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Killing Fields of All Sizes

AS mainstream Hollywood movies increasingly fail to confront complex, often unpleasant realities, independent films are rushing to fill the void. And with the war in Iraq threatening to turn into a Vietnam-like quagmire, Errol Morris's documentary "The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert F. McNamara" couldn't be more pertinent. The film, which was shown at this year's Cannes Film Festival (it opens Dec. 26), was constructed around more than 20 hours of interviews with the former secretary of defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. In it, Mr. McNamara, who is widely blamed for escalating the Vietnam War, sketches a history of how this country has justified its use of military force over the decades. While re-examining his roles in World War II (he and Gen. Curtis LeMay approved the fire-bombing of Japanese cities that cost a million civilian lives) and Vietnam, he imparts some cautionary advice.

About Vietnam, he says: "We acted according to what we thought were the principles of the nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong." And he concludes that the United States should never apply its military power unilaterally, without the support of countries that share our values.

Mr. McNamara is the only person interviewed in the film, which otherwise consists of rare archival material and re-creations, as well as declassified White House telephone tapes from the 1960's.

Gus Van Sant's film "Elephant" (opening Oct. 24), which won best picture and best director at Cannes, may be fiction, but its portrayal of a Columbine-like high school massacre looks and sounds like a documentary. Hand-held cameras follow selected students around the school during an afternoon in which two boys armed with explosives and guns go on a murder spree.

"Elephant," filmed in Portland, Ore., in 20 days in a spruced-up former high school, uses only three professional actors, all adults. The students are played by non-professionals selected from a casting call that drew 3,000 teenagers. Except for the two killers, played by Alex Frost and Eric Deulen, the teenagers in the cast played broad variations of themselves. The script was largely improvised in the manner of Mr. Van Sant's previous film "Gerry," about two hikers hopelessly lost in the desert.

"Elephant," which is named for the parable of the blind men who mistake the parts of the beast for the whole, doesn't try to explain high school violence. The two killers, who have a confused sexual connection, methodically prepare for slaughter as if they were completing a science project. Dressed in combat gear, they carry out the massacre with the swaggering aggression of an elite SWAT team run amok. But "Elephant" indirectly suggests that the American high school experience is itself a deadening treadmill that leaves many students alienated.

John
Robinson, Kristen Hicks and
Elias McConnell in Gus Van
Sant's "Elephant," below.

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Scott Green/HBO Films

In its assessment of the banality of suburban high school life, "Elephant" could be a companion piece to Catherine Hardwicke's recent excoriating portrait of adolescent Girl Culture and its cutthroat rituals in "Thirteen."