

Trauma at the Movies: Cinematic Memories of Columbine

Johannes Vith

ABSTRACT: The Columbine High School shooting of 1999 has become a cultural icon for school shootings in the United States and beyond. Still, there are only a few cinematic adaptations of it. This article addresses how these movies nonetheless impact the culture of remembering Columbine. It argues that films about Columbine use different strategies to mediate the trauma of the shooting that are closely related to framing or recreating trauma. In addition, as traumatic events such as Columbine often lack clear causes and effects, this article will argue that film is particularly effective in mediating trauma.

KEYWORDS: Columbine High School shooting; trauma film; *Bowling for Columbine*; *Elephant*; trauma studies; Columbine; school shootings

Restoring our belief in the world—this is the power
of modern cinema (when it stops being bad).
(Deleuze, *Cinema* 172)

Introduction

When two high school students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, attacked Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999, the world was in shock. The shooting left fifteen people dead, including the two perpetrators.¹ While quantifying such events seems impossible, Columbine stood out as the deadliest school shooting up to that point (Larkin 1311).² Harris and Klebold's suicides and undisclosed motives complicated ensuing discussions of cause and effect. This led to questions regarding the placement of blame and whether the shooting could have been averted. However, for the vast majority of people in the US, who were not directly affected by the shooting, the most pressing question seems to have been whether a shooting similar to Columbine could also happen in other communities throughout the country.³

¹ Hereafter, I will refer to the Columbine High School shooting mostly as 'Columbine' or 'the shooting.'

² Four mass shootings in educational facilities have since exceeded Columbine's death toll: the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007 (with 33 fatalities), the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 (with 28 fatalities), the Stoneman Douglas High school shooting (better known as the Parkland shooting) in 2018 (with 17 fatalities), and most recently the Robb Elementary School shooting in 2022 (with 22 fatalities).

³ One central reason for this was that several of the school shootings leading up to and including Columbine took place in middle-class suburban high schools or in predominantly white, southern communities (Springhall 626). For context, gang-related violence, which is another major source of mass shootings, does not garner similar media attention. In contrast to school shootings, gang-related mass shootings mostly occur in inner city areas and predominantly affect minority populations. For a largely white, middle-class population within US society, a perceived proximity to school shootings (both racial and spatial) resulted in the fear of mimetic violence.

The news media were quick to address and exploit Columbine. Different news media outlets extensively covered the shooting (Lawrence 100). In turn, it became the largest news story of the year in the US, which 68% of Americans followed very closely (Pew Research Center). For political scientist Regina Lawrence, Columbine was more than just a long-running sensational news story; it also came to symbolize both the issue of youth violence as well as the media's involvement in shaping public problems (91-92). The media introduced a wide array of narratives of explanation for the shooting, ranging from mental health and bullying to gun laws and video games (see Lawrence 107). Consequently, the shooting was vital in shaping the public discourses surrounding the aforementioned issues in the US. Most prominently, though, Columbine was instrumental in shaping discussions of juvenile delinquency, gun control, and general social problems related to teenagers and high schools in the US and beyond (see Muschert, "Frame-Changing" 164). As such, the shooting at Columbine has become a cultural symbol and a reference point for school shootings in general (Lawrence 91; Larkin 1311-14). In turn, it has also become a marker of the trauma of school shootings. Since the perpetrators' ultimate motives have remained in the dark, attempts to explain the various potential reasons for the shooting in a non-sensationalist way were often insufficient in meeting the US general public's demand for clear answers. This subsequent lack of easy answers resulted in a need to narrativize the event. Apart from the news media, various other genres of storytelling also responded to this need, including the film industry.

This article examines the cinematic narrativization of the Columbine High School shooting and its traumatic unfolding. Especially in the weeks following the shooting, the news coverage on TV significantly shaped the narrative discourse surrounding Columbine. Surveillance footage of the shooting was televised repeatedly and came to (visually) support various narratives of explanation. The same footage also served as a visual reference point for a small number of films, all of which respond to and differ from the news coverage and its narratives of explanation. This article will address how these movies impact the culture of remembering Columbine. Moreover, films about Columbine use different strategies to mediate the trauma of the shooting and thereby actively contribute to the memory culture surrounding school shootings. These strategies range from revisiting Columbine High School after the shooting to cinematically reenacting (parts of) it. In these cases, the mediation of Columbine is strongly related to framing the trauma of the shooting for political purposes or recreating it to present audiences with new perspectives on the shooting itself. To expound on these arguments, I will discuss Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and their strategies in mediating and framing Columbine. In addition, as traumatic events such as Columbine invite narrativization, this article will show that the medium film is very effective in mediating trauma. The films on Columbine significantly contribute to the societal discourse on and memory culture of this traumatic school shooting. By revisiting, mediating, framing, or merely alluding to the shooting, these films keep Columbine part of the conversation around school shootings more than twenty years after it happened.

The Cinematic Mediation of Trauma

Cinema has a long history of mediating traumatic events, occurring across different genres. In recent decades, scholars have introduced the concept of trauma cinema as an umbrella term for films that depict traumatic events. In this sense, Janet Walker defines trauma cinema as a loose category of films that address “a world shattering event,” the impact of which might occur either on a personal or a public level (19). The discourse surrounding cinematic depictions of trauma usually focuses either on episodes of immense violence in contemporary history, such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Vietnam War, and other events where humanity has revealed its worst, or on more personal accounts of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. The focus of these films lies in the mediation of events that may or may not be part of the public discourse. In the process, they highlight aspects of traumatic events that might otherwise remain hidden. In doing so, they can create a unique affective impact on audiences and contribute to shaping the public discourse surrounding such events.

Many movies that address these forms of trauma have become very famous. Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) and Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002) depict the trauma of the Holocaust; Hideo Sekigawa’s *Hiroshima* (1953) and Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) address the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and cult-classics such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) are only two examples of critically-acclaimed movies about the collective trauma of the Vietnam War in the US. While patriarchal structures of oppression, repression, and denial also affect the production and reception of movies (see, e.g., Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze” in her foundational essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” [1975], as well as the history of the #metoo movement), the trauma of sexual violence is nonetheless a frequent topic in film. This theme is portrayed in cult classics such as Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Frank Darabont’s *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (the latter two depicting male-on-male sexual violence), and Patty Jenkins’ *Monster* (2003). Films of the last decade likewise mediate this form of trauma. Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020), Maria Schrader’s *She Said* (2022), and Sarah Polley’s *Women Talking* (2022) all enjoy ongoing critical and popular appeal (with several recent productions winning Academy Awards). Many of these more recent productions choose not to depict the act of sexual assault itself and instead highlight the power structures that allow for this form of violence (see Benson-Allott 67).

While seismic historical events such as wars and genocides or the theme of sexual violence might be the most prominent topics of trauma cinema, other examples of violence can equally be considered under this category. While in no way comparable to the death toll and collective guilt of events such as the Holocaust, this second group of traumatic incidents is in no way less traumatic and impactful. As such, these events might also have shaped the public perception of specific issues and can still be a historical marker for certain problems. This group includes traumas of natural disasters, large-scale (work) accidents, anxieties about the future in the form of eco- and climate trauma (see Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*), as well as the trauma of school

shootings. This plethora of topics enables filmmakers to address trauma across different genres.

While trauma cinema is a relatively broad concept, there are still specific genre categories wherein it occurs most frequently. In “Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma” (2001), film scholar E. Ann Kaplan identifies four positions to trauma cinema that all relate to the viewer differently. The first position is melodrama, which conceals trauma to circumvent the pain it induces (203). In addition, melodrama mediates trauma as an event in the past that is clearly “locatable, representable and curable” (204). In horror or other violent films, the second position she identifies, Kaplan sees a vicarious (re-)traumatization for the audience (204). The third position, which involves news broadcasts and similar modes of film, approaches the viewer “as a voyeur” (204). Kaplan situates the viewer “as a ‘witness’” (204) in the fourth position, which mediates trauma’s “paralysis, repetition, circularity” (204). This position echoes scholar Cathy Caruth’s discussion of Resnais’ *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Caruth writes that the film affords viewers “a new mode of seeing and of listening [...] [that] resonates beyond what we can know and understand; but it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place” (*Unclaimed Experience*, 56). Fittingly, Kaplan defines this fourth position as “arguably the most politically useful position” (204). These different genres allow filmmakers to address various forms of trauma in different ways. The position to trauma a filmmaker engages in significantly alters the (traumatic) effect a film has on audiences. In this sense, two films about the same traumatic event can incite entirely different understandings of the trauma the incident induced. Nonetheless, both iterations mediate trauma, which is strongly related to cinematic affect.

Film’s potential in mediating trauma is closely related to the medium’s affective qualities. While scholars such as Kaplan have stressed film’s capacity to perform trauma (“Melodrama” 204), there is a plethora of cognitive, affective, and societal reasons for the link between cinema and trauma. While not all of these qualities are unique to film, the medium’s cognitive and affective foundation allows for a mediation of events that defy explication via other media. Film combines moving images, camera angles, field sizes, and an underlying score to carefully orchestrate and surge emotions and affect. Cinema’s unique potential in mediating trauma builds on its position in societal discourse, its affective foundation, and the cognitive reception of artificial input, which I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

First and foremost, film visualizes trauma. In this context, I want to turn to Gilles Deleuze and his understanding of the *dispositif*. This concept is related to the analysis of public discourse. In his description of the *dispositif*, Deleuze links “curves of visibility and curves of enunciation” (“Dispositif” 160). Deleuze’s statement implies that our ability to imagine something is directly related to our ability to talk about it; the more visible an issue becomes, the more likely it is to become present in public discourse. Similarly, in the preface to *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), philosopher Judith Butler assesses that “[t]o produce what will constitute the public sphere, however, it is necessary to control the way in which people see, how they hear, what they see. The constraints are not only on content [...] but on what

‘can’ be heard, read, seen, felt, and known” (xx). I would argue that the audiovisual nature of the medium film is thus crucial for making a *dispositif* such as the trauma of school shootings visible, thereby enabling viewers to talk about it. By visually introducing traumatic events to the public discourse, films potentially break the “stigma” that witnessing and speaking about such events often entails (see Herman 2). The cinematic mediation of trauma thus goes beyond a simple form of entertainment to the societal importance of allowing viewers to talk about it. Moreover, this cinematic visualization entails and connects narratives, forms of explanation, and aspects of traumatic events that were initially not part of the general discourse surrounding the traumatic issue.

The second reason for film’s potential in mediating trauma lies in the affective qualities of the medium. This allows for the treatment of topics that might be emotionally challenging for some viewers. School shootings predominantly—but not exclusively—endanger children and teenagers and take place in public spaces that are normally associated with learning and safety, and, therefore, significantly affect us on an emotional level. Such incidents disrupt the idea of schools as safe spaces to the point where, rationally thinking, we might know that school shootings occur sporadically (see Wang et al. 129; see also fn 6) but still perceive them as frequent events and a constant source of fear and horror. By building on such solid affective ground, films enable viewers to reflect on their own emotional responses to traumatic issues. As film scholars Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith explain, cinemas are central spaces for members of society “to express and experience feelings” (1). For philosopher Noël Carroll, it is notable how important emotions are for keeping attention in cinemas high (23). The resulting emotional engagement often constitutes “the most intense, vivid, and sought-after qualities available in the film experience” (Carroll 24). As we associate cinemas with emotion, affect, and feeling, they might also enable viewers to confront their own emotions in connection to traumatic incidents.

The affective potentials of cinema notably stem from careful curation. Carroll reminds us that filmmakers organize and compose scenes deliberately to create a particular emotional response in the viewers (29). For Smith, films provide viewers with “invitations” for emotional engagement (12). Viewers who accept these affective invitations might “experience some of the range of feelings proffered by the text” (Smith 12). By carefully arranging elements such as the field size of a shot, its duration, the underlying score, the lighting, the editing, etc., filmmakers can emotionally foreground aspects of a scene to the audience. The ability to anticipate and influence how viewers react to what they see on screen thus gives a considerable amount of power to the filmmaker and the production team. The constructedness of cinematic affect is crucial in films about traumatic events and experiences. Despite their different approaches to mediating traumatic events, trauma films all elicit specific affective responses in their audiences. As Kaplan points out, these positions range from emotionally introducing viewers to traumatic events, traumatizing them through visuals, or addressing viewers as voyeurs or witnesses (“Melodrama” 204)—all of which build on the strong affective potential of cinema.

The third and final reason is closely related to cognitive film theory and lies in our emotional and cognitive reception of visual input. Whereas a film is always the product of what a filmmaker and the production team choose to show audiences—and is, therefore, “emotionally prefocused” (Carroll 30)—each viewer’s emotional response is unique to them. Notably, Smith argues that films “elicit a *real* emotional response from our already existing emotion systems” (6; emphasis added). The emotions felt upon watching a movie are thus the same emotions we experience in real life. The only difference is that in real life, “our emotions have to select out the relevant details from a massive array of largely unstructured stimuli” (Carroll 29), which brings us back to the aforementioned idea of affective curation. In the context of trauma cinema, this ‘realness’ of our emotional responses is crucial. As it is difficult to comprehend the traumatic experience of the victims of a school shooting, audiences can engage with such movies to expand their emotional vocabulary. Cinematically witnessing such a traumatic incident and experiencing real emotions related to fear, sorrow, and anger might help audiences overcome the limitations of language and at least partially understand other people’s emotional responses to a traumatic incident.

The mind’s inability to differentiate between ‘real’ and ‘artificial’ visual input further informs our cognitive response to cinematic texts. In trauma cinema, filmmakers often present audiences with points of view from both victims and perpetrators. Psychologist Jeffrey Zacks points out that while we might know that these positions are not ours, our brains cannot fully differentiate between visual input from a live event happening in front of us and an artificial recreation thereof (4). On levels of both cognition and affect, the responses to the sensory input of artificial movies are thus indistinguishable from real-life experiences. Zacks argues that “[w]hether we experience events in real life, watch them in a movie, or hear about them in a story, we build perceptual and memory representations in the same format” (110). Notably, this statement does not imply that our responses to a traumatic incident are entirely similar regardless of the form of encounter (i.e., personal or artistic/cinematic). Instead, it suggests that viewers might acquire a form of emotional knowledge that in turn might help them better understand the immediate victims of a traumatic event.

Films are thus ideally suited for mediating trauma. Not only is it important to visualize trauma to enable people to talk about it, but film’s unique affective qualities also elicit a real emotional response to traumatic incidents. When films place audiences either in the midst of a traumatic incident or as witnesses thereof, they force viewers to develop the necessary emotions to confront these events. Trauma cinema often marks the first contact between viewers and (aspects of) a traumatic incident. The cinematic representation of war, concentration camps, sexual violence, or even school shootings might be the first time a viewer comes into contact with this subject matter. The visualization of an event is thus directly linked not only to verbal but also to emotional enunciation. The cinematic engagement with these themes can help audiences understand why certain events are traumatic for victims, places trauma in public discourse, highlights multiple perspectives on such events, and potentially helps audience members process and overcome trauma. However, film’s affective qualities might also contribute to a traumatization of the audience. This form of cinematic trauma can be related

to both the content of a film and to traumatizing imagery (see Kaplan 204). In this sense, cinema might retraumatize audience members who had already been exposed to (images of) a traumatic event, or it might even traumatize viewers in the first place.⁴ I will illustrate the complex forms of (re-)traumatization in cinematic treatments of Columbine in the subsequent sections of this article.

The cinematic mediations of Columbine and its trauma are simultaneously limited and manifold. Whereas Columbine was extensively covered by different news media outlets, the topics of school shootings and other real-life incidents involving gun violence are narratives that mainstream cinema seems to shy away from (see Suskind). Still, there are a few films that address Columbine. Released only a few months after the events at Columbine, William Hellfire and Joey Smack's *Duck! The Carbine High Massacre* (1999) tells a satirical story of two teenagers on a rampage shooting. The film caused significant uproar and is one of the only films about Columbine made by teenagers. In his film *Bang Bang You're Dead* (2002), Guy Ferland resolves a Columbinesque conflict in a stage play at a school. In search of a different perspective on Columbine, Ben Coccio's *Zero Day* (2003) mediates the perpetrators' lives in the months leading up to the school shooting. Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) tells the story of Eva, the mother of a school shooter, and her struggles and experiences in coming to terms with her own (possible) guilt. In *Run Hide Fight* (2020), Kyle Rankin presents the fictional story of Zoe, a student who first helps her peers escape a school shooting and later overpowers the shooters. Similar to Ramsay's film, Fran Kranz's *Mass* (2021) depicts a confrontation between the parents of a school shooter and the parents of a victim and addresses the question of parental guilt.

The case studies of this essay are Michael Moore's documentary film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003). One reason for this choice lies in the comparable success of these two films. While there are a few small independent productions about Columbine, these two films (together with Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*) clearly stand out in terms of audience numbers, box office success, and critical acclaim (see also fn 7). In addition, the genre difference makes this comparison very fruitful. While Moore's documentary film connects Columbine to a political plea for a change in gun ownership laws, Van Sant's psychological drama visits a similar shooting from multiple perspectives to let viewers come to their own conclusions about the reasons for the shooting. The films thus approach Columbine from different genres, which not only influences how these films mediate the trauma of the shooting, but also how viewers respond to them.

Eliciting and Framing Trauma: Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002)

In a strongly abstracted understanding of trauma, Columbine has incited three different forms of trauma. First and most notably, for the immediate victims, Columbine was psychologically and physically traumatic (see also Kaplan "Global Trauma" 4). In her oft-cited *Trauma and*

⁴ On the ethics of representing trauma, see also Dominic LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001).

Recovery (1992), Judith Herman explains that “traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (33). Many students at Columbine survived the attack with physical and emotional injuries and scars. The psychological toll of such an event on victims and survivors is immeasurable. Caruth links trauma to “belatedness and incomprehensibility” (“Traumatic Awakenings” 208). Since victims of trauma are unprepared for the experience and unable to process the unfolding events, trauma becomes a temporal void which the human mind repeatedly revisits to turn the traumatizing incident into an event that carries some form of meaning. Caruth writes that paradoxically, the survival of such a near-death experience forms the source of trauma, as this “lack” of experiencing death gives way to countless mental recreations (*Unclaimed Experience* 64). In this sense, the struggle to make sense of a traumatizing experience results in a (mental) revisiting of this incident in the future.

The second form of trauma occurs on a communal level. The shooting was deeply traumatic for parents who either lost their children or suffered the fear of losing a child, as well as for other members of the community who lost a sense of security in their lives (see also Kaplan “Global Trauma” 4-5). While this group of people did not suffer from the school shooting directly, they were nonetheless impacted by the event and ensuing trauma. This second kind of trauma gave way to a discussion of US society as a whole, as Columbine is only one incident in a long history of school shootings in the US. Moreover, this form of trauma partly incited the aforementioned societal discourses on gun control and youth delinquency.

The third level of trauma is a temporally and spatially removed form in which people experience psychological trauma in anticipation of a future event. Essentially, this refers to the fear that a school shooting could happen at any time in any community worldwide. Kaplan labels such a form of trauma “pretrauma.” For her, pretrauma causes people to “unconsciously suffer from an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future” (*Climate* xix). She argues that pretrauma can cause “Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome” (PreTSS), which is similar to “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) (see *Climate* 1). Working with Danish soldiers deployed to Afghanistan, Dorthe Berntsen and David Rubin describe pretraumatic stress as “disturbing future-oriented cognitions and imaginations as measured in terms of a direct temporal reversal of conceptualizations of past-directed cognitions in the PTSD diagnosis” (663). Traumatic stress can thus not only happen after but also in anticipation of an event.

Pretrauma was the dominant form of trauma after Columbine. While the shooting took place in Colorado, the fear of a possible school shooting was widespread throughout the US. This anxious anticipation was what mostly shaped the public discourse around Columbine. Trying to find and explain the reasons behind the shooting (i.e., placing blame) is not only linked to the desire to find a scapegoat (see, e.g., Springhall 622) but also to avoiding specific behavior in the future to avert a school shooting altogether. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, two central lines of argumentation emerged that either focused on overly lax gun laws or on a deterioration of popular (youth) culture (see Lawrence 106-07; Springhall 626-31). The underlying assumption was that Harris and Klebold attacked their school either because guns

were easily available or because overt displays of violence in video games, songs, and films had radicalized them. In turn, the idea was that by either introducing stricter gun laws or by strengthening traditional family values, controlling school life, and monitoring youth culture, future school shootings might be averted. In the years since Columbine, pretrauma has become an even more dominant response to school shootings due to the increasing frequency, violence, and numbers of fatalities of these events in the US (see also fn 2).

The prominence of pretrauma after Columbine and comparable school shootings contrasts with the small likelihood of such events. As David Altheide remarks, while fear of school shootings is widespread, they are relatively infrequent occurrences (1355). In the case of Columbine, media outlets contributed to this collective fear through their extensive coverage. Fittingly, Jeffrey Alexander argues that society influences what we consider ‘traumatic’ in the first place (2). By presenting a variety of perspectives on school shootings to increase the salience of the news story, the media coverage led to the public belief that school shootings were much more common than they really were (see Muschert, “Research in School Shootings” 65). In addition, most news outlets with a nationwide scope eventually presented Columbine as indicative of bigger societal trends in the US, rather than as an event that occurred in a distinct school and because of two unique individual perpetrators (see, e.g., Chyi and McCombs 28-29; Muschert and Carr 753-54).⁵ In this sense, Birkland and Lawrence assess that the public framed Columbine as an indicator of a seemingly growing problem of school violence (1407), which significantly contributes to pretrauma of such an event. However, such growth was not the case, as schools tend to be relatively safe spaces for children (Muschert, “Research in School Shootings” 60).⁶ With their extensive coverage of Columbine, different US media outlets ultimately changed the public perception of the frequency and severity of school shootings to the extent that a sense of societal pretrauma of a coming school shooting became omnipresent.

These different forms of trauma were mediated and perpetuated in films about Columbine. Since most people lacked direct exposure to the traumatic event, some of these films about Columbine presented audiences with unique perspectives on the event. In *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Michael Moore mediates the Columbine High School shooting to incite an anxious anticipation of school shootings in support of his political agenda. Moore connects Columbine to his political pleas for stricter gun laws and the National Rifle Association’s (NRA) seeming indifference to the shooting. The film follows Moore on a journey through the United States and Canada, where he talks to victims of Columbine, then-president of the NRA Charlton Heston, musician Marilyn Manson, and others in search of the source for what he understands to be a deeply-engrained culture of fear within US society. Moore addresses Columbine itself mostly *en passant* and dedicates most of the screen time to political arguments. In turn,

⁵ Both studies examined coverage in the *New York Times*. In “Frame-Changing in the Media Coverage of a School Shooting,” Glenn Muschert also examined articles from the *Associated Press*, *CNN*, *ABC*, and *PBS*. Whether news outlets with a more regional focus framed the narrative differently remains subject to further research on Columbine.

⁶ For context, in the school year of 2016/2017, only 1.13% of all the homicides of youth aged 5-18 in the US (18 of 1,587) occurred at school (Wang et al. 129).

Moore deliberately uses Columbine to draw on three different levels of trauma to support his case: the trauma of the immediate victims of the shooting, of parents and other members of the community, and of US society as a whole and its constant fear of another school shooting. In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore ultimately frames trauma as a matter of politics. Moore's inclusion of Columbine supports his political agenda with the trauma of many. Moore interviews victims of the shooting and parents of dead students and presents visuals from the shooting in his film. By mediating these visuals, he potentially resurges the traumatic response of both immediate victims and those who were traumatized by the ensuing coverage of the shooting on television. Moore draws extensively on the pretrauma of school shootings and frames this trauma for his political goals. Whether his approach to Columbine is utilitarian or exploitative remains subject to discussion. The following two stills are indicative of Moore's inclusion of Columbine and its footage. While his pleas for stricter gun laws become more evident in other parts of the film, these two scenes illustrate Moore's attempt to tap into, recreate, and frame trauma.



Fig. 1. (left) Michael Moore visits Columbine High School

Fig. 2. (right) The footage of the shooting in *Bowling for Columbine*

In a longer scene that starts with Fig. 1., Moore visits Columbine High School and presents audiences with several shots of an empty school. It would almost look like a regular high school were it not for the accompanying audio. Moore uses phone recordings of April 20, 1999, in which terrified parents call the police to inquire about what had happened to their children. Then, the visuals change to footage from the security cameras (Fig. 2.), accompanied by audio recordings of a distressed teacher talking to the police. The footage is slightly distorted so as to make the two perpetrators more visible. The phone recording presents the auditory counterpiece to the visual footage of shots being fired and students panicking. This section of the film then continues with footage from interviews with crying students immediately after the shooting. With his inclusion of the visual footage of the shooting and the interviews with distressed students, Moore draws on imagery that was widely circulated in the news media.

In the first part of this sequence (Fig. 1.), Moore detaches the violence of the school shooting from the actual school where it occurred and suggests that Columbine was not a singular incident. There are a few links to Columbine as a distinct place, such as an engraved plaque that

says “Columbine High School – Home of the Rebels” and a banner that reads “We are Columbine.” Apart from that, Moore presents this school as one high school of many. There seems to be nothing particularly unique about it that could have triggered the shooting. Fittingly, when asked about his visit to Littleton, Colorado, Moore stated, “[t]he scariest thing about it is that it is so normal, it is so much like every other suburb. There’s nothing wrong or bad about Littleton, you know, or weirdly different that this tragedy would occur there. That’s what makes it more scary, that it literally could happen anywhere” (Moore in Rose “Michael Moore”). This statement demonstrates the film’s overall relation to pretrauma. Moore perpetuated a narrative of Columbine where action (i.e., the shooting) is strongly detached from space (i.e., Columbine High School). Since the physical space where the shooting took place is so interchangeable, the film suggests that a similar shooting could happen anywhere, thereby eliciting a sense of pretrauma in the audience.

With *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore ultimately promotes stricter gun laws. The film not only recreates the trauma of Columbine for victims and their parents, but the scenes above also elicit an anticipatory anxiety of a school shooting in the audience. It suggests that gun violence in the US is constantly present. Ultimately, the film is not about Columbine but about gun control and fear in the US. The film’s underlying message seems to be that since Columbine was such a regular school and still saw violence, something like this could happen anywhere in the US. The only way to avert future school shootings is by introducing stricter gun laws. The remainder of the film is mostly dedicated to this political plea and culminates in representatives of *Kmart* agreeing to no longer sell ammunition at their stores. *Bowling for Columbine* thus frames trauma to serve an explicit, political purpose. The film’s political agenda most certainly has legitimacy in attempting to avert such deadly school shootings in the future. However, it simplifies the various reasons for the shooting and thereby hinders a holistic approach toward gun violence at US schools. In turn, some scholars and critics have lauded the film’s exploration of gun violence (see, e.g., Ordoñez-Jasis and Jasis), while others have highlighted problematic aspects of the film, such as Moore’s prominent position within the film and its arguably manipulative and at times exploitative editing practices (see, e.g., Bouzard).

Bowling for Columbine primarily faced criticism for its complex relationship with the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘reality.’ The documentary genre as a whole is intricately connected to the question of whether reality can and should be represented. In his landmark book *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), Bill Nichols argues that “documentary is not a reproduction of reality, [...] [but] stands for a particular view of the world” (20). Nevertheless, compared to other film genres, the documentary genre enjoys a certain level of trust by audiences in that there seems to be the assumption that what is shown on screen is somehow inherently true. Moore’s film certainly exploits the genre’s link to ‘truth.’ While his practice of filmmaking strongly relies on him as a narrative guide throughout his quest for answers and a manipulation of scenes to foreground aspects to the audience, he upholds an overall claim to presenting the truth. On his former website, Moore even went so far as stating that “every fact in [*Bowling for Columbine*] is true.” Under the guise of the documentary genre, Moore seems to partially perpetuate the news coverage’s attempts at clear, easy answers to the shooting. In some ways, Moore’s

insistence on truth also seems to undercut his political message. While his pleas for stricter gun laws certainly resonate with large parts of US audiences, the question of whether the ends justify his means remains.

With *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore has influenced the international memory of Columbine like no other filmmaker. His film was very positively received by critics and even won an Academy Award in 2003. The ethics of his representations of the trauma of Columbine and of artistically and politically framing footage of a school shooting remain subject to avid discussion. Nonetheless, the film exemplifies the potential of cinema to mediate trauma. It highlights the complexity of Kaplan's second modality of trauma cinema, in which "the spectator is vicariously traumatized" (204). While she links this to horror films and traumatizing imagery, Moore's documentary film attests to the universality of this modality beyond genre and temporal boundaries.

Remaking Trauma: Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003)

Apart from (re-)traumatizing audiences, cinematic mediations of trauma enable different perspectives on a traumatic event. Recreating the horrors of a school shooting allows for a general discussion of the subject matter that includes different kinds of arguments and narratives. In this sense, many films on Columbine depict bullying, violent video games, the (fairly easy) acquisition of guns, social outsiders, negligent parents, and other narratives surrounding the shooting. A cinematic take on the shooting also lets audiences experience what this event could have felt like for the people involved. For some filmmakers, recreating a feeling of horror and shock becomes more important than telling audiences what to think (see, e.g., Van Sant in Hattenstone; Diane Keaton in Rose "Elephant;" Coccio in Applebaum). Notably, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) features the perspective of the perpetrators, which was hardly part of the societal discourse after the shooting. By putting viewers into the first-person perspective of a school shooter, *Elephant* not only allows viewers to experience what it means to be attacked, but also offers them insight into the process of planning and carrying out a school shooting.

Elephant's mediation of trauma mirrors the film's approach towards Columbine as a whole. In her introduction to *The Fictional Dimension of the School Shooting Discourse* (2019), Silke Bräselmann describes *Elephant* as one of the few films on Columbine that do not only examine the perpetrators' reasons and motivations but instead approach the shooting more holistically (3). The film follows different students on the day of a school shooting. In doing so, it shows the audience several moments leading up to the eventual shooting from different perspectives. The film's treatment of the trauma of Columbine is unique in its narrative presentation and cinematographic realization. Van Sant deconstructs narrative and presents the same event from different perspectives. This narrative structure brings to mind Kaplan's assertion that trauma cinema often works "without the ordered sequence we associate with narratives. Images are repeated but without meaning; they do not have a clear beginning, middle and end" ("Melodrama" 204). In this sense, *Elephant* does not attempt to explain the shooting but

instead calls on viewers to reflect on the often ambiguous reasons for and inexplicability of school shootings more generally (see also Vith 60). Beyond its refusal to explain the shooting, the film stands out for its inclusion of a school shooter's first-person perspective.

Elephant puts the audience into the position of the shooter. In a first-person perspective shot, the film remediates the aesthetics we commonly associate with shooter games (see Vith 55-57). By providing such a sense of hypermediacy (in this case, film and video games), the film creates a strong sense of immediacy for the audience (see Bolter and Grusin 5). Since the news coverage mostly focused on possible reasons for, and the aftermath of, the shooting, such a first-person perspective of a shooter was most certainly novel to most members of the *Elephant* audience. Additionally, being put in the position of a school shooter might also entail traumatizing elements for some viewers. The following still illustrates Van Sant's brief remediation of video games.



Fig. 3. *Elephant*'s first-person perspective

The scene invites a phenomenological reading. In the context of phenomenological film theory, Vivian Sobchak explains that “[e]xperiencing a movie, not ever merely ‘seeing’ it, my lived body enacts this reversibility in perception and subverts the very notion of *onscreen* and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive sites or subject positions” (67; emphasis in original). The scene's goal is to make viewers feel as if they had pulled the trigger and students were running from them. Moreover, it seems to suggest that even viewers at home or in theaters could become perpetrators (Vith 56). Ultimately, Van Sant's take on Columbine requires us to add a fifth position to trauma in film. While “the spectator is vicariously traumatized,” as Kaplan explains in the context of horror or other violent films, *Elephant* suggests a new position in which the spectator becomes the perpetrator (see Kaplan “Melodrama” 204). This phenomenological immediacy strongly contrasts with *Elephant*'s somewhat elusive narrative in the rest of the film. By putting us in the position of both victim and perpetrator, the film gives us insights into

our deepest psychological abysses: it juxtaposes our fear of death with fantasies of violence in a more or less uncommented neutral way.

Bowling for Columbine and *Elephant* have significantly contributed to how Columbine was and still is remembered in the US and beyond.⁷ While both films position the viewer as a witness to much of the shooting (see Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 56; Kaplan “Melodrama” 204), the framing of this experience is what sets the two films apart. *Bowling for Columbine* exploits audiences’ pretrauma of a school shooting and links the Columbine High School shooting to overly lax gun laws. With its implicit claim to truth as a documentary film, the film thereby frames Columbine as a pawn in a political game for stricter gun laws. As a psychological drama, *Elephant* is less interested in providing easy answers. The trauma incited in the latter film manifests itself in the dual perspective of victim and perpetrator. Not only do viewers bear witness to the shooting, but by putting audiences into the position of the shooter, *Elephant* incites a form of trauma that most other films shy away from. With this, it opens up a reflection on the perpetrators and their motivations for the shooting.

Conclusion

Despite the limited number of cinematic adaptations, Columbine remains a cultural anchor for school shootings more than twenty years after it happened. The mediations of trauma examined in this article are related to the framing of public pretrauma and the attempt to provide unique and different perspectives on the shooting. More than twenty years after the shooting, these cinematic mediations of Columbine not only shed light on the discourse surrounding school shootings in the early 2000s but also help us engage with a highly traumatic event. In this sense, cinema is crucial in making sense of the unspeakable. Film mediates trauma for the masses—it visualizes and performs it—and thereby potentially helps audiences confront trauma. At the same time, the two case studies examined in this article not only mediate trauma but traumatize audiences themselves. Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* contributes to a (mis-)understanding of school shootings as highly frequent events that can happen anywhere at any time. In doing so, it instills its audiences with a sense of pretraumatic anxious anticipation. Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* puts audiences in the position of the shooters, which adds another dimension to trauma cinema. Rather than suggesting that school shootings can happen anywhere at any time, *Elephant* suggests that everybody could become a perpetrator, which negates traditional narratives of parental neglect, societal deterioration, and violent video games. While the ethics of (pre-)traumatizing audiences remain subject to debate, the two films highlight film’s potential in mediating traumatic events. This

⁷ *Bowling for Columbine* more so than *Elephant*. Moore’s film garnered both critical and public attention, which culminated in an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2003. As a result, it shapes the discourse on Columbine to this day. *Elephant*’s success was more of a critical than of a public nature; nonetheless, it won the Palme d’Or in 2003, which attests to its success. In the years since its release, *Elephant* has become a reference point for independent films on school shootings. As such, Ben Coccio compared his style of filmmaking in *Zero Day* (2003) to Van Sant and *Elephant* (see Applebaum); numerous critics have compared *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011) to *Elephant* (see, e.g., Fisher); and even Kyle Rankin’s *Run Hide Fight* (2020) was described as a mix between *Elephant* and *The Hunger Games* (2012, dir. Gary Ross) (see Lodge).

discussion of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Elephant* therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of both trauma cinema as well as the Columbine High School shooting and its societal aftermath.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Jeffrey. "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Edited by Jeffrey Alexander et al. University of California Press, 2004, pp. 1-30.
- Altheide, David L. "The Columbine Shootings and the Discourse of Fear." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 52, no. 10, 2009, pp. 1354-70, doi:10.1177/0002764209332552. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Applebaum, Steven. "BEN COCCIO - Confronting Columbine in Zero Day." *Netribution*, 26 June 2006, www.netribution.co.uk/people/filmmaker/ben-coccio-confronting-columbine-in-zero-day. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Benson-Allott, Caetlin. "Empowerment by Design: On Not Depicting Sexual Assault in Film." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 4, June 2023, pp. 67-72, doi:10.1525/fq.2023.76.4.67. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Berntsen, Dorthe, and David C. Rubin. "Pretraumatic Stress Reactions in Soldiers Deployed to Afghanistan." *Clinical Psychological Science*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2015, pp. 663-74, doi:10.1177/2167702614551766. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Birkland, Thomas A., and Regina G. Lawrence. "Media Framing and Policy Change after Columbine." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 52, no. 10, 2009, pp. 1405-25, doi:10.1177/0002764209332555. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, 2000.
- Bouzard, Brandon. "Bowling for Columbine." *Reverse Shot*, 11 July 2007, www.reverseshot.org/symposiums/entry/406/bowling_for_columbine. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Bowling for Columbine*. Directed by Michael Moore, MGM Distribution Co., 2002.
- Bjelopera, Jerome P., et al. *Public Mass Shootings in the United States: Selected Implications for Federal Public Health and Safety Policy*. Congressional Research Service, 18 Mar. 2013. *Federation of American Scientists*, www.sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R43004.pdf. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Braselmann, Silke. *The Fictional Dimension of the School Shooting Discourse: Approaching the Inexplicable*. De Gruyter, 2019.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.
- Carroll, Noël. "Film, Emotion, and Genre." *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*. Edited by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith. Johns Hopkins UP, 1999, pp. 21-46.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

- . "Traumatic Awakenings." *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*. Edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber. Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 208-22.
- Chyi, Hsiang Iris, and Maxwell McCombs. "Media Salience and the Process of Framing: Coverage of the Columbine School Shootings." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2004, pp. 22-35, doi:10.1177/10776990040810010. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "What Is a Dispositif." *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*. Translated by Timothy J. Armstrong, Routledge, 1992, pp. 159-68.
- . *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Elephant*. Directed by Gus Van Sant, HBO Films, 2003.
- Fisher, Mark. "Implausible Psycho: 'We Need to Talk About Kevin.'" *Film Quarterly*, 31 May 2012, www.filmquarterly.org/2012/05/31/implausible-psycho-we-need-to-talk-about-kevin/. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma." *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2001, pp. 201-05, doi:10.1093/screen/42.2.201. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- . "Global Trauma and Public Feelings: Viewing Images of Catastrophe." *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2008, pp. 3-24, doi:10.1080/10253860701799918. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- . *Climate Trauma*. Rutgers UP, 2015.
- Larkin, Ralph W. "The Columbine Legacy: Rampage Shootings as Political Acts." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 52, no. 9, 2009, pp. 1309-26, doi:10.1177/0002764209332548. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Lawrence, Regina G. "Defining Events: Problem Definition in the Media Arena." *Politics, Discourse, and American Society: New Agendas*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, pp. 91-110.
- Lodge, Guy. "'Run Hide Fight' Review: Hunters Become Prey in a Crass, Wildly Misjudged School-Shooting Thriller." *Variety*, 10 September 2020, www.variety.com/2020/film/reviews/run-hide-fight-review-hunters-become-prey-in-a-crass-wildly-misjudged-school-shooting-thriller-1234765063/. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Moore, Michael. "Bowling for Columbine." *michaelmoore.com*, 07 January 2023, www.web.archive.org/web/20230107172800/https://michaelmoore.com/movies/bowling-for-columbine/. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Muschert, Glenn W. "Frame-Changing in the Media Coverage of a School Shooting: The Rise of Columbine as a National Concern." *The Social Science Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2009, pp. 164-70, doi:10.1016/j.soscij.2008.12.014. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- . "Research in School Shootings." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1, 2007, pp. 60-80, doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00008.x. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Muschert, Glenn W., and Dawn Carr. "Media Salience and Frame Changing across Events: Coverage of Nine School Shootings, 1997-2001." *Journalism & Mass Communication*

- Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2006, pp. 747-766, doi:10.1177/107769900608300402. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana UP, 2001.
- Ordoñez-Jasis, Rosario, and Pablo Jasis. "'Bowling for Columbine': Critically Interrogating the Industry of Fear." *Social Justice*, vol. 30, no. 3 (93), 2003, pp. 127-33. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/29768213. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Pew Research Center. "Columbine Shooting Biggest News Draw of 1999." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, 28 December 1999, www.pewresearch.org/politics/1999/12/28/columbine-shooting-biggest-news-draw-of-1999/. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Plantinga, Carl and Greg M. Smith. "Introduction." *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*. Edited by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith. Johns Hopkins UP, 1999, pp. 1-17.
- Rose, Charlie. "Michael Moore." *charlirose.com*, 2002, www.charlirose.com/videos/15889. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- . "Elephant." *charlirose.com*, 2003, www.charlirose.com/videos/14983. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Smith, Greg M. *Film Structure and the Emotion System*. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "What My Fingers Knew. The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh." *Expanded Senses*. Edited by Bernd Kracke and Marc Ries. Transcript Verlag, 2015, pp. 279–313, doi:10.1515/9783839433621-027. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Springhall, John. "Violent Media, Guns and Moral Panics: The Columbine High School Massacre, 20 April 1999." *Paedagogica Historica*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1999, pp. 621-41, doi:10.1080/0030923990350304. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Suskind, Alex. "Real-Life Mass Shootings: The Subject Hollywood Dare Not Touch." *The Guardian*, 5 October 2015, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/05/mass-shootings-hollywood-violence-movies. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Vith, Johannes. "Remaking Columbine." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, pp. 47-64, doi:10.47060/jaaas.v2i1.43. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Walker, Janet. *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Wang, Ke, et al. *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2019*. National Center for Education Statistics, 2020. nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020063.pdf. Accessed 25 July 2023.
- Zacks, Jeffrey M. *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*. Oxford UP, 2015.