will ever be. That we will never know exactly what happened and why it happened, but that we are allowed to formulate our own suggestions.

According to Bauman, this questioning of truth and certainty makes ambiguous post- or liquid-modern art and fiction a subversive and emancipative force.¹³³ Elaborating upon this notion, it can be put, then, that this subversiveness gains in significance whenever this kind of ambiguity constitutes the very argument of a docudrama. As a hybrid type of film that operates in between fiction and historical reality, the docudrama automatically operates within the discourse of the historical event it depicts. Within this discourse, it is generally expected that the film will offer answers and explanations. When a film's answer comprises the notion that all previously formulated, as well as all future answers should be questioned endlessly, it singlehandedly challenges all these established truths by making it clear that they too are in fact merely suggestions instead of full proof explanations. Although this rule is most evident in *ELEPHANT* and *LAST DAYS*, as they both depict events that are widely known and still debated today, it even attributes to *GERRY*. After all, even though the desert tragedy might not be widely known, it does have its own prefilmic discourse.

Although it has come to light that some of the filmic principles that constitute and regulate the films' ambiguity are not particularly new to cinema,¹³⁴ we can postulate that the specific combination of these principles can certainly be labelled as new to the form of the docudrama. As it is already pointed out in the introduction, Van Sant's 'death trilogy' films characterise a particular shift within docudrama filmmaking that has started over the past decade. A shift in which Lipkin's typical kind of suspension of disbelief is often reversed or taken with a grain of salt. Evidently, this tendency constitutes the very reason that the 'death trilogy' films have been analysed in conjunction with Bauman's theory on post- and liquid-modern art. Offering very clear examples of ambiguous docudramas, the 'death trilogy' films must be seen as reflections of a condition that characterizes our current society and the artistic expressions that are produced within it.

While it is true that this study falls somewhat short in offering a detailed historical context, its extensive analysis has certainly taken a first step in generating our understanding of the phenomenon of ambiguous expression in the docudrama. Departing from David Bordwell's precise method of film analysis that stems from his *Poetics of Cinema*, the analysis of the three 'death trilogy' films has created extensive insights into the way in which the films are formed and how this affects their construction of both meaning and truth. It is has thereby shown to be crucial to base the analysis upon the compositional principle of rhetoric. Although it might seem quite contradictory to Bordwell's values and beliefs of film analysis, this study has proven that it bares fruit to jump into such an analysis with a preconceived idea or sense of what the films are trying to tell us. In pointing out their ends, you can better explain the very way in which the films function. André Bazin is right: new subject matter demands new form, and to understand what a film is trying to tell us, is indeed to know how it is telling it.

¹³³ Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 106.

¹³⁴ This notion refers to those instances in which the stylistics of the three 'death trilogy' films were compared similar with Bazin's statements that referred to such directors as Vittorio De Sica, Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau or Robert Flaherty.

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