Following in the Footsteps: Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* and *Elephant* in the American independent field of cultural production

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This paper considers Gus Van Sant's Gerry *(2002) and* Elephant *(2003) as manifestations of contemporary American independent cinema that, characteristically, balance departures from mainstream/Hollywood convention with the use of frameworks that locate such films as marketable to particular niche audiences. The initial focus is on the use of formal devices, particularly the very-long take, that mark these films out as distinct from typical mainstream production. Aspects of international art cinema are drawn upon to situate such films within particular regions of the independent spectrum – the latter being understood here as an example of what Pierre Bourdieu terms a 'field of cultural production', in this case one that stretches from the avant-garde to the margins of Hollywood. Formal analysis is considered in relation to the substantive content of the two films and the specific contexts in which each was produced and distributed, and in relation to the kinds of audiences to which they are likely to be targeted.*

This paper is part of a larger project in which I am seeking to identify and explain some of the different components of contemporary American independent cinema, including its points of intersection with and distinction from the Hollywood-based mainstream. My focus is on the balance achieved in specific examples between departures from what we associate with the Hollywood tradition and the employment of a number of frameworks that either contain such departures or locate them in other ways as still part of a commercially-viable form of cinema, targeted at particular niche audiences. The notion of 'independent' cinema used here is one that suggests a location somewhere between Hollywood and what goes by the name of 'art' cinema. This is seen as a hybrid form that often bears the marks of a number of different inheritances.

Gus Van Sant's two recent features *Gerry* (2002) and *Elephant* (2003) are interesting examples as they include some quite distinct formal departures from mainstream/Hollywood practice.[1] In the case of *Gerry*, this is taken to an extent that verges relatively close to the avant-garde or experimental; a rare quality in commercially-distributed indie cinema. *Elephant* uses some similar formal

approaches, but is generally situated quite a few degrees closer to the mainstream. My aim in this paper is to identify how formal and other qualities are combined in these two films and how these can be used together to *situate* such works within the wider independent spectrum. The wider spectrum itself is viewed here as an example of what Pierre Bourdieu (1983) terms a 'field of cultural production', a term that seems particularly appropriate to the Hollywood/independent intersection in its embrace of a dynamic that ranges from the non-commercial margins (what Bourdieu calls a 'restricted' field) to the arena of larger-scale market-oriented production.

This paper begins by focusing on the formal dimension, a defining feature of where *Gerry* and *Elephant* locate themselves in this field. Formal qualities – particularly the use of temporally extended takes – are examined as features that situate *Gerry* and *Elephant* within a broader tradition of an 'art' cinema marketable to particular niche audiences, including explicit references to and borrowings from the work of other filmmakers (notable influences including Bela Tarr, Miklos Jancso and the British television filmmaker, Alan Clarke). I also consider a number of other factors that contribute to making such films relatively commercial (including the star presence in *Gerry* and the currency of the Columbine context in *Elephant*), arguing that these films are illustrative of a tendency in the American independent sector to combine 'alternative' with more conventional and familiar dynamics. This location will also be considered in relation to the specific industrial contexts in which the two films were produced and gained commercial distribution. The overall aim is to provide a concrete analysis of such texts as the outcome of particular strategies of niche cultural production.

Formal distinction

Formally, both *Gerry* and *Elephant* are very distinctive when compared with the norms of Hollywood or of mainstream production more generally, including many films produced in the independent sector. Both use very long takes in which the camera follows the movements of characters for extended periods at a time: in the case of *Gerry*, two characters who get lost in an American desert and mountain wilderness landscape; in *Elephant*, a number of characters attending a high-school on a day that culminates in a Columbine-style massacre.

Gerry is, as suggested above, quite a rarity in the indie landscape in the extent to which it draws attention to its own formal qualities. It is reminiscent in this respect of

the relatively little-seen and little-distributed films of Jon Jost. It shares with Jost a use of extended takes, during which very little happens or develops, in which the viewer is forced to become conscious of *cinematic* duration as much as anything relating to the fictional characters. A typical example is a sequence in which the faces of the two characters are closely framed in the shot, bobbing up and down with motion, as they trudge along, seemingly endlessly, a sequence held for in excess of three minutes There is one sense in which this quite radical formal approach can be said to be *motivated* by the nature of the material. The duration of shots such as this helps to create an impression of the experience involved for the characters; it gives quite a strong sense of presence, of the viewer being forced to share at least something of the experience, one that is very much about duration and the seemingly endless nature of the ordeal faced by the protagonists. Character-centred material of this kind is what usually tends to motivate the use of unconventional formal devices, in the independent sector as well as in Hollywood, something I consider at greater length elsewhere (King 2005). How this works, though, is very much a matter of degree. The sheer volume of such footage in *Gerry* makes the film lean more than usually towards the abstract, much of the film being comprised of a series of sequences of this kind. It seems deliberately designed to challenge the viewer; to deny mainstream cinematic pleasure (as indicated by the tendency of the film to provoke some cinema-goers to walk out in disgust).

The same goes to some extent for *Elephant*, although there are also some important differences. *Elephant* is comprised primarily of a series of extended tracking shots that follow the movements of a number of students through the corridors and other spaces of the high school around which it is set. The camera follows in the footsteps of several different characters in turn, including the perpetrators of the massacre with which the film climaxes. The exact effect is different from that found in *Gerry*, as we follow characters who are involved most of the time in much more 'normal' and conventional-seeming interactions with others; it does not veer towards the abstract in the way *Gerry* does. The style can be said, again, to be motivated to a significant extent by the material. In this case, the effect is to give us a number of different perspectives on the events of the day. There is clearly a logic here that can be linked to what the film seems to have to 'say' about the subject: that there is no single, encompassing vision or understanding of such events; no simple answer to questions about their causes. If *Gerry* verges on the 'arty' and abstract, in its formal location, *Elephant* is more prosaic, in this sense, the camera following behind the movements of characters much of the time in a manner that is styled as something

closer to a documentary-like impression, with specific reference made by Van Sant to the films of Frederick Wiseman (HBO Films 2003; 12). The extended camera movement also creates a somewhat 'floaty', otherworldly and more artistically stylized impression, however, increased by the use of close focus that often leaves background material in a state of blurry indistinctness. The most radical departure from mainstream fictional convention is that the viewer is denied any sense of the interiority of character: the kind of close orchestration of shots that would, conventionally, be presented as giving access to subjective thoughts and feelings. We are constantly close-up to the characters, physically, but at the same time kept at a distance (the only real exception is a moment in which a sense of oppression is implied subjectively, in the case of one of the killers, by a rising volume of background noise at the climax of a sequence in the school cafeteria).

In both films, the attention of the viewer is likely to be drawn to the formal dimension itself. In *Elephant*, this is the effect largely of the long tracking shots and also the fact that we soon realize that the trajectories of the different characters we follow overlap at various times. Certain events are seen more than once, from different perspectives, drawing attention to the fact that they have been staged more than once (as is clear from the fact that, otherwise, the camera from one strand would be visible when a cross-over is reached from another). Each strand covers much the same period of time, creating an impression of repeatedly backtracking, after the first sequence, and exploring events from a series of different perspectives.

What, then, should we make of these features of *Gerry* and *Elephant*? How are these films *situating* themselves in the wider independent field of production; and how might these qualities be balanced by other ingredients in the mix? Form is quite strongly related to 'content' in both cases, as I have already suggested. Neither offers a purely formalist exercise. It is important to be clear about that, because as purely formal exercises such films would stand little chance of getting produced or, if produced, achieving any kind of commercial distribution. They would belong exclusively to the 'restricted' field, as defined by Bourdieu, a realm in which he suggests cultural producers produce primarily for consumption by other producers. But there is a distinct sense of the formal dimension being offered to the viewer as an *attraction* in its own right rather than a dimension intended to disappear into the background. What is encouraged here can also be seen as a broadly 'serious' and sober attention to form, as distinct from the more 'showy' or crowd-pleasing highlighting of form found in some other independent features (examples such as the

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early work of Joel and Ethan Cohen in which hyperbolic use of formal devices, such as outlandish camera movement or editing, serves essentially as a source of heightened audio-visual pleasure, a quality I explore in more detail in King 2005). The distinctive formal qualities of *Gerry* and *Elephant* entail the denial rather than the heightening of familiar-conventional cinematic pleasures, positioning them, in a general sense, as 'difficult' or 'challenging' rather than just pleasurably 'stylized'.

The formal dimensions of *Gerry* and *Elephant* situate both films towards the 'art' cinema end of the independent spectrum, *Gerry* probably further to that end than *Elephant*. Part of the motivation is what Russian Formalist criticism would term 'artistic'; that is to say, some of what these films offer 'makes sense' specifically *as* a drawing to attention of formal departure from the mainstream. The pleasure being offered to viewers lies partly in a more or less explicit marking of this distinction. *Gerry* and *Elephant* exhibit, in this regard, some features of what Jeffrey Sconce (2002) has termed American 'smart' cinema, in their marked difference from a Hollywood mainstream that has tended towards an intensification of conventional regimes through devices such as faster cutting and rapid camera-movement (Bordwell 2002). The use of 'Hollywood mainstream' as a reference point for varieties of cinema defined against it as 'other', to one degree or another, is far from an arbitrary process. The dominance and familiarity of various qualities associated with Hollywood makes such a process inevitable, in both 'regular' audience consumption and in academic study. This process also goes to the heart of the manner in which cultural distinctions are made or asserted. Products aimed at the largest audiences are designed specifically to be widely accessible; they set, as Martyn Lee puts it, 'the primary benchmark' against which other taste formations are defined through varying degrees of exclusion (1993; 36). In some cases, such as the formal strategies of *Gerry* and *Elephant*, specific points of departure can be identified from specific dominant conventions. But the concept of the 'mainstream' also serves a rhetorical purpose in the process of marking particular varieties of cinematic practice as more or less distinctive. A simplified and often unexamined notion of 'mainstream' offers a negative point of reference against which particular niche-market investments can be defined and celebrated (for more on the workings of this process, in relation to dance music subcultures, see Thornton [1995]; and for an application of Thornton to distinctions performed by fans of cult films, Jancovich [2002]).

In distinction from the 'mainstream' – either in specific textual/formal detail or the more rhetorical deployment of the term – *Gerry* and *Elephant* are positioned as

closer to the modernist tradition of a kind of cinema that invites critical reflection on its own formal qualities. How exactly this is articulated can be understood in relation to a number of concrete reference points, in addition to that broader tradition. One is the notion of the filmmaker as 'auteur', formal departure being a familiar way in which individual filmmakers can seek to mark off their work as distinctive. Form that draws attention to its own presence, as a departure from mainstream convention, also draws attention to the presence of the filmmaker as its 'source', as David Bordwell puts it in the case of art-cinema narration (1985; 211). It is significant, in the case of *Gerry* and *Elephant*, that we have two films by the same director that use formal approaches marked as 'unconventional' that have something in common. And, from the perspective of the career of the filmmaker, these films were situated as marking what was generally hailed as Van Sant's *return* to his independent roots, after his involvement in much more Hollywood-centric productions such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997), the remake of *Psycho* (1998) and *Finding Forrester* (2000). If we look at the critical reception of these films – how they were placed for potential viewers, an important element in the independent field – they were very strongly labelled as the work of Gus Van Sant, and as a move by him away from the mainstream that was generally valorized as a 'good thing' (for a particular constituency of critics and viewers, at least).

Another dimension that features in the critical reception is the particular heritage of earlier work on which Van Sant is identified as drawing. These films were not seen as appearing from nowhere. Their validation as forms of art-cinema includes reference – by Van Sant and various critics or interviewers – to the work of several others, including the films of the Hungarian directors Bela Tarr and Miklos Jancso, as well as figures such as Chantal Akerman, Andrei Tarkovksy and Alexander Sokurov. The camera-closely-following-characters is very evident in Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), for example, the three-minute-plus sequence cited above being an almost exact lift from the film, while the orchestration of multiple characters coming in and out of frame in long sequences is the trademark of Jancso. The overlapping time-frame used in *Elephant* is closely based on Tarr's seldom-screened 450-minute epic *Satantango* (1994). The film also draws quite heavily on Alan Clarke's BBC film of the same title: a litany of short sequences of sectarian killings in Northern Ireland, in which the camera often follows characters from behind, in some cases in lengthy sequences down corridors or in other such spaces in a manner very similar to the style employed in Van Sant's *Elephant*. These are all figures identified

as auteur filmmakers, including Clarke, who has been valorized as a maverick figure working within British television.

The auteur dimension in Van Sant and the heritage of other auteurist works function quite importantly in the process of situating films such as these in a particular region of the independent marketplace. They can be understood as credentials that validate the films as not just one-off oddities or individual works, but as part of a substantial and established tradition. The role of critics and commentators is important in drawing attention to this heritage, as part of the process Bourdieu describes as the 'consecration' of the work or its author (1986; 78). As far as reference to the work of figures such as Tarr and Clarke is concerned, this is a process of mediated placement more than a direct picking up of references by viewers, relatively few of whom are likely to have direct experience of films such as *Satantango*, *Werckmeister Harmonies* or Clarke's *Elephant* (of the three, only *Werckmeister Harmonies* was available on video or DVD at the time of the release of Van Sant's films). It is not necessary for actual or potential viewers to have direct familiarity with such sources, or to be capable of recognizing such references themselves, for them to play a role in the broader process in which films such as *Gerry* and *Elephant* are located in the relevant part of the field of production. Van Sant's status as creative artist – as opposed to commercial director-for-hire – is supported by a notion of drawing on the work of other consecrated figures. How far this is viewed in a positive light might depend on a number of factors, including the degree to which the work of others is drawn upon and its familiarity. The influence of the likes of Bela Tarr on *Gerry* and *Elephant* was given a positive spin by many critics, in contrast to the response to Van Sant's use of Shakespearean dialogue in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and his nearly exact remake of *Psycho* (1998). In one case (*Idaho*), the stated view of many critics was that an alien presence (Shakespeare via Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* [1965]) had been swallowed awkwardly whole, to the detriment of the piece. In the other (*Psycho*), Van Sant created widespread critical discomfort, provocatively and deliberately blurring the line between original and copy.[2] In *Gerry* and *Elephant*, the borrowings from others seem more organically integrated into Van Sant's own material, and thus less disruptive of prevailing notions of the process of artistic influence or 'inspiration' (although individual judgements might vary according to familiarity with the originals and, thus, the extent to which any borrowing is recognized).

What results in *Gerry* and *Elephant* is a product that is marketable to particular niche audiences. Exactly how these audiences are defined raises a number of questions that cannot be examined here in detail. They are usually defined as involving viewers who possess certain quantities of cultural capital involved in the exercise of a taste for this more 'arty' kind of work. Such formulations, also derived from Bourdieu (1979/1984), raise many issues, however, including how applicable Bourdieu's work on cultural distinction might be to the United States. Michele Lamont (1992) suggests, for example, that Bourdieu overstates the importance of *cultural* markers of status, generally and particularly in relation to the US context. The niche audience for these kinds of films is often defined in terms of particular social class fragments, especially some of the more educated sectors of the middle and upper-middle classes. It is also sometimes defined partly in generational terms; for Sconce the 'smart' indie film is associated with the post-baby-boom audience of the so-called 'Generation-X'. It has been argued elsewhere that what is involved is a combination of class fragment and generation that has created a blend of bohemian and bourgeois qualities in a new elite culture dubbed 'BOBO' by David Brooks (2000). These are often quite contentious formulations, however, and need further investigation, both generally and in their potential relevance to niche audiences for particular kinds of independent cinema.

However exactly it is defined, it is often suggested that for an audience with the appropriate cultural capital, formal innovation and associations with an art-cinema heritage can be understood as serving as attractions in their own right. Innovations in form are particularly important signifiers of 'higher' cultures, as suggested by Herbert Gans (1999). Some radicalism at the level of form might be expected to be more appealing to such audiences than distinction via radical subject matter, permitting the mobilization of cultural capital without overt challenge to dominant ideologies (the latter might appeal to some potential viewers from the same class/taste strata, but appears less often as a marker of distinction in the realm of art, indie or 'specialist' cinema).[3] The point to emphasise here is that these are seen as qualities that can be *sold* to particular audiences. There is not a complete opposition between Hollywood-as-commercial and the indie sector as non-commercial, even in its artier leanings. They are both commercial enterprises, in their own ways. I now want to consider some additional factors that help to make these films at least *relatively* marketable in other respects.

Other marketable dimensions

As far as *Gerry* is concerned, one obvious factor is the presence of two recognizable performers, Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, the former a reasonably big-name star. That immediately creates potential for a certain amount of commercial leverage (the two were also heavily involved in the creation of the film, which they co-wrote with Van Sant). Stardom remains one of the biggest marketing draws in American cinema; generally a good deal stronger than the name of the filmmaker, although not necessarily so at the artier end of the independent sector. The presence of stars can also cause problems, however. Stars bring with them certain expectations, and in this case the expectations accompanying Matt Damon are in danger of clashing with what is offered by the film. An audience drawn by the name might not appreciate what they are given: the kind of disjuncture than can create poor worth-of-mouth reaction, to the detriment of box-office returns.

Gerry could also be said to be marketable in the specialist sector on the basis of 'scenic' image quality, an aspect of the film drawn to attention by many media commentators. It is notable that the film's main success in terms of awards can be related to this dimension: Harris Savides won 'best cinematographer' of the year in the New York critics awards for both *Gerry* and *Elephant*, while his work in *Gerry* was also nominated in the Independent Spirit Awards for 2003. A link might even be drawn between this aspect of the film and its more abstract qualities. In an empirical study of those who consume abstract painting, David Halle (1992) finds that when they interpret such works, many tend to imagine them as landscapes of one kind or another. This is significant, he suggests, because it reduces the high-art domain of abstract art to something much closer to more general art-consumption, in which landscape is generally favoured by all classes, not just the wealthy and more powerful who tend to display abstract work in their homes. The implication for a film such as *Gerry* would be that the potentially alienating qualities of abstraction might be contained by the fact that it can be enjoyed to some extent at the level of pictorial landscape beauty, something generally seen as accessible to a wider range of viewers.

What, then, about *Elephant*? No stars this time, but a cast primarily of non-professionals. The main selling point here, or the main point of accessibility to a wider audience, is, quite clearly, the subject matter: the very strong currency of the post-Columbine theme. And also, to a lesser extent, the more generally familiar territory of the high-school landscape as a generic setting. The school-massacre

theme is the type of material likely to gain commercial interest and create potential for marketing. It gives *Elephant* a touch of the exploitation-cinema end of the independent spectrum. Exploitation cinema can be understood as one of the poles of the independent field, both in low-budget exploitation films themselves – which are not always seen as part of the more 'offbeat' or artier 'indie' sector – and as an influence on other indie films (for more on this, see King 2005). To gauge how far an element of exploitation exists in *Elephant*, we might imagine the film without the climactic massacre as a point of orientation and a source of suspense that hangs over the film. It would be a very different and much less commercial project. And, yet, the massacre is handled in a manner that is also very different from what would be expected closer to the mainstream or in low-budget exploitation, especially in its refusal to suggest any clear or single 'answers' or 'explanations' for what happens.

If Michael Moore's tongue-in-cheek suggestion is that bowling could offer as ready an explanation as many of the others used in the post-Columbine hysteria, Van Sant offers preoccupations of the protagonists ranging from playing videogames and watching a documentary about Nazism to playing the piano. He seems deliberately to tease by including an element such as a first-person-shooter (FPS) game, played by both perpetrators of the massacre; a brief game-like FPS image appears on screen at one point during a flash-forward to the killing spree, fleetingly seeming to imply some connection between the two activities, as suggested many anti-game critics in the wake of Columbine. The Nazi documentary playing on a television set in front of which the killers unwrap their newest mail-order weapon also fits into the conventional agenda of suggested points of influence (although the easy availability of automatic weapons opens up a quite different and perhaps more pertinent avenue of concern). But not the ringleader's proficiency on the piano; a prominent ingredient, a seemingly defining feature of the character, that jars with familiar explanatory accounts. It is notable that Van Sant does not choose to ignore conventional 'blame' elements such as videogames or an interest in Nazism, as would have been possible, but situates them in a less conventional mix and leaves any attempt to resolve or interpret further to the viewer. *Elephant* is typical here of independent features that tend to be radical (in a socio-political sense) in negating familiar/mainstream dynamics more than in providing positive alternatives, an approach very different from Moore's effort to explain American gun violence in a number of broader political-economic contexts. The refusal to provide simplistic answers is another factor that links *Elephant* to both the 'smart' cinema described by Sconce and the broader art cinema tradition. The film's 'following camera' form is a

very clear example of what Sconce identifies as a tendency to foster 'a sense of clinical observation' (2002: 360) from which the viewer is distanced, although this is achieved through a device opposite to the static tableau format seen by Sconce as symptomatic of the form.

If these films draw on a wider modernist tradition, and the work of specific filmmakers, there are also respects in which they do not depart as far from mainstream-commercial convention as some of their predecessors. There is something lighter about the texture and tone of *Gerry* than the work of Bela Tarr, for example; it seems, in some respects, more playful and absurd much of the time (a notable example being the sequence in which the Casey Affleck character somehow becomes stranded on a tall rock and manages to jump down, unhurt, onto an implausible-seeming 'dirt mattress' constructed by his colleague). *Gerry* does not have the gloominess, pessimism and gravitas found in Tarr. The conversations between the two main characters are generally insubstantial, while the discourse in Tarr's films tends to dwell on more weighty matters of metaphysics, politics and morality: the kind of material we generally associate with the 'heavyweight' modernist tradition. Art cinema itself has a history of being subject to the contradictory pulls of relatively exclusive/modernist and more accessible/marketable ingredients, as suggested by Barbara Wilinsky (2001), but the work of figures such as Tarr and Jancso is located quite clearly at the more exclusive and specialist end of the spectrum. It is tempting to suggest that *Gerry* is more 'postmodern' in approach (however abused that concept might be), in its apparent depthlessness and in detail such as the preoccupation of the characters in the early stages with popular cultural trivia related to a TV game-show and computer game, rather than the more serious nature of their developing plight. It is possible to read a variety of implications or 'meanings' into the film, but this is not something it appears overtly designed to encourage. It could be read in the context of the broad and often diffuse theme of 'alienation' familiar from the European art cinema tradition, for example. Or a reading might be essayed, more specific to the American context, along the lines that the film suggests a loss of contact with previously-hallowed 'frontier' virtues: the protagonists wander blithely into a potentially hostile 'wilderness' landscape, entirely ill-equipped for the enterprise, as might be suggested by their association with 'decadent' cultural forms and the nonsense they talk around the subject of following animal tracks – the latter precisely the terrain on which the mythical frontier hero would thrive. Even mores so than in *Elephant*, any interpretive work is left largely to the viewer.

If Van Sant's *Elephant* draws partly on Clarke's film of the same title, it is a good deal closer to mainstream convention in the degree of access it gives us to character. Van Sant's film is unconventional when compared with the Hollywood norm, in the fact that the viewer is restricted to limited shot-perspectives on characters. It still gives us a series of quite accessible and conventional character portraits, however, developed through dialogue exchanges and the existence of a number of familiar, in some cases stereotypical, characterizations among the students. The power and originality (and controversy) of Clarke's film is based on a denial of *any* sense of character interiority; its total refusal of context or motivation beyond that of a relentless and seemingly impersonal series of killings. Van Sant's *Elephant* is in this respect a good illustration of the way such films are often positioned somewhere in between the poles of mainstream convention and more radical alternative. *Elephant* is, partly, a formal exercise, but this is combined with the pull of more generic/familiar forces, most notably the clear sense for most viewers (assuming some level of pre-awareness) of the inevitable direction towards massacre in which it is leading.

Both films might also be considered in relation to Robert Kolker's definition of a modernist version of post-war art cinema marked as distinct from Hollywood in its reaction against the melodramatic demand for emotional identification with central characters (1983; 6). Each uses formal and other devices that distance us from character, but not entirely. We are invited in *Gerry*, at least in part, to share some sense of 'what it might be like' to experience the plight of the two protagonists; to share their moments of desperation, even if we are also pulled away by other forces such as formal distance. *Elephant*, too, enforces distance and detachment, but we are also mean to *care* about the eventual fate of the selective number of characters to whom we are introduced. When a hiding couple is confronted by one of the killers, for example, as he moves his gun from one to the other in a deadly game of 'eenie meenie minie mo', we are invited, it seems, to feel emotionally involved, in a conventional-enough manner; but then the camera withdraws, followed by a cut to a cloudscape over which the final credits roll, denying the emotional pay-off of a resolution to this particular micro-drama and the larger drama as a whole. The result, again, is a blend of the more and less familiar/conventional dynamics. In a particularly felicitous construction, Kolker describes the modernist endeavour in some instances of art cinema as an attempt 'to prevent the spectator from slipping easily through the structures of presentation into an emotional world of character and action' (159). The line between this and more mainstream/melodramatic cinema is

precisely that across which films such as *Gerry* and *Elephant* hover, the viewer being invited to move, variously, between one state and the other.

Some more immediate contextual factors might also contribute to making the formal qualities of *Gerry* and *Elephant* relatively less radical or unfamiliar than would otherwise have been the case at their time of release. The extended take or the following camera had some particular currency, in the indie or specialist arena at least, in the wake of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), for example, and the exploitation by some filmmakers of the very-long-take possibilities created by the use of digital video recording (in movie-long-sequence examples such as *Timecode* [2000] and *Russian Ark* [2002]). Both *Gerry* and *Elephant* were shot on celluloid, as it happens, but the advent of DV may have brought such formal qualities more generally into the repertoire of approaches found in this part of the cinema landscape.

Industrial location

Having considered in several ways the commercial potential of these films, I want to move on now to consider exactly where in the industrial spectrum they can be placed as far as their histories of production and distribution are concerned. Who funds such films and where exactly are they situated in the broad territory that lies between the Hollywood studios and the no-budget and often no-distribution world of the experimental avant-garde? Who would fund and distribute a film like *Gerry*, in particular, even with a star attached? The answer in this case appears to be that Van Sant did not have to persuade anyone to put the money up, initially, for this particular project. Before he made the studio film *Finding Forrester*, he says, he was given guaranteed funding of a million dollars by a German company to make a small film of his own choosing, without any requirement for stars or any other guarantees (Tobias 2003). The Internet Movie Database lists the budget as in the region of $3.5 million, although if that is correct the source of the remainder of the funding is unclear.

Gerry showed at the Sundance festival in January 2002 and reportedly received a rather mixed reception. Commentators doubted whether it would gain much of a distributor (Hernandez 2002a). It did get signed up, though, by ThinkFilm, a small Toronto-based outfit created in 2001 by a group of former executives from the larger independent distributor, Lion's Gate Films. ThinkFilm's head Mark Urman commented a few months later that he thought the film could be released on the back of the controversy its minimalist form would cause (Hernandez 2002b). This is

significant, suggesting that an element of exploitation-type strategy was included in the mix even for what would usually be seen as a resolutely 'arty' kind of indie feature. 'If a film can't be marketed, it stops right there', as Urman commented elsewhere, stressing his background in public relations and marketing (Toumarkine 2002).This strategy does not appear to have paid off particularly well, though. Distribution of the film was delayed until some months after the originally planned date and Urman conceded that the eventual US box office take of $250,000 was disappointing even for a film that had never been expected to achieve great success (Hernandez 2003). ThinkFilm was reported to have paid at least $1 million for the North American rights (Lyons 2002).

Gerry came, then, from quite a marginal position: funds including a rather privileged source, and a small distributor. It made a bit of a stir within indie circles, but had little impact anywhere else. *Elephant* can be located several degrees closer to the mainstream industrially, as might be expected given the fact that it has at least some more mainstream ingredients. The film developed from Van Sant's initial intention to make a more straightforward TV movie based directly on Columbine itself. He was told, according to one interview, that he would be more likely to find acceptance for something less direct and was referred to Clarke's *Elephant* as an example; a film he had not, apparently, seen at the time. Harmony Korine was involved at this stage, as a fan of Clarke's film, but a planned screenplay by Korine never emerged; a script was written by the novelist JT LeRoy but was deemed too conventional by Van Sant who based much of the eventual detail of the film on elements of the background and interests of the cast (Hattenstone 2004, HBO 2003). The film was produced by HBO Films, the production arm of the upmarket cable TV channel, with the involvement also of a company in which the actress Diane Keaton is a partner, which made her executive producer: reasonably substantial backers, in other words, with credentials at what would be defined as the 'quality' end of the market. The distribution of *Elephant* marked a significant move by HBO; it was one of a group of films involved in the company's first move into theatrical distribution, in a joint arrangement with Fine Line Features. This all located the film firmly in the indie or specialist wing of the major studio-distributors, Fine Line being the indie or specialist division of New Line Cinema, a former independent distributor that has gone much more mainstream and that is, in turn, owned by the giant Time Warner corporation. (New Line was one of the major players, along with Miramax, in the growth of the independent sector from the 1970s to the 1990s, but is now associated with large-scale productions such as the *Lord of the Rings* series.) HBO is also owned by Time Warner, making the

connection between Fine Line and HBO very much an in-house arrangement (although one subject to the kind of realignment typical of the sector in the early 2000s following the creation in 2005 of a new 'indie' division under the Time Warner banner, a move in which the formerly independent Newmarket Films was acquired under the joint control of HBO and New Line, putting Fine Line's future into doubt).

Elephant gained the prestige and publicity of winning the Palm d'Or at the Cannes film festival in 2003 (a significant source of consecration for the film and its director) and did significantly better than *Gerry* at the box office, as might be predicted. It took just over $1.2 million in the US and was given a broader release than *Gerry*, although both were very much indie-scale patterns of distribution. *Gerry* opened on two screens and had a 8-week run in which the maximum number of screens on which it played was 15 (figures for both films are from the Internet Movie Database, imdb.com). *Elephant* opened on six screens, did quite well for an indie feature and was extended to 30 screens after two weeks, reaching a maximum of 38 (this in a context in which the biggest Hollywood blockbusters typically open on up to 7,000 screens in some 3,000 to 4,000 theatres).

Conclusion

What can we conclude from all this, about these two films and how they illustrate aspects of the wider field of cultural production of which they are a part? Both films are located clearly in the independent or specialist market. *Gerry* is the more radical or alternative of the two from a formal perspective, as is reflected in where it stands in the industrial domain. It is the kind of film that needed some special backing or the kind of open-ended deal Van Sant had for at least a sizeable chunk of the budget. It would also be expected to gain commercial release only from a smaller indie distributor, particularly a relative newcomer such as ThinkFilm, seeking publicity as a way of making its mark in the field. *Gerry* is unusual and uncommercial enough not to appeal to any of the larger distributors, while also having the director 'name', star presence and potential controversy to generate some coverage in certain sectors of the media. *Elephant* is, relatively speaking, a more commercial prospect, but still a long way from mainstream convention in its form and in the implications its form has for the take it offers on the very contentious subject-matter in which it deals. Its hybrid industrial location is what might be expected given this combination of qualities: situated in the 'quality', 'specialist' domain suggested by names such as HBO and

Fine Line, and given very much an indie scale release; but a part of the indie landscape that remains within the orbit of mainstream media corporations.

In both cases, these films offer significant departures from dominant formal conventions. But a number of frameworks are in place to 'contain' or 'make sense of' these departures and to make them potentially attractive to particular audiences. Much the same can be said of *Last Days* (2005), the film with which Van Sant followed *Gerry* and *Elephant* in what has been interpreted as a trilogy of works that combine formal experiment with material dealing with youthful death. *Last Days* draws on a similar mixture of formal devices: long-held static shots and some that follow the central character, along with a fragmented, overlapping narrative design. This is motivated, quite strongly, as a figuration of the disconnected terminal experiences of a drug-addled rock star, based on Curt Cobain. The Cobain dimension also gives the film a marketable *Elephant*-like exploitation dimension. But, at the same time, *Last Days*, with its shambling central character and refusal to engage in linear narrative momentum, is rigorously designed to deny most of the conventional pleasures that might be expected from a tale of rock-star decline.

My aim in this paper has been to give a sense of the balance between these different dynamics, which varies in detail from one example to the other at a number of levels. Which of these factors are most important in situating such films to particular audiences also remains subject to variation. The auteur dimension, mediated by critical opinion, appears to loom particularly large in the case of *Gerry* and *Elephant*, but it is not always easy to separate one element out from others. In some instances, different specialist-marketable frameworks might be mutually supportive (the heritage of art cinema, auteurism and notions of desolate scenic beauty in *Gerry*, perhaps, even if the latter raises questions about the relative credit to be given to writer-director or cinematographer), while others remain more contradictory (star presence and the general tenor of the film). The main conclusion I draw from this kind of analysis is that it is useful to break films such as these down into their various components: elements that are more or less radical or different from the mainstream, and elements that contribute in various ways to balance or 'make sense of' these; that combine to enable different degrees of departure to exist within different parts of the wider independent field of production. Individual films such as those considered in this paper can reveal much about the context in which they appear; as Bourdieu puts it, 'it is a question of understanding works of art as a *manifestation* of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the

determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated' (1983; 37, emphasis in original). The field of which *Gerry* and *Elephant* are manifestations is one in which distinctions are made between more or less 'mainstream' and 'conventional' cinema practices, targeted at particular parts of the film-going public, but in which a number of overlaps are also characteristic of films situated in realms that remain part of the commercial marketplace. This might also be related, more speculatively, to broader trends in the landscape of taste distinctions in the United States.

A number of commentators, including Michael Kammen (1999) and Gans, have argued that taste boundaries and distinctions have become increasingly blurred and fluid in recent decades, even if determinants such as social class remain important indicators of likely taste preferences, especially for Gans. The principal reason for this change, such commentators agree, is a widening of access to higher education, one growth area being what Gans designates as the domain of upper-middle culture, particularly in the numbers of those employed in professional and technical occupations that require college or postgraduate degrees (1999: 149). Others, including George Lewis (1981) and Judith Blau (1989), argue that such developments are part of a process in which cultural taste has become less clearly associated with social class. This is often seen as specific to the US context in which, according to Peterson (1994) and Lamont, social distinction is marked by access to a range of cultural products that spreads wider than the restricted arena of elite arts to include aspects of popular or mainstream culture (Peterson, 180; Lamont, 113). At the top of the heap, as Peterson puts it, is not the exclusive highbrow but 'what can be called the inclusive yet discriminating *omnivore*' (180), a formulation that nicely captures a sense of the product offered by many films made in the independent sector or in its area of overlap with Hollywood. 'Inclusive yet discriminating' suggests a balancing act between the pull of mainstream and alternative dynamics; marked by distinction, but not too far, in a culture whose dominant expressions have, historically, voiced a suspicion of that seen as excessively intellectual/highbrow.

Instances of upper-middle culture cited by Gans include work screened by the Independent Film Channel, which would encompass films such as *Gerry* and *Elephant*. The formalist dimension of such titles would skew them more to Gans' version of high culture, in which 'innovation and experimentation' are seen as particularly dominant (101), but this might be balanced by the some of the other dimensions of the films explored in this paper. A boundary particularly subject to

cross-over in Gans' account is that between upper- and lower- middle culture, one of his examples of this phenomenon being the substantial audience and Oscar recognition given to *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). If the 'inclusive yet discriminating' qualities offered by *Shakespeare in Love* place it on the boundary between upper- and lower-middle culture (and also on the boundary between Hollywood and the independent sector, having been co-produced by Miramax and Universal Pictures and distributed in the US by Miramax, the 'indie/specialist' arm of Disney), *Gerry* and *Elephant* might be located in the overlap between high and upper-middle cultures, broadly drawn, two of many products in the broader independent or semi-independent sectors that can be understood as hybrid forms designed to appeal on the basis of marking but also crossing particular zones in the niche-marketable cinema taste spectrum.

1. The analysis of these two films in this article is developed from a brief initial consideration in King 2005. I am grateful for feedback given by seminar audiences to earlier versions of this paper at the universities of Kent and Sussex.

2. *Psycho* sits somewhat ambiguously in the Hollywood/independent spectrum traversed by Van Sant's work. It is quite clearly a Hollywood production in many respects, produced and distributed by Universal and founded, commercially, on the dimension of marketable exploitation/controversy guaranteed by a remake of Hitchcock's original, a pre-sold properly owned by the studio. At the same time, the novelty and provocation of attempting something close to a shot-for-shot repetition gives the film an almost 'experimental' dimension, within a more mainstream context, as was highlighted by the director in interviews and some reviewers. The cast also includes a number of performers associated with the independent sector, including Julianne Moore and William H. Macey.

3. This is not to say that formal radicalism might not potentially constitute a challenge to dominant ideologies in a more implicit manner; by, for instance, denying the easily 'taken for granted' character of the nature of the dominant-conventionally represented world and the ideological assumptions according to which it is structured, as suggested most famously by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni (1969). My suggestion is that this is much less likely to feature as a specific point of attraction in work of the kind considered in this paper; or, more strongly, that for many of those in the kinds of social class groups to which such work is targeted, formal regimes offer sources of pleasurable distinction in the act of consumption more immediately in keeping with objective class interests to which more radical/alternative subject matter might often be opposed.

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