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## FILMS

## The Avengers

STUART KLAWANS

ELEPHANT • KILL BILL, VOLUME 1 • INTOLERABLE CRUELTY • IN THE CUT

Hosts are notorious for getting stuck in time. Having lost track of the ongoing world, they will revisit certain hours as obsessively as they haunt a fatal spot. In Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, the camera wanders like a ghost. It trails half a dozen teenagers through their Oregon high school, looping back repetitively to a few moments in their day—ordinary moments, you might think, which grow full and weighty only because they precede the kids' violent deaths.

Van Sant is not the first filmmaker to respond to the massacres at American high schools, in Colorado and elsewhere. He is the only one so far who has felt the need to linger over the texture of the kids' lives. Despite its power to devastate, his ghost story is full of vitality, precisely because normal time is coming to an end—but not yet, not until you've walked the halls with these young people and felt what they're about to give up.

Elias (Elias McConnell) spends his last hours doing what he loves: taking photographs, working in the school darkroom, chatting easily with everyone he meets. Michelle (Kristen Hicks) agonizes over the other girls' put-downs but finds refuge in the library, where she's welcomed as a volunteer. Carrie and Nathan (Carrie Finklea and Nathan Tyson), the high school's

beautiful couple, get signed out early, having a serious affair to manage. John (John Robinson) just tries to make it through a day that's been messed up from the start by his dad (Timothy Bottoms), a middle-class drunk who needs John to take care of him. You meet other students, too, and a few adults—decent sorts, mostly—as the camera floats through the school, tracking now one character and now another. You also meet Alex and Eric (Alex Frost and Eric Deulen), the boys who stride across the lawn wearing camouflage fatigues and carrying heavy bags just as John walks through the door. "Get the fuck out of here and don't come back," Alex tells him—at which point, the movie itself goes back, returning to an earlier moment and another view of these events.

That scene in front of the school, with John going out and the killers coming in, becomes a chronological marker in the ghost-time of *Elephant*. You glimpse the scene twice more, from different characters' view-

points, and each time feel a deeper, more horrific undertow pulling you from a spot you've now learned to identify.

The danger of this elegant construction—if I may speak here of mere artistic risks—is that Van Sant, through his cleverness, may overshadow his own characters. But in *Elephant*, Van Sant practices a sober brilliance: creating tracking shots that are as quiet as they are complex, elongating or compressing time by changing the images' speed, letting a mood coalesce from uninterrupted stretches of music (composed, for the most part, by Beethoven and sound designer Leslie Shatz). The direction, though hardly self-effacing, is subtle—all the more so, when you consider that Van Sant recruited a mostly nonprofessional cast for this film and had them create their own characters and scenes through improvisation.

The young performers all deserve to be called flabbergasting; but special mention must go to Alex Frost, the dark-haired, almond-eyed boy in the Triomphe T-shirt who took on the role of chief killer. Because Van Sant wisely refuses to explain the massacre, a special burden falls on Frost, who must be plausibly creepy for no plausible reason, disastrously odd yet nondescript. You see Alex memorizing grudges in the cafeteria, or bashing out *Für Elise* on an upright piano at home, and you understand he's both watchful and wounded. At that point, you still think you can grasp him. Then you listen to him coolly review the plan of attack for Eric—finishing with a sporty "Most importantly, have fun, man"—and you feel the bottom drop out of the world.

Maybe it's because of that loss of ground that *Elephant* so often directs its attention toward the sky. The students, when they're outside, sometimes pause in their tracks and gaze upward; and the camera, too, has a habit of studying the treetops and clouds. Is everybody looking to heaven for answers? Or are ghosts circling obsessively over the Oregon suburbs?

Happy Halloween.