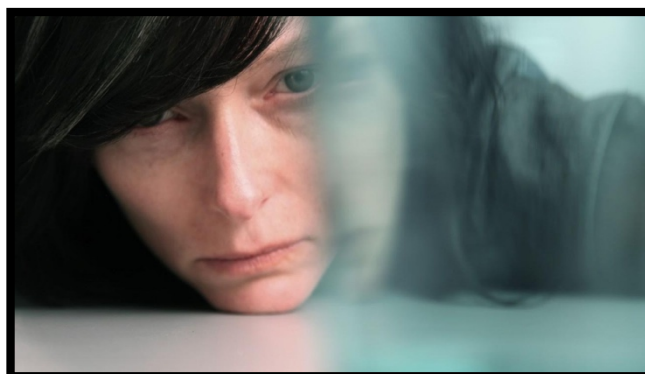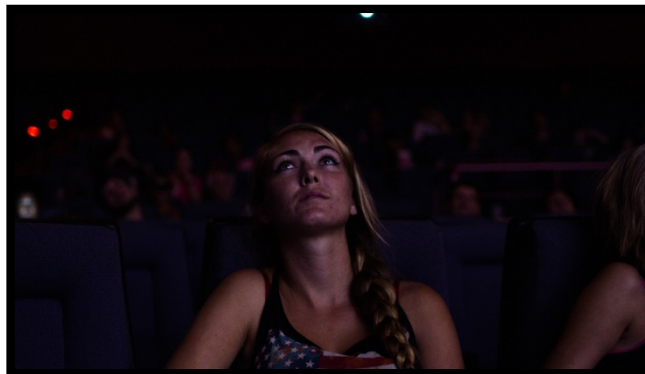# Framing Mass Shootings

Fictional Depictions of Real-life Gun Massacres in American Cinema

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Abstract

This thesis examines the concept of real-life mass shootings and its depiction in American fictional cinema. The issue of mass shootings is a highly controversial subject of discussion, both within the public and political sphere, as it necessarily touches upon rigid perceptions of civil liberties – specifically those of the Second Amendment – which further permeates the field of fictional cinema. As opposed to assessing the issue of mass shootings as a product of a prevailing culture of guns, it is to a significant extent reduced to political leverage, a rhetorical weapon aimed to legitimize prevailing attitudes on a political battlefield on which opponents and supporters of one's individual right to bear arms meet head to head. Moreover, it may be argued that there is a general reluctance to acknowledge the issue of mass shootings as a national concern, particularly when the foundation on which contemporary society is built will have to be scrutinized and examined from different angle. Certain traditional conceptions of the US as a nation may further distort the pathway towards efficiently and constructively deal with a widespread concern that is fundamentally American in nature; the prevailing mentality surrounding the issue of mass shootings thus leaves the idea of progress deadlocked.

All things considered, newfound perspectives are necessary, and fictional cinema may prove to be of significant rhetorical value within this context, which constitutes the main argument of the thesis. As of today, the issue remains largely unseen on screen, particularly within the commercial sector, as Hollywood operates within relatively rigid traditional boundaries of expression, both in terms of ideological and financial structures – particularly when mass shootings are to be examined. Yet, attempts have been made within the independent sector. Certain filmmakers are unwilling to allow the acclamation of the second amendment of the Constitution fall in disfavor of the first; some step carefully around the elephant in the room, while others are willing to face it head on. In order to illuminate the sociopolitical value of fictional film and the ways in which aspects of the ongoing debate of mass shootings may be critically examined, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and Tim Sutton's *Dark Night* are analyzed. While Ramsay examines the concept of scrutiny and prejudice, Van Sant targets the distortedness of the discourse of mass shootings, and Sutton frames the issue of mass shootings as an inevitable downfall of the cultural status quo, in which guns are assigned the leading role.

Foreword

At the age of fourteen, I encountered Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* for the first time. Fascinated by its alternative perspective on the otherwise disturbing subject of mass shootings, watching it became a matter of routine. Still, at this day – perhaps even more so now – it never seizes to amaze for its ability to come across as simple and complex at the same time, to synthesize the ordinary and the sensational, for its ability to challenge its audience and stimulate reflection overall. It is still, in my opinion, a pace changer for the ways in which fictional cinema can address sociopolitical controversies and offer important insights in ways other artistic outlets cannot. Luckily, certain filmmakers acknowledge the value of such sentiments and rekindle the cinematic rhetoric offered by Van Sant.

I believe it was my brother who brought (the) *Elephant* into our household (living room). Thank you for that.

On that note, I would like to thank the rest of my family as well for showing a keen interest in my thesis matter, and for their relentless support overall. Second, my academic entourage, a wonderful group of people with whom I have shared this experience – thank you for all the off-topic digressions. They were absolutely imperative. Third, Martin Frogner – I am tremendously appreciative of you taking your time to proofread my thesis.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Asbjørn Grønstad, for constructive feedback, reflective conversations and invaluable guidance throughout.

Ane Johannessen Tryggeseid,
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I. INTRODUCTION

Directors will be fighting over this story … I know we're gonna have followers because we're so fucking G-d-like. We're not exactly human – we have human bodies, but we've evolved into one step above you, fucking human shit. We actually have fucking self-awareness.
(Harris and Klebold, quoted in Rich, 2012)

There were undoubtedly many things off about the ways in which Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris – the perpetrators behind the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999 – perceived the world, as it comes across in their manifesto, «Basement Tapes and Home Videos» (Rich, 2012: 1310). If they were still alive, they would be disappointed to see that no directors were eagerly waiting to tell their story – at least not in the manner they were hoping. The vast majority of American directors seem to hold their ground when the issue of mass shootings is to be examined. Ironically, while one is regularly subjected to a hailstorm of gun massacres within the commercial sphere, one is yet to see a big budget Hollywood film address the subject of Columbine, or any other incident of real-life mass shootings. Aside from a few documentaries, a handful of more or less independently produced films have aimed to fictionalize the phenomenon of mass shootings; however, if distributed at all, they largely go by unnoticed or slaughtered at the box office. Naturally, it is a controversial issue, and there are certainly ethical dilemmas to consider if aiming to depict the subject; yet, controversial issues have made the cut before, whether terrorism, suicide, antisemitism, racism, sexual deviation, serial murder or other forms of extreme violence. The repertoire of films, commercial or not, depicting these issues – particularly the latter on account of its apparent similarity – will beg the question of why fictional examinations of mass shootings cave before scripts are visualized – if they even make it to this stage. However, there is no way to know with certainty whether this issue is even sought upon by directors and whether it is necessary to disarm them at all; enabling them to pursue the issue might as well translate as handing them a loaded gun without them knowing where to aim it.

However, the issue of mass shootings also begs the question of why in itself. Therein lies the complexities of the phenomenon and the controversies surrounding them, moving beyond ethical considerations. The inherent disturbing nature of mass shootings are followed by national distress in the aftermath; while there is consensus on the fact that something must be done, that the overall aim always will be to prevent future shootings from happening, there

is no consensus on which measures to implement in order to reach the endpoint, and whether one will be able to remain proactive at all. The inability to grasp, or acknowledge, the underlying issues that ultimately hold the responsibility for the prevalence of mass shootings in the US will inevitably prevent the public and the political sphere from visualizing the road ahead. The why is dependent on the how, the how is dependent on the why, and the fear and distress arising in the aftermath will further complicate thorough assessment of the situation. The lack of consensus in terms of the very source of the existence of mass shootings promotes ungrounded perceptions of solution; allegation trumps solution, and there are as many allegations as there are myths. Mass shootings are consequently addressed in isolation, defined in accordance with the allegation one wishes to legitimize, as opposed to addressing its roots. The debate on the issue involves reassessment of the fundamental values on which contemporary society is built, the values forming the nation's *Bill of Rights* ratified in 1791 (Bill of Rights Institute, 2017). Arguably, the repercussions of at least one of the amendments were unforeseen. Refusing to come to terms with the realities that make up the issue of mass shootings becomes a matter of opening a closed door without using the key at hand; those aiming to establish alternative pathways towards fighting its existence ultimately ignore or deny that the infection of gun violence peaks at the occurrence of another mass shooting, and that the Second Amendment is its patient zero.

Aims & Objectives

Originally, the intent of this thesis was to examine fictional cinematic depictions of mass shootings and assess the ethical issues of concern that may consequently emerge. However, as it became gradually evident that mass shootings are positioned within a controversial discourse requiring thorough assessment, and the fact that every aspect of discussion in this context are intertwined and occur within a larger sociopolitical and cultural narrative, the thesis took a different turn. When debating the concept of mass shootings, the same topics of discussion reoccur in a continuous loop, and familiar patterns are set to repeat themselves while waiting for another shooting to occupy the public agenda. There is an evident need for alternative perspectives to enter the arena – sentiments in which the phenomenon of mass shootings is not tainted with ulterior political motives that ultimately prevent progress. Cinema may be of value when attempting to visualize the road ahead; some may visually portray how the idea of moving forward requires a change in the prevailing mentality surrounding mass shootings, that one must move backwards in order to move forward. The intended aim thus evolved into larger

questions of research – the question of *what fictional cinema may offer in terms of sociopolitical and cultural insights on the subject of real-life mass shootings, how these insights are manifested through narrative and stylistic approaches and why these sentiments are of rhetorical value.* Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) – perhaps the most frequently referred films on the topic, as of today – and the most recent fictional depiction of the subject, Tim Sutton's *Dark Night* (2016), will be analyzed accordingly.

There seems to be little research on the topic of real-life mass shootings in fictional cinema, to the extent general searches in public search engines and academic databases allow such conclusions to be drawn. The theoretical frameworks will therefore not be strictly grounded in previous studies; rather, theories on the subject of political cinema and commercial cinema in general will function as a backdrop, recontextualized in order to illuminate and provide depth to the arguments presented throughout the thesis. Due to the complexities surrounding the subject and its limited coverage in previous research, further infiltrating the cinematic sphere, there will be no established disciplines employed when analyzing the films in question. The analytical approach will have to be tailored in accordance with the nature of the ongoing debate to assess whether and how reoccurring topics of concern are examined within these films; consequently, this thesis will not offer a traditional case study. As the issue of mass shootings is positioned within a narrative evoking fundamental questions on the perception of civil liberties, the three cases will be addressed as a part of a larger narrative themselves, thus forming a contextual study. Part II will elaborate on the core issues evoked within the sociopolitical discourse of mass shootings, as theoretical framework for discussing its depiction in American fictional cinema; part III will examine how the controversies of the sociopolitical discourse infiltrate Hollywood, how the concept of mass shootings challenge conventional norms of commercial cinema and why fictional portrayals of this subject largely remain non-existent. Further, the reflections on political cinema in Hollywood serve to highlight the rhetorical value and overall importance of those willing to address the subject within the independent sphere in part IV. When analyzing *Elephant*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Dark Night*, aspects that may be interpreted as critical perspectives on the legacy of the Second Amendment and the overall political discourse will be accentuated.

II. DEBATING MASS SHOOTINGS

There is a certain degree of inconsistency when it comes to mass shooting statistics in the United States. As more and more incidents of mass shootings have occurred, there has been an exponentially growing debate regarding what one should count as a mass shooting (Schaul, 2015). Relying on statistics is imperative when researchers, journalists and other commentators assess the severity of mass shootings in the US. A prominent factor in the development of these figures is establishing a proper definition of «mass shootings»; yet, there is no definition said to be universally accepted (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Prior to 2013, the Federal Investigation Bureau (FBI) considered an incident of mass shooting to include four or more victims. Since then, federal statues lowered the number of casualties to three (Willingham, 2016). The Gun Violence Archive, a non-profit corporation providing public access to information about gun-related violence in the United States (2017a), base their statistics on the definition stating that a mass shooting occurs when four or more individuals are shot and/or killed in a single event. On the basis of this definition, there have been 384 mass shootings in 2016 (2017b). The most common definition, however, is four or more casualties in a single event (Willingham, 2016) – the definition utilized by the FBI prior to 2013 – which in effect lowers the total number of mass shootings. The establishment of a definition does not only involve the number of casualties; there is also the issue of whether to label them as «regular shootings», «mass shootings», «mass killings» or «massacres» (Ingraham, 2015), or issues related to the context in which the shootings occur. Congressional reports sometimes exclude incidents occurring in gang-related or domestic settings (Willingham, 2016). These reports define a mass shooting as an incident involving four or more deaths, not including the shooter (Bjelopera et al., 2013). These frameworks and formal requirements further lower the total number of mass shootings to a significant extent.

Definitions have been widely criticized on different accounts; the definition utilized by the Gun Violence Archive is, by some, considered to be too broad, while FBIs definition excludes too many shootings, both on account of number of casualties and the context in which a shooting occurs; in order for an incident to be labelled as a mass shooting, the shooter must be «actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area» (Sanburn, 2015). Additionally, there is a level of skepticism targeted at the degree of accuracy in reports conducted by police agencies, based on the possibility that some mass killings are left out, while other incidents that do not meet the set requirements are included (Overberg et

al., 2013). According to an investigation conducted by USA Today in 2013, there is only 57 percent accuracy, roughly, in the data on mass killings extracted by the FBI (Berkowitz et al., 2017). In general, some reports do not reflect the actual scope of the particular case in question, and some do not make it into the records at all due to «noncompliant reporting agencies», consequently reducing the reliability of public statistics on mass shootings and gun violence overall (Fox & Levin, 2016: 38).

Defining an incident based on the number of casualties and context may be unfortunate on the basis of reliability and accuracy; however, it may also pose issues on ethical grounds in the act of reducing complex and horrifying incidents into numbers and statistics (Schaul, 2015). The theater shooting taking place in Lafayette, Louisiana, in July 2015, serves as an example of the arguably cynical yet necessary process of categorization; «only» two people were killed, while nine others were injured. This shooting did not meet the definition of «mass shooting» set by federal law, and were, as a result, not included in the official statistics (Ingraham, 2015). However, as Schaul points out, in order to gain knowledge about the status quo of this national issue, «one must draw the lines somewhere». The different tallies conducted vary to a significant extent; the statistical inconsistency in itself may nevertheless be viewed as an indication of the severity of the situation, as the frequency of mass shootings in general is substantially high. There have been many disturbing incidents taking place through the years, regardless of the various definitions applied by different organizations and institutions, and there is no shortage of lists illustrating the frequency of mass shootings. *The Washington Post* is one of many newspapers providing a timeline of the deadliest shootings in American history, in which at least nine people died (Bump, 2016). There are 21 shootings on this list, ranging from 9 to 50 lethal casualties. This includes the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 and its 13 casualties, the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 first graders and six adults were fatally shot, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting in Blacksburg, resulting in 32 casualties, and the Orlando shooting in 2016. The latter is generally considered to be the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history, claiming 50 lives and leaving 53 injured. Based on definitions and the nature of the specific shootings, there is, as in many other articles and tallies, a possibility of some incidents being left out, even if they meet the criteria – a possibility of inaccuracy Philip Bump recognizes: «If we missed any, please let us know» (2016).

Whether the tallies include shootings in single or multiple settings, of a domestic or gang-related nature, or whether the limit is set to three or four casualties, not including or including the shooter, there is a general agreement, more or less, on the fact that the phenomena

of mass shootings in many respects continue to renew its status as an American issue. Casualties or not, there are seemingly more mass shootings than there are days during the course of a year (Gun Violence Archive, 2017b). Statistics on the frequency of mass shootings in itself is an important subject worthy of investigation, as they in general serve as an indication of its severity. Different commentators rely on different definitions; some may claim that the issue of mass shooting is a national crisis, while numbers generated by more narrow definitions – excluding injuries, for instance – utilized by other commentators and institutions, might paint a slightly different picture. Some further claim that there is no such thing as a mass shooting epidemic when looking at the frequency of gun violence in general. For instance, James Alan Fox and Jack Levin argue that the perception of mass shootings as an alleged epidemic is due to media hype, as journalists, and consequently the public, are quick to draw conclusions, urging to sensationalize high-profile shootings (2017: 37) – if it bleeds, it leads. The problem arises when mass shootings are framed as a phenomenon speaking for itself; it is easy to coin them as abnormal due to their disturbing nature, from which distortive perceptions of the issue are welcomed. They are ultimately the most disturbing outcome of a greater issue; the nation's gun culture. Criticizing the media for their ability to frame mass shootings as an epidemic may be founded on misleading grounds, as some may seek to discredit mass shootings as an issue restricted to their nation. Media sensationalism should be problematized for its ability reproduce distortive narratives, and framing mass shootings as an epidemic is problematic when mass shootings essentially constitute a familiar aspect of American society on the basis of its statistics.

Debating whether it forms an epidemic or not is thus irrelevant, and even though the frequency of mass shootings sometimes is claimed to be exaggerated, the numbers speak for themselves, as echoed in Bump's question; sensational or not, he has missed hundreds of shootings. Regardless of whether there has been an increase in its occurrence or not, they still take place, and will – all things considered – continue to do so in the following years. Some seek to counter media hype by claiming that they are «astonishingly rare», as pleaded by researchers Benjamin Winegard and Christopher J. Ferguson (2017: 60). While they aim to counter distortive patterns emerging in the aftermath of every high-profile shooting, this claim remains peculiar. Perhaps mass shootings are framed as rare in context, in comparison with other forms of violence, or perhaps they specifically refer to those of sensational value in the media, or even out of sensitivity towards a public in distress following these incidents. Regardless, framing them as rare may come across as misleading – whether rare when compared to other forms of violence or not, they are still highly frequent, and one shooting will

always be one too many. By contrast, it may be argued that mass shootings should be perceived as frequent – claiming otherwise might in effect prevent constructive discussion. On the basis of mere statistics, mass shootings should be addressed in isolation, but not in terms of explanation. The different boundaries, definitions and perceptions of frequency will not be discussed in further detail in this thesis; as everything else on the subject of mass shootings, there is inconsistency, and there are no patterns of explanations widely agreed upon – its statistics is merely the beginning. In this context, the debate on statistical frameworks and definitions merely functions as a framework for discussing the controversy of mass shootings and its depiction in American cinema. Often politicized, yet, paradoxically, rarely a subject of fruitful debate, as the phenomenon itself, as well as its frequency, is reduced to mere political leverage, recontextualized in order to fit the agenda of its preacher.

Explaining Mass Shootings

Following every mass shooting, debates involving how to effectively address and deal with the issue of mass shootings seem to be rekindled; questions on who to blame and which precautionary measures to take emerge in the aftermath of these incidents. The ability to identify contextual and underlying problems and provide explanations and solutions is commonly sought after by journalists and other commentators (Kleck, 1999: 60), and the spotlight falls in many different directions. The fact that there does not seem to be any indication of a decline in the frequency of mass shootings speaks for itself. It is severely difficult to pinpoint a single issue causing mass shootings, and consequently a single solution to prevent them from occurring in the future. In his essay, *There Are No Lessons to Be Learned from Littleton* (1999), published the year of the Columbine massacre, Gary Kleck, professor at Florida State University, provides a rather excessive list of problems proving to be prominent in the aftermath of these events – in this case, in schools (60):

> A partial list of the problems that have been blamed for the recent mass killings in schools would include: guns, "assault weapons", large-capacity ammunition magazines, lax regulation of gun shows; the failure of parents to secure guns, school cliques, and the exclusion of "outsiders"; bullying and taunting in schools, especially by high school athletes; inadequate school security, especially a lack of metal detectors, armed guards, locker searches, and so forth; excessively large high schools; inadequate monitoring of potentially violent students by schools; lazy, uninvolved Baby Boomer parents and correspondingly inadequate supervision of their children; young killers not being eligible for the death penalty; a lack of religion, especially in schools; violent movies and television; violent video games; violent material and

communications on the World Wide Web/Internet (including bomb-making instructions); anti-Semitism, neo-Nazi sentiments, and Hitler worship; "Industrial" music, Marilyn Manson's music, and other "dark" variants of rock music; Satanism; "Goth" culture among adolescents; and Southern culture.

Kleck provides a list of contributing factors – some might be considered extremely narrow – which are not necessarily widely agreed upon. Moreover, each shooting is unique, and the motivations of the shooter may to a large extent only be speculated upon. The purpose of his essay is not to single out the main problems and necessary solutions; on the contrary, Kleck argues that this is generally infeasible. As stated in his essay, identifying the causes and providing preventive solutions would only be beneficial if there were a sufficient level of continuity in the nature of the shootings Americans have witnessed over and over again. As a result, based on the uniqueness of each shooting, it is difficult, or even impossible, to fully prevent future shootings as the precautionary measures discussed in the aftermath are developed in compliance with the specific nature of the shooting in question: «Thus, because bizarre events are unlikely to be repeated in quite the same way in the future, the more narrowly a preventive measure is tailored to the specifics of such events, the less likely it is to save lives» (Kleck, 1999: 61). Another argument in Kleck's essay is grounded in the fact that mass shootings inherently differ from other types of violence. Applying the same methodologies and knowledge derived from other types of incidents may be problematic when the cases of mass shootings in reality are much more complex; mass shootings are «almost invariably planned», unlike the vast majority of other types of homicide. Moreover, there is rarely correspondence in terms of the backgrounds of the mass shooters and other types of killers; for instance, mass shooters frequently come from a middleclass background, and they often exhibit a clean criminal record (ibid). The investigation of mass shootings calls for other perspectives and approaches due to its complexities and the general lack of consistency.

In their article, *School Shooters: History, Current Theoretical and Empirical Findings, and Strategies for Prevention* (2014) psychologists Caitlin M. Bonanno and Richard L. Levenson state that there has been an increase in school shootings in the recent years, particularly drawing attention to the Columbine High School shooting, the Virginia Tech shooting and the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting. As most of these shootings include adolescents and on occasion children, these events are subjected to widespread attention and extensive investigation. In order to efficiently deal with this issue and figure out the next preventive steps, there have been attempts to identify potential external and internal factors negatively influencing the minds of these individuals by building a set of common

characteristics describing school shooters. These characteristics cover a wide range of issues related to social relationships, family backgrounds, demographics, mental health and exposure to violence in the media, among other factors. Within the context of school shootings, those of prominence are theories on «bad homes», bullying and violent entertainment, as argued by Winegard and Ferguson (2017: 64-68). For instance, while it is easy to blame the upbringing of perpetrators for the nature of their personalities and their behavior, it only generates the question of «why hundreds of thousands of children who suffer similar or worse trauma do not commit heinous crimes as adolescents or adults» (67); the same reasoning may be applied in terms of bullying and violent entertainment as well. According to the researchers, attempting to gather a set of common characteristics have been chiefly unsuccessful, as many studies fail to specifically target individuals of risk without stigmatizing individuals otherwise considered harmless.

Studies conducted by Vossekuil et al. in 2002 (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014), in which 37 incidents of school violence were analyzed, show a range of similarities in the actual unfolding of these incidents, such as use of weaponry, type of targets and duration of attacks, and, as stated by Kleck, most of them did not present a criminal history. However, the study nevertheless concluded that «there is no "profile" or "set of demographic and other traits that a set of perpetrators of a crime have in common" for student attackers» (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014: 2). The attackers came from different family backgrounds and differed in terms of social status and relationships, as well as in records of behavioral or disciplinarian problems. Although there arguably are various practical issues related to methodology and reliability, a relatively varied range of motives were detected, including motives of revenge, different types of grievance, suicide or desperation or a desire for attention and recognition (ibid: 3). There were nevertheless certain similarities related to mental health, as a majority of the attackers investigated experienced verbal and non-verbal strain in the form of bullying, for instance, prior to the attacks. Other common factors the attackers shared were feelings of «personal failure» or «significant losses», contributing to the development of mental health issues (ibid) – an issue often discussed in the aftermath of mass shootings, regardless of the context in which they occur. The possibility of false positives further complicates the matter of creating a profile, or a set of characteristics, as many students otherwise not considered a threat might fit the profile (ibid: 2). There have been attempts at establishing a typology of mass shooters as a whole when aiming to understand the prevailing psychological forces driving them; yet, these are only useful to a certain extent, and are unable to grasp the essence of the psychology of mass shooters

without framing others as prospective shooters by proxy (Fox & Levin, 2017: 51). A more detailed assessment of such typologies is offered in the analysis of *Dark Night* in part IV.

Even though the process of identifying causes and establishing patterns proves to be inherently difficult, both on a practical and ethical level, precautionary measures have been taken or suggested in response. As opposed to identifying common traits defining school shooters, and consequently students most likely to commit violence, the preventive measures taken or discussed are more of an external nature, in the form of increased security, actions for safe school environments and threat assessments (ibid: 6-7). Many schools in general respond by increasing school security due to the fact that cases of school shootings tend to receive excessive media coverage. The Columbine shooting, among others, received massive media attention, causing a boost in security measures in the form of surveillance, trained personnel, restrictions in access on campus, metal detectors and emergency exercises. Moreover, in broad lines, the creation of safe environments is dependent on the achievement of a number of factors, such as the ability to spot and recognize cries for help or other indications raising concern, and the practice of open and honest communication between students and adults, in which students are able to openly share their concerns, whether they involve themselves or fellow students. Anti-bullying programs have also been suggested, focusing on empathy, emotion-management, internal discipline and problem-solving and general life skills. Finally, Bonanno and Levenson (2014: 8) vouch for proactive actions in the form of threat assessment, involving a thorough analysis of communications, actions and circumstances potentially signaling a future attack. When conducting threat assessments, students who pose a threat are focused on, and whether there have been any previous trauma or loss should be investigated. More specific background checks should be implemented as well; whether the student in question has access to firearms or not is imperative.

Whether these measures are or would be effective and beneficial is nevertheless not easy to determine. Every measure comes with certain challenges. Increased security, for instance, is potentially problematic, especially when schools are applying methods to secure a safe school environment. Increased security might in fact pose the opposite; victimization and resentment of students, stress and fear or greater school disorder (ibid: 6). There have also been attempts to restrict sales and extend background checks at gun shows, but these attempts have proven to be ineffective and irrelevant; school shooters have been able to acquire firearms in other ways, through theft, family members or friends. Moreover, school shooters tend to plan their attacks in advance, often over long periods of time, and are therefore more likely to succeed (Kleck, 1999: 61). The measures may have had a preventive effect, but the fact that there, in retrospect,

have been other shootings calls for different conclusions: the preventive measures must either be strengthened both in number and nature or discontinued in favor of other measures – otherwise, nothing can be done (ibid: 62). As stated, each shooting is unique – there are different motivations, different killers and different circumstances – therefore it is challenging to identify causes and preventive measures applicable for all future shootings, whether they take place on school premises or other locations: «Even under the best of circumstances, the lessons one could derive from the examination of individual violent events are inherently ambiguous» (ibid). The fact that there are no specific common traits to look for and usually no criminal backgrounds further complicates this matter; the incidents are hard to explain and consequently hard to foresee.

Intense Public Concern

Measures have been applied and discussed within the school system, but the issue of mass shooting expands beyond this sector. Even though the texts by Kleck (1999) and Bonanno and Levenson (2014) primarily focus school shootings, a subset of mass shooters, and specific incidents, they illustrate how the assessment of this issue poses a wide range of challenges. A significant level of time and energy has been devoted into defining causes and solutions, but these measures nevertheless prove to be more effective with more mundane crimes, and therefore, according to Kleck (1999), not sufficient in the context of school shootings. However, when looking at mass shootings in general, these preventive measures are relatively specific and therefore not transferrable to other types of mass shootings. The profile describing a school shooter – to the extent that there is one – already changes at a college or university level (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014: 5). These students are often driven by other factors, such as academic pressure and feelings of failure as opposed to bullying or other forms of verbal and non-verbal torment. It is far more complicated to identify solutions for all scenarios involving mass shootings, especially when this already is a complicated matter within the school sector; the scope of variations and differences between shooters widens, and the idea of pinpointing preventive measures becomes even more challenging and controversial. Moreover, students find themselves on a relatively restricted and controlled area, therefore making it theoretically easier to implement preventive measures. The question of why warning signs were ignored is thus misleading in itself; «If anything, these indicators are yellow flags that only turn red once

the blood has spilled and are identified in the aftermath of tragedy with crystal-clear hindsight» (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 133).

Mass shootings tend to inflict what Kleck (1999: 62) refers to as «intense public concern», a state of «fear or hysteria», in which people draw certain conclusions and make certain choices regarded as questionable on the basis of logic, relevance and durability. Given the fact that mass shootings happen on a relatively regular basis compared to other nations, the public turns to solutions that may be implemented quickly, driven by a wish to have something done once and for all. However, as stated, these proposed and implemented solutions prove to be irrelevant, more or less, as the debate regarding school shootings illustrates. The distress emerging in the aftermath of every shooting is likely to influence the process of decision-making and rational thought in one way or another, and people may not find themselves in a state of mind enabling them to thoroughly assess this issue, where every detail, every nuance and every potential consequence of proposed solutions are sufficiently examined: «Unfortunately, people often favor actions that make them feel better over those that would actually make them safer, if the actions can be implemented quickly and easily and are touted as producing results immediately» (Kleck, 1999: 63). As there does not seem to be a single set of solutions proving to be directly effective or applicable for all mass shootings, questions on who or what to blame seem to overshadow discussions on precautionary measures and solutions, especially when one is dealing with mass shootings beyond the school sector. As for high school students, for instance, there primarily seems to be a focus on mental health by searching for contributing factors in their family backgrounds, upbringings and social relationships at or outside school – a relatively specific focus on specific triggers and how to assess these triggers. As this is a more restricted area within the field of mass shootings, several proposed solutions will arguably be more concrete – despite their inaccuracies – compared to the case of mass shootings in general.

When looking at the bigger picture, identifying causes at the expense of concrete solutions seems to be more prominent, which in part may be a result of difficulties in assessing specific factors as the scope of variation widens, but also due to a state of distress and confusion over the lack of answers. A key factor in the existence of a widespread public concern is the media, shaping the public perception of mass shootings. Jaclyn Schildkraut and H. Jaymi Elsass (2017) address the media as «moral entrepreneurs», referring to their capacity of agenda setting and their ability to direct attention towards potential causes, self-protection and the overall severity of mass shootings in general (2017: 117). In the eyes of the general public, the media constitutes an independent, credible and legitimate first-hand source of information – therefore

constituting a powerful influence on attitudes towards mass shootings and its political significance. As opposed to merely reflecting the status quo of society, they shape the public consciousness by sorting out issues considered worthy of investigation, highlighting aspects urged to be seen as problematic. The media is imperative in the creation of an overall agreement on the importance of particular issues – public consensus is one of the main goals in the process of agenda setting (118). In the case of mass shootings, certain stories and cases are accentuated on the basis of the issues they reflect; some stories are viewed as more important than others, addressed to influence public opinion and achieve overall consensus. These accentuated cases tend to constitute the most extreme and severe stories, consequently accentuating the perception of the likelihood of becoming a victim and the general fear of crime, according to Schildkraut and Elsass (2017). Even though the chances of becoming a victim are substantially slim, the stories conveyed in the media, and the ways in which they are conveyed, may pose emotional strain among its consumers. This bears resemblance to the state of distress and concern Kleck addresses in the context of Columbine, potentially stimulating unhealthy and disproportionate perceptions and ideations.

Mass shootings receive widespread coverage in the media as they tend to represent the most atypical forms of crime, threatening «society's perceived stability» (ibid). Among these stories, the ones reflecting key issues are highlighted; several of the factors listed by Kleck are continuously revisited as other shootings occur. The moral spotlight has been directed towards a handful of factors regarded as potential contributors pushing the shooters «over the edge» (Wallace, 2015). In order to achieve public consensus on the issues viewed as important by definitions of the media, the focus is limited to involve only a few issues at the time (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2017: 118). The attention is primarily dedicated to the issue of gun control and mental health, in which the healthcare system is scrutinized. Others have turned towards the media in itself when investigating and reflecting upon potential contributors. A supposed prevalence of a culture of violence has been addressed, in which widespread media coverage and the entertainment industry are of significant concern (Bushman & Anderson, 2015). In general, high profile cases generate reoccurring «hot topics» of discussion (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 125); yet, particularly due to the fact that there is no sufficiently established tradition of research within the field of mass shootings, these hot topics may as well, to a large extent, be regarded as myths. When attempting to explain the unexplainable, distortive narratives may arise. The public discourse seems to favor causality at whatever cost, as they ultimately offer explanations. This is where theories become causes, in which the mother of a perpetrator (Wallace, 2015) or the producers of *Grant Theft Auto V* (Kain, 2013) become mass murderers by proxy. The high-

profile incidents do not only generate fear, they may legitimize wrongful or irrelevant perspectives – however misleading, myths allow narration, and narration provides patterns of explanations (Collins, 2016). While there are many reasons for why media sensationalism is unfortunate, the ability to establish ungrounded perceptions may in fact be the most controversial aspect in a long-term perspective.

Kathryn E. Linder (2014), research director at Oregon State University, aims to portray how the public will be inclined to rely on distortive perspectives in a state of fear. School shootings, particularly, would challenge Americans' predefined perception of «white youth innocence». Prior to the Columbine massacre, school violence was associated with colored adolescents in urban areas (xiii) – when the phenomenon of school shootings became redefined as an act of violence that could seemingly happen anywhere, regardless of demography, a presence of fear and distress became an inevitable outcome, and the importance of explanation increased exponentially. According to Linder, the «spectacle of terror», as coined by Douglas Kellner, seems to influence the general discourse; this was particularly relevant in the aftermath of Columbine, framed as a «direct assault on the American Dream» (xiv). While ironically elevating the presence of fear, it seems to form the go-to narrative when there are no answers to be offered. Certain figures criticize the sensationalistic perspective of the media for reasons other than credibility and trustworthiness in terms of causes and solutions; one of them, as mentioned, is the ways in which the US is portrayed. Researchers Jaclyn Shildkraut and H. Jaymi Elsass (2016) aim to discredit the perception of mass shootings as an American phenomenon by referring to other incidents on a global level; while this is a separate issue in itself, particularly as the foundation of comparison constitutes entire continents (98), they further represent how the issue of terrorism has made it into narratives of mass shootings. The Utøya massacre in Norway, orchestrated by Anders Breivik in 2011 is one of them. However, the researchers seem to ignore, whether intentionally or not, that this event was in fact an act of terror. Thus, mass shootings on US soil are labeled as terrorism as well, in effect distorting the entire image of the situation.

Linder further argues that the discourse of mass shootings and the spectacle of terror is incorporated within what Guy Debold refers to as «the Society of the Spectacle» (2014: xiv), imposed by the news media in their aim to provide good stories in which mass shootings are framed in accordance with various perceptions of their causes (2014: xiv). The entertainment value – the spectacle – may override thorough analysis, resulting in distorted and oversimplified perceptions of the issue of mass shootings (xiv). Consequently, according to Debold and Linder, the public becomes subjected to experiences «fabricated by others» to the point where «the

authentication of illusion» becomes «more real than the real itself» in their desire to understand the phenomenon of mass shootings. Moreover, as the profile of the «common» school shooter, relying on cultural, ethnical and demographical factors, does not sufficiently explain why these individuals decide to commit these acts of violence, the news media would assign the shooters contrastive qualities in comparison with their victims, consequently portrayed as «psychopaths», «mentally unbalanced monsters» and «instruments of the devil», according to a study conducted by the University of Virginia (xv). Although this perception of the news media may be worthy of nuancing – few journalists would intentionally aim to prioritize profit over journalistic integrity – it represents a tendency within the discourse of mass shootings. The factor of importance here is that it generates a form of moral panic aimed to control the individuals in question and the meaning of the acts they commit (Altheide, 2012). These narratives may not always be intentional; it is natural to seek answers and attempt to connect the dots when subjected to phenomena that includes senseless multiple murder, particularly when the victims are adolescents or children. The problem is, politically speaking, that the dots connected result in explanations that could make matters worse.

Politicizing Mass Shootings

The notion of evil and terror is extreme, yet, it represents the prevailing mentality and its distortedness, the urge to assign meaning to meaningless situations, the very nature of the public discourse of mass shootings. Whether the sender or receiver, seeking narratives of explanation is overall favorable, and these narratives – potentially distortive narratives – are continuously reproduced in the quest for answers. The problem truly emerges when distortive perceptions infiltrate the political sphere; as David Altheide (2009: 1359) will illustrate, the Columbine shooting came to be reframed within the narrative of terror, following 9/11, by government officials, coined as an attack on America itself. Political figures are also bound to offer explanations and solutions – particularly the latter – and efficiently deal with a prevailing state of distress. Distortedness becomes politicized, due to the issue of the Second Amendment silently permeating the overall discussion. Proposing solutions will thus be politically loaded, defined in accordance with underlying agendas. Certain promoted causes and solutions will ultimately mirror one's stand on the issue of guns and the perception of civil liberties. Scapegoating becomes a matter of fact, and the issue of mass shootings is in rough terms reduced to political leverage in a debate that fundamentally concerns the Second Amendment,

tailored to fit within preferable narratives; in general, figures of political influence frame the issue of mass shootings. Even though the media – if politically independent – do not aim to support specific political agendas, they may legitimize them by proxy. The nature of certain incidents is more applicable within the messages political figures aim to convey; high profile incidents may easily be reframed in accordance with whichever topic of discussion one wishes to emphasize – prominently the issues of gun control, mental illness or media violence. This is where relevance becomes irrelevance, and irrelevance becomes relevance. Some may be more durable than others; however, there is ultimately one factor continuously confirming its status as the most reasonable explanation – yet, when perceived as a matter of civil rights, it seemingly cannot be applied.

The Issue of Gun Control

The issue of gun control is frequently addressed in the media, and the debate involving access and acquirement of firearms and its status on the political agenda is revived following a high-profile case of gun violence. In an article by CNN-journalist Jen Christensen (2016), published the day of the Orlando shooting, it is stated that there are more guns in the United States than in any other nation: «There is an estimated 270 million to 310 million firearms in circulation … With the American population at 319 million, that breaks down to nearly one firearm for every American». The documentary *Under the Gun* (2016) further addresses the accessibility of firearms by providing a rather thought-provoking and descriptive image of the situation, claiming that «there are more gun shops in the US than McDonald's and Starbucks combined». A firearm seemingly constitutes a relatively common piece of inventory in American households; a survey conducted in august 2016 by Pew Research Center – a nonpartisan and nonprofit «fact tank» informing the public about current issues, attitudes and trends – shows that 44% of Americans say someone in their home owns a gun. Even though the establishment of these numbers and figures comes with a certain potential of inaccuracy, they nevertheless confirm the well-known, supported and verified assumption about the accessibility of firearms in the US. The idea of gun control is subjected to widespread controversy across the US, and advocating for stricter laws and regulations does not come easy within the political sphere. According to surveys conducted by Gallup (Swift, 2016), the public opinion on current gun policies shifted from majority satisfaction to majority dissatisfaction following the Sandy Hook shooting. There is nevertheless a difference in opinion on proposed solutions among the

dissatisfied – the vast majority supports the idea of stricter gun laws, while others advocate widespread gun ownership for protection. Even though there is a general agreement on the fact that gun violence and mass shootings constitute a national problem, the public opinion on gun laws remains miscellaneous (Craighill & Clement, 2015).

Several of the speeches made by Barack Obama in the aftermath of high-profile shootings taking place during his presidency address the need for stricter regulations by following the example of other nations in which gun-related deaths are declining. The relatively stringent gun policies of Australia, among other nations, have frequently been referred to when discussing the issue of gun control, as in Obama's speech following a mass shooting taking place at a college in Oregon in 2015;

> We know that other countries, in response to one mass shooting, have been able to craft laws that almost eliminate mass shootings. Friends of ours, allies of ours -- Great Britain, Australia, countries like ours. So we know there are ways to prevent it.
> (The White House, 2015).

In response to the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, leaving 35 people dead and another 23 wounded, Australia's prime minister pushed through a sweeping package of gun reforms, in which over 600 000 semiautomatic rifles were bought back, destroyed and, from that point on, banned (Bodenner, 2016). As of 2016, there have been no mass shootings in Australia since these regulations were introduced. In the case of the United States, acting on the idea of a total ban of possession of firearms is seemingly out of the question from a political point of view, and opposed by a large majority of the American population (Newport, 2016). Howard's deputy prime minister Tim Fischer is one of many politicians drawing attention to this situation, presenting itself like a political dead-end street: «Port Arthur was our Sandy Hook … Port Arthur we acted on. The USA is not prepared to act on their tragedies» (Wahlquist, 2016).

There are several reasons why it is unrealistic to implement these measurements in American politics. Compared to other countries, such as Australia, the issue of gun violence is far more extensive in the United States, and therefore more challenging to assess. The protests against gun regulations are as familiar as mass shootings themselves, and attempts to politicize gun violence face objections from both the political sphere and law-abiding citizens possessing firearms:

> We spend over a trillion dollars, and pass countless laws, and devote our entire agencies to preventing terrorist attacks on our soil, and rightfully so. And yet, we have a Congress that explicitly blocks us from even collecting data on how we could potentially reduce gun deaths. How can that be?
> (The White House, 2015)

Right-to-carry laws are well-implemented in US, founded in the constitutional right to practice self-protection – the Second Amendment: «A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed» (Bill of Rights Institute, 2017). The Second Amendment has been subjected to widespread interpretation, particularly when addressing the issue of mass shootings, in which the intended scope of the amendment has been discussed (Legal Information Institute, 2017). When American citizens and officials advocate stricter and more rigid gun regulations, supporters of gun ownership argue on the basis of an individual constitutional right serving as a sufficient argument in the prevention of stricter regulations. Others implement «the collective rights theory» in their interpretation, focusing on a state's right to practice self-defense as opposed to individual rights, therefore justifying legislative bodies' authority to regulate the possession of firearms (ibid).

The fact that the right to carry firearms is enshrined in the US Constitution creates complexity, confusion and controversy in the attempt to lead a proactive discussion on implementation of stricter gun regulations. The idea of gun-sweeping laws like those of Australia is generally viewed as a violation of constitutional rights, a way of «losing this great American freedom and with it, this great nation», according to Chris Cox, head of the National Rifle Association's lobbying enterprise (Velencia, 2016). The rhetoric of the NRA is an explicit one, drawing on concepts of freedom, religion and patriotism, as demonstrated by chief executive of the gun lobby group Wayne LaPierre in his declaration of political war against Hillary Clinton in 2016: «Mrs Clinton, if you want to come after the NRA, if you want to fight over the God-given rights of America's 100 million gun owners, if you want to turn this election into a bare-knuckled brawl for the survival of our constitutional freedom, bring it on» (Smith, 2016). The NRA constitutes a strong influence on behalf of Americans protecting their constitutional right to carry guns. There seems to be a constant clinch between the definition of safety and the definition of American freedom in the context of gun policies, even though a vast majority of Americans agree on the fact that gun policies prove to be insufficient, as there is a continuous growth in the frequency of mass shootings and gun-related deaths.

Due the political status quo, an elimination of right-to-carry laws is seemingly inapplicable. Democratic officials have on several occasions been criticized and accused – in which the NRA take the lead – of proposing confiscation of all firearms, including those of «responsible gun owners». In the case of the US, this hypothetical proposal is generally viewed as a violation, a proposal Democrats, among them Obama and Hillary Clinton, continuously deny (Lavender, 2016):

> First of all, the notion that I or Hillary or Democrats or whoever you want to choose are hell-bent on taking away folks' guns is just not true … There have been more guns sold since I became president than just about any time in U. S. history. There are enough guns for every man, woman and child in this country … and at no point have I ever, ever proposed confiscating guns from responsible gun owners.
> (Obama, quoted in Lavender 2016)

Whereas a suggestion of extensive confiscation of firearms would be considered reasonable from other perspectives, such as those of Australia, the political and cultural state in the US generally prohibits this from happening. All things concerned, US politicians have not come close in offering an explicit – and deliberate – proposal in which guns are reclaimed. Instead, compromises are made, and specific restrictions are suggested. These restrictions do not prevent political stir between the proponents of gun control and gun rights, but nevertheless prove to be more realistic, to a certain extent. Democratic officials take the lead, proposing universal background checks, termination of loopholes enabling easy access to gun purchase and an elimination of legal immunity protecting the business of gun dealers and manufacturers (Lavender, 2016). It is easy to take these suggestions for granted from an international point of view, but they nevertheless prove to be controversial in the context of American politics, in which the Second Amendment is deeply manifested. The NRA and their supporters generally regard elimination of loopholes and stricter background checks as signals of massive confiscation in which law-abiding citizens lose their right to obtain guns. Even though this proves to be inaccurate, opponents of stricter regulations claim that these measures are and will be insufficient in preventing future shootings and criminals from acquiring guns (*New York Daily News*, 2016) – an argument also used in favor of universal background checks – as stated by Wayne LaPierre in an NBC interview: «I'll tell you, my standard is this. You can't legislate morality. Legislation works on the sane. Legislation works on the law abiding» (Gregory, 2012). Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2016, the NRA argued that strict gun laws in European countries did not prevent the terrorists from accessing firearms, despite the fact that gun homicide is significantly more frequent in the US compared to France (Beckett et al., 2016).

In the eyes of the Wayne LaPierre and the NRA, the most effective solution is to practice self-defense by carrying firearms, stating that «the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun» (Gregory, 2012) – a quote that has seemingly manifested itself as a common saying among protectors of the Second Amendment, continuously repeated throughout the documentary *Under the Gun*. Again, the narrative of terror is conveniently applied.

The debates on gun control evolving in the aftermath often revolve around the specific circumstances and nature of a particular mass shooting receiving widespread attention in the media, which might be unfortunate as the focus is directed towards factors proving to be irrelevant on a general level, as advocated by Kleck (1999). As implementation of radical restrictive measures – at least from a US perspective – are close to impossible, measures of a smaller scale have been assessed. In 2013, prior to the suggested measures provided by Hillary Clinton, Obama proposed a legislation aiming to improve FBI background checks, reinstate and strengthen the federal ban on assault weapons, provide greater transparency and registration of previous criminal records and reduce the size of ammunition magazines (Chalabi, 2015). Apart from the fact that these regulations would target law-abiding gun owners as well, there is nevertheless no sufficient grounds to guarantee that these proposals would actually work. Even though the countering argumentation of the NRA has other motives, arguing that perpetrators would be able to acquire firearms regardless of these proposed regulations is not unreasonable. There are several incidents in which these measures would be ineffective; for instance, the Sandy Hook shooter had access to firearms purchased legally by a family member (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2017). Moreover, most perpetrators will not exhibit a history of criminal activity or psychiatric treatment before the damage is done; «people cannot be denied their Second Amendment rights just because they look strange or act in an odd manner» (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 135).

Moreover, these proposals were constructed in correspondence with the case of Sandy Hook in order to prevent similar types of shootings from occurring in the future. In her analysis of the 20 worst mass shootings in 2015, as of 14 December, Mona Chalabi argues that an implementation of these proposals would have made the occurrence of these shootings less likely; yet, her conclusion is cautiously drawn. As these proposals are designed in accordance with the Newtown shooting, it consequently becomes challenging to assess whether they would be applicable in the future and whether they would have prevented previous shootings. Additionally, more information relevant to these particular proposals will have to be systematically and continuously extracted by the authorities in order to conduct thorough

evaluations and draw solid conclusions. For instance, there would have to be a record showing whether the firearm used in a particular shooting had more than ten rounds – the proposed limit in Obama's legislation (ibid). In addition, it would be severely challenging to extract all necessary information from all 334 shootings – judging by the statistics of the Gun Violence Archive – taking place in 2015:

> Overall, the picture suggest that tougher gun control measures could have reduced the likelihood of some of the worst mass shootings this year. But the analysis also shows that what we don't know about the impact of gun control is far more that what we do know … we won't know how they obtained their weapons and we don't know how US gun law impeded or facilitated their crime.
> (Chalabi, 2015).

None of these proposals were approved. Thus, one continuously returns to the very core of the issue of gun control – the question of whether gun policies call for radicalization, as in the case of Australia, or whether the constitutional right to carry firearms for self-protection should be practiced in order to stimulate change in the right direction. As of today, the former scenario seems to be off limits. By contrast, opponents of gun control have argued in favor of expanding right-to-carry provisions in order to disarm the perpetrator before he is able to reload (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 137). In the heat of this debate, other potential causes and concerns are addressed, such as the issue of mental health – a key issue in the argumentation in favor of the former or latter political scenario. Cases such as Virginia Tech, heavily covered in the media, typically sparks the discussion on gun control versus mental health; the Virginia Tech shooter passed all background checks, and was therefore able to purchase firearms legally. In retrospect, the shooter should have been prevented from doing so as he later proved to be suffering from mental illness (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2017: 124).

The Issue of Mental Health

Similar to the case of risk assessment and security measures conducted within the school sector, it is difficult to know whether the proposed legislatives and restrictions actually prevent – or would prevent – future shootings. The controversy of gun control and the practical and methodological challenges posed by suggested preventive measures sparks discussion on other areas as well; the issue of mental health is arguably an equally prominent subject. According to Schildkraut and Elsass (2017: 124), the debate involving mental illness has been especially

predominant in the case of the Virginia Tech shooting, the Tucson shooting in 2011 – in which 6 were killed and another 13 wounded – and the Sandy Hook shooting. In the aftermath of these shootings it became clear that the perpetrators exhibited long histories of mental illness, including severe depression, schizophrenia and Asperger's syndrome. Following these findings, the healthcare system has been widely criticized for their failure to see through treatments and sufficiently and systematically provide information for the authorities; as a result, the Virginia Tech shooter passed all background checks, enabling him to purchase firearms (ibid). According to studies conducted by Grant Duwe (2017), in which patterns of 160 public mass shootings occurring between 1915 and 2013 have been examined, there is a relatively high rate of serious mental illness present among the shooters in comparison with the general population (ibid: 31). Slightly more than 60% of the perpetrators were «either diagnosed with mental disorder or demonstrated signs of mental illness prior to the attack». Roughly a third of these shooters received treatment prior to the shootings in question (ibid: 10). Investigation into the correlation between mass shootings and mental health, along with the media's influence on the matter, highlighting the cases in which the healthcare system's supposed failures are more prominent, will to a certain extent affect the public opinion on this issue – certain cases are framed as evidence of ineffective treatment. Both Gallup (Saad, 2013) and *The Washington Post* (Craighill & Clement, 2015) have claimed, on the basis of surveys conducted in 2013 and 2015, respectively, that Americans tend to blame the healthcare system's systematic failures in identifying and treating those suffering from mental illness rather than inefficient gun policies. According to Gallup, the mental health system was perceived as the most prominent cause of mass shootings compared to other factors, including current gun policies, violent content in the entertainment industry and lack of security. Moreover, when *The Washington Post* respondents were asked whether inadequate gun laws or mental health issues were to blame, 63 percent claimed the latter. Although the number of respondents is quite restricted – a little over a thousand – they arguably signal tendencies worthy of attention. As in the case of stricter gun laws, the public opinion tends to vary in accordance with the nature and media coverage of a particular shooting at a particular time, such as the case of Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook or the Tucson shooting.

In order to protect American citizens and prevent future shootings, the NRA argues in favor of an increased armed security on public grounds (Gregory, 2012). Moreover, the NRA frequently utilizes the ambivalence and skepticism present in the assessment of the mental health system to their own benefit when arguing against stricter gun regulations. The protection of law-abiding gun owners and the Second Amendment proves to be an important, yet implicit

factor in the context of mental health as well. Those criticizing the mental health system receive widespread support from the NRA and their supporters, when claiming that an implementation of methods aiming to improve the transference of prohibiting mental health records to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System is to be prioritized over gun control proposals «repeatedly rejected by the American people and their representatives» (NRA-ILA, 2015). According to the NRA, the assessment of mass shootings should solely be based on the mental state of the individual in question, as opposed to «the inanimate tool used by the perpetrator» (ibid). As noted by *The Economist*, the NRA's arguments in favor of thorough background checks, providing a register of mentally unfit individuals, might at times present themselves as liberal advocacies for gun control (2013). However, these proposed improvements in background checks nevertheless only involve those regarded as ineligible due to mental illness; the idea of universal background checks, in which the closing of loopholes is of primary concern, is strictly opposed.

The «liberalistic» rhetoric of the NRA has consequently been widely criticized, primarily by Democratic officials, describing their form of argumentation as a «smokescreen», in which the gun lobby aims «to appear constructive without allowing any gun rules to change» (*The Economist*, 2013). Moreover, the idea of a proactive mental health system, singling out mass shooters before they act, is by certain perspectives considered naïve and unrealistic – as argued by senator Chris Murphy (ibid). Their statements are by many opponents considered as means of redirecting attention from gun policies to mental health policies, attempting to win over the public by emphasizing factors indicating that the mental health system is unable to live up to its responsibilities and expectations. In his interview with the NBC, Wayne LaPierre claims that the US is in the possession of «a completely cracked mentally ill system that's got these monsters walking the streets» (Gregory, 2012), highlighting the difference between «the bad guy with a gun» and «the good guy with a gun» – individuals suffering from mental illness versus the law-abiding American – by describing the mentally ill as «disturbed», «monsters» and «lunatics». Yet again, LaPierre confirms established patterns of distortive perceptions. According to *The Economist* (2013), LaPierre has further blamed liberals for the alleged failures in the mental health system:

> They're not serious about fixing the mental health system. They've emptied institutions and every police officer knows dangerous people out there are walking the streets right now. They shouldn't be on the streets, they've stopped taking their medicine and yet they're out there walking around …

The NRA thus paints a picture in which «the only means of security is the second amendment» (ibid), therefore justifying the necessity of self-protection. Due to the influential position of the gun lobby, the call for improvements within the mental health sector, regardless of their political agenda, is not left unheard in Congress or other political institutions, as it has sparked a nationwide debate in which measures of increased supervision and mandatory reporting have been proposed (ibid). This view on mental illness and gun violence is not strictly limited to the far right on the political spectrum. Advocating a better healthcare system seems to be the only common ground, to the extent that there is one, between those who favor gun regulations and those protecting their constitutional right to carry firearms. Obama has on several occasions noted that the issue of mental health is a key factor of concern, claiming that there is a need to provide and enhance treatment «before it is too late» (ibid). Furthermore, following the Umpqua Community College shooting in 2015 (Ford & Payne, 2015), in which nine people were killed, he stated that « … it's fair to say that anybody who does this has a sickness in their minds, regardless of what they think their motivations may be» (Lopez, 2015).

Needless to say, mass shooters do overall suffer from some sort and some level of mental distortion. The mental state of each shooter is often a common factor in the attempt to identify common traits and a common profile shared by mass shooters, as in the case of school shooters addressed earlier. In their research, Benjamin Winegard and Christopher J. Ferguson (2017) have conducted an in-depth study on a wide range of previous psychological research, including those of Vollekuil et al. (2002), on mass shooters. When conducting these studies, the researchers focused on various factors, including family backgrounds, previous physical and psychological abuse, bullying and exposure to violent entertainment. The results were mainly inconclusive, with certain exceptions; almost all the perpetrators in question were male, experiencing feelings of inferiority or injustice, and they all exhibited evidence of mental illness (Winegard & Ferguson, 2017: 70). These traits are nevertheless of a very general nature, shared by many non-criminal and non-violent adolescents and adults. In terms of risk assessment, these common traits are therefore to a large extent insufficient and inoperable. Even though individuals suffering from mental illness may theoretically exhibit certain predispositions enabling them to act out in violent manners when compared to others, the vast majority of these individuals «are not violent and never will be», as stated by Jeffrey Swanson, professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences (Beckett, 2015). The correlation between mental illness and mass shootings is complex and challenging to assess, and is not to be oversimplified by placing blame solely on the mental health system. Even though Obama's statements in the wake of high-profile shootings are not grounded in the same perceptions as those of the NRA, they

symbolize a tendency in which mental illness constitutes a «scapegoat that lets policymakers and the public ignore bigger, more complicated contributors to gun violence», as stated by professor Jonathan Metzl (Lopez, 2015). Claiming that there is a clear causal relationship between psychiatric diagnoses and mass shootings is in general ungrounded (Fox & Levin, 2017). According to Swanson, a perfect healthcare system – in which one could cure all cases of severe mental illness – would only lead to a 4 percent reduction in overall violence (Beckett, 2015).

James Alan Fox and Jack Levin (2017: 52) argue that the public perception on mental illness as the primary cause is grounded in an idea of mass killers as subjects of schizophrenia and other severe mental diseases, even though psychotic thinking seems to be the case in relatively few random incidents. In fact, as argued by Metzl, there are studies showing that individuals with mental illness are more likely to become victims as opposed to perpetrators (Lopez, 2015). Mass murderers show a more frequent pattern of chronic depression, «not unlike millions of other Americans». As there is a boost in the debate on mental illness in the aftermath of mass shootings, as in the case of gun control, stigmatization is a subject of concern, portraying individuals suffering from mental illness as ticking time bombs – much like the idea of false positives within the school sector described earlier. It may be argued that the media in part is responsible for this view on mental illness due to the selective attention dedicated to the most unusual cases (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 126). The cases excessively covered by the media, in which the perpetrator seemingly «snaps» in a state of paranoia or psychosis, where shootings occur as completely random and senseless, are more likely to create fear and confusion (ibid: 128) – a state of intense public concern:

> After all, they can happen at any place, at any time, and to anyone – usually without warning – and, for this reason, random acts of mass murder, although the least frequent form, receive the most attention by the mass media and the public alike.
> (ibid)

However, mass shootings are usually conducted on the basis of specific motives and planned over long periods of time, in which specific locations, targets and timing are carefully assessed, such as in the case of the Columbine shooting (ibid: 126). The persisting view on mass shooters feeds the public idea of individuals suffering from mental illness as potential shooters, automatically scrutinized when mental illness and mass murder are equated. The rhetoric of the NRA arguably enhances this tendency in the political sphere. The primary motivation of this

«nip it in the bud»-mentality is prevention of future shootings, as opposed to the idea of addressing the needs of individuals with psychological difficulties in itself – a righteous action initiated for the wrong reasons: «We should endeavor to help the mentally ill out of concern for their wellbeing, not just because we are worried about the wellbeing of those they might kill» (Fox & Levin, 2017).

As in the case of gun regulations, targeting mentally ill individuals poses questions on whether results would be produced, to which the answers are largely unclear. Aside from the ethical dilemmas present in this debate, there is, as mentioned, no one-to-one relationship between mass shootings and mental health; one rarely leads to the other. Widespread media exposure of mass shooters diagnosed with illnesses of this nature is in many respects an important contributor in the development of this perception. In these cases, a more proactive healthcare system and a more efficient transference of reports on the mental status of these individuals would possibly have prevented certain shootings from occurring. However, as many cases oppose the theory claiming that all mass shooters constitute the worst of the worst in terms of mental health, pinpointing those suffering from schizophrenia or other severe illnesses would not significantly influence the frequency of gun violence. As in the case of the term «mass shootings», there are issues related to the definition of mental illness in this context. According to Swanson, the state of Connecticut began reporting mental health records to the background check system in 2007, consequently preventing those suffering from severe mental illness from acquiring firearms (Beckett, 2015). A small number of these individuals were disqualified, leaving the rest legally eligible in terms of purchase. Providing mental health records, in which the more severe cases are targeted, proved to be generally inefficient, allegedly estimated to prevent 14 violent crimes a year (ibid). Moreover, expansion and improvement if mental health services will not necessarily reach the targeted individuals; as argued by Fox and DeLateur (2013: 135), mass shooters tend to «externalize blame and consider themselves as victims of mistreatment», thereby reluctant to seek treatment.

National background checks on mental illness would possibly prevent a larger number of individuals from purchasing firearms, but it would arguably have to include, to a certain extent, less severe cases of mental illness in order to produce results, avoiding to disregard those considered dangerous in accordance with the established view. Again, this scenario would pose ethical controversy on a significant level, both based on stigma and the fact that there does not exist sufficient level of research proving its effectiveness (Beckett, 2015). Among these continuous attempts to develop a profile in order to effectively practice risk assessment and ideally prevent other shootings from occurring, there are certain psychological traits in

common, as mentioned. Due to the presence of a widespread public concern, as argued by Kleck (1999), and the intense urge to provide an explanation, the fact that researchers, politicians, journalists and other commentators choose to hold on to the idea of mental illness as the primary cause is a natural response. However, as Metzl argues, the reality of the matter is more complex – not simply in terms of defining the boundaries for mental illness and ways of operationalizing them – but also in terms of ignored contributing factors on an individual level (Lopez, 2015). The controversy of gun control and the lack of it will redirect the attention towards other causes; it is easy to blame the mental health system when radical regulatory measures prove to be impossible to implement, and it is easy to believe that mental illness is the primary cause when it is conveyed as such on the political agenda:

> So mental illness is important, but it becomes a scapegoat. It becomes the one thing we can all agree on … but I feel compelled to resist that narrative because it gets us off the hook from looking at society, culture, laws and other things that hit closer to home for people.
> (Lopez, 2015)

The Issue of Media Violence

While some dedicate all their energy towards the debate regarding gun regulations and mental health, others point their finger elsewhere to uncover potential causes and moral sinners. There has virtually always been a certain level of concern regarding representations of violence in the media and the effects on its audience. Even though it has never been labelled as the sole cause of mass shootings, depictions of violence in the entertainment industry and in the media overall have always been a part of the equation, and tends to fit within the notion of causality. The speculations regarding media influence in terms of violent content are not politically manifested in the same manner as the issues of gun control and mental health, but nevertheless permeates the general discussion of mass shootings overall due to its position within the scapegoating tendency. In their research covering 37 incidents, Vossekuil et al. (2002) found that 59 percent «demonstrated some interest in violence whether it was through video games, movies, books or other media» (Bonnano & Levenson, 2014: 2). Various polls conducted by Gallup or other institutions have further confirmed that there is a certain level of concern present when assessing the relationship between violent media and mass shootings. The 2013 poll by Gallup (Saad, 2013), in which the mental health system was perceived as the primary cause, showed that 32 percent of its respondents blamed media violence for mass shootings. Following the

Columbine shooting, 62 percent of more than a thousand respondents claimed that «entertainment media was a major cause of school violence». Moreover, in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, 78 percent expressed belief in the effectiveness of a reduction of the various depictions of gun violence in entertainment (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 132).

Studies on the effects of violent media output have always been a subject of concern, in which the influence on public perceptions of the seriousness of violence is assessed. Questions of how violence is portrayed, to which extent it is normalized and desensitized, and whether these portrayals contribute to a justification of – or even encourage – violent behavior have been raised (Carter & Weaver, 2003: 2). These concerns have prevailed as the availability and scope of various types of media outputs continuously increase, and they redeem their prominence when attempting to identify causes and solutions in the wake of mass shootings. Both in the field of politics and academia, these concerns boil down to questions on whether there is a casual link between portrayals of violence and violent behavior (ibid). In the context of mass shootings, the attention is primarily dedicated to the excessive media coverage of high-profile mass shootings and the entertainment industry. Relevant to the question of violent behavior as a result of exposure is the assessment of how violence is represented. The portrayals of violence through media coverage and the entertainment industry may be viewed as sources of modeling behavior, with particular focus on the process of sensationalizing horrific incidents through news coverage, in which the spotlight falls on the perpetrator (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 132), as well as the idea of desensitizing and normalizing violence through modern entertainment. Even though these views on media violence as potential contributors have prevailed through many generations, it continues to redefine its position as a subject worthy of investigation – a subject aspiring journalists draw attention to:

> Movies, television shows and video games all display violence so often that viewers become desensitized to it. These are just outlets used to express violence without fear of punishment, but they also make acts of violence -- acts that would disgust many people -- seem normal and achievable.
> (University Wire, 2015)

Media Sensationalism & Copycatting

The responsibility of the media weighs heavily on their shoulders; as moral entrepreneurs, their agenda is to shape the public consciousness by focusing on issues considered important. At the same time, the ways in which they direct attention towards certain issues are sensitive,

particularly in the context of mass shootings. The overall style of news publishing raises concern, particularly related to their selection of cases and how they are portrayed. The media tends to focus on high-profile cases, often of a highly unusual and disturbing nature; the Sandy Hook shooting, among others, were immediately and extensively covered by the media, which naturally had an immense emotional effect as the majority of the victims were children. Moreover, the media seemingly address mass shootings from a categorical perspective, in which groundbreaking and record-setting shootings receive widespread attention (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 131). Aside from the ethical issues these perspectives pose, the issue of sensationalism creates concern at times of distress, when one is desperately trying to prevent history from repeating itself. Sensationalizing mass shootings often involves identification and thorough assessment of the perpetrator behind the attack in question. As the identification of potential causes dominate the debate on mass shootings, in which the media aims to direct the public's attention towards key issues and generally seek to reflect the truth, information about the shooters – including their backgrounds, mental health records, the means by which firearms were acquired, among other factors – is consequently publically shared. The shooters become the center of attention, receiving front page coverage in newspapers for weeks to come: «Though most people will know the names of the perpetrators, only a few will know the names of the victims» (University Wire, 2015).

The ways in which the portrayals of shooters and incidents are interpreted by the audience is imperative in this context. While these cases will create empathy among the majority of Americans, some might respond differently. As opposed to identifying themselves with the pain and suffering of the victims and their families, a few might be drawn to the perpetrator with empathy or even admiration, potentially urging to achieve the same level of fame and recognition (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 131). The media is consequently scrutinized and criticized in fear of similar incidents occurring, in fear of aspiring copycats acting on their inspiration drawn from the hype surrounding a particular incident, in which the perpetrators are overexposed. Certain researchers claim that mass shootings are contagious, particularly relevant to the cases in which the perpetrators have committed suicide, and that the outlet for this alleged contagion is the media, spreading information about high-profile mass shootings in the manner of a virus. The so-called «Werther effect» has been adopted in the context of mass shootings, a term coined in the 1970s to describe the following streak of suicides allegedly taking place after Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) was published, in which the main character, Werther, kills himself in the end (Philips, 1974:

340). Studies have been conducted on the copycat phenomenon, linking sensationalism in mass media to the contagiousness of mass shootings.

Sherry Towers et al. (2015) published a study aiming to investigate, using mathematical models calculating probability, whether or not contagion is more evident in cases of mass killings – high-profile incidents receiving widespread media attention – in which four or more individuals are murdered (1). The study found that there is a temporary increase in probability – 13 days, on average – of similar cases to unfold in the aftermath of a mass shooting, therefore concluding that «there is significant evidence of contagion in mass killings and school shootings» (7). According to the researchers, there is no evidence of contagion in cases involving three or fewer casualties. There is a higher frequency in the occurrence of such cases compared with mass killings and school shootings; however, the relative sensationalism of these cases is consequently reduced through less coverage media coverage, in effect reducing their contagiousness (ibid). The researchers nevertheless emphasize that there are other external factors to take into account when assessing the probability of contagiousness, including the accessibility of firearms, various degrees of regulations, prevalence of mental illness and access to treatment (8-9). Moreover, there are studies aiming to investigate the underlying factors of contagiousness, focusing on the perpetrators as sources of inspiration. According to *Mother Jones Magazine*, the legacy of the Columbine shooting has reoccurred in various violent scenarios (Follman, 2015). 74 cases in which the suspects or perpetrators claimed to have been inspired by the Columbine-duo were analyzed by examining news reports, public documents and by conducting interviews with law enforcement officials. These were long-term effects, taking place over the course of many years. 21 cases were acted out, and the perpetrators behind 14 of these cases planned to strike on the anniversary of the Columbine massacre. Moreover, in 13 scenarios, the shooters aimed to produce a higher number of casualties than Klebold and Harris, referred to as heroes in at least 10 of these cases. As argued by Fox and DeLateur (2013: 131), modeling the behavior of others is more likely to occur if there is some sort of reward or retribution involved; aside from receiving a status of fame, being fronted on the cover of *TIME Magazine*, their death represented a form of resolution. In these cases, the shooters may by some, particularly teenagers, be perceived as martyrs, sacrificing themselves for the greater good by standing up to those who supposedly treated them unfairly – as a result, some troubled teenagers might identify with the perpetrators, representing them in the avengement of bullying and ostracism (ibid).

The theory of copycatting and contagion is widely embraced in the popular press, ironically, but receives limited support in the field of scholarly research (ibid: 132). There are

several factors challenging the reliability and durability of studies on media contagion; as already stated by Towers et al. (2015) themselves, there are external variations in the surrounding environments and conditions, as well as personal predispositions, to consider. Moreover, as many mass shooters commit suicide towards the end of their streaks, it is difficult to assess whether or not they were inspired by previous events. The fact that inspiration might be present on a subconscious level further complicates the process of investigating contagiousness. Traditionally, the copycat-effect has been referred to when research on suicide is conducted – studying contagion in mass shootings is a relatively unknown territory. There is not a sufficient level of research proving the existence of contagiousness, apart from «an array of anecdotes suggesting how mass murderers were drawn to those who perpetrated similar crimes», essentially making it impossible to claim with certainty that perpetrators generally draw inspiration from previous high-profile shootings. Additionally, there are not sufficient grounds for claiming that the shootings in question would not have occurred either way, even if copycatting proved to be a durable phenomenon in the context of mass shootings: «At best, copycatting might influence the form, and not necessarily the inspiration, for mass murder» (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 132). The theory of contagiousness is nevertheless worthy of investigation as modern mass media constitutes a powerful influence on public consciousness, including the perpetrators' – cases of mass shootings should therefore be assessed with sensitivity and respect. What is of primary importance here, is the media's ability to favor sensational events and thereby legitimize ungrounded patterns of explanations; extreme cases evoke extreme perceptions of their causes. This may distort the perception of mass shootings overall, including those of prospective shooters.

Violent Entertainment

The fear of the potential consequences of desensitization and normalization of violence is particularly relevant to violence in the entertainment industry. As in the case of the mass media, there has been a long history of skepticism towards its effects on its audiences and users, especially children and adolescents. The alleged causal relationship between mediated violence and violent behavior is more thoroughly assessed in the context of violent entertainment than in the context of media contagion, in which researchers to a certain extent acknowledge the fact that other factors matter. In terms of violent entertainment, however, researchers aim to investigate the link between exposure and aggressiveness, violent behavior and other forms of «undesirable behavior» (Bushman & Anderson, 2015: 1807). The shooting taking place in

Aurora in 2012, during a screening of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) was particularly controversial as the shooter allegedly was inspired the Joker, reincarnating the character prior to the shooting by dyeing his hair orange, claiming he was the Joker himself when arrested (Rayner et al., 2012). In cases like these, it is tempting for the media to claim that violent entertainment is responsible for the actions of these individuals (Bushman & Anderson, 2015: 1808). The copycat phenomenon is transferred into the context of entertainment, even though other factors such as mental illness is of significant concern as well.

Several studies of different research designs and disciplines have been conducted on the compliance between violent content and violent behavior, in which researchers have claimed that there is a relatively strong link between them (Bushman & Anderson, 2015: 1815). Some studies have focused on violent content in films; for instance, a study in which «delinquent boys» were exposed to violent films five nights in a row showed that these individuals were more likely than others to express aggressiveness in the form of fights and verbal confrontations. Others have focused on violence on television or in newer types of media, particularly video games. According to Bushman & Anderson, there is a relatively high level of consistency across different types of research, concluding that exposure to violent media increases aggression (2015: 1815). The long-term effects are of particular concern, focusing on whether violent behavior as an adult is caused exposure to violent media as a child. A research published in 2003 studied the development of aggressiveness among children ranging from 8 to 10 years of age. The same group of participants showed significant level of aggression fifteen years later as young adults; the factors of investigation were non-verbal aggression in the forms of domestic abuse, violent actions such as punching and beating and criminal convictions (ibid: 1816). The researchers concluded that TV-violence exposure «predicted violent behavior in adulthood for males and females, even after controlling for childhood aggression, parent educational status, child intellectual ability, and parent aggression, child-rearing practices, and TV-viewing habits» (ibid). In general, research has shown that individuals who frequently consume violent media become «numb to the pain and suffering of others» (ibid: 1817). Violence is normalized, and consumers become desensitized, as the psychological effects of depictions of real violence are minimized compared to others.

These studies are nevertheless not sufficiently applicable in the context of mass shootings, being a relatively rare form of violence overall. As argued by Kleck (1999), there tends to be a focus on factors proving to be irrelevant, more or less, when mass shootings are assessed. Attention has primarily been dedicated to the video game industry in the context of mass shootings, especially due to the connection between first-person perspectives and the idea

of desensitization: «Television and film viewers have the choice of taking the perspective of the killer or the victim, but in violent video games, the player takes the perspective of the killer» (Bushman & Anderson, 2015: 1817). It is claimed that the first-person perspective through the eyes of the killer prevents the player from developing feelings of empathy towards the victims. Allegedly, the Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza spent a significant amount of time playing violent video games; along with the debate on mental health, the proposed causal link between games of this nature and extreme violence was heavily addressed in the press (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 133). Violent media games have been a subject of investigation as in the case of other outlets; a few longitudinal studies conducted in 2008 and 2009 detected long-term effects on violent behavior among the investigated individuals resulting from exposure to violent video games (Bushman & Anderson, 2015: 1817). Moreover, several meta-analyses, in which data from multiple studies are combined (Biostat, 2016), claimed that violent video games constitute a significant influence on mild aggression (Winegard & Ferguson, 2017: 65).

However, these analyses have been criticized on account of methodology and publication bias, as numerous studies by causationists were included, consequently creating a skewed image of the situation in which reality is not sufficiently reflected. Other researchers have opposed this theory by claiming that video games function as a source of relief for young males who might otherwise act on their feelings of aggression in real life, suggesting that releases of popular violent video games lead to a decline in violence (ibid: 66). This perspective is often defended by claiming that extreme violent acts are «multidetermined»; expressing interest in violent entertainment is generally viewed as a key predicator when attempting develop a profile. However, as in the case of mental illness, this is one of many indicators present among the general public (Fox & Levin, 2017: 51), and does not necessarily constitute an indicator in itself. The belief in the casual link between violent video games and mass shootings are, according to Winegard and Ferguson (2017: 66-67), a result of «confirmation bias», as violent video games and violent entertainment overall is of interest among young males in general. The discussion on violent video games is otherwise non-existent, more or less, when the shooters in question are older. As a result, the media sheds light on the issue of violent video games when the type and behavior of a perpetrator in a specific case confirms these assumptions.

Moreover, incidents of mass shootings «can lead to pseudoscientific public statements that support specific political agendas» (Winegard & Ferguson, 2017: 61-62). When a specific case indicates that the perpetrator was heavily exposed to violent entertainment – for instance, a frequent player of video games – politicians demand extensive research dedicated to confirm

the alleged link between violent content and violent behavior «while making clear, in advance, what results they wish the "study" in question to yield» (ibid: 61). As acting member of Congress, Frank Wolf managed to persuade the National Science Foundation to conduct a study on youth violence, following the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012. In order to produce results in agreement with the established assumption, the study welcomed authors known for promoting the causal relationship between the media and behavioral change, and singled out mass shootings where perpetrators were known to play violent video games for reference (ibid). As in the case of mental health, scapegoating is a matter of concern (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 133). In the wake of the same shooting, this view was further promoted by Wayne LaPierre: «There exists in this country a callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people – through vicious, violent video games …» (Zak, 2012). Moreover, LaPierre criticized music videos portraying «murder as a way of life» and «blood-soaked films» such as *American Psycho* (2000) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Again, the idea of blaming violent media is arguably a product of intense public concern; the urge to provide answers feeds overgeneralization and ungrounded assumptions, as there is no sufficient degree of evidence supporting this view on violent entertainment. Due to media sensationalism, proposed risks are often interpreted as causes. As in the case of many other attempts to establish a one-to-one relationship between proposed causes and mass shootings, the fact of the matter remains – the issue of mass shootings is much more complex.

III. SCREENING MASS SHOOTINGS

The debate on mass shootings is messy. The political tension between those in favor of the Second Amendment and those advocating regulation permeates the overall debate on mass shootings, consequently undermining a constructive discussion on preventive measures. The overall political ritual repeats itself in the wake of every mass shooting, and the rhetoric emerging in the aftermath of mass shootings has to a large extent become predictable. Official statements are continuously reloaded by means of scapegoating – a reoccurring strategy implemented to keep gun control out of the loop while clinging to the sanctified words of the Second Amendment. The debate on mass shootings evolves into a debate on gun ownership, symbolizing American freedom and patriotism. Although widely discredited, there is a belief in causal connections, in which mental illness, lack of sufficient treatment and violence in the media, including news coverage and entertainment, primarily take the fall. Moreover, political

motives tend to drive research, allegedly implemented to enlighten and enhance knowledge on causes and preventive measures, as certain types of research and funding practices are known to be heavily biased (Winegard & Ferguson, 2017: 61-62). Funding on gun violence has to a significant extent been blocked by a congress on which the gun lobby keeps a firm grip (Towers et al., 2015: 9). The state of distress continuously rekindled as shootings occur is further fired up by a seemingly corrupt debate, particularly in the eyes of those addressing the importance of gun control: «Mass shootings have become an unsurprising part of American life, with lame public rituals in which political officials express grief and then retreat quickly into denial about this scourge» (*the New York Times*, 2015).

As the issue of mass shootings presents itself as a political dead-end street, the situation calls for other participants in the debate whose motives are of a different nature – perspectives that have not been subjected to criticism for reflecting unethical political practice or the urge to sensationalize. The nature of the ongoing debate will have to be redefined and assessed from a different angle by welcoming other reflective manifestations of mass shootings. The public opinion is to a significant extent a product of the ways in which mass shootings are addressed within the political sphere and by the mass media; the mass media constitutes a major source of public information about current political and social issues and debates, and function as the primary channels of public persuasion and mobilization. In *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (Prince, 1992), Professor Robert E. Denton Jr. argues that there are three principle ways the mass media influence American politics, and consequently the public opinion (1992: xiv). As stated by Schildkraut and Elsass (2017) as well, the mass media selectively subjects a few specific topics to public debate, serving as important outlets for establishing and maintaining agendas, to which politicians both respond and utilize to convey political and social ideas and beliefs. Moreover, the media shapes the content in accordance with the messages they want to convey: «Through the media we learn what is good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak, just or unjust. In addition to telling us what to think about, the media thus influences us how to think». Finally, the media personalizes political and social issues, focusing on individuals rather than policies or ideologies (Denton, 1992: xiv).

Scholars gradually moved away from systematically studying political content and messages in itself, and recognized the influence of popular media in which «the concerns, issues, myths and values of the larger society» are reflected (ibid: xv). The importance of popular media was already acknowledged in the beginning of the 1990s; the rapid technological developments taking place over the years continuously confirm this perception. As of today, social media is becoming an increasingly dominant arena for the production of political, social

and ideological content, in which the general public has become a major contributor as well. The link between politics and mass media has grown stronger, particularly due to the various «popular forms of communication» constituting «mass media». Cinema has for a long time been an important part of the idea of popular media as outlets for political content, providing «a wonderful landscape to assess the social concerns of a nation» (ibid). American cinema, especially Hollywood, consistently seeks topicality in order to fulfill the requirements and needs of the audience at the time, in effect maintaining popularity and a healthy economy. American cinema has to various extents and in different ways continuously addressed contemporary political and social issues, in which Hollywood constitutes a «contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era» (Kellner, 2010: 2). Stephen Prince addresses the cycles of Hollywood film in which filmmakers have dealt with the prevailing public concerns of the time (1992: 3). Crime, prohibition, censorship, political corruption and sexual morals, among others, were reoccurring concerns in the early silent era, while filmmakers in the sound era approached issues such as unemployment, organized crime and racism. Progressive politics and social concerns occupied the social problem film from the age of the depression to the 1950s, which marked a decline in films of this nature due to the Red Scare; the Vietnam war and the counterculture movement nevertheless boosted political filmmaking in the 1960s and 70s, and the political shift taking place during the Reagan era – Prince's main point of focus – stimulated political filmmaking in response to the political controversies taking place at the time.

As topicality is key in American cinema, in which important political, social and overall public concerns are addressed, one would to a certain extent expect to see the issue of mass shootings and the politics of guns depicted on screen. However, there seems to be little attention dedicated to this sociopolitical phenomenon, even though it is a highly topical subject worthy of cinematic examination. Some seek to discredit the alleged presence of a mass shooting epidemic, including Gary Kleck (1999); this may in part, at first glance, be read as an attempt to discredit the fact that mass shootings constitute a national concern, but it may nevertheless express quite the opposite. The idea of an epidemic suggests that the issue of mass shootings is a temporary phenomenon, occurring over a fixed period of time. As history proves to repeat itself on this matter, there are no sufficient grounds to address mass shootings as an epidemic. In comparison with established cycles of social and political concerns addressed in American cinema, the temporal boundaries of the issue of mass shootings lacks rigidity. However, this does not counter the severity of the situation – few would argue that mass shootings and gun violence is not an overall topical issue in the United States. An epidemic comes with an

expiration date – if there were reasons to believe that mass shootings would come to an end, there is also reason to believe that filmmakers would be more inclined to engage.

The media alters the stories of mass shootings and personalize them in order to convey specific political messages, as stated by Denton (1992); they create narratives and highlight characters in the context of a specific theme they wish to address, whether mental health, gun control or violent entertainment. Jeremy Collins (2016) assesses the Virginia Tech shooting in the context of media stories and the framing of mass shootings as a consequence of the urge to provide explanations. Prior to the shooting, Cho Seung Hoi posted videos, photographs and text of a highly controversial nature, referred to as a «planned and orchestrated self-representations of a mass murderer», to the NBC (99). The content included references to various violent movies, and investigators further noted a similarity between the stylistic embodiment of violence in Seung Hoi's «multimedia manifesto» and Chan-wook Park's *Oldboy* (2003). As a result, the shooting was on several occasions perceived as a reenactment of direct inspiration, raising concerns about the causal link between violence on screen and violence in real life. Certain shootings are presented as stories in which the perpetrators are reduced to victims of irresponsible filmmakers, being unable to distinguish between fiction and real life. Perceiving violent entertainment as the moral sinner has been a relatively common practice in the context of mass shootings – for instance, as in the case of Virginia Tech, it has been claimed that Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* inspired the Columbine shooting (Collins, 2016: 111)

Seemingly, in stories like these, the perpetrator is not the sole antagonist, but rather a product of unfortunate circumstances in which certain figures are perceived as contributors. The main point of focus in Collins' case study is popular culture, but it nevertheless addresses other types of media framing in which other factors are perceived as contributors. Certain newspapers examined in Collins' study perceived the shooting as an act of «class/wealth hatred» due to the discovery of a note in which Seung Hoi expressed hate towards the prevalence of wealth and status at Virginia Tech. Other newspapers focused on the perpetrator's failed relationship or failures of the police and university officials. The vast majority of the newspapers in question nevertheless presented stories involving gun availability, mental/psychological illness and violent entertainment (2016: 105-106). Other credible and potentially accurate factors, such as Seung Hoi's personal issues in term of relationships and feelings of inferiority among his fellow privileged students, diminish in favor of external, causal connections accommodating demands of explanation applicable when addressing mass shootings in general. The apparent connection to *Oldboy* provided a familiar pattern satisfying

previous assumptions in which causality and explanation are equalized – therefore worthy of reproduction:

> The Columbine shootings in 1999 united the media 'in their search for explanations' which functioned 'as consolation, an insulation, protection against having to face not just the inexplicability of horror, but the horror of inexplicability (Springhall, 1999: 621, 622) … In this sense, the disturbing images of Cho provided a means for the news media to re-present an established explanatory theme in which violence in the 'real world' can be explained by, or even blamed on, violent imagery in popular culture.
> (Collins, 2016: 112)

The news media has been criticized for sensationalizing disturbing events of this nature, but they nevertheless, to a certain extent, fulfill an overall public demand and urge for explanation in times of distress and concern. The news media is criticized for the potential effects of sensationalism, in which the perpetrators are portrayed as «criminal celebrities», with particular focus on contagiousness, while scholars criticize the idea of causality on the basis of probability and plausibility prevailing in the news media in general. However, seemingly, they are rarely subjected to criticism over the idea of providing stories in itself – in effect explanations – by establishing narratives and highlighting specific characters, in which the individuals in question are assigned the role of the protagonist or the antagonist in the context of a specific theme or message. Narratives of this nature, developed to provide some sort of explanation, are nevertheless largely unrepresented in American cinema, even though they seem to be desirable as they provide some sort of meaning – regardless of plausibility – to an otherwise meaningless situation. As the news media assigns narrative qualities to a very real and controversial issue, sensitive in terms of representation, it is only natural that filmmakers enter the arena as well.

As of today, gun violence in general is seemingly not perceived as particularly problematic in fictional film. Films such as those of Quentin Tarantino, a highly acclaimed director portrayed as a «cinematic institution» (Dickenson, 2006), more than often present narratives in which mass shootings generally prevail. Films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) represented the emergence of an independent film wave in the 1990s in which excessive gun violence was a common factor, from which established filmmakers «within the system» drew inspiration, including director David Fincher and his grotesquely violent, but overall well-received film *Fight Club* (1999) (ibid: 152). The success generated by films of this nature did not go by unnoticed in Hollywood. Specialty divisions, functioning as a hybrid between the independent and commercial sector, were established within the studios, in which films embracing qualities previously associated with independent cinema, including violence of a

more «radicalized» nature, were produced (King, 2014: 198). Although there are limits to the extent of radicalism and edginess, Indiewood-films represented a shift welcoming new perspectives in both content and stylistic embodiment. The presence of gun violence does not seem to constitute a financial threat; films such as *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Jason Bourne* (2016) – a financially healthy franchise in itself – are frequently represented among the highest grossing films of the year (Mandell, 2016). Even though gun violence consequently holds a more or less dominant position in commercial film, there are limits to the various expressions of violence – especially when the type of violence in question is deemed ethically controversial on account of the perception of fiction versus reality. Based on the history of violence in Hollywood films in general, depictions of real-life mass shootings would and should not be completely unexpected, as stated by *The Guardian*-journalist Alex Suskind:

> Trotting around dark subjects has never stopped directors before. In fact, if there is one thing American entertainment does well, it's bloodshed. And when it comes to mass shootings, we certainly don't lack for material … Why do we feel the need to mine our darkest impulses on screen except the one that is staring us right in the face?
> (2015)

The subject of mass shooting has been addressed in the documentary genre; Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and Stephanie Soechtig's *Under the Gun* are well-known contributions from a public perspective, in which the filmmakers explore the politics of gun violence in the aftermath of the Columbine shooting and the Sandy Hook shooting, respectively. Mass shootings have been explored on television as well; *Grey's Anatomy, Glee, One Tree Hill* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are among a few television shows receiving widespread attention for tackling the subject in one or two episodes (Brucculieri & Delbyck, 2016). However, the narratives involving real-life mass shootings – narratives in which the distinction between reality and fiction weakens – are seemingly far from common in fictional cinema, particularly within the commercial sphere. In the context of mass shootings and gun politics, this distinction is not only defined on the basis of formal qualities; the borderline between fiction and reality is also ethically and morally motivated. The notion of distance seems to be an ethical subconscious requirement in fiction; narratives evolving around a mass shooting might constitute a far too recognizable narrative in which emotional distance is challenged.

Real-life mass shootings make up stories in which there essentially is no explanation – at least none receiving widespread support – in effect becoming unfit for fictional depiction on screen, at least on account of traditional and conventional norms of Hollywood cinema. In order

to sufficiently reflect the reality of the situation, in which there are no definite answers, this subject manifests itself as a story of a relatively young white male going on a seemingly random shooting spree – a story lacking a moral climax and a clear-cut distinction between «good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak, just or unjust» (Denton, 1992: xiv). This is, all things considered, not a story desired by commercial filmmakers, nor by their audience. Attempting to provide explanations and a desirable story would nevertheless potentially be interpreted as political sentiments, in which filmmakers in effect would become participants in an otherwise controversial debate. Moreover, fictionalizing real-life mass shootings poses ethical threats in terms of depictions of violence and supposed negative effects on a vulnerable audience – both on account of potential copycatting and the idea of depicting a highly sensitive issue that potentially hits too close to home. Even though the ethical pitfall of such depictions might seem far too large for commercial studios, others would argue that filmmakers willing to pursue this subject could and would offer enlightening perspectives elevating the discussion on mass shootings and gun violence in the United States.

Hollywood Politics

Political filmmaking in Hollywood is not rare in itself – the ways in which political content is presented and the context in which it occurs are nevertheless significant when discussing controversial subjects, such as the case of mass shootings. In certain aspects, providing explanations for the apparent lack of real-life mass shootings in American fictional cinema reflects the political complexities present in the attempt to explain mass shootings in general. First of all, the issue of mass shootings is not easily politicized in cinema, as the ongoing debate is heated and multilayered, in which political opinions and statements are founded on core, inflexible issues on human rights, deeply rooted in American society and mindsets overall. Secondly, as mentioned, it is a highly sensitive and sore subject of national concern, in which sufficient solutions are yet to be offered. Third, the political issue of mass shootings does not form a particular cycle in the manner in which they are addressed by Prince (1992). It is continuously a topic of concern on the political agenda, and it does not take the form of an epidemic coming to an end at a certain point. It is arguably easier to present films depicting issues and concerns taking place in the past or issues on the verge of coming to an end in order to avoid hailstorms from a vulnerable audience, including journalists, politicians or other commentators, in the midst of a crisis. For instance, according to academic Douglas Kellner,

there were no films, with the exception of John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1969), explicitly addressing the Vietnam War at the time of the conflict; these films emerged years after the American troops pulled out (2010: 2, 28). Needless to say, the issues of mass shootings and war are in several manners incomparable, but its nevertheless represents a way of thought in terms of timing transferrable to the case of real-life mass shootings. Finally, the financial frameworks of Hollywood and the influence of corporate power are highly relevant, constituting a significant influence on political and ideological expressions. The perspectives on commercial power structures do somewhat differ, but it is nevertheless commonly known that there are limits to what commercial filmmakers are allowed, and allow themselves, to convey.

Hollywood Ambiguousness

Certain scholars convey a relatively optimistic tone in terms of political filmmaking in Hollywood, emphasizing the value of political ambiguousness as a response to the frameworks in which commercial films are produced. As in the case of Prince (1992), Douglas Kellner (2010) examines Hollywood cinema in relation to specific political eras – primarily the era of George W. Bush – in which he draws attention to a heightened political awareness in cinema in response to the political climate at the time. Hollywood cinema is addressed as a platform in which the political battles between the political left and right are mirrored (ibid: 10). Although this is a subject of debate in itself, which will be revisited below, the Bush-Cheney administration represented a political era to which Hollywood responded by producing films of both liberal and conservative orientation, in effect opposing or supporting the politics of Bush to various extents. While Hollywood put a pin in the production of films depicting the Vietnam War, the political failures of the Bush-Cheney administration boosted contemporary political filmmaking. This is further supported by Ian Scott (2011) in his discussion of Hollywood in the post-9/11 era, in which a reactionary change in Hollywood attitudes developed. Films critically examining the politics of Bush – facing criticism themselves for «their unapologetic approach to both the attitudes and the ideology of the American government after 2001» – emerged in response to the «age of terror» (7). Some films expressing a highly explicit form of criticism practically never saw the light of day, including British director Gabriel Range's mockumentary *Death of a President* (2006), in which a documentary team tracks the investigation of the assassination of George W. Bush. The film was systematically banned by the largest cinema chains in the US, called on by the Bush administration (Scott, 2011: 7; Arendt, 2006).

Certainly, political and social concerns do not have to be explicitly addressed in order to bring forth some sort of rhetorical effect. Some Hollywood films advance «contemporary liberal, conservative, or radical ideologies, and thus intersect with current public controversies», potentially in an overt manner, while others address public controversies indirectly and implicitly by being «complex, multilayered and open to multiple readings» (Scott, 2011: 2). Certain Hollywood filmmakers promote liberal or conservative perspectives; others aim to be apolitical by producing politically ambiguous films in which the political motifs are difficult to identify (ibid: 1). Kellner draws attention to a number of films read as interrogations of the culture of violence prevailing at the time, offering commentary of a more or less implicit nature, on the «war on terror» posed by the Bush-Cheney administration, including *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and the *Saw* film series (2010: 7). Kellner separates cinematic realism from allegory in this context – films directly displaying the social realities of an era, including films such as *J.F.K.* (1991) and *Platoon* (1986), versus films providing allegorical representations, in which artistic visions of the world may transcend the various sociopolitical aspects of an era. Films of this nature thus require critical allegorical interpretation in order to unveil commentary on sociopolitical phenomena (2010: 14). Implicit commentary on the political status quo, as opposed to explicit and vivid ideological content, seems to be the norm as Hollywood's economic responsibilities define the boundaries to which commercial filmmakers have to adapt. The various forms and relative significance of political views and messages in commercial film serve as expressions «within a limiting field» (Prince, 1992: 7). Entertainment and general appeal is imperative in Hollywood; commercial studios are financially dependent on meeting the requirements of a diverse and heterogeneous audience. The stakes are too high; consequently, Hollywood has traditionally found itself «suspicious of the inclusion of overtly partisan political positions in its films, preferring instead to emphasize entertainment values and, when necessary, to permit political issues to speak through the dominant entertainment formulas» (ibid).

According to Prince, Kellner and Scott, the financial dependence on the entertainment factor and mass appeal does not suggest that Hollywood films are generally apolitical, unreflective and unchallenging. They must be interpreted in context, aware of the boundaries in which commercial filmmakers operate within, in order to identify and recognize the political value of the film in question. The relationship between the requirements of topicality and entertainment needs to be in perfect balance; symbolism is significant, in which the expressions of social and political values, emerging through a film's narrative design, dialogue and stylistic

embodiment, are altered in accordance with a specific agenda, but also in accordance with the existing boundaries, limits and requirements defined by the industry. By acknowledging the conditions of political filmmaking in Hollywood, in which «contemporary narrative films, manufactured as entertainment with mass appeal, must necessarily draw upon and rework salient cultural values», one may also acknowledge how Hollywood films may offer challenging commentary on «established social values that underlie our attitudes and assumptions about real historical, social, or political events or conditions» (ibid: 7). Moreover, political commentary in Hollywood films is not to be assessed solely on the basis of the assumption that political films necessarily express explicit propaganda in reference to overtly political topics, such presidential eras, parties and electoral institutions, or broader issues such as US intervention in the Vietnam War, or the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Political film in Hollywood may reference «salient clusters of social and political values», through cinematic designs developed in accordance with collective desires (ibid: 9).

In the attempts to describe the relationship between film and society, the question on whether Hollywood film aims to shape political and social attitudes or merely reflect them has been a classical issue of debate (ibid: 2). The various studies conducted to identify a perfect, causal connection between film and society – in which the question of whether society influences cinema or the other way around is of primary concern – are nevertheless generally insupportable, as in the case of mass shootings and the identification of potential causes and contributors, oversimplifying an otherwise complex correlation. The relationship between Hollywood and politics is ambiguous, resulting in politically ambiguous films, in which the political implications may be both progressive and reactionary, and the ambiguousness is to a significant extent a consequence of the value of entertainment and mass appeal, as discussed by Prince and Scott. The advances in political introspection in Hollywood would imply that filmmakers would be less reluctant to examine the politics of mass shootings. However, even though is it argued that more radical political developments in attitudes and ambitions within Hollywood have occurred, and that the political values of Hollywood film – though highly covert, implicit and potentially ambiguous – should be acknowledged, functioning as expressions within a limiting field, there seems to be little evidence of major shifts in attitudes towards mass shootings as a political issue. The complexity of politics in Hollywood film is even more detectable in this context, as, arguably, even the most implicit commentary on real incidents of mass shootings remains to be seen in commercial film – at least in films fulfilling the requirement of mass appeal.

The issue of mass shootings is certainly not an overt political subject – it is equally a social concern, in which factors other than gun politics as discussed, therefore challenging to examine in political cinema. However, as the ongoing debate illustrates, the issue is frequently politicized as these factors – including mental health and media violence – often pose as arguments, or by certain perspectives, scapegoats, opposing measures enforcing gun control. There are limits to what commercial filmmakers may comment on. Whereas Hollywood film implicitly commented on the politics of the Bush administration and the controversial ways in which it was reflected in the Middle East, mass shootings do not make the cut. As a political subject, it lacks rigidity. There has always been a mass shooting, and it cannot clearly and strictly be associated with a particular shift in the political climate. The politics of mass shootings involves the very foundation of American politics in terms of the overall comprehension of civil liberties, and it is in this context highly unlikely that Hollywood would be able to be progressive and still remain appealing towards a diverse audience and a diverse political climate in which the opinions on the matter move in opposite directions. For the same reasons, there are no films merely reflecting the social and political attitudes towards mass shootings. Reflecting prevailing attitudes on this issue would most likely express, regardless of ambiguousness, partisan perspectives – particularly if the conventional norms of storytelling are to be implemented. It is arguably easier to be implicitly partisan when the subject matter is violence and torture, particularly associated with a specific figure and his supporters, as opposed to mass shootings, a subject closely linked to current gun policies and definitions of civil rights in the United States.

Whether or not Hollywood actually addresses a specific political topic, and whether partisan implications are conveyed, arguably depends on individual predispositions in terms of interpretation and individual comprehensions of political ambiguousness in film, to a certain extent. Not everyone would acknowledge the alleged presence of political remarks in *Back to the Future* (1985) or the *Poltergeist* trilogy, representing a «desire for retrieval of and reconciliation with a past» and the economic fears of middle-class families, respectively, posed by the political culture of the Reagan era (Prince, 1992: 9; Kellner, 2010: 15). Put somewhat extremely, some might argue that films such as *Suicide Squad* offers implicit critical commentary on gun violence as a national concern; it is nevertheless highly doubtful that its viewers would leave the theatre with a heightened critical understanding of the prevalence of mass shootings in the United States. Certainly, there have been films implicitly addressing gun violence, such as Ryan Cooglar's *Fruitvale Station* (2013), a biographical drama film based on the story of Oscar Grand who was shot to death by a police officer in 2009. *American History*

X (1998) or *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) might, for that matter, comment on the culture of gun violence in the United States. Gun violence is nevertheless contextualized in these films, functioning as an element integrated in narratives of racial justice and equality – social criticism – as opposed to the culture and politics of gun violence in itself. Moreover, evidently, this approach does not reference real-life mass shootings. The issue of mass shootings is challenging to contextualize, reflecting the nature of the ongoing debate in which there is no explanatory context agreed upon by the majority of the American people, other than the fact that the issue of mass shootings is a national concern. Offering context and an explanatory narrative would potentially convey political implications and partisan views. Finally, it may be argued that films depicting serial murder, such as *Badlands* (1973) or *Natural Born Killers* critically examine the issue of gun violence; compared to films in which the primary aim is to examine social phenomena, as in the case of *American History X*, commentaries on gun violence arguably come across in a more evident manner. However, films depicting serial killers often constitute in-depth examinations of these criminals on an individual level, potentially countering the effect of critically examining a sociopolitical phenomenon in general. Moreover, the traditional entertainment appeal of serial killers may further influence the process of interpreting sociopolitical commentary. This conceptual contrast is discussed in further detail below.

In general, it may be argued that these films to a larger extent examine the culture of gun violence – if aiming to do so – than gun politics; after all, the issue of mass shootings is arguably perceived as the most disturbing consequence and prime symbol of current gun policies. In order to convey rhetorically effective commentary on this controversial matter, real incidents of mass shootings will necessarily have to be referenced in one way or another. These incidents may be implicitly referenced through a film's narrative design, dialogue or stylistic embodiment. For instance, although the conveyance of political implications is a matter of discussion in itself, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* will illustrate how real-life mass shootings may be referenced through the notion of foreshadowing, symbolism, suspense and overall mood, without addressing the action of mass shootings in terms of action or words. However, seemingly, even the most implicit and covert commentary nevertheless becomes too explicit, consequently too radical in terms of Hollywood standards. The relationship between political implications and mass appeal must be carefully balanced, and the distinction between implicitness and explicitness diminishes in this context. It may be generally challenging to examine this subject without crossing the thin line set to define the boundaries of financial responsibility – in terms of storytelling, entertainment and mass appeal – and ethical responsibility. Something must be sacrificed in favor of the other; in order to offer enlightening

and influential commentary on mass shootings and fulfill commercial requirements of an engaging narrative with a moral payoff, the political frameworks will necessarily be implicitly – or explicitly – addressed. Moreover, it is challenging to address the politics of this issue without expressing views potentially interpreted as politically partisan, which again constitutes a risk factor in terms of mass appeal. John Madden's *Miss Sloane* (2016), in which a liberal gun lobbyist goes head to head with the NRA in her advocacy for universal background checks and the closing of loopholes, might be the most radical contribution so far in terms of addressing current gun policies and, very implicitly, its consequences. Although the director aimed to capture the overall political process, as opposed to being polemic – perhaps a strategic response in order to avoid alienating «half their potential consumer base ahead of their release» (Bunch, 2016) – the film has generated criticism from the political right, as there is a fairly strong liberal undertone, being referred to as «another reminder of Hollywood's liberal smugness» (Toto, 2016) and a «pro-gun control fairytale of liberals' dreams» (Adams, 2016).

In this incident, political implications are expressed at the expense of mass appeal. It does provide some sort of explanation and some sort of moral pay-off in terms of gun control, an engaging story Hollywood can get on board with, but consequently has to «pick a side». As a result, *Miss Sloane* went down as «a historic box-office bomb» (Richardson, 2016), alongside crowd-pleasing box-office winner *Office Christmas Party* (2016) (Mendelson, 2016). Even though it may be argued that the film is politically ambitious, at least by Hollywood standards, the question of whether it is particularly rhetorically progressive, and the extent of progressiveness, is to be discussed. Certainly, examining the issue of gun control is in itself an important step in elevating the general consciousness on and discussion of an important national concern, but it nevertheless comes across as quite restrained in terms of the very consequences of current gun policies. It remains highly self-conscious on an ethical level. Mass shootings, arguably the most disturbing outcome of these policies, are implicitly referenced in the depiction of the political fistfights they narrow down to. In order to sufficiently grasp the concept of real-life mass shootings in itself, and still remain widely appealing by avoiding political implications, it may be argued that these incidents and/or the surrounding circumstances would have to be depicted as they actually appear and unfold, or are about to unfold, seemingly without any plausible form of explanation, as there is none widely agreed upon by the diverse audience they wish to capture. Again, this would most likely violate the traditional narrative conventions defined by Hollywood – conventions that are financially and ethically imperative in order to fulfill the requirement of mass appeal. *Miss Sloane* does represent a shift in the discussion, mainly that Hollywood is willing to take risks in order to be

political, but the most controversial aspects of gun politics, which would possibly constitute the most rhetorically powerful aspects, is generally absent. Evidently, there are ethical lines one cannot cross, and a line seems to be drawn at the idea of depicting real-life mass shootings. The urge to examine this issue might be there – it is just a matter of how. The perspectives conveyed in this film fuel the political disunity that is already there – in order to sufficiently challenge the public consciousness on the politics of mass shootings, larger sacrifices must be made.

Hollywood Conservatism

The views expressed by Prince, Scott and Kellner are fairly nuanced – or even optimistic – in terms of political and rhetorical influence, provided that the political implications are interpreted in context, aware of the limits of latitude and independence to which filmmakers have to adjust in order to gain mass appeal. By acknowledging the necessity of interpretation of symbolism in narratives, dialogues and stylistic and visual embodiments, the political implications may be easier to identify, which in effect may intensify the rhetorical outcome of the films in question. Despite the political potential of Hollywood cinema, these perspectives are seemingly inapplicable in the context of real-life mass shootings. In order to appeal to a diverse audience and remain ethically conscious and responsible, the issue would arguably have to be carefully examined by being extremely discreet, implicit and covert, potentially at the expense of rhetorical value. While scholars such as Stephen Prince largely address the situation of political filmmaking in Hollywood from the filmmaker's perspective, emphasizing the need to acknowledge that commercial filmmakers work within a limiting field, others express a more critical understanding of the industry of Hollywood, both on account of the influence of profit-oriented mechanisms and the general values they choose to convey. These overall critical perspectives on Hollywood as an industry may elevate the comprehension of why commercial filmmakers are reluctant – whether by choice or due to corporate interference, or both – to examine the issue of mass shootings. As Hollywood may be viewed as a contested terrain where liberals and conservatives – here mainly understood in terms of criticism or support towards the political status quo, respectively – attempt to influence the political nature of commercial cinema, it is also subjected to criticism for producing films in accordance with liberal or conservative ideologies and frameworks, regardless of the fact that commercial cinema aims to appeal to a fairly segmented and diverse audience.

Liberal criticism tends to manifest itself in the discussion of Hollywood as a profit-driven industry, specifically the commercial boundaries filmmakers are obligated to work within by complying with the requirements of entertainment and mass appeal, and the impact on political, artistic and rhetorical liberty. In general, judging by the perspectives of Richard Rushton (2013: 1), Hollywood has systematically been subjected to criticism for being «politically naïve or backward», strictly apolitical by definition or, if said to be political at all, of a «bourgeois», «capitalist-based» conservative nature. Prince, Scott, Kellner and, perhaps more explicitly, Rushton, to various extents seek to argue against the general liberal perception portraying Hollywood as a ruthless, uncompromising corporate force practicing ideological control in favor of profit. Moreover, Prince and Rushton challenge the established idea of political film, in part a result of traditional academic disciplines and overall definitions of political film, as inherently «good» or «bad» based on progressiveness versus mere reaction, in which, according to the established perception explicitly addressed by Rushton and implicitly referenced by the other scholars, the latter tends to pose a hidden conservative ideology (Rushton, 2013: 2). Although it may be true that the correlation between Hollywood and politics is more complex than generally assumed, and that commercial films to various extents offer critical political perspectives on prevailing sociopolitical concerns, it is nevertheless important to assess opposing views, the very perception Rushton in certain aspects aims to discredit, and other forms of explanations, as there evidently are limits to the extent of Hollywood's progressiveness. As an internationally recognized cultural institution, constituting a tremendous influence on the public consciousness, as in the case of the news media, the ideological frameworks of Hollywood – the repercussions of its profit-seeking structures – are worthy of reflection and discussion.

To Prince, commercial filmmakers play the hand they have been dealt; this is nevertheless not necessarily a winning hand. Matthew Alford (2010) addresses Hollywood as a limiting field from a different perspective. While Prince emphasizes symbolic interpretation as a gateway to the identification and acknowledgement of political commentary in Hollywood cinema, in which the political value of a film may be recognized in spite of its limiting surroundings, Alford emphasizes a general lack of critical political perspectives as a consequence of the limiting field of Hollywood. Moreover, the perspective of Prince would imply that commercial filmmakers are fully aware of the conditions under which they operate. One cannot with certainty claim that the limits of expression are fully disclosed, and consequently that filmmakers working within the system are «fully able to recognize the ideological boundaries set by state and corporate forces within which they work» (Alford, 2010:

175). Whether consciously aware of these profit-driven limits or not, attempting to break through these boundaries would potentially put the careers of the filmmakers in question on the line (Parenti, 2010: xii). The continuous strive for profit is dependent on mass appeal, in which public demands for entertainment and escapism often come at the expense of sociopolitical enlightenment, as well as financial power through marketing and distribution. Ideological control largely ensures mass appeal, which constitutes an overall explanatory factor in the assessment of why Hollywood films at best appear topical by offering superficial criticism of political issues, of why filmmakers cannot offer explicit radical criticism without putting themselves and their work at risk. Political implicitness, or ambiguousness, as discussed, is the only option: «Mainstream film-makers have a built-in capacity to handle burning issues in ways that mute their impact and reduce their meaning. Oppositional realities are incorporated into the script, but in a pre-digested form» (ibid: xi). Ideological control thus prevents commercial filmmakers from accessing the very core of sociopolitical conflicts and reality in itself.

Apart from mass appeal and the perception of public demand, in which unchallenging narratives seem to be of general preference, and the fact that commercial filmmakers will have to compromise by downplaying their political statements in favor of security, the industrial and structural frameworks hold significant power in the recycling of narratives expressing «considerable sympathy for the political status quo» (Alford, 2010: 4). The extensive consolidation taking place in the 1990s, in which studios were bought up by dominating media conglomerates, has left six film studios in charge of the film industry from production to distribution (Ortner, 2013: 96). Concentrated corporate ownership has thus been a subject of debate in terms of ideological control. First of all, low-budget productions are squeezed out as the majors set the bar too high by defining the industry standards in terms of financial recourses and distribution. Moreover, expenses related to production, marketing and distribution keep increasing, and the financial pitfall keeps growing deeper. As a result, the studios become even more dependent on profit maximization, and executives become increasingly inclined to take precautions by avoiding «narratives that are unfamiliar to American audiences» (Alford, 2010: 5) – including narratives of mass shootings. This might in part explain why these stories to a larger extent are traceable in TV-shows; an audience base has already been established, and there is in effect less to lose in terms of ratings, even if the episodes in question were to generate criticism. Eliminating risk is also a result of commercialization in terms of merchandising deals – appealing to marketing and distribution teams and appealing to a diverse audience are perhaps of equal importance. Selling a product becomes the top priority, and scripts are potentially altered in order to present the product in the best possible way – and «the order of the day is

happy endings, light entertainment and an absence of disturbing political narratives» (ibid: 7). These factors are clearly incompatible with a story in which a real-life mass shooting is the subject matter.

Secondly, in order to maintain its position as a cultural superpower, the government has secured Hollywood's position on an international level by offering lucrative domestic tax incentives to the majors while ensuring representation abroad, as several studios have international owners. Due to its global impact, commercial filmmakers must necessarily internationalize their messages, potentially by oversimplifying the narratives and dialogues of the film in question (ibid: 8-9). International ownership is nevertheless fairly limited, and distribution is still domestically controlled, consequently eliminating foreign competition, which in effect prevents alternative perspectives from being depicted on screen. Both the domestic and international affairs of Hollywood may thus be viewed as a one-way street in which output trumps input. The uncontested Hollywood machinery systematically prevents alternative and critical perspectives from emerging through the system while leaving the door open for politically sympathetic cinematic expressions and other forms of expression in which political points of view are generally absent. Third – although not addressed by Alford – is the establishment of specialty divisions, as mentioned earlier, as a response to the commercial success generated by independent films in the 1990s, aiming to capture both mass and niche audiences (Ortner, 2013: 97). Even though specialty divisions in many aspects may be viewed as fortunate, as independent filmmakers are provided with a platform and necessary financial means securing an increased audience base, whether or to which extent «independent» filmmakers are able to remain in full ideological and artistic control and avoid conscious or subconscious interference from studio executives is nevertheless an issue of discussion. At first glance, specialty divisions may be perceived as a form of acknowledgement of alternative mindsets, leading the way for films thoroughly assessing the prevailing political issues at the time. However, they might as well be viewed as an expansion of the hegemony of Hollywood in their quest to streamline ideological content and eliminate competition in favor of financial success.

However, according to Alford, mass appeal and profit maximization do not seem to be the sole purpose of ideological control executed upon films produced within the system:

> … if simplicity is all that is required, films would be able to promote slogans expressing solidarity against government/corporate repression, like 'Freedom to the Workers' and 'No Blood for Oil', but this is not the case, so political factors appear to be decisive.

(2010: 19)

The financial structures tend to overshadow public demand; whereas Hollywood executives would justify distribution as a result of the latter, it is argued that the opposite in many incidents proves to be the case, mainly that «supply creates demand» (Parenti, 2010: viii). Audiences are consequently subjected to films due to their financial value as opposed to content value and actual preferences, and will to a large extent consume whatever Hollywood executives deem valuable, even if the repertoire of products constitutes politically truncated, mediocre and shallow films. Scrutinizing ideological control becomes even more imperative as there are many incidents in which heavily distributed and marketed films turn into box-office flops. These miscomprehensions may be a consequence of difficulties in the prediction of financial success, but the perceptions of mass appeal may also be «shaded by one's own socio-political proclivities» (ibid: ix). The nature of these socio-political proclivities and ideological control, whether consciously or subconsciously imposed on both filmmakers and their audiences, is debated and problematized by Alford in the assessment of why certain films never see the light of day. Hollywood cinema as a political battlefield is clearly conveyed through the perceptions of Alford, offering opposing arguments to those of scholars such as Michael Medved (1992), in which criticism towards Hollywood is rooted in highly conservative ideologies. By the perspectives of Alford, political ambiguousness may be perceived as a result of right-wing resistance towards politically challenging cinema, as the industry of Hollywood keeps restraining the emergence of films interpreted as critical towards certain aspects of US politics. The potential of political film is in effect cut short, and seemingly, escapism is not just a matter of audience preferences, but also a matter of escaping reality by preventing filmmakers from digging too deep.

American Exceptionalism

The alleged prevalence of conservative politics in Hollywood is by Alford challenged in the context of US power politics, specifically illustrated by the assessment of films addressing «politico-military ventures abroad» (Parenti, 2010: x), in which political filmmaking is deeply rooted in perceptions of patriotism and moral superiority. The corporate power holds a firm grip on Hollywood's outlet, and structural frameworks in the form of concentrated ownership create rigid boundaries of expression. The presence of right-wing power politics, fueling the self-perception of America as a universally benevolent force fighting to conquer its «implacably

villainous» enemies (Alford, 2010: 149), is detectable through the financial, therefore ideological, control of government and corporate bureaucracies, including the Pentagon, NASA, Homeland Security, the Secret Service and the CIA (ibid: 9-11). These instances bring authenticity, quality and cost-effective solutions to films in which US defense and military affairs is the subject matter by providing military advice and materials. In return, scripts are altered by representatives from the respective public relations divisions in accordance with established self-perceptions of the US military, resulting in «scripts that are highly favorable to recruitment and public relations drives» (ibid: 10). Due to corporate influence and the urge to maintain cultural dominance, scripts are thoroughly assessed in order to avoid narrative or visual signals potentially translated as critical scrutiny of government affairs. The potential repercussions of violating corporate requirements are too severe, as illustrated by the case of *Countermeasures*. Allegedly, the script implicitly referenced the Iran-Contra scandal taking place during the era of Reagan, therefore denigrating the White House – consequently, the Pentagon withdrew support, and production was shut down. The Pentagon and the CIA have proven to be the most influential; whereas the Pentagon holds sufficient leverage, the CIA has traditionally held a significant position within Hollywood since the early days of the Cold War, noticeable in films such as *Arrowhead* (1953) in which scenes interpreted as critical towards the treatment of Apache Indians were removed in accordance with CIA orders. Moreover, in cooperation with other corporate instances, CIA has proved to be on the offensive as well by acquiring creative control over George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1954) and incorporating elements signaling anti-Soviet ideologies.

Government and corporate bureaucracies are vividly aware of the influence Hollywood poses on the public consciousness, and will consequently have to execute preventive ideological control upon studios and filmmakers pushing the limits. In the aftermath of 9/11, Bush's Deputy Chief of Staff – well aware of the fact that US foreign affairs and the war on terror would potentially fall under critical scrutiny – met with the head of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and Hollywood executives representing the studios (Scott, 2011: 5). A few ground rules were laid out; for instance, if a film were to address the war in Afghanistan, it would have to be sufficiently emphasized that this was a war on terror, as opposed to Islam, representing «a fight against evil». Moreover, executives were to reassure that there would be no elements of propaganda opposing current foreign policies in future films ahead (Alford, 2010: 14). Certainly, it is challenging to accurately assess the level of influence corporate power has issued upon Hollywood, but there is nevertheless reason to believe that conservative ideologies, manifested in regulation and creative control, have put alternative ideas to sleep

before they are able to develop, and therefore continuously reinforced prevailing ideologies «promoted by official and unofficial mouthpieces of the state» (ibid: 19). Thus, according to Alford, conservative influence is particularly vivid when the subject matter challenges the notion of patriotism, morality and the overall self-perception of the US – primarily that the US constitutes a universally benevolent force, whose superiority works at the benefit of other nations by representing the greater good. This self-perception is rooted in a historical belief in «American exceptionalism», traced back as far as the colonial times, kept alive in Hollywood narratives (ibid: 21).

Consequently, oppositional criticism tends to focus on anti-patriotic depictions thriving amongst the leftist cultural elites in Hollywood, in which America is portrayed as the enemy. In this context, however «diluted, incidental and innocuously decontextualized», anything critical will be regarded as degrading and offensive in the eyes of «uncompromising reactionaries» (Parenti, 2010: xii). Hollywood has for decades been scrutinized for opposing American virtues and power; for instance, Jewish influence was a subject of concern among conservatives in the early days of cinema, and filmmakers considered «un-American» were blacklisted during the 1950s as a result of the Red Scare (Alford, 2010: 3). Conservative criticism is vividly conveyed by Michael Medved in *Hollywood vs. America* (1992), in which Medved explicitly expresses a mood of moral superiority when criticizing the output of «the poison factory», claiming that Hollywood cinema constitutes an assault on «our most cherished values» and continuously challenge conventional norms of decency (1992: 1). Apart from attacking Hollywood on the basis of family values, religion, marriage, violence, sex, vulgarity and the ways in which children are affected by their poison, Medved is vividly engaged in the question of patriotism: «Americans are passionately patriotic, and consider themselves enormously lucky to live here; but Hollywood conveys a view of the nation's history, future, and major institutions that is dark, cynical and often nightmarish» (ibid: 10). According to Medved, there has been a continuous increase in negative portrayals of the US military since the 1960s (ibid: 218). For instance, both Prince and Medved agree on the fact that the Reagan era stimulated political filmmaking in which critical perspectives prevailed – Prince's «optimistic» reflections are nevertheless countered by Medved's pessimistic reflections on the direction in which Hollywood is headed, particularly in terms of its responsibilities towards its audience:

> … the majority of Americans maintain their faith and pride in a wide range of national symbols and
> institutions – emphatically including the armed services of the United States. In its surprisingly

unsympathetic attitude to the military, the entertainment establishment is driven more by its own inner demons than by any desire to please the public.

(ibid: 220)

Pleasing the public would thus involve celebrating American exceptionalism, particularly in times of crisis, in which Hollywood serves as an homage to American patriotism and «the many blessings of the land they love». Instead, according to Medved, Hollywood has lost touch with the American mainstream by insulting the public's passionate feelings for their country (ibid: 235, 275). While mass appeal in this context involves romanticizing narratives of American patriotism, Alford's perception of mass appeal involves slick, unchallenging and often inaccurate depictions of US power. Alford aims to counter conservative assumptions, including those of Michael Medved, by arguing that commercial cinema largely does not dare to challenge the prevailing assumptions of American exceptionalism and benevolence, mainly as a result of excessive corporate control, in which conservative ideologies are recycled. Generally, it is unfeasible to claim that there is a liberal establishment within Hollywood unless one discredits the following factors: the presence of «numerous right-wing stars, censors and industry professionals, the presence of national security systems and – most importantly – the industry's business leaders working within a rigid corporate system» (Alford, 2010: 169). Moreover, the idea of Hollywood as «a den of leftist shills», dominated by «inner demons» undermining America as a moral superiority, might be a rhetorical strategy applied to remain in ideological control – after all, promoting America as inherently good is arguably good for business. By siding with the public, right-wing commentators may gain the moral upper hand; it is easier to justify criticism towards politically oppositional narratives and gain audience support based on core values than coming to terms with the reality of a specific issue. What lies beneath the surface is thus concealed in favor of «the greater good» and, supposedly, the types of stories the public requires. Although audience preference is imperative for any industry relying on profit, addressing public demand as the sole explanation for Hollywood's output might also constitute a strategic maneuver, by which corporate forces are able to avoid denigration of government bureaucracies and eliminate the risk of political chaos.

Even though Alford's perspectives on the industry of Hollywood might come across as fairly pessimistic, they do make sense when the issue in question is real-life mass shootings. Apart from the obvious factors of commercialization and profit maximization, in which unfamiliar narratives are generally unwanted, conservative ideologies prevent – to the extent that there is anything to prevent – narratives of mass shootings from emerging. The political

issue of mass shootings would have to be rather explicitly challenged in Hollywood cinema in order to gain rhetorical value, as discussed earlier. However, this would potentially influence the public's perception of the American government to the extent that its credibility is weakened, in effect undermining conservative values. Although the subject matter in Alford's *Reel Power* is the US military, it sheds light on the presence of a conservative mood prevailing in the industry of Hollywood, which poses a significant effect on the overall production of sociopolitical film. Moreover, Medved channels this prevailing assumption of US superiority in his evaluation of Hollywood cinema. The political ethos of government bureaucracies is dependent on Hollywood cooperation in which its output reproduces narratives that explicitly mirror these values, and it is arguably reasonable to claim that an emergence of films tackling the subject of real-life mass shootings would «open up a can of worms». Inviting the audience to scrutinize gun policies through the exposure to narratives of this nature would most likely cause severe repercussions within the political sphere, which consequently would be bad for business in Hollywood.

The prevailing image of the United States as an exceptional and benevolent force, representing what is inherently good and pure in this world, would in part break down if stories of real-life mass shootings were to make it to Hollywood – stories in which there is no moral epiphany and no ways in which America could be portrayed as the moral superiority. Of course, stories of real-mass shootings could be altered to the extent that focus shifts from government policies – mainly its current gun policies – to other factors, such as those of mental health or violent entertainment, but this would nevertheless counter financial and ethical responsibilities; there is too little to gain and too much to lose. Narratives conveying an «us versus them» mentality and the notion of good versus evil is often a necessity in terms of conventional storytelling and entertainment, particularly detectable in the narratives of interest in Alford's study. There is nevertheless no room for the paradigm of «us versus them» to prevail in narratives of mass shootings, and there certainly is no room for patriotism and pride – even though both the media and government officials continuously attempt to reproduce the spectacle of terror, as argued by both Kellner (Linder, 2014) and Altheide (2009). These incidents take place on American soil and are executed by American citizens – there are no one else to blame. Naturally, Hollywood is not eager to invite filmmakers – American or foreign – to challenge and undermine the prevailing self-perception of the American society. According to Medved's scrutinizing perspective of the industry of Hollywood, further induced by a wide range of other critics referenced throughout, this has already been the case for decades in Hollywood history:

To an outrageous extent, that negativity turns up not only in portrayals of our present situation, but in venomous evocations of the American past. The days when Hollywood captured the imagination of the entire world with stirring accounts of our heroic history have given way to an era of self-flagellation and irresponsible revisionism – with a series of preachy, politically correct, propagandistic presentations of our country's many crimes and misdemeanors.

(1992: 224-225)

Evidently, depending on whichever perception one chooses to encourage, terms such as «political correctness» and «propaganda» are defined in radically different ways, as illustrated by the referenced scholars – particularly by Medved and Alford.

In addition to financial motivations, there might be a level of fear associated with the idea of breaking through the boundaries of expression among filmmakers within the system – not just in terms of financial security, but also potentially in terms of social and personal repercussions. Although the controversial incidents referred to by Alford are extreme, and to a certain extent products of speculation, they might nevertheless, subconsciously and consciously, impose a certain psychological affect. For instance, the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of scriptwriter Gary Devore on the verge of completing his highly critical film *The Big Steal*, in which the US military takes the fall, are provided in order to illustrate how corporate power and conservative influence prevent filmmakers from getting too close to the truth (2010: 13). Moreover, the social repercussions of challenging government affairs are problematized by referring to the case of actress Jean Seberg, whom the FBI decided to «neutralize» by leaking a lie stating that her unborn baby was fathered by a prominent member of the Black Panthers – deemed «the greatest threat to national security» by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover (Duncan, 2017) – after learning that she provided financial aid to the organization. Due to excessive stress posed by this story, Seberg collapsed and lost her child, and finally committed suicide after several attempts in 1979, followed by her husband a year later (2010: 16). For emphasis, these examples are not referenced in order to argue that these tragic faiths would repeat themselves if a filmmaker were to address the subject of real-life mass shootings, but merely serve as potential generators of fear and insecurity – feelings that might manifest themselves as personal barriers in the production of challenging narratives.

Thus, in order to keep certain controversial realities out of the loop, conservative ideologies are able to prevail due to the ways in which the industry is structured, through concentrated corporate ownership, state and corporate interference and elimination of domestic and international competition by establishing specialty divisions and by limiting international ownership, respectively, in which voices expressing opposing and alternative perspectives on

US political affairs may be silenced. All things considered, Hollywood would not be interested in welcoming foreign examinations of the topic of mass shootings – perspectives that may challenge the notion of pride and the overall self-inflicted image of the United States. As pleaded by Alford, a freer, less concentrated system of ownership and production, preventing political and corporate forces from «driving a wedge through the relationship between artist and audience», could make filmmakers less reluctant to offer challenging and compelling narratives (Alford, 2010: 175-176). Medved, on the other hand, calls for change in the opposite direction, in which certain forms of expression are withheld in consideration of the general public. Medved opposes censorship, though not to the benefit of artistic liberty: «as soon as the government attempts to crack down on some purveyor of slime he is quickly transformed into a defender of the First Amendment» (1992: 321). Instead, he represents the audience, «the greater good», by encouraging change in the prevailing Hollywood mentality in terms of the industry's responsibilities towards its audience. It may nevertheless be argued that responsibility involves subjecting the audience to stories in which government policies are scrutinized, generating public enlightenment on matters by which they are affected and concerned. However, even though narratives of this nature would serve as important democratic contributions, the question of whether the American public would value such narratives, especially in terms of the ethical boundaries they may cross, is an issue of concern in itself.

The Ethical Pitfall

The ethical issues emerging from depicting the subject of mass shootings on screen, primarily related to the effects these depictions might have on the audience, might be equally important in the assessment of why there is an evident lack of films of this nature. Stories of mass shootings are generally incompatible with conventional norms of storytelling, and narratives designed to appeal to the vast majority of the population are arguably grounded in ethical norms and perceptions as well. There are reasons to why the same types of narratives generate profit and why narratives that are unfamiliar to the public are held back. Claiming that audiences are generally opposed to being challenged on sociopolitical issues, that it is «better to treat them as shallow fools» (Alford, 2010: 176) is evidently a denigrating oversimplification – as stated, there are a number of incidents in which Hollywood has failed to predict box office success. However, controversial sociopolitical statements will not ensure mass appeal, nor do audiences expect to be subjected to radicalism in mainstream cinema, as, according to Alford, the same

types of narratives continue to circulate – at least in comparison with the independent scene. Therefore, one may presume that the audience base of Hollywood cinema is relatively defined; those looking for alternatives will naturally turn elsewhere. This perception of the mainstream audience is more or less stressed among independent filmmakers, according to Sherry B. Ortner, who are passionately invested in the idea of cinema as a democratic platform on which truly challenging and truthful explorations of contemporary societal issues may prevail: «Independent filmmakers often have a prickly and somewhat adversarial relationship with the imagined audience, that is, the mainstream American audience schooled in Hollywood movies, and presumed to want only to be mindlessly entertained» (2013: 12). Independent filmmakers who share this perception define themselves in opposition to the hegemony of Hollywood, and will potentially offer a fairly clear-cut definition of the mainstream audience. Naturally, the reality of the matter is more nuanced, as argued by Stephen Prince in his assessment of political film, but there is surely some truth to this as certain stories never make the cut in commercial cinema. Consequently, on the basis of expectation and audience satisfaction, the ethical pitfall is far greater in Hollywood. Medved's perception of the American audience might have taken effect when controversial issues are discussed. Whether it is ethically and morally justifiable to present audiences with these types of narratives and the overall subject of mass shootings in itself is questionable – then again, in order to stimulate fruitful debate over an issue worthy of enlightenment, filmmakers might have to break through certain boundaries. By contrast, as discussed in part IV, the reluctance to challenge an audience through the depiction of controversial issues might be perceived as unethical as well.

Narratives of mass shootings are unfamiliar in theatres, but vividly familiar on the outside. Certainly, there have been waves of sociopolitical films critical of the status quo that cannot strictly be labelled as conventional, as argued by Prince, in which escapism does not form a requirement from neither the filmmaker or the audience. Whether escapism constitutes a dominant factor within the Hollywood sphere depends on individual perceptions; yet, as there have been very few, if any, commercial portrayals of the subject, the idea of escapism may be speculated upon as a contributing factor to the apparent lack of them. Taking mass shootings to the cinema would certainly violate all conventions of escapism, to the extent that escapism forms a requirement; the distinction between fiction and reality, established on ethical grounds in addition to motivations of entertainment, would in certain aspects fall through. When turning to documentaries tackling this issue, one knows what to expect, and will consequently be prepared to be subjected to disturbing depictions – perhaps in the form of real footage – and examinations of a particular incident in a different manner than those of fiction. Moreover,

depending on individual predispositions in terms of knowledge on the subject and expectations of fictional cinema, the viewer already knows on some level not to prepare for an uplifting epilogue. Audiences may be more inclined to expect a silver lining in fictional films, as argued by film critic Roger Ebert: «When it comes to tragedy, Hollywood is in the catharsis business» (2003). As discussed earlier, this is nevertheless severely challenging in this context. If a filmmaker hypothetically were to break through the financial and ideological boundaries in Hollywood, there would have to be some sort of moral undertone on which a narrative could be built. This would nevertheless stimulate political controversy, and Hollywood is overall reluctant to participate. However, presenting a narrative in which there is no evident moral catharsis might not be ethically justifiable in times of public distress, as narratives aiming to depict the situation of mass shootings in an authentic manner counter the urge to provide causal patterns of explanation – an urge that is imperative to fulfill in the aftermath of a mass shooting. Consequently, filmmakers addressing ethically complex subjects may be subjected to vast criticism for being inconsiderate and insensitive towards the needs of the public. Unexplainable actions form unexplainable narratives portraying the American society as disunited in times when solidarity is imperative. In turn, these narratives may be perceived as destructive – particularly if audiences are used to being subjected to stories mirroring the self-inflicted image of America, as argued by Alford.

While the terrorist attacks of 9/11 seemingly form commercially friendly narratives, however disturbing, the incidents of Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech or Columbine, among others, are attacks of a very different nature. Both may symbolically represent attacks on American core values; yet, mass shootings problematize the perception of civil liberties, manifested in the Second Amendment. Although opinions on how US power politics is represented in 9/11-films somewhat differ, as illustrated by Ian Scott and Matthew Alford, the fact that there is an extensive repertoire of films on this subject – at least compared to films tackling the subject of mass shootings – speaks for itself. In narratives of real-life mass shootings, there is no way in which America as a nation may cast themselves as the morally superior protagonist of the story, as highlighted by journalist Peter Bradshaw in his assessment of *Elephant*:

> After Columbine, America was in trauma and Elephant, with its dazed and disoriented feel, explores that clinical sense of shock. Before 9/11, Columbine and the Oklahoma City bombing were the most important issues in American life, and all the more difficult and irresolvable because they were not the work of Arab terrorists or "furriners" but Americans. What the Columbine killings mean for Homeland security continues to be a haunting question for a country in love with guns.
>
> (2004)

Of course, there are prominent figures – highly conservative figures – aiming to create a hypothetical narrative in which the paradigm of «us versus them» may thrive in relentless manners. In the immediate aftermath of the Orlando shooting in 2016, president Donald Trump – Republican nominee at the time – was quick to paint a picture of this nature on Twitter: «What happened in Orlando is just the beginning. Our leadership is weak and ineffective. I called it and asked for the ban. Must be tough» (King, 2016). Chris Cox, executive director of the NRA Institute for Legislative Action, further claimed that «radical Islamic terrorists are not deterred by gun control laws», and that «law-abiding gun owners are tired of being blamed for the acts of madmen and terrorists» (Tracy, 2016). The fact that most incidents of mass shootings are carried out by white men of American origin is well-known. Moreover – although not strictly relevant – the Orlando shooter, regardless of ethnicity, is a US citizen, according to official reports (Chan, 2016). These viewpoints do represent a tendency in which certain realities are covered up to the benefit of a more favorable story, but nevertheless come across as extreme and at times inaccurate. Consequently, there is no reason to believe that Hollywood, in their quest for mass appeal, are willing to reproduce and encourage these viewpoints in narratives of mass shootings. However, in the context of cinema, the story of Orlando might be «appealing» for a different reason. This incident is in many ways as senseless as all previous acts of mass murder, but constitutes a story generating solidarity by bringing people together to fight hate and intolerance towards minorities. Due to the shooter's ethnic and religious background and ISIS' claim of responsibility for the attack (Malsin, 2016), the incident also generated a response of solidarity in terms of religion, aiming to counter harmful generalizations equalizing Islam and intolerance (Blumberg, 2016). A narrative of this nature is arguably more favorable than those of other incidents, in which there are no moral anchor points. Moreover – although not to suggest that these values are not worthy of depiction on screen – the issue of gun control would remain below the surface and out of focus.

Destructive Narratives

Regardless of its political implications or lack thereof, the ways in which the issue of mass shootings is manifested through different narratives, and whichever perception scholars choose to convey in their assessment of Hollywood cinema, the ethical issues might prevent the subject of real-life mass shootings from emerging in itself. As stated, examinations of this issue on screen might do more harm than good, and consequently fuel the public distress that is already prevailing. The potential consequences in terms of audience effects, such as those of violent

content, has been under scrutiny since the early days of cinema, and Hollywood has thus had a long history of various degrees of censorship (Couvares, 1996: 8-9). Both Medved and Alford find common ground in their critique of Hollywood as a profit-driven industry and the fact that its financial frameworks have a significant effect on its outlet. There is nevertheless an obvious difference in the nature of these alleged consequences, as their critique revolves around democratic issues in terms of freedom of speech and ethical issues in which the perspective of a vulnerable audience is applied, respectively. Depictions of violence will continuously pose ethical dilemmas, and commercial filmmakers and executives will, more or less, always have to cope with criticism, as violence seems to be a key element in a profitable Hollywood package. Naturally, violence is also a key element in Medved's assessment of the general lack of decency in Hollywood (1992: 183), in which the idea of causal connections and confirming research are vividly embraced. Medved's point of view is particularly evident through his harsh criticism of those aiming to discredit the notion of causality, and of course, those who contemplate the idea of violent entertainment as a form of catharsis or a form of diversion, allegedly advocated by prominent directors such as Martin Scorsese (ibid: 199). Medved's critique of Hollywood is not only founded on the depiction of violence in itself, but also concerns the ways in which violence is portrayed by claiming that the industry «does more than recreate the real-world brutality; it glorifies violence as an enjoyable adventure and a manly ideal» (ibid: 196). Moreover, the potential consequences of normalizing violence through consistent exposure, resulting in an increased level of tolerance, is a subject of concern (ibid: 186).

Without providing a detailed discussion of the nature and extent of potential audience effects and the accuracy of these assumptions, it is evident that Hollywood is subjected to continuous criticism for its «destructive messages», and will consequently have to lay low when examining certain controversial issues. Medved's perspectives may have taken effect within Hollywood to a certain extent as well. For instance, the Weinstein Company's Harvey Weinstein, producer of Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994)*, Reservoir Dogs* and *Django Unchained* (2012), has had a change of heart on the issue of violence on screen: «The change starts her. It has already … For me, I can't do it. I can't make one movie and say this is what I want for my kids and then just go out and be a hypocrite» (Busch, 2014). Weinstein represents the favorable, ethically conscious response Medved calls for by acknowledging how extreme violence in cinema stimulates audience insensitivity towards real-life violence, and confirms the perception of Hollywood as a dollar-driven industry prioritizing profit over ethical responsibility: «Abject violence has proven successful, and as long as it is, it will be produced because it's profitable. It's the accepted way of life rather than asking is this the right thing to

do?» (ibid). According to journalist Anita Busch (2014), in her interview with studio executives, there seems to be a general skepticism towards gun violence in Hollywood, further confirming Weinstein's newfound observations and perceptions. Ethical self-scrutiny is inherently a good thing – however, Hollywood's apparent shift in consciousness might as well serve as a response to widespread criticism as well. Hollywood is in the midst of the alleged scapegoating tendency in terms of mass shootings, predominantly imposed by right-wing commentators, and continuously takes the moral fall for acts of violence. The copycat theory would certainly be even more relevant if commercial filmmakers were to actually depict the very acts of violence one is trying to prevent. Moreover, films of this nature would fuel the discussion on the issue of sensationalizing mass shootings, as cinematic portrayals of such events might come across as a way of «glorifying» perpetrators through the provision of an audience. Certainly, the means in which the perpetrator is portrayed is dependent on narrative and stylistic qualities, but the idea of examining the issue of mass shootings seems to constitute sufficient ethical grounds for preventing such a narrative from occurring. First, the idea of causal connections, in which excessive exposure to cinematic violence generates real acts of violence, is naturally a gross oversimplification in itself; second, it is safe to say that no respectable filmmaker would purposely, in good conscience, aim to glorify violence in itself. Third, and especially relevant in the context of mass shootings, violence, whether explicitly depicted or not, must necessarily be interpreted in context, both by critics and by its audience. As discussed, in order to offer rhetorically strong sentiments and elevate the discussion on mass shootings, the issue must arguably be somewhat explicitly addressed, therefore touching upon certain ethical grey areas.

Medved introduces his sentiment by claiming that the «alienating force» of Hollywood continuously «ignores the concerns of the overwhelming majority of the American people who worry over the destructive messages so frequently featured in today's movies, television and popular music» (1992: 4). Of course, there have been many contributions of a sociopolitical nature from Hollywood since this polemic contribution was published, but there are reasons to believe that certain aspects of this perspective are valid in the context of screening real-life mass shootings. Although there is a wide range of reasons for not addressing the issue, the general lack of these narratives nevertheless suggests that Hollywood to a certain extent does respond to the needs of the general public. The public has to a certain extent expressed disfavor of such narratives. Various petitions have been organized in order to halt productions of films and TV-shows examining the subject – naturally, these productions take place outside Hollywood. On 1 December 2016, Berger Bros Entertainment, founded by Josh Berger in 2008

(Berger Bros Entertainment, 2017a), announced the 2017 release of the highly controversial film *Del Playa* (2015), despite receiving widespread public criticism (Berger Bros Entertainment, 2017b). The production of *Del Playa*, allegedly based on a mass shooting taking place in Isla Vista, California, in 2014, generated several petitions. A petition organized by Kate Michelle gained almost 30 000 signatures in which the petition letter emphasizes the concerns of exploitation and insensitivity:

> It is clear that the creators of this film conceived their idea immediately after the Isla Vista shootings, seeking to profit off the horror felt by the students and community […] Releasing such a film merely 18 months after this tragedy recreates the helplessness and horror felt by the Isla Vista community. (Michelle, 2017)

The case of Lifetime and Columbine nevertheless illustrates the potential efficiency of vocal public opposition. Since 2012, the network has aimed to portray the Columbine shooting, based on Dave Cullen's book *Columbine*, in a series of movies. The upcoming series sparked «public outrage» (Strachan, 2012); a petition named «Say 'No' to Columbine Movie» was organized, roughly holding 6000 signatures, in which the petition organizer Michael Berry calls for «basic human respect to be shown to a community that does not want to be exploited over a sensitive, and persistently prodded event». A few Columbine survivors who have signed the petition address the issue of personal and emotional wellbeing, claiming that Cullen's book is a subject of sensationalism and inaccuracy. Moreover, adapting it into a series of films would, according to Columbine survivor Anne Marie Hochhalter, bring back «all the pain I experienced and is insensitive to all of us in the Columbine community» (ibid). Moreover, the perception of Hollywood as an unethical profit-seeking machinery is reflected in the blunt criticism of Cullen, flourishing in the commentary section on the website, in which the author by some is portrayed as a «money grubbing creep», «a lying, greedy, selfish person», «an ignorant, insensitive piece of trash» and «quite simply a lying, fame seeking, exploitative, egotistical, biased wannabe celebrity» when opinions on the matter are expressed, while others merely narrow their anger down to phrases such as «I HATE YOU SO MUCH DAVE CULLEN» (Berry, 2017).

Among those commenting on the petition, prevailing ethical concerns, in terms of sensationalism, copycatting and the idea of providing narratives with no moral epiphany, are continuously confirmed:

> While I understand tge [sic] basic human need to ask "why" and to want to look for answers, movies that exploit tragedies such as columbine never offer that answer and instead turn those who should be forgotten

into infamous heros [sic] of the mentally disturbed. You know what kind of movie id [sic] like to see about tragedies like this? One in which the murderers are never mentioned, their stories never told, their pictures never shown. Instead a movie focusing on the lives of the victims before the incident and the healing of their families afterwards, one tgat [sic] focuses on tge [sic] truly important people in these events is the onky [sic] type of movie I would support.

(Berry, 2017)

The type of narrative this petitioner favors seems to be reoccurring in various TV-shows in which episodes depicting mass shootings have been produced. In *One Tree Hill* or *Grey's Anatomy*, among others, the established audience already knows the prominent characters – consequently, these characters tend to occupy the point of focus when these incidents occur. The predator is not provided with significant screen time, and the viewer is able to emotionally engage in the personal and individual stories of the survivors or victims. To a certain extent, the point of focus might ethically justify the idea of examining the issue of mass shootings. Moreover, particularly in the case of school shooting episodes, it is easier to offer some sort of explanation without explicitly reflecting or challenging prevailing controversial political tensions, both on account of context and audience preferences. First of all, it is difficult, and, all things considered, undesirable, to address the issue of gun control in a TV-series in which the very aim and scope of the series in question has already been thoroughly established. Moreover, as discussed, those assessing school shootings tend to focus on factors related to upbringing, bullying, depression and other issues that might be explanatory in the development of a common profile describing this subgroup of mass shooters. In effect, writers tend to portray the fictional perpetrators as marginalized outcasts in one way or another (Ge & Donnelly, 2015). However, the ability to offer more accommodating narratives and explanatory perspectives does not eliminate criticism – several TV-shows have generated opposition for declining to offer explanations that are inherently useful and helpful (Brucculieri & Delbyck, 2016). According to *Buzzfeed* news reporter Louis Peitzman, school shooting episodes may nevertheless be cut entirely if they cannot offer anything new, arguing that episodes on the subject matter merely reflect the discussion on adolescent mental health – primarily the issue of bullying – as generated by the Columbine massacre in 1999 (2013). As gun control is off limits on television, the idea of subjecting the audience to such narratives is generally pointless. This nevertheless does not suggest that Peitzman calls for narratives aiming to portray the senselessness of mass shootings, in which *Elephant*, among others, takes the fall:

But what are episodes like *American Horror Story's* "Piggy Piggy" or films like *Elephant* trying to say? Shit happens. That's a remarkably bleak assessment, but there it is: no moral, no endgame, just violence because violence exists […] We might cry or sleep less soundly that night, but only because a series played on our darkest fears, and reminded us of recent real-life tragedy […] They become "too soon" when they make no attempt to move past exploitation.

(Peitzman, 2013)

Evidently, filmmakers or TV-series creators will face criticism either way, continuously returning to square one. Regardless of whether one chooses to offer explanatory sentiments or not, the notion of distance, both in terms of time and emotional distance, will always cause ethical controversy. There has always been a mass shooting, and it will always be, according to Peitzman, «too soon». If mass shootings were to take the form of an epidemic, Lifetime's adaption of *Columbine* would perhaps be less likely to generate such a vast amount of criticism; even in 2012, thirteen years after the massacre, the nature of the following criticism could in itself indicate that the incident occurred only a few months prior. Columbine has nevertheless continuously reoccurred, and the dust never settles before there is another shooting – the general audience will potentially never be fully ready for a fictional film tackling the issue, as illustrated by the petitioners in question:

Tell you the truth at first i [sic] thought the world would be ready to have a mobie [sic] on Columbine but then I realized after all that has been going on…more school shootings have occurred and this movie will continue to inspire Harris and Klebold fans. Here I say No to Columbine movie.

(Berry, 2017)

Seriously—there can be no valid reason for exploiting our community once again! We collectively have wounds that will never fully heal. School shootings are still a reality in our nation, and happen every week. No one has forgotten what happened at Columbine, but no one needs to be making money off of our collective national tragedy. Shame on you!

(Berry, 2017)

As a result, premieres have been pushed and films have been reedited in the aftermath of mass shootings. For instance, following the Newtown and Colorado shootings in 2012, the Weinstein Company cancelled the formal premiere of *Django Unchained*, Paramount Pictures removed a gun sequence from the promotional material of *Jack Reacher* (2012), and Warner Brothers rescheduled the premiere of *Gangster Squad* (2013) and aimed to remove a shooting scene taking place in a theatre – baring resemblance to the case of Aurora, Colorado – prior to the release (Paquin, 2012). There are reasons to believe that these films would appear as originally

intended and released as scheduled if Sandy Hook and Aurora would have taken place years earlier, and if there were grounds to assume that these incidents, along with Columbine, represented a closed chapter in US history. As previously noted, filmmakers, and audiences, are arguably more likely to pursue a specific subject of controversy when there are reasons to believe that it will, or has, represented a specific era. The public's urge to seek these types of narratives and messages is, for instance, detectable in the establishment of a non-profit organization called Images & Voices of Hope (ivoh), dedicated to «strengthen the media's role as an agent of world benefit: «As we grow our organization, we are exploring ways to support the work of journalists, filmmakers, photographers and others who want to create restorative narratives and other forms of strength-based narrative[s]» (ivoh, 2017). The organization aims to guide media practitioners and highlight stories in which restorative narratives are prevalent – stories that show how people and communities «are learning to rebuild and recover» and move forward in the wake of a tragedy. According to referenced research supporting the need for restorative narratives, there is an increasing urge to consume a type of content that «acts as a force of good in society» – narratives conveying a future-oriented tone, focusing on how individuals may move past an ongoing crisis:

> People's appetite for news is changing, and with that change comes opportunity – to tell stories that shift the traditional journalistic focus from tragedy to recovery. Too often, journalists tell stories about the most dismal problems, thinking that "if it bleeds, it leads". These stories, though, can leave people feeling like the worlds is a cold and callous place.
> (Tenore, 2016)

Although the organization primarily focuses on the news media, it represents a state of mind that might be imperative to acknowledge in cinema as well – the necessity of providing a glimpse of a future in which a tragedy is reduced to a disturbing, but distant, memory.

Peitzman's call for a moral epilogue, which seemingly represents a relatively widespread public perception, might symbolically echo a state of mind prevailing in political filmmaking since the 1930s and 1940s, in which it was imperative to rekindle public faith in the strength of the political system in the wake of the Depression – that «the system could and would always overcome its harshest challenges» and that democracy would survive the ongoing crisis (Scott, 2011: 24, 28). This perception is to a certain extent noticeable among those who accuse filmmakers or TV-series creators of exploiting a particular subject and consequently the audience to their own benefit – when given nothing in return, no moral payoff or a light at the end of the tunnel, exploitation naturally becomes a subject of debate. According to Scott,

American politics has «lived and breathed» messages of hope and expectation «for the better part of 200 years» – messages that are continuously rearticulated in political filmmaking. Even though Scott argues that the post-9/11 era constituted a new wave of scrutinizing and accusatory political filmmaking, the notion of hope, expectation and an undertone of optimism – the triumph of the greater good – is still valid to various extents and in different ways. Even in cases where the political culture is brutally criticized, «this hopeful and often simplistic redemption is never far away» (ibid: 23). Peitzman's call for a moral epilogue might translate into a call for a message of hope. Perhaps particularly in the context mass shootings, these are the types of narratives the public seek – those suggesting that mass shootings do form a dark chapter in US history, that society is dealing with, and will overcome, an ongoing crisis. However, mass shootings do not take the form of an epidemic until the solution is at hand, until the ways in which «the greater good» can prevail has been established. The perception of the story's protagonist differs greatly, and is consequently too risky to portray.

Apart from the necessity of distance in time, narratives of mass shootings challenge the physical and emotional distance between the subject matter and the audience; as an American citizen, one is in one way or another personally affected by every incident taking place on American soil. These are acts in which there are many victims – in many occasions, young victims, including the perpetrator – who lose their lives virtually within a few minutes; moreover, they are perceived as incidents that may happen anywhere at any time. Consequently, mass shootings are naturally perceived as more disturbing, therefore ethically challenging to depict in cinema. The apparent lack of emotional and physical distance between the audience and the subject matter may fuel a presence of fear that is already there – naturally, the audience is not particularly inclined to seek out these narratives, especially if there is no moral endgame to be conveyed. Elevating the level of fear by portraying these incidents on screen is an apparent ethical concern. Images & Voices of Hope's focus on restorative narratives is in part a result of the urge to prevent excessive fear and stress, claiming that the media's portrayal of disturbing events, including shootings, cause additional harm (Tenore, 2016). This perspective is further supported by Schildkraut and Elsass (2017) by stating that «the amount of coverage and the ways in which the stories are framed can affect how people perceive their likelihood of becoming a victim of a mass shooting or heighten their fear of crime in general» (2017: 127). Despite the actual likelihood of becoming a victim of a crime of this nature, the researchers find that people are more inclined to believe that a similar incident could happen to them and their own community in the aftermath of a shooting (ibid).

It is interesting that the public so vividly opposes depictions of mass shootings on screen when serial murder apparently is, by contrast, most welcome in theatres. There are as many myths associated with serial killers as there are in the case of mass shooters, and serial murder also constitutes disturbing and horrifying acts of violence. According to Christine M. Sarteschi, Assistant Professor of Social Work and Criminology, it is the perception of fear, in part caused by the perception of mass shootings as randomized incidents of violence, that primarily separates the public perception of mass murder from serial murder (2016: 13). As mentioned, the Columbine shooting, a vividly sensationalized event, would be coined as an act of terrorism and framed as «a direct assault on the American dream» (Russel, 1998, quoted in Linder, 2014); the perception of fear may thus be further induced by the ways in which mass shootings are framed by the news media, as argued by David L. Altheide (2009). Sarteschi does not offer any other explanations as to why depictions of mass shootings evidently hit too close to home, and why there seems to be a sufficient degree of distance between the concept of serial murder and real life. However, the fact that the depiction of serial murder, as opposed to mass shootings, constitutes a relatively familiar narrative nevertheless forms an explanation in itself. Continuous exposure to these narratives naturally influences audience perceptions of the phenomenon. Sarteschi provides a rather extensive list of films and television series in which serial killers have been the subject matter, including the Hannibal franchise, *Natural Born Killers*, *Se7en* (1995), *American Psycho*, *Zodiac* (2007), *Monster* (2003), *Dexter* and *True Detective* (2016: 9-10). Excessive exposure to these stories might eventually provide the notion of distance constituting an ethical requirement when examining controversial issues. In reference to Medved, this might in part have caused the audience to become desensitized to this particular form of violence, therefore to a larger extent interpreting the stories in question as works of fiction with no particular relevance to reality, despite the fact that several of them are based on real incidents.

Although this self-contradictory cultural phenomenon may only be speculated upon, there must nevertheless be more to this than the idea of exposure. There is also the subject of the ways in which the serial killers have been portrayed in these films and in media in general; according to Sarteschi, serial murderers are often mystified by being depicted as «evil geniuses who can outsmart the investigators trying to catch them» (ibid: 13). The viewer is in many of these stories invited to follow the path of perpetrators' killing sprees along with the protagonists of the stories, getting to know the minds and ways of each serial killer. The portrayal of serial killers as highly abnormal individuals of dehumanizing qualities creates a certain sense of fascination; thus, the perception of emotional distance might be even greater, and the fictional

aspects of the narrative in question is emphasized. Diving into the mind of a mass shooter would apparently not be ethically justifiable in terms of the prevailing perception of glorification and copycatting, as well as the fact that some sort of explanation would have to be provided, which is a subject of disagreement and controversy in itself. It may be argued that the public seems to have come to terms with the idea of serial killers, in part constructed by the media in general, as individuals who differ from the average viewer to an extreme extent, to the point where the public develops a certain level of fascination towards them. Mass shooters are also portrayed as psychological deviants by certain elements of the media; yet, they do not evoke fascination, potentially due to the presence of fear and the fact that they are more or less absent on screen. Serial murder seems to provide ethical latitude in cinema. Moreover, portraying them in accordance with serial killers would potentially further legitimize distortive perceptions of mass shooters.

Another explanation for the lack of interest in mass shootings as opposed to serial murder, particularly from the perspective of the filmmaker, is the fact that serial murder rarely is politicized – at least not in the same manner as the case of mass shootings. Serial murder seems to be a well-integrated concept of entertainment in general. In narratives of serial murders, the individual stories of the perpetrators, often portrayed as fascinating psychological deviants, are the main point of focus. For many reasons, this is ethically unjustifiable in narratives of mass shootings – a perception Lynne Ramsay partially challenges in her portrayal of the subject. Therefore, it may be argued that the individual stories of serial killers are less likely to be interpreted as a type of narrative explicitly referencing a sociopolitical issue, including the issue of gun violence, as mentioned earlier. Even if a filmmaker aims to challenge current gun policies, it will arguably be difficult to impose rhetorically effective sentiments through narratives that are more likely to be perceived as entertaining as opposed to politically challenging. If anything, narratives of serial murder might to a larger extent shed light on issues related to mental health than those on gun politics. Although the depiction of serial murder might be ethically problematic in itself, the political pitfall filmmakers will have to take into account when examining the issue of mass shootings is not detectable to the same extent in the context of serial murder. The issue of mass shootings constitutes a piece of a complicated political puzzle that remains unsolved, as constitutional rights permeate the overall discussion of mass shootings and gun violence. The mass shooter, as opposed to the serial killer, has become the poster boy for America's prevailing gun problem.

IV. FICTIONALIZING MASS SHOOTINGS

When assessing the sociopolitical potential of fictional cinema, it is evident that filmmakers operate within rigid boundaries; commercial filmmakers are torn in different directions, continuously forced to adapt to the requirements posed by the audience and studio executives, who themselves operate under ethical, political and financial scrutiny. Assuming that a commercial filmmaker has his or her heart set on examining a difficult subject matter deemed worthy of depiction, such as the issue of mass shootings, the idea of balancing the pressure posed by both the audience and the studios, and at the same time maintain artistic integrity as a filmmaker, seemingly becomes a severely difficult – if not impossible – task to complete. When acknowledging the potential of fictional cinema as «a wonderful landscape to assess the social concerns of a nation» (Denton, 1992: xv), it becomes evident that the notion of mass appeal, in which political, ethical and narrative requirements are imperative to fulfill, seems to permeate every step of the process, from pitch to distribution, potentially streamlining and downplaying sociopolitical rhetoric on screen. Rhetorically strong sentiments seem to overshadow mass appeal; by contrast, mass appeal seems to overshadow rhetorical sentiments, particularly in cases where there are no common political or ethical grounds to fall back on. The issue of mass shootings is inherently complex and difficult to examine without stepping on someone's toes – whether due to its political implications or its ethical ramifications. The financial and ideological frameworks of Hollywood will, all things considered, prevent narratives such as those of mass shootings from breaking through the rigid boundaries of expression. For these reasons, it is argued that independent filmmakers are more inclined to pursue controversial subjects that counter the norms of commercial cinema, and audiences may thus be more inclined to seek challenging narratives outside Hollywood:

> … independent films perform cultural critique by way of embracing a kind of harsh realism, by making films that display the dark realities in contemporary life, and that make demands on the viewer to viscerally experience and come to grips with those realities.
> (Ortner, 2013: 29)

Of course, the notion of independence is a subject of discussion in itself – it may be argued that many important films critically examining contemporary sociopolitical phenomena have been produced within the specialty divisions of Hollywood. There nevertheless are, evidently, limits to what one may pursue as a filmmaker, and the label «independent» will not necessarily

eliminate all aspects of conscious or subconscious ideological control imposed by studio executives, along with corporate and commercial influence. Independence is in this context assessed in terms of personal expression, functioning as an artistic gateway to explore issues that are truly challenging and difficult, yet valuable and worthy of depiction to the benefit of public debate and society overall.

Even if the circumstances allow filmmakers to pursue these issues, the importance of elevating the discussion on mass shootings might not necessarily make the audience susceptible to depictions of this issue on screen, as discussed earlier. The limits of expression in cinema are not only defined by the industry, but also by those subjected to these expressions. Seemingly, audiences are not eagerly waiting for filmmakers to break through the boundaries, at least when narratives of mass shootings are next in line. The financial outcomes of *Elephant* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* partially reflect this assumption, grossing 1 227 000 dollars and 1 738 692 dollars at the box office, with an estimated production cost of 3 000 000 and 7 000 000 dollars, respectively (IMDB, 2017a; IMDB, 2017b). In his assessment of why filmmakers seem to deceive their own values as artists by continuously returning to the studios, independent producer Ted Hope argues that «the logic of the studio film – its range of political and social concerns, its marketing dictates, and even its narrative aesthetic – is slowly colonizing our consciousness» (quoted in Ortner, 2013: 49). It may nevertheless be argued that the logic of the industry is colonizing the minds of the audience as well; given the excessive influence of Hollywood as cultural hegemony, one might assume that the general perception of fictional cinema has been subconsciously shaped by the industry to a certain extent, as conveyed by independent filmmaker John Sayles through his experiences as an occasional screenwriter and «screen doctor» in Hollywood:

> As a screenwriter for Hollywood movies, my job is often to take out factors which get in the way of a smooth flow of story or the perceived enjoyment of a mass audience, and these are often the political and economic realities of whatever era the movie is set in. In the case of my own movies, the closer to the present situation the film is dealing with, the more complaints from critics (and sometimes audience) we get that the film has an 'agenda' – as if this is in some way breaking a covenant with them or betraying what 'the movies' is supposed to be about.
> (Sayles, quoted in Tzioumakis, 2016: 339)

In effect, the logic of the industry may define the limits of expression within the minds of the viewers as well, determining which, how – particularly in terms of narrative qualities – and to what extent sociopolitical sentiments should be allowed in fictional cinema. Naturally, films

that cross these limits, challenging the perception of fiction versus reality – such as those of real-life mass shootings – will potentially cause controversy and «public outrage», particularly in terms of ethical concerns, including those of glorification of violence, potential copycatting and respect towards affected individuals and communities:

> Let's continue our conversation about the prevention of gun violence without letting it bleed into popular entertainment, where it's exploited for ratings and a raw emotional response. More than any other violence on TV, it feels wrong, because the moral justification has slipped away.
> (Peitzman, 2013)

> I [petitioner] actively support the documentaries that correctly depict this tragedy [the Columbine massacre] in order to educate and prevent, but glorifying it into a miniseries is beyond wrong. It is disrespectful to the families and victims. For anyone to think they can even imagine the horror of what happened that day is disgusting.
> (Berry, 2017)

Thus, if one were to respond to the requirement of mass appeal while aiming to portray this subject in fiction, filmmakers would have to avoid coming off too strong in terms of its controversial political implications, in which public perceptions of American freedom is at stake, by allowing other factors to prevail in the foreground, such as those of mental health. Moreover, this would allow for more commercially friendly stories to emerge, as these factors would constitute explanations on which a narrative of preference may be built, as well as the fact they are widely accepted within the public and political sphere. If gun politics were to occur as the primary point of focus, it would seemingly be more feasible to provide different narratives – alternative narrative pathways – apart from those vividly depicting mass shootings, such as *Miss Sloane*. While the film may counter mass appeal on account of its relatively explicit liberal point of view, it nevertheless avoids being deemed ethically irresponsible and insensitive. However, the most rhetorically effective narratives in terms of gun politics – arguably those of mass shootings – diminish in favor of the perception of ethical responsibility. Moreover, regardless of whether one chooses to favor largely accepted patterns of explanations, such as mental health, when examining mass shootings in fiction, there will always be an ethical pitfall. The level of criticism reflects the level of realism – the shorter the distance between reality and fiction is, the higher the plausibility of opposition will be, as argued by Sayles.

Escaping Escapism

In rough terms and by certain accounts, the public turns to the news or documentaries when seeking the truth – by contrast, fictional cinema steps in to provide an escape from harsh truths about the society in which they live, as argued by film critic A. O. Scott (2009). Although this statement might constitute an oversimplification, it may be somewhat accurate when the subject of mass shootings is the overall target. Upon the release of Shawn Ku's *Beautiful Boy* (2011), critic Stephen Holden asked «Why make a fictional movie, however tasteful, about the aftermath of a horror apparently based on the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, whose perpetrator killed 32 people and them himself? Why not a documentary?» (2011). The idea of providing escapism in fiction may not only be motivated by perceptions of a commercial audience as a massive group of passive recipients, subconsciously molded by the logic of the industry; seeking escapism may also be perceived as a natural psychological reaction in times of crisis, in which the question of what kind of films the public needs at a particular point in time seems to arise, as promoted by Scott. Although he agrees with Ian Scott when stating that post-9/11 commercial cinema at times offered spectacles heavy with political subtext, they nevertheless constituted exceptions to the conventional norm, as there was consensus on the fact that there was a general need for «fantasy, comedy and heroism» in the «wake of such unimaginable horror» among studio executives and journalists:

> Remember the '30s, when we danced through the Depression with Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley and giggled amid the gloom with Lubitsch and the Marx Brothers? […] Then, as now, what we wanted was to forget our troubles. In recession, as in war – and also, conveniently, in times of peace and prosperity – the movies we evidently need are the ones that offer us the possibility, however fanciful or temporary, of escape.
> (2009)

Scott further argues that the rigid establishment of diversion as an ideological principle calls for a reassessment of the potential of fictional cinema, «an escape from escapism». Conveying narratives embracing the American Dream, the notion of a bright future ahead, might to a certain extent be perceived as means of seducing, or deceiving, the audience into «believing in lies». Getting to the core of the realities of the time, depicting contemporary issues in a truthful way, is, according to both Scott and Ortner (2013: 51), one of the prime motivations of independent cinema. Scott portrays independent cinema as expressions of «neo-neo realism»,

the legacy of Italian Neorealism, in which the hallmarks of *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), among others, mirrored the economic crisis and political turmoil of the 1940s (Scott, 2009). The idea of conveying a clear sense of realism, in which features of documentary and fiction merge and transcend as an alternative pathway to assess contemporary societal issues, symbolically encodes a critical opposition towards the «tyranny of fantasy» prevailing in the political sphere, further induced in the production of Hollywood entertainment (ibid). In the context of mass shootings, this ideological principle is mirrored in the general need for «restorative narratives» in times when depictions of mass shootings are perceived as destructive. However, the general lack of films portraying these narratives might fuel the idea of fictional cinema as means of escaping the truth, and restorative narratives and optimism are overall challenging to incorporate in this context. Escaping these narratives will certainly not advance the discussion of mass shootings; «perhaps what we need from the movies, in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world, is realism» (Scott, 2009).

Although independent filmmakers, as any other filmmaker, ultimately wish to find an audience base, these filmmakers are often prepared to overrun their audiences in favor of reflecting and challenging the realities of contemporary society in a truthful way (Ortner, 2013: 51). Based on audience expectations of fiction, a filmmaker examining the dark realities of society, such as mass shootings, will potentially find himself or herself in a vulnerable position; the auteur behind the film will be exposed, scrutinized and potentially criticized on account of political implications and ethical breaches – quite vividly illustrated by the case of Dave Cullen. As advocated by filmmaker Guy Davidi in his essay on provocative filmmaking, «the more a film challenges an audience, the more resistance it will inspire», and the more exposure one retrieves for dealing with controversial subjects, «the more fire you attract» (2014). Then again, purpose trumps appeal, and many independent filmmakers are ready to burn bridges and say «to hell with the audience if necessary» (ibid) – and this might just be necessary when the debate on mass shootings and gun policies seems to constitute a destructive narrative in itself. Filmmakers addressing this issue might not only ignore public demand, but challenge public demand by seeking to bring forth strong emotional reactions and, if possible, generate a newfound way of perceiving fictional cinema and its potential (Ortner, 2013: 57), as emphasized by Davidi:

> It is our duty as filmmakers to stir something meaningful in our audience and be willing to deal with the fallout that comes along with that […] Overly soft, balanced works don't generate change. Films that deal with political and social issues may appear to be attempting to mobilize their audiences but often all they

are attempting to do is create consensus. However, every day, there are filmmakers out there creating resonant, inspiring works even if they're not active in the political and social realm. Filmmakers should focus on being a messenger for new ideas and truths – whatever those ideas and truths may be.
(2013)

Allowing controversial issues such as mass shootings to enter the fictional scene may subconsciously, in time, change the audience's perception of what fictional cinema may offer. Fictional portrayals of real-life mass shootings may shake up a «passive» audience subconsciously predisposed to expect a work of fiction responding to established norms of storytelling and ethical concerns; challenging established perception of fiction by portraying sociopolitical sentiments through unexpected narratives might be rhetorically rewarding. As stated by Alford, filmmakers should not «feel bound by what they think audiences expect» (2010: 19), but transcend expectations. Unexpected narratives will potentially cause controversy and public resistance, but these reactions may nevertheless be unavoidable in order to get through to the audience; widespread criticism might be the price to pay for being a messenger for new ideas and truths. Moreover, resistance and criticism may indicate active reflection – imperative in a situation where there are no signs of advancement in the ongoing debate or public enlightenment on the issue of mass shootings. Fictional narratives hold the ability to examine these issues in a newfound way, and audiences are invited to assess the situation from a different angle. Whereas the subject is expected to be portrayed within relatively rigid boundaries, as those of the news media or documentaries, fictional narratives may – even if they by definition are not inherently real – add depth to the understanding of mass shootings and the political concerns emerging from them, inviting the audience to «live in a fictional reality that illuminates our daily reality» (Robert McKee, quoted in Alford, 2010: 19).

Preventing narratives on mass shootings from occurring might in itself constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy, feeding the perception of filmmakers as profit-driven beings. Responding to the audience might legitimize the perception of real-life mass shootings in fictional cinema or television as means of exploiting an issue in favor of financial success. Allowing these narratives to enter theatres might symbolically redefine fictional cinema as a platform driven by democratic ideologies as opposed to financial motivations. Such depictions would generally challenge the idea of commercial cinema as mere reflections of political and social attitudes as opposed to challenging and shaping them, as addressed by Prince (1992: 2). Moreover, even though the idea of depicting real-life mass shootings in fiction primarily is criticized on account of ethical issues from an audience point of view, it may be argued that it is, in fact, unethical to

not depict this issue in fictional cinema. Those affected by the frequent occurrences of mass shootings, including the victims, deserve action, and action requires constructive and preventive discussions. Although these stories might evoke painful memories, they may nevertheless stimulate fruitful discussion and progress in return. Blocking these narratives, whether imposed by studio executives or by the audience themselves, will certainly not advance the debate on mass shootings, as expressed by manager Jeff Field on behalf of Lifetime's planned adaptation of Cullen's *Columbine*:

> This was not an exploitative piece … This could have been a game-changing project for television and could have prompted some needed dialogue on this issue. There *are* people in our business who are trying to address this difficult subject matter. I think it's always relevant, in many ways it was the defining mass shooting in this country … If I could bring the knowledge that book brings, that sort of insight, the humanist look at something so inhuman … My hope was to bring that to a wider audience.
> (Ge & Donnelly, 2015)

As opposed to documentaries, for instance, fiction might suggest subjectivism, and people may thus be more inclined to criticize on account accuracy and authenticity, as if they are already predisposed to attack every alternative take on the situation. Believing that there is a «hidden agenda» behind fictional sociopolitical films seems to constitute a general perception evoking negative connotations, as observed by John Sayles, as if the idea of agenda connotes propaganda. Consequently, if this is the case, the public will be ready to critically scrutinize sociopolitical sentiments as opposed to keeping their minds open – echoing Kellner's perception of Hollywood cinema as a political battlefield. However, it is arguably inherently challenging to remain objective, whether consciously or not, when constitutional rights are at stake, and at the same time follow through on public requirements of narrative ideals. Moreover, fruitful discussion is founded on differences in opinion, and conveying alternative perspectives through alternative outlets might just be necessary – even if ethical boundaries would have to be crossed – when the debate on mass shootings evidently is deadlocked. Allowing fictional cinema to enter the podium might apply pressure within the political sphere. This is naturally a far reach in Hollywood – independent filmmakers consequently take the first step.

Although they are not particularly popular based on their box office success, the relatively limited repertoire of independent films addressing this subject matter must be acknowledged for tackling the subject of mass shootings at all. Regardless of the ways in which they are conveyed, they do, whether explicitly or implicitly, problematize aspects worthy of scrutiny and shed light on mass shootings as a national concern overall. However, the real challenge lays in their ability to generate newfound viewpoints within the debate. When assessing the content of some of these films, it is evident that compromises have been made in terms of offering more favorable narratives, potentially at the expense of rhetorical value. Andrew Robinson's *April Showers* (2009), Vadim Perelman's *The Life Before Her Eyes* (2007) and Paul F. Ryan's *Home Room* (2002) depict Columbine-inspired incidents from the perspective of the survivors, focusing on the challenge of finding a new normal in the aftermath. There is an evident sense of community and solidarity – values that are imperative in restorative narratives:

> I didn't want to focus on the gunmen or the actual shooting … What is more important is what do we do now? You know, these neighborhoods get turned upside down. These lives get turned upside down. We kind of almost became strangers in our own land.
> (Robinson, quoted in Villarreal, 2009)

Shawn Ku's *Beautiful Boy* and William H. Macy's *Rudderless* (2014) go one step further in their portrayal of the parents' days ahead following the suicide of their son, a rampage shooter. The idea of criticizing the media as cynically driven on sensationalism is implicitly conveyed through these films in their continuous quest to expose the parents, thereby signaling a stronger sociopolitical approach. Some films may more explicitly seek to signal explanations, in which certain familiar themes reoccur, such as the issue of mental health, media sensationalism or bullying, and some may even implicitly convey a critical tone towards current gun policies. As in the case of political ambiguousness in Hollywood cinema, the rhetorical effect is nevertheless highly dependent on the agenda of the filmmaker, audience interpretation and the ways in which these alleged causes and explanations are contextualized. For instance, while *Home Room* may reference the complexities of establishing a set of reasons for why someone would commit a mass shooting, it is ultimately viewed as a story in which two survivors find common ground and found a meaningful friendship in times of distress (Holden, 2003). Despite their subject matters, these stories arguably, in context, form easily digestible and audience-friendly

narratives. While it is important to convey restorative narratives addressing the needs of the victims and the community, the public also seeks stories in which there is a sociopolitical approach – specifically in terms of explanatory patterns. Although it is challenging, as discussed, to provide definitive answers, some aim to more or less explicitly offer some sort of foundation for explaining the phenomenon of mass shootings.

All the films in question address the issue of school shootings. As mass shootings frequently take place in schools – environments perceived to be inherently safe – thus involving children and adolescents, they constitute the most disturbing and unexplainable stories. Consequently, as the profile of the «typical» school shooter breaks down, the media, as well as the political sphere, compensate by reframing them within preferable narratives or assigning contrastive qualities in order to separate «us» from «them», whether those of «psychopaths», «monsters» or «instruments of the devil», as discussed previously. Additionally, on account of the ways in which the scapegoating tendency within the political sector has come to include popular media, and the ways in which the general discourse – whether within the political sphere or by certain elements of the news media – tends to oversimplify the phenomenon of mass shootings, those aiming to provide explanations within fiction potentially step onto dangerous territory. When attempting to provide explanations in the context of school shootings, there has been an excessive focus on youth culture and mental health, particularly the issue of bad homes, bullying and violent entertainment, as argued by Winegard and Ferguson (2017: 64). While some may in good conscious aim to address a particular important issue, they may nevertheless interpret as means of legitimizing certain aspects of discussion and implicitly discredit others, depending on the ways in which the issue in question is framed.

Brian Ging's *American Yearbook* (2004), Joey Stewart's *The Final* (2010), *The Only Way* (2004) by Levi Obery and David Zimmerman III and Guy Ferland's *Bang Bang You're Dead* (2002) all problematize the issue of bullying in one way or another – a prominent factor of explanation in the assessment of school shooters. While they may address other issues, whether media sensationalism, the attraction of «the spectacle» or parental neglect, they nevertheless front the issue of bullying, thereby coming across as stories framing bullying as a prominent cause of mass shootings, purely on the basis of plot descriptions and – to the extent that there are any – reviews. For instance, *Variety* critic Laura Fries (2002) assesses *Bang Bang You're Dead* as a story involving a troubled teenager who embodies all the signs of risk, yet failed by his support system in their inability to detect the source of his troublesome behavior; his continuous subjection to bullying. Even though bullying is an important issue of discussion in itself, and even though they do not necessarily seek to convey political sentiments, they may

nevertheless fuel an ungrounded assumption, potentially distorting the audiences' perception of mass shootings, by implying that there is a strict causal connection between bullying and mass shootings. Although audiences may apply a more critical interpretation of these films and acknowledge the fact that the reality of the matter is more complex, they form a convenient explanation in times where any form of explanation is highly valued, in effect discrediting other potential contributing factors – bullying and mass shootings are indirectly equalized. Moreover, both bullying and mass shootings occur in settings other than those of schools, further weakening the promoted causal relationship between bullying and mass shootings. As in the case of media sensationalism and potential copycatting, there are, evidently, psychological factors forming the basis for why the issue of bullying may push them over the edge. Certainly, the issue of mental health lingers within these narratives; yet, bullying is perceived to be the foregrounded factor of explanation.

Based on the extent of critical reception, Michelle Danner's *Hello Herman* (2012) has evidently been able to enjoy more time in the spotlight. *Hello Herman* depicts the story of a journalist, Lax, finding common ground with an imprisoned school shooter by the name of Herman, with whom he is invited to conduct a series of exclusive interviews. The film addresses a number of issues: bullying, violent entertainment, parental neglect, past trauma and access to weapons while aiming to convey a critical tone of voice towards media sensationalism and their failure to thoroughly address the complex aspects of school shootings. *Hello Herman* should be acknowledged for its ability to reflect the pitfalls of the general assessment of school shooters by portraying the two characters as similar in their flaws. Its ability to counter irrational characterizations of school shooters in the media through the depiction of Herman, contrasting him with the perception of uninformed bystanders addressing him as «a monster», deserves attention. Naturally, there are severe psychological afflictions to be dealt with; yet, the agenda is to highlight the fact that mental health issues must be carefully assessed. Presenting them as monsters is unfeasible and unconstructive, and will potentially do more harm in terms of the overall aim to counter future mass shootings. Moreover, its political agenda is particularly traceable in the ways in which Danner frames the monster-rhetoric within the Republican discourse, in which conservative figures assess Herman as a mental deviant worthy of the death penalty. Thus, mental illness is implicitly presented as a scapegoat in their refusal to recognize nuances, complexities and that the fact that there are other factors to assess. Additionally, its sociopolitical consciousness is visible in its reluctance to explicitly frame a specific cause. However, the supposed narrowmindedness of the news media is merely reflected, as opposed to challenged; its push towards complexity is quickly countered by simplicity. While the

message may be important – chiefly that is unfeasible and inaccurate to pinpoint one specific cause – it lacks depth in its criticism, and legitimizes proposed causes by explicitly portraying them as a wide range of explanations for this character's act of violence, as noted by *Slate* journalist Andrew Schenker (2013):

> Thus the searching inquiry that Lax, like the film, seeks is jettisoned in favor of easy observations about the correspondences between the extreme graphicness of the kid's favorite video game and the school shooting, rote deductions about bullying leading to revenge, and the well-rehearsed rundown of the ease with which a teenager can acquire an arsenal of weaponry. And because the film insists on the bluntest possible presentation of its message, these conclusions are spelled out as if they're revelations.

On these accounts, it generally comes across as spineless, falling short in its inherent potential to offer a compelling story: «Well-meaning, but ineffective, it mainly registers as a missed opportunity» (Scheck, 2013). *Hello Herman*'s underlying messages, which might constitute the most rhetorically effective sentiments, are overshadowed by its reluctance to critically address promoted causes. As illustrated by *Elephant*, this is imperative when aiming to stimulate reflection. Evident in the reviews, Danner's perception of alleged causes might be of primary concern among its viewers. There are important issues worthy of enlightenment, yet, they are reduced to a transparent subtext, a glimpse of reflective potential. It demonstrates the difficulties of breaking through the urge to extract answers in favor of sociopolitical enlightenment – if this is in fact her overall aim.

Stylistic qualities are in many respects imperative when aiming to provide rhetorical sentiments on the issue of mass shootings. *Hello Herman* is fairly conventional in its cinematography and editing; although this might be perceived as fortunate on account of audience preference, the idea of explicitly countering conventional aesthetics, form and genre expectation might be beneficial when trying to promote alternative perspectives, allowing the visual embodiment to reflect and enhance its rhetorical aim. As in the case of its content, the stylistic approach must nevertheless be carefully balanced. The satirical black comedy *Duck! The Carbine High School Massacre* (1999), directed by William Hellfire and Joey Smack, is explicit in every sense of the word. The film illustrates how certain filmmakers are willing to go very far in the ways in which they are conveying their message. Evidently referencing the Columbine massacre, it does not only challenge proposed causes, it goes out of its way to ridicule them. Referencing Gary Kleck's list, the perpetrators embody all proposed theories: they are portrayed as psychopaths, Neo-Nazis and explicitly racist in their excitement over

shooting the only African-American boy in their school; along with the Goth kids, they are physically and psychologically tormented by the school jocks, they wear trench coats, they listen to heavy metal, they are neglected by their alcoholic parents and they thoroughly study Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Visually, no efforts have been made, functioning as a satirical element in itself; its cinematography and scenography vividly express the «do-it-yourself» approach to the point where it looks its budget of 5000 dollars is unreasonably excessive. Being immensely parodic, there is terrible acting, poorly written dialogue, at times exceeded by the noise from the camera microphone, and the characters are limited to the simplest form of stereotyping, all in the name of satire. The point has already been made in the very beginning, in which the on-screen text sequence reads as follows:

> […] We realize that some people may find it offensive, obscene, sacrilegious [sic], and thoroughly disgusting. However it was bound to become a motion picture eventually, or even worse, a "made for TV" movie. So we decided to do it first. God bless America!

The filmmakers address the importance of remaining critical to the discourse of school shootings and how it may cinematically translate – thereby ridiculing the sociopolitical mentality in terms of school shootings through every aspect of the film. Being the first film to deal with the Columbine shooting, released six months after, it was predisposed to constitute the pacesetter for critical examinations of mass shootings within fictional cinema. Due to its subject matter, time of release and the ways in which the message is conveyed, it evidently struck a chord. After facing charges for the possession of weapons on school premises during the shooting, ironically, the film received some attention (IMDB, 2017c); as of today, however, there are seemingly nothing but a few, dim footprints left behind when searching for the film. Its overall approach towards critical examination, apart from its timing, might be the decisive factor. Unfortunately, the film becomes its own antithesis, in which its own agenda is countered by the vividly unappealing stylistic embodiment and overall parodic approach. Paradoxically, *Carbine*'s message bears the potential to provide audience enlightenment only to find itself hindered by its inability to do just that. Consequently, it has fallen into oblivion.

Thus, Van Sant's *Elephant* came to be the go-to fictional film on the topic of Columbine. Along with Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, it is seemingly one of the most frequently referenced fictional films in the context of mass shootings. As opposed to *Carbine*, their stylistic choices enhance their rhetorical approach; the former embodies anti-sensationalism and the latter aims to incorporate elements associated with the horror genre in order to convey

a certain mood, imperative to the value of its subject matter. *Elephant* represents the idea of portraying these incidents in an utterly realistic manner; along with *Elephant*, Ben Cuccio's *Zero Day* (2003) was released the same year, embodying a similar approach. Framed as a mockumentary, it depicts the incident through the video diary of the Columbine perpetrators, prior and during the shooting. Both filmmakers examine the concept of scrutiny, seeking to discredit snap judgements and assumptions arising in the aftermath; while Cuccio primarily focuses on the perpetrators and their traits, Van Sant incorporates the idea of scrutiny as a part of a bigger picture – an aim partially rekindled by Tim Sutton's *Dark Night*. Due to their widespread reception – at least when compared to other films tackling the issue – in addition to their ability to produce both praise and slaughter and the ways in which they challenge promoted assumptions, *Elephant*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Dark Night*, will be the main point of focus. While the spotlight has been directed towards *Elephant* mainly on account of its seemingly «pointless» narrative, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* came to be known for its disturbing stylistic take on an otherwise disturbing subject.

Although these films might not, at first glance, come across as particularly explicit in terms of their political rhetoric, they must be interpreted in context, and the context generally does not allow for fictional depictions of mass shootings to emerge. Moreover, they must be interpreted in the context of their own agenda and public reception; whereas *We Need to Talk About Kevin* does not aim to provide political sentiments, it is nevertheless frequently promoted as a film addressing the phenomenon of mass shootings – as illustrated by journalist Camilla Tominey, for instance, when drawing a parallel between the film's subject matter and the Sandy Hook shooting (2012). Echoing the continuous search for answers prevailing in the aftermath, the film demonstrates how films of this nature may offer insights of value, yet, at the same time, implicitly signal viewpoints that may be problematic. For better or worse, films such as *We Need to Talk About Kevin* may come across as works of a sociopolitical agenda. In general, none of these films can be assessed as political films in a traditional sense – as already discussed, constitutional rights permeate the debate, and the complexities shaping it limits the degree of cinematic latitude. Perhaps due to the controversy of the debate, neither of the filmmakers are inclined to explicitly promote their films as political. Furthermore, several of the mentioned filmmakers may perceive the issue of gun control as a political dead-end, thereby focusing on other factors. Ambiguity seems to have made it to the independent scene; however, when aware of the challenging circumstances under which they come forth, they may nevertheless to different extents and in different ways be perceived as quite bold in their

approach. Although highly dependent on how they are interpreted, some of them may in fact dare to rip of the band aid and pick a fight with the Constitution.

Framing the Discourse: *Elephant*

The Columbine massacre of 1999 is in many ways perceived as the cornerstone of mass shootings due to the ways in which debate was sparked and the many directions in which it headed. The majority of the films mentioned are allegedly inspired by the Columbine massacre. The incident received massive news coverage, and was particularly perceptible for its ability to establish a cultural narrative, focusing on adolescent mental health and psychological triggers, in times of fear and distress (Altheide, 2009: 1365). As examined by Bonanno and Levenson (2014), Columbine generated excessive studies aiming to develop a common profile, a shared set of characteristics describing school shooters, to be utilized when practicing risk assessment. The news media and the public debate overall actively searched for the «meanings of Columbine» in the context of violence, crime, youth, popular culture, surveillance and social control (Altheide, 2009: 1354). Moreover, according to David L. Altheide and his qualitative study of various news documents in which Columbine was assessed, the aim to gain social control in the wake of the 9/11 attacks came to include the Columbine shooting, fitting into «the expanding discourse of fear and terrorism in the United States» (ibid: 1360). The fear evoked by the incomprehensible incident of Columbine, particularly towards the safety of children, became contextualized and redirected towards acts of terrorism, consequently intensifying the fear of terrorism, by both government officials and the news media:

> Officials played a prominent role in making statements about Columbine, especially following 9/11, when various policy makers sought to find similarities in the two events, including charging actual or would-be school shooters with terrorism. Fear is the common link or symbolic glue.
> (ibid: 1360)

The idea of regaining social control by framing Columbine and contextualizing mass shootings transcends the inherent urge to make sense of experiences that are otherwise incomprehensible; writers further reproduced the perception of terrorism and school shootings, whether explicitly or implicitly, when reflecting on the state of uncertainty arising «when our taken-for-granted world becomes challenged» (ibid: 1361). Altheide further argues that this type of framing, imposed by government figures, might also be perceived as means of making use of widespread

fear in order to impose strategic political narratives. Specifically, the shortcomings of current gun policies were framed as terrorism by claiming that terrorist organizations exploit the loopholes in US gun laws. This political narrative would legitimize expansion of social control in terms of extensive security measures within the school sector, yet also constitute an attempt to justify the war on terror. Certainly, framing school shootings as acts of terrorism has not had any measurable impact on the frequency of mass shootings. Then again, it constitutes an explanatory, therefore favorable narrative echoing the paradigm of «us versus them», as in the case of the Orlando shootings, in which responsibility does not rest solely on US shoulders: «The discourse of terrorism encompasses other attackers and knocks off any disparaging edges in favor of a smoother cultural narrative about blame, responsibility and moral order» (ibid: 1361-62). The Columbine shooting was perceived to counter core values of American society in accordance with terrorist attacks. «The spectacle of terror» residing within the news coverage of the event came to include the discourse surrounding future shootings in its ability to legitimize ungrounded assumptions, convenient simplifications and create distortions (Linder, 2014: xiv).

In an interview with *Film Journal*, Van Sant allegedly compared the «reactionary» nature of the Bush-Cheney administration to «the McCarthy witch-hunts» of the 1950s in its eagerness «to find scapegoats to blame things on» (Van Sant, quoted in Walsh, 2003). The Columbine shooting symbolizes the insufficiencies within the public discourse on mass shootings, in which distorting depictions and assessments of mass shootings may occur. Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, released in 2003, emerged at a time in which distress and uncertainty would form a cultural narrative proving to repeat itself as other mass shootings have occurred; a narrative attempting to make sense of senseless acts by identifying causes and solutions, the protagonist and the antagonist, aimed to regain and maintain social control. *Elephant* transcends the public discourse on mass shootings, inspired by the Columbine massacre, and might thus constitute the cinematic cornerstone of mass shootings due to its subject matter, its continuous topicality, its narrative approach and its iconic status as one of the first fictional portrayals of mass shootings on screen, paving the way for others aiming to generate debate on this issue.

When familiarizing oneself with the repertoire of subject matters that make up Van Sant's filmography, the idea of examining the issue of mass shootings does not come across as particularly surprising, despite the general lack of such depictions – it takes a certain kind of auteur to embrace issues that might otherwise be perceived as too controversial. The work of Van Sant stem from both within and miles away from Hollywood; despite earning an Academy Award for *Good Will Hunting* (1997), among a few of his commercial projects, the director

seems to continuously return to off-beat and complex expressions of society, both in terms of subject matter and stylistic embodiment. *Mala Noche* (1986), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), his first self-written features, particularly illustrate the former by portraying the lives of social outsiders – street hustlers and junkies – while *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* and *Last Days* (2005) examine the concept of death from different angles, yet find common ground in their low-pace, unconventional style of photography and editing – perhaps a style that best reflects the auteur behind them. The urge to experiment and create something new seems to be the primary motivation for his continuous return to independence; creating something *avant garde* is driven by the desire to affect change, and Van Sant's encounters with Hollywood is in part founded on this aim: «I became involved with the mainstream partly because I thought, in order to affect change, you needed to be able to do it … You need to know the actual elements to be changed» (Van Sant, quoted in Hattenstone, 2004). As for *Elephant*, the avant garde is detectable in both its subject matter and stylistic qualities.

There are evidently solid grounds for change in the ways in which mass shootings are depicted, and Van Sant's *Elephant* conveys a voice of change at a time when newfound perspectives are called for. Even though Van Sant's body of work cannot be assessed as explicitly political, *Elephant* addresses fundamental societal issues echoing aspects of the contemporary political climate – aspects that prevail 13 years later. It is versatile, ambiguous and complex, yet forceful in its approach; it does not explicitly convey a subjective political point of view, but may nevertheless come across as explicit in its aim to generate self-scrutiny and reassessment of the public discourse on mass shootings:

> This film is my reaction to the journalistic representation of Columbine […] Seeing so many journalists telling this story and this horrific event in a high school, I thought there was place for drama within that. I thought that drama shouldn't leave the subject alone. It shouldn't be afraid to go in and tell its own point of view of the same event.
> (Van Sant, quoted in Howell, 2003)

In despite of its ambiguousness and aim to bring forth individual interpretations, it conveys a political tone of voice in its ability to spark further debate. Certainly, the discourse on mass shootings lingers in its title, adopted from director Alan Clarke's film (1989) which depicts a series of seemingly random violent shootings in Northern Ireland; the title evidently references the elephant in the living room, the taboo one does not dare to address. However, there is more to this title than first assumed, as stated by the director – the Indian fable of the five blind men and the elephant:

One thinks it's a rope because he has the tail, one thinks it's a tree because he can feel the legs, one thinks it's a wall because he can feel the side of it, and nobody actually has the big picture. You can't really get to the answer, because there isn't one.

(Van Sant, quoted in Hattenstone, 2004)

Due to the nature of the debate on Columbine and mass shootings overall, it may be argued that «the big picture» cannot be sufficiently extracted from the news media; the issues discussed in terms of causes and preventive measures are relatively fixed, whether the point of focus is risk assessment among adolescents or overall issues of mental health, violence in the media or current gun policies – the tree, the rope or the wall. Bringing certain issues into the spotlight might be a result of an urge to provide a specific explanation in times of distress, in result neglecting to sufficiently address other relevant issues; however, the idea of providing specific explanations might convey political implications as well. At times, it may be challenging to assess the nature and extent of political bias in news coverage. Certain sources are explicit in their political nature by more or less defining themselves as liberal or conservative. Other sources are politically independent, or, as in the case of commercial sociopolitical cinema, politically ambiguous, and it is occasionally, from a reader's or viewer's perspective, challenging to assess whether a particular news article is politically biased or not. This is a complex subject of discussion in itself as the overall credibility of journalists is at stake; however, there are reasons to believe that political orientation is imperative in the assessment of the overall discourse on mass shootings, permeating the debate on causes and preventive measures. As stated, it is arguably challenging to remain fully objective when core, constitutional values and perceptions of «freedom» are problematized. At its most extreme, focusing on factors such as mental health might come across as scapegoating, as means of avoiding to acknowledge the bigger picture. When recognizing all the parts that make up the elephant, the big picture, it may be easier to thoroughly and constructively debate mass shootings, and eventually draw conclusions that may, in time, provide a positive effect. Although the title's reference to the fable may be interpreted in different ways, it might suggest that one cannot access the answer due to the ways in which mass shootings are debated – not necessarily because there is no answer at all. *Elephant* does not offer any concrete explanations or solutions, but nevertheless embodies the bigger picture in ways that other outlets of expression cannot.

Establishing a sense of realism through the film's narrative, characters and overall stylistic approach is imperative when attempting to problematize the discourse on Columbine and mass shootings overall. Weakening the boundary between fiction and reality by creating a highly realistic and recognizable setting will potentially create a psychological sense of presence, thus empowering the rhetorical value of the perspectives one is trying to convey. The sense of realism A. O. Scott promotes is vividly mirrored in *Elephant*. First of all, the circumstances of production establish the very foundation of its realism. The majority of the characters portrayed are embodied by actual high school students using their own names; the film is largely produced without a script, allowing improvisation in dialogue and, to a certain extent, action (Howell, 2003). The students act out their characters and the narrative of *Elephant* in their own habitat, in the familiar hallways – hallways that come to bear symbolic value – of their own high school, located in Van Sant's home town, Portland. Columbine is never explicitly referenced through location and characters, with the exception of Eric, one of the fictional perpetrators who happens to share his name with one of the actual Columbine predators. As opposed to providing a different name to his character, Van Sant stays true to the symbolism of Columbine, in which the character's name highlights the fact that Columbine may happen anywhere and involve anyone – whether the victim or the perpetrator. Although the likelihood of experiencing an incident of mass shootings first-hand are statistically slim, one cannot with certainty anticipate these events and sufficiently prepare oneself psychologically for these events to occur. The fictional aspects of *Elephant* and the reality of Columbine are carefully balanced; there are narrative components reflecting the incident of Columbine and the ways in which it was debated, yet, they do not come across as elements suggesting that they are exclusive to this incident. This might consequently fuel public distress – however, generating a certain level of emotional strain might be necessary in order to stimulate constructive debate and access the core of this national issue. The realistic approach ensures consistent relevance and topicality, and the balance between fiction and reality will strengthen the perception of *Elephant*'s narrative as a symbol of real-life mass shootings overall and they ways in which they are publically and politically assessed.

Elephant's realism is perhaps most notable in the ways in which Van Sant challenges the prevailing drive to understand and make sense of senseless acts of violence, detectable in both content and form, through its narrative, characters and overall stylistic qualities. The narrative of *Elephant* first and foremost reflects the reality of mass shootings; there are no

conventional norms of storytelling – formal explanations – to be applied when this issue constitutes the subject matter. *Elephant* depicts the last day of the lives of the perpetrators Alex and Eric and a handful of other students by opposing conventional norms of structure and time. John is introduced first, late for school due to his alcoholic father weaving back and forth while driving him; next up is Elias, an aspiring photographer walking around «shooting» portraits of fellow students, followed by the school's poster couple, Nathan and Carrie. Acadia is briefly introduced as she is comforting John in one of the common rooms, struggling to cope with his father's behavior, on her way to a Gay/Straight Alliance meeting; the story moves on to Alex and Eric, the prospective shooters, the trio Brittany, Jordan and Nicole, complaining over the trivialities of adolescent life in the cafeteria before throwing up their lunch in the girls' room, and Michelle, a self-conscious alienated girl who works in the school library. Finally, there is Benny, one of the least prominent, yet symbolically valued, characters of the story.

The event about to unfold is not presented in chronological sequences; rather than suggesting temporal reality, thus in a sense opposing the notion of realism, the narrative continuously rewinds to a previous point of time in which we are to observe elements of action from another character's point of view. Narrative elements are replayed from the perspectives of all the characters in question and intertwine and overlap throughout the story as the event unfolds. For instance, the incident in which Alex and Eric are entering the building before the shooting is depicted from three different points of view; first from that of John (fig. 1), briefly playing with a fellow student's dog on his way out to look for his father before encountering Alex and Eric on their way in. Second, the action is witnessed by Brittany, Jordan and Nicole (fig. 2) from the inside of the school cafeteria. Third, the point of view returns to the prospective shooters (fig. 3). Although the structure of the narrative does not embody realism in itself, it conveys the reality of the discourse of mass shootings, in which the incidents are assessed from different angles in search for explanations. The shifting perspectives deprive the viewer of sufficient examination, being continuously cut off by someone else's individual story, in effect preventing the audience from accessing explanatory factors and gaining full insight. As in the discourse on mass shootings, the different perspectives counter each other – symbolically embodied in each cut, marking a shift in point of view – consequently preventing progress and leaving the debate deadlocked. The effect of the shifting perspectives is rhetorically imperative through the idea of denying emotional access. In the meantime, the story evolves; while one is preoccupied by looking for answers elsewhere, the shooters make it through the door and start shooting. The individual pathways fully intertwine at their last stop; the shooters roam each hallway and fire at every individual entering their viewpoint, including several of the characters

we are invited to observe. Elias, depicting the audiences' scrutiny through the lens of his camera, adds further depth to this symbolism; the portraits of fellow students developed in the school's dark room embody the various perceptions of risk among high school students – a portfolio of promoted explanations. Elias' final portrait will be of Alex in the library (fig. 4). The composition may symbolize how he is taking a final «shot» at the audience as a reminder of how the excessive focus on inaccurate explanations requires too much attention and time; consequently, as Elias frames the final source of explanation, it will be too late.

The overall art-house approach in *Elephant*'s cinematography and editing further induces the perception of realism to the point where it resembles a documentary. The general lack of overt editing and its low-pace rhythm emphasize the sense of presence and provides space and time for reflection. The overall cinematic style denotes an observational tone through long tracking shots in which we follow each character as they move through the corridors, either immediately behind them or in front of them. The movements do not control the characters; rather, the characters are in control, determining the directions in which the viewer is heading. The camera is levelled with the characters throughout the film; in certain incidents, the camera faces the characters from below, suggesting that they are in control, as in the scene where Alex and Eric are working through the details of their plan (fig. 5). Otherwise, the positioning of the camera and the character in question are equally levelled, visually refusing the viewer a position of superiority in terms of knowledge and insight. The nature of the film's cinematography invites the audience to scrutinize the characters and assess their traits; the fronted characters are in complete focus, while others entering the frame are blurry, as in the case of the scene in which Alex and Eric are about to enter the building. The composition within the frame reflects the parable of the elephant – the inability to pay attention to other aspects in the assessment of risk, focusing on its tail, side or legs, resulting in a conviction that may be partly correct, yet «overshadowed by their ignorance in not understanding the varied perspectives that make up the entire creature» (Turbett, quoted in Rich, 2012: 1314). Visually, Van Sant provides the bigger picture by assigning every perspective the main point of focus, as illustrated by figure 1, 2 and 3. Their continuous movement down the corridors further emphasizes the narrow-mindedness perceived to prevail in the discourse of mass shootings. However, the cinematography does not invite thorough scrutiny; there are limits to how far one may follow each character down the corridor before the viewer is forced to return to a previous point in time and reassess the situation, or the narrative, from another angle – focusing on one particular factor will not constitute sufficient grounds for explaining the act of mass shootings. Although the long tracking shots may invite scrutiny, the viewers are continuously denied emotional

access, which in turn, paradoxically, may generate a clearer image of the story in its totality, from which it may be easier to extract answers. Besides, as spectators, one is never granted emotional access into the minds of the perpetrators of Columbine or other shootings, and one is never really able to grasp the nature of their psychology:

> It's showing a clean portrait of the event in the way that, maybe the Lumière brothers would show a clean view of a boulevard … You just watch and make the associations for yourself, as opposed to having the filmmakers impose ideas on you.
> (Van Sant, quoted in Said, 2004)

Moreover, there is symbolism in the dialogue of *Elephant*, as well in its general absence. While the viewers often hear indistinct background conversations as they move through the corridors, the fronted characters often stay quiet. They sometimes exchange a few words when the individual paths of the characters meet – yet, the segments in which there is no fronted dialogue or music might constitute the film's most vocal moments; what is written in between the lines is of primary importance. There are no elements incorporated to influence audience perceptions, therefore stimulating reflection and challenging the audience to interpret situations that might appear pointless, echoing the urge to make sense of something senseless. Every now and then one hears fragments of dialogue of which there is no context, therefore semantically incomprehensible, symbolizing the inability to assess the bigger picture. The fragmented dialogue emphasizes the fragmented narrative of shifting perspectives, further representing the fragmented vision of society:

> In daily life in America there is always discontinuity […] Things don't have beginnings and ends in our lives, and if you want to make storytelling lifelike, you have to play by the rules of reality, which is that nothing is connecting, nothing is making sense.
> (Van Sant, quoted in Said, 2004).

As journalist S. F. Said notes, the incident in which one of the more prominent characters of the film, John, is seen crying in one of the common rooms, embodies the notion of fragmentation through miscommunication. His friend Acadia enters the room and attempts to comfort him, asking him why he is upset, to which he answers «I don't know». Acadia kisses him on the cheek and leaves to attend a Gay/Straight Alliance meeting – the circumstances prevent them from getting to the core of the issue. As he covers for his father while being confronted by the principal for being late, seemingly a matter of routine, he never allows

himself, or is never allowed, to come to terms with reality and confront the issues that evidently permeate all aspects of his life. The fragmented dialogues echo the discourse of mass shootings, in which there is a continuous loop of allegations continuously preventing progress. Moreover, the scene in which John plays with the dog illustrates how assumptions are made on the basis of exposure to a particular point of view; from the perspective of John, it is evident that the dog belongs to someone else – the girls sitting in the cafeteria nevertheless assume that the dog belongs to John while contemplating on why he would bring it to school. If the audience were to be subjected to their perspective only, the dog would be perceived as John's. If one is continuously subjected to the idea of mental health issues as the primary cause of mass shootings, whether by journalists, political figures or lobbyists, one will potentially, in time, subconsciously or consciously adopt this point of view and assume that this is in fact the case, unaware of the other side of the story. The vision of the issue of mass shootings is certainly fragmented, and there is discontinuity in the assessment of its alleged causes, in which prominent figures approach the situation in accordance with the perspective they wish to promote. This may, in part, constitute a result of the fragmented vision of the Constitution and perception of civil liberties.

Van Sant establishes a slight level of suspense throughout the narrative, further emphasized by its low-pace cinematography and editing, signaling a change of pace towards the end. Every now and then there are concrete signs foreshadowing something about to unfold. Three images of the sky, appearing in the opening shot, midway and in the exit shot, bear symbolic value; the relatively long day to night time-lapse, accompanied by the distant sound of students engaging in activities outside, captures any other day before the incident. While the opening shot establishes a sense of normality, the following shots insinuate the opposite. The following morning, Michelle stops to curiously gaze upon the sky during her gym class as if something suddenly caught her attention. Later the aspiring photographer Elias is observed in the school's dark room, in which the viewer is presented with a long close-up of his hand rocking the container developing his negatives back and forth in a rhythmic motion, to the pace of a clock. The two-minute long shot provides enough time to establish suspense and curiosity as to what is going on outside the dark room – the viewer is refused sufficient overview and knowledge, symbolizing the inadequacies of the debate in which one fails to, or refuses to, assess the bigger picture. So far it is quiet before the storm; towards the end, grey clouds and distant sounds of thunder appear in yet another long shot enclosing the last day before the attack. Van Sant nevertheless challenges audience expectation; despite signals of suspense, there will be no shift in the film's calm, grounded and overall realistic atmosphere when the shooting

occurs. There is no acceleration or dramatic transition from normality to abnormality. The viewer is deprived of moral epiphany, retribution and catharsis – the shooting happened either way, regardless of whichever clues one is able to spot by assessing the situation from the different perspectives of the students in question. At this point, the narrative returns to temporal reality and ties up the loose ends that make up the individual stories of the different characters, thus expressing the reality of the situation. Its lack of moral catharsis is countered by its striking realism. There is no moral retribution to detect in real life, therefore none to depict in *Elephant*; this is the only moral payoff Van Sant is willing to offer to the benefit of self-scrutiny and reassessment of the discourse. There are no heroes to «save the day» in these stories, whether real or fictional, as depicted by John and Benny, briefly introduced during the shooting spree. John desperately tries to prevent students and teachers from entering the building after encountering Alex and Eric on their way in, urging him to «get the fuck out of here and don't come back». As he is preoccupied with localizing his drunk father, who he left outside to be picked up, he is unable to prevent them from entering. The protagonist of the story falls short. Benny, emerging in his statuesque, hero-like figure, embodies the idea how the greater good will conquer all that is evil; as the camera tracks him down as he slowly and confidently walks towards Eric, holding the principal at gunpoint, there is a glimpse of hope. However, the viewers know how the story goes – there is not battle or dialogue in which the hero appeals to the soft side of the villain. Eric quickly turns around and shoots Benny point-blank, reducing Benny to a moment of distraction before returning to his hostage. Contrary to the idea of foreshadowing a shift in atmosphere, the elements of suspense suggest that incidents of this nature always linger in the air. The elements of classical music sporadically distributed throughout the film adds to *Elephant*'s anti-sensationalistic tone of voice, portraying mass shootings as an unfortunate, yet highly familiar phenomenon in contemporary society. The exit shot depicts the sky once again, accompanied by Beethoven's *Für Elise*; one is back to square one, as in the aftermath of every mass shooting, awaiting history to repeat itself.

Challenging Assumptions

The reluctance to face reality and come to terms with the situation is reflected in the critical reception of *Elephant*. Particularly due to the depiction of the actual shooting, Van Sant provides a form of insight exclusive to that of fictional cinema. Moreover, his realistic depiction of this incident further challenges the perception of fictional cinema – its definition as fiction

does not necessarily influence the reality of the subject matter. The dream-like, floating and near comfortable atmosphere is arguably not the type of mood one would expect to be subjected to in films addressing such issues; the atmosphere further highlights the potential of fictional cinema, in which a contrastive mood forces the audience to reassess the situation and, ideally, their own perception of their situation. Apart from scrutinizing journalistic representations of Columbine and mass shootings overall, Van Sant is also motivated by the idea of problematizing the definition of fictional cinema and the boundaries within which filmmakers work:

> I knew there would be no dramatic coverage of the event because of the way we think of drama as entertainment and not investigative … My reaction was, why not? Why don't we use drama to look into something like this?
> (Van Sant, quoted in Said, 2004).

In order to provide meaningful and valuable perceptions, the conventional norms of fictional cinema must be countered if one aims to depict the reality of its subject matter – this approach is detectable in *Elephant*'s narrative, reflecting the importance of realizing that one cannot access every side of the story unless the nature of the ongoing debate takes a different turn. The fragmented dialogue further aims to challenge our perception of fiction as entertainment – *Elephant*'s dialogue does not serve to the benefit of the audience:

> It's a suspicious fabrication within cinema that words are meant to entertain us, like we're at a cocktail party where everyone is coming up with gags and clever observations. The dialogue of Elephant is anti-entertainment because it's trying to reach at something that's lifelike.
> (Van Sant, quoted in Said, 2004)

Particularly due to the ways in which Van Sant counters the general demand for answers and a moral payoff, the highly realistic depiction of the subject will naturally impose objections, and some will perceive it as a way of exploiting a sensitive subject to the benefit of the filmmaker. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy (2003) vividly embodies the type of criticism one would expect after being subjected to a narrative that provides «no insight or enlightenment», perceived to be «pointless at best and irresponsible at worst». While McCarthy is appreciative of the film's «glancing poetic effects», there were expectations of resolution; when his expectations are countered, the critic consequently criticizes the film accordingly, deemed «gross and exploitative during the shooting rampage of the final act». As opposed to

acknowledging the film's attempt to stimulate reflection, it is harshly perceived as a failed attempt to find «a fresh method» to examine the issue of mass shootings. Certainly, the outcome at the box office works in his favor. Moreover, McCarthy's criticism echoes established assumptions about violence in fiction. As Van Sant notes, the established ethical boundary between distant, fictional violence and violence reflecting reality deserves to be problematized. Dramatizing distant violence is seemingly justifiable, or even desired, in fictional cinema – as soon as these depictions move too close to «contemporary truth» it is deemed «irresponsible» (Hattenstone, 2004). Despite its lack of moral resolution and overall change in atmosphere, *Elephant*'s rhetorical climax is founded in the final act of the shooting, challenging the prevailing perceptions of violence in fiction as well as in society. *Elephant*'s violence bears sociopolitical value in itself, as opposed to narratives in which its violence is justified on account of the greater good, acted out by the heroic protagonist – referred to as «the hero insurance» by journalist Steven Paquin (2012). Van Sant's observations implicitly reference Michael Haneke's essay, *Violence and the Media*, in which Haneke in part problematizes representations of violence and its positioning within the commercial sphere:

> The salesman who defines and produces film as a commodity knows that violence is only – and particularly so – a good sell when it is deprived of that which is the true measure of its existence in reality […] fears remain non-consumable and are bad for business.
> (Haneke, quoted in Paquin, 2012)

David Walsh (2003) counters the perception of *Elephant* as a mere montage of images bearing no meaning or explanation; Walsh suggests that its criticism should not be founded on its lack of explanation, but for its intuitive and impressionistic nature, «a convenient vagueness» in which depth and context is absent. He criticizes those praising Van Sant for assigning the responsibility of interpretation to the audience, claiming that a process of reflection is impossible when the supposed level of explanation stays well above the surface. In spite of acknowledging the value of formal realism, in which the pitfalls of «crowd-pleasing catharsis», «cheap sentimentality» and «heart-warming characters» are avoided, Walsh argues that *Elephant* fails to capture the truth about traumatic social events through its inability to «illuminate deeply either the characters or the episode in itself». He assesses the various narrative elements of the film, such as incidents of bullying, as mere hints, elements of «convenient vagueness» perceived as means to avoid sufficient scrutiny of contributing factors. Consequently, *Elephant* is by Walsh perceived as intellectual and artistic failure for its inability

to «shed light on a vital and tragic event». Van Sant would possibly agree with his assessment of these narrative elements as superficial – if they in fact were to be perceived as attempts to provide explanations. *Elephant* does not directly aim to establish the truth about mass shooting; it sheds light on these vital and tragic events by reflecting the discourse of mass shootings. It invites the viewer to critically assess their own assumptions about the phenomenon as opposed to searching for answers within what they are subjected to. The narrative may be perceived as destructive because it reflects the destructiveness of the ongoing debate; moreover, it may be perceived as exploitative in its deception of audience expectation, but at the very least, *Elephant* exploits audience expectation in favor of rhetorical value, and hopefully, enlightenment. Once acknowledging the rhetorical value of its aim to mirror the prevailing assumptions that constitute the discourse, it may become clear that there in fact is depth to its political implications, that there is a point to its pointlessness and a level of sense in its senselessness.

Evidently, the perception of sociopolitical enlightenment differs; while «staying above the surface» in the depiction of narrative elements and the various characters, *Elephant* nevertheless touches the bottom when familiarizing oneself with its context. The metaphor of «the bigger picture» equally portrays the realism of its sociopolitical surroundings as it portrays the realness of mass shootings in contemporary society. From its immediate pointlessness one can retract political implications; by contrast, its political implications will explain the apparent pointlessness. When subjected to a narrative of this nature, the natural reaction is to actively search for signs providing meaning to the narrative overall. Van Sant makes use of this reaction – by some perceived as exploitation – to contradict whichever conclusions the viewers may draw on their way down the school corridors. The cinematography essentially encourages the audience to play the role of the omniscient figure of authority, all in order to find themselves degraded in the end. The tracking shots and compositions bear resemblance to video games, as if the audience is directing the action taking place in front of them. The aesthetic features provide a sense of control while assessing the characters and their encounters, as if there are clues yet to be found, symbolizing the very urge to regain social control in the aftermath of mass shootings by providing sufficient explanations and solutions. However, once it becomes evident that none of the characters' flaws, traits or the incidents in which they are involved form adequate explanations, as Walsh argues, despite the nature of his criticism, the expectation of control will be countered. This is one of *Elephant*'s main objections – the idea of spotting a mass shooter based on signs perceived as potential risk factors is generally unfeasible. The scene in which Acadia attends the Gay/Straight Alliance meeting symbolically encodes the reality of risk assessment, in which they discuss whether it is possible to tell whether someone

is a gay at first glance, based on the color of their hair or their posture. Naturally, they seem to reach the reasonable conclusion – there is no way of knowing with certainty. The camera pans from one student to the next in the middle of the circle (fig. 6), true to the idea of promoting scrutiny – perhaps the viewer will find him or herself caught in the act of assessing who fits the «criteria» in question.

Characters other than the perpetrators embody qualities perceived as risk factors – yet, they do not decide to act out on their issues in the form of a shooting spree. Moreover, the attention is, to a certain extent, equally distributed among the characters – including the actual shooters – suggesting that anyone could be perceived as potential shooters if one legitimizes the established risk factors. The various characters depict relatively common adolescent social issues and traits to which the audience may relate; Brittany, Jordan and Nicole denote the issues of jealousy, status and self-image through their conversations and evident eating disorders. Nathan and Carrie form the couple of envy on the top of the social ladder. From the peers' points of view, they are seemingly perfect; yet, as they are discussing their plans for the weekend, they insinuate that Carrie might be pregnant. Alex and Michelle embody the social outcasts, subjected to bullying during class and in the locker room, respectively. As the point of view shifts between the various characters, one hears fragments of conversations in which the trivialities of adolescent life are discussed, further emphasizing the mood of a relatively normal day at school. Elephant's formal structure prevents the viewers from being granted thorough access to the emotional lives of these individuals, in effect sufficient grounds for interpretation; there is constant «interruption» and «temporal dislocation» through its shifting perspectives, «spatial dislocation» through the denial of physical orientation within the building and «rejection of interiority» due to the nature of its cinematography, in which the viewers merely function as observers, prevented from being a part of the interactions and conversations observed (Rich, 2012). On these accounts, several of the characters may come across as stereotypical, as Welsh argues; however, they do reflect the presence of overgeneralization that forms the idea of providing a common profile describing the «typical» school shooter. The characters may be stereotypical – yet, so are the traits one is to look for when explaining why someone would commit an otherwise atypical and complex act of violence. One knows there is probably more to these individuals than first assumed, lingering in the term «stereotypes». Van Sant thus frames explanations that particularly prevailed in the aftermath of the Columbine shooting by framing the characters in question. Overgeneralization may lead to stigmatization and the creation of a hostile environment generating fear among students if one is to act on

every single observation in which something is perceived as a risk; moreover, it neglects to acknowledge that there are larger issues to be discussed.

Some of the characters play the parts of a more evident sociopolitical nature than others, in which some embody specific references to the discourse on the Columbine shooting. Upon the introduction of Alex in the classroom, his fellow students, including Nathan, shoot spitballs of paper at him; judging by the weary look on his face and his apathetic walk into the bathroom to clean himself up, this is a matter of routine. Eventually, as he is conspicuously assessing the cafeteria while taking notes, it becomes evident that Alex is the prospective shooter. Bullying constitutes one of many factors of discussion in the aftermath of Columbine, as illustrated by Gary Kleck (1999). Van Sant nevertheless portray these alleged «causes» of the shooting by «normalizing» them in context – which also form an important aspect in the overall realistic approach of the film – in comparison with the other characters and through his realistic, documentary-like cinematography. *Elephant* depicts these explanatory patterns in an anti-sensationalist manner, creating a contrastive and contradictory relationship between the alleged causes, implicitly embodied by Alex and Eric, and the other characters, further induced by its aesthetics. Michelle is also evidently a victim of bullying and alienation; yet, the viewer will not see her overcoming her obstacles by shooting her fellow students. By contrast, she will be the first one to go, shot in the library as she is placing books on the non-fiction shelf – a symbolic gesture in itself. Van Sant thus challenges the idea of framing bullying as a «cause», as a simple explanation for an otherwise complex incident; it may serve as a contributing factor along with a range of others, but it does not generate mass shootings. Bullying is a known phenomenon among adolescents, certainly worthy of concern, but it does not exclusively apply in the context of mass shootings. There is no point in pinpointing everyone when it only takes one. Teenage worries, whether serious or not, are implicitly conveyed throughout the narrative of *Elephant*, even through the fragments of dialogue. The audience may to various extents relate to the trivialities of adolescent life and the more severe aspects of it, including bullying, whether first-hand or not. Mass shootings, however, are generally not relatable by experience – thus, one must turn elsewhere for answers.

Furthermore, the anti-sensationalistic and grounded tone of voice is detected in how the implicit references to promoted explanations counter each other and themselves. In context, they diminish, becoming a part of an individual narrative in which it is challenging to assess the signals of risk from others. Nathan and Carrie are the last ones to fall in the final scene in which Alex corners them, allowing the children's rhyme of «eeny, meeny, miny, moe» to decide who should be shot first. One would expect Alex to swear vengeance on Nathan and the

other bullies; although the final scene would suggest that Alex finally finds redemption, there is nothing suggesting that Nathan was on the top of his list. The final kill is executed in style with the others, in a nonchalant manner, conveyed with a chilling randomness. Seemingly, the main aim is to kill as many students and teachers as possible, regardless of who they may be or what they may have done. Moreover, there is no way of knowing whether they were systematically bullied – in her assessment of *Elephant* as the «new locus of horror», Jennifer A. Rich claims that this was not the case at all (2012: 1311). Whether bullied or not, chances are, someone else were subjected to this as well, as depicted by Michelle. In addition to signals of bullying, one sees them playing violent video games, watching a documentary on Hitler and ordering guns online. The real perpetrators' fascination for Hitler formed an explanatory factor in the assessment of the incident; the moment in which they watch the documentary has lead certain critics to claim that Van Sant supports the idea of neo-Nazism as a sufficient explanation. While they ironically agree with him on the fact that this is highly misleading, they nevertheless seem to interpret these moments as means of legitimizing explanations:

> … while it is clearly not Van Sant's intent to offer a facile explanation for why two teenage boys marched into their high school with assault weapons with the aim of picking off as many of their fellow students as possible, he does so when he reveals the killers to be *gay-inclined Nazis!* You might have expected such a characterization of young renegades from a hack Hollywood screenwriter, but not from Van Sant. (McCarthy, 2003)

First, what counters this assumption is the dialogue, conveying adolescent ignorance; Eric does not even seem to recognize Hitler and whether the documentary is set in Germany or not. Moreover, Eric asks Alex whether one can purchase «a Nazi flag», to which Alex responds «sure, if you're a nut». The dialogue clearly emphasizes the absurdity of the perpetrators being «Nazi fag killers» (Rich, 2012: 1326). Alex and Eric further share a kiss in the shower before the shooting; allegedly, according to Van Sant himself, there were people holding signs outside the school stating that «fags did this» (Said, 2004). The footage of the kiss is nevertheless «reaction to that reaction», and is meant to express teenage insecurity and innocence, which equally applies to the perpetrators as to their peers – yet, «I guess the easy answer is, they're gay Nazis» (Van Sant, quoted in Said, 2004). This moment adds rhetorical depth to the Gay/Straight Alliance meeting; one's sexuality does not predispose individuals to act in certain ways – therefore, why aim to define them at all. The incident in which we see them playing a «violent» video game (fig. 7) certainly echoes the idea of violent entertainment as a contributing factor to school shootings. However, upon closer examination, it is highly unrealistic in its

design; the platform resembles the scenery from his previous film *Gerry*, in which we follow Gerry and Gerry lost in the desert; when shot, elevating the «GERRY COUNT» on the bottom left of the computer screen, there is no gore, blood or action of any kind – there is no actual glorification of violence to detect, thus discrediting the assumption of video game producers as moral sinners. Moreover, the aesthetic style of *Elephant* does in fact resemble the visual embodiment of a video game, thus creating a paradox. As Rich notes, the audience «has been playing a version of this game» (2012: 1327), targeting plausible connections as they are walking down the corridors. The shooting may come across as disturbing in its chilling randomness; however, due to the denial of emotional access, the audience is in some way desensitized to the actual shooting, as when playing violent video games – yet, safe to say, this will not encourage acts of violence among them.

In between the activities in which they engage, we see Alex playing *Für Elise* on the piano, Eric reading a book, taking a shower and engaging in casual conversations with Alex' mom while eating eggs and drinking milk for breakfast. We spend an equal amount of time watching them engaging in everyday activities as we do watching them involved in situations perceived to be signals of risk. As noted by Rich, they are «hosts of incongruities» (1325); whereas the several of other characters may embody stereotypes, Alex and Eric «defy categorization» through depicting contradictions: «… no one has suggested he's implying the Columbine killings were carried out by literate, milk-drinking Beethoven fans» (Said, 2004). Van Sant seems to acknowledge the fact that perpetrators of mass shootings overall suffer from some sort of mental disorder; every now and then, this is signaled through dialogue, as in the case where Alex reminds Eric «to have fun» prior to the shooting, or when Alex quotes *Macbeth* during the attack: «So foul and fair a day I have not seen». One thus sees and hears glimpses of characteristics one would associate with portrayals of serial killers in fictional film. However, they are not the Joker; most of the time, they do not come across as inherently different from the other characters, including John, close to being the protagonist of the story. John struggles with his own issues, perhaps transcending the idea of «bad homes» and parental neglect as potential contributors. Moreover, the anti-sensationalistic approach, in which promoted explanations counter each other, denotes a two-fold similarity between the perpetrators and the audience: first, in the context of *Elephant*'s narrative, being victims of bullying, watching a documentary on Hitler or playing a violent video game does not necessarily signal danger of this nature. Any viewer could find themselves subjected to bullying or engaging in these activities. Klebold and Harris' manifesto revealed hatred towards country music or *Star Wars* fans (Rich, 1310); due to established assumptions, whether imposed by the news media,

political figures, lobbyists or the news media, depicting this as a potential contributing cause would come across as absurd. Second, Alex and Eric, as well as the other characters, have become «the audience's own acts of interpretation», torn down by *Elephant*'s realistic and anti-sensationalistic narrative and aesthetics – in effect, one is watching a physical manifestation of one's own insufficient assumptions. What drove them, according to Rich, was the spectacle, the idea of leaving a significant mark in history, forming a story «directors will be fighting over» (Harris & Klebold, quoted in Rich, 2012: 1310-1311).

The portrayal of the perpetrators may be viewed as a response to the urge to separate «us» from «them», in which the media sought to alienate the shooters by establishing a contrastive, mutually exclusive relationship between the perpetrators and the victims, portraying them as psychological deviants, even as downright «evil monsters» (Linder, 2014: xv). In certain ways, the media assigned the qualities of serial killers as they are portrayed in fictional cinema in order to make sense of these incidents as spectacles of terror. *Elephant* breaks down the spectacle and the illusions of explanations that may emerge from it; its anti-sensationalistic approach grounds an otherwise sensationalistic event. As in the case of *Zero Day*, in which the idea of grounding the hyped portrayal of mass shooters is the primary aim, *Elephant* allows the viewer to come to terms with the fact that mass shooters may embody traits recognizable in others who are suffering from mental illness – yet, the vast majority of them have not and will not commit mass shootings. By breaking down the image of the mass shooter and incorporating them within a normalized setting, emphasized by its cinematography and editing, it may be easier to thoroughly assess the situation and gain a reasonable perspective of the situation. *Elephant* further challenges the criticism of popular culture and potential copycatting. Kathryn E. Linder claims that films such as *Elephant* reproduces a cultural narrative that came to be perceived a source of inspiration for future shooters allegedly referencing Klebold and Harris, thereby creating a «hyperreality» in which fact and fiction have merged: «Popular culture influenced early school shootings, which influenced additional media and cultural representations, which then influenced more school shootings to the degree where it is no longer clear which is the primary influence» (2014: xvi). While *Natural Born Killers* may have been a source of inspiration for Klebold and Harris, it is arguably overly simplistic to claim that *Elephant* has «exacerbated mythologies» used within the media spectacle. The film addresses aspects that came to be assessed as explanatory factors, yet only to discredit them; the «fact» of the matter is that these aspects constitute proposed causes, and, by contrast, the «fiction» lies in their accuracy. There is no trace of «the spectacle» perceived to be attractive among prospective shooters; the self-inflicted image of the shooters as «superior», as

«revolutionaries», is demolished in Van Sant's narrative. Certainly, one cannot deny that someone could potentially draw inspiration from *Elephant* – however, there are evidently other reasons to why these individuals would be susceptible to find inspiration within these stories. The alternative would be to keep quiet and avoid addressing this issue overall in fictional film – yet, this would further legitimize the perception of fiction as a moral sinner, in accordance with Linder's point of view.

What is yet to be commented upon is the assault rifle and what it represents. Van Sant aims to stimulate reflection by avoiding interpretive clarity. The effect of its anti-sensationalistic, even normalizing, depiction of the incident, comes to represent the discourse on school shootings in general, and creates a certain contrast between the elements of discussion. Analyzing *Elephant* is thus somewhat ironic; yet, Van Sant provides the bigger picture while highlighting the shortcomings of the ongoing debate to stimulate progress, urging the viewers to provide the answers for themselves. There is no particular focus on gun policies in the referred critics' assessment of the film – nor is there in *Elephant*. However, when aligned with the other notable narrative elements, symbolizing prevailing explanations, it may be argued that certain moments stand out; in between playing video games, reading books, watching Hitler documentaries, playing Beethoven and eating breakfast, they visit a webpage by the name of «Guns USA» on their laptop, eying out the new item of the week: «the ultimate killing machine» (fig. 8). No domain is listed in the address; yet, interestingly, searching for gunsusa.com will redirect you to gunsusa.biz, «Big Iron Guns», announcing their proud support of the Portsmouth Patriots Friends of NRA. The assault rifle, one of several in their arsenal of firearms, is delivered at the door, as if they were ordering take-out, in exchange for a signature. There are no questions asked – besides casually observing that they «must be out of school today» – as effortlessly as reading a book, playing a video game or watching a documentary. By contrast, this excludes the moment in which Alex is playing the piano and giving Beethoven the finger; mastering the notes of Beethoven seems to be a bigger obstacle than purchasing weapons. Consequently, the shooting spree comes across as effortless as well, while hearing birds signing in the background, drained from «energy, purpose, glamor, reward or social context. It just happens» (Ebert, 2003).

Thus, due to the ways in which it is depicted, purchasing firearms is seemingly as common and familiar as playing violent video games. While aware of the fact that interpretation to a large extent is inherently subjective, there is an evident contrast between them in terms of assessing explanatory factors. Depending on one's predispositions in terms of opinions on gun policies, one may choose to acknowledge this contrast, inherently believe that there is none, or

choose to ignore it. It is arguably easier to blame individual factors of upbringing and «bad homes», bullying and alienation, controversial right-wing ideologies or violent entertainment, whether video games or movies, than those of current gun policies, as the former issues are easily separated from constitutional rights. In his review of *Elephant*, Roger Ebert addresses the urge to provide explanations – yet, explanations that do not impose political controversies – and how the idea of providing such explanations may potentially make matters worse. When interviewed by a news reporter the day after Columbine, Ebert was asked whether he perceived violent movies – specifically *The Basketball Diaries* (1995) – to be a contributing factor, to which he responded «if they are influenced by anything, they are influenced by news programs like your own. When an unbalanced kid walks into a school and starts shooting, it becomes a major media event», arguing that killers may be glorified «in the guise of explaining them». His interview never saw the light of day; they nevertheless found «plenty of talking heads to condemn violent movies, and everyone was happy» (2003). Violent entertainment fits the equation, and it is difficult to deny that it may impose some level of negative effect; yet, it constitutes a deficient explanation for mass shootings. *Elephant* certainly counters the idea of glorification through its anti-sensationalistic approach; it does what *Duck! The Carbine High School Massacre* could not. *Elephant*'s style does not smother its rhetoric – rather, it fuels it. Whether suffering from mental disorders, affected by the alleged influence of violent entertainment or inspired by glorification of previous perpetrators in the news, the circumstances allow them to act on it. While assessing the bigger picture, it may become evident that the idea of dwelling on these alleged contributing factors prevents progress. Their validity is dependent on the individual in question; moreover, they primarily apply to adolescents – mass shootings are not restricted to the premises of high schools. Perhaps the elephant Van Sant encourages the audience to see is the Second Amendment, the elephant in the very living room in which Alex and Eric are watching the Hitler documentary and unwrap their delivered package. When conversing with Peter Howell (2003), he avoids taking an explicit political stand, yet offers fairly clear hints on the matter:

> My stand on guns is pretty middle-of-the-road. I do admire countries where the population doesn't have guns, although I don't think that's gonna happen overnight in the US […] I do think it's crazy, the types of guns that are produced and sold over the counter in the US – sniper weapons and assault rifles and things that wouldn't be used for hunting or even defense. I just hope that people can view Elephant as something that helps them think about an issue like Columbine.
> (Van Sant, quoted in Howell, 2003)

Regardless of whichever answers one may come up with, *Elephant* problematizes the discourse on mass shooting by countering prevailing assumptions about explanatory patterns, its own agenda in depicting these patterns, as well as those of fictional cinema and audience expectations. Symbolically similar to his frame-by-frame remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) (Hattenstone, 2004), Van Sant mirrors the journalistic tendencies reproduced in the aftermath of sensationalized mass shootings. Unless the debate takes a different turn, there will be no progress to detect.

Framing the Mother: *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

Apart from declaring their hatred towards *Star Wars* fans, country music, «people who say wrestling is real», as conveyed through their manifesto «Basement Tapes and Home Videos», Harris and Klebold acknowledged the potentiality of public scrutiny and judgement of their parents by trying to absolve them from blame (Rich, 2012: 1310-1311). Their presumptions foreshadowed an aspect of discussion – although not politicized to the same extent as other factors – yet to occur in the case of the Columbine shootings. While the idea of blaming the parents might come across as absurd as blaming country music for their actions, the social repercussions prove to feed the psychological strain imposed on the parents, predominantly on the mother, in the aftermath of mass shootings: «a mother is supposed to know» (Brockes, 2016). The Columbine incident, holding the position as the main cultural narrative of reference in the assessment of mass shootings, illustrate how the proposed patterns of explanation came to include the mother and the opposing factors of nature versus nurture. Certainly, judging by the cocktail of various explanatory factors that came to emerge post-Columbine, the idea of blaming the mother cannot be perceived as particularly surprising; if the alleged prevalence of «goth» culture among adolescents and Marilyn Manson's music should take the moral fall, the mother is likely to be exposed. Along with her husband, Sue Klebold was by their lawyer advised to prepare for «a firestorm of hatred»: «The gentlest portrayal of us as parents in the media was that we were useless» (ibid). Seventeen years later, she released her memoir *A Mother's Reckoning* in 2016, in which she reassesses her parenting decisions in her search for answers; in part, her memoirs are a response to the allegations of parental neglect and failure to identify signals of risk. She reassessed herself with «the same harsh incredulity», yet, years later, came to terms with the fact that the idea of blaming the parents is an easy fix for a public

in distress, expressing their own fear of becoming victims themselves through wrongful assumptions:

> I understand, but one of the frightening things about this reality is that people who have family members who do things like this are just like the rest of us. I've met several mums of mass shooters, and they are as sweet and nice as they can be. You wouldn't know, if you saw all of us in a room, what brought us together.
> (Klebold, quoted in Brockes, 2016)

We Need to Talk About Kevin is a peculiar work of fiction within the discourse of mass shooting. The film, based on Lionel Shriver's novel of the same title, published in 2003, is frequently embraced as an enlightening sentiment in its ability to examine an otherwise difficult aspect of school shootings – the one of the mother's role. In accordance with the inherent need to find answers, whether within news coverage or popular culture, it is often interpreted as a story attempting to reflect on the reasons for why the perpetrator of the story, Kevin, would grow up to conduct a «Columbine-style» massacre at his high school (Fisher, 2012). Others decline the film accordingly for its inability to provide «deep insights» into this violent phenomenon and its psychological context (Howell, 2012). In a feature published by *the Guardian*, Shriver acknowledges the controversy of the story and the potential negative outcomes:

> The novel breaks one of the last taboos (and how amazing that at such a late date I found a taboo still standing): a mother disliking her son. Rife with difficult characters and climaxing in a high-school massacre of the sort Americans are rightly ashamed of, Kevin was a poor commercial bet from the get-go.
> (2011)

Aiming to have to book published in America in the aftermath of 9/11, it naturally took time before Shriver's book came to see the light of day in the US; one of her potential publishers suggested a rewrite of her story to include humoristic elements and remove any suggestion of mass murder. Yet, the book became popular beyond expectation, eventually to be picked up by Lynne Ramsay: «Lo, I have created a monster» (Shriver, 2011). The story about Eva and her son is an uncomfortable depiction of motherhood; the film scrutinizes the relationship between them, how their natural, unbreakable bond evokes questions of guilt, blame and responsibility after Kevin commits the ultimate crime. It accesses the core of mental health problematics in

its reflective, yet disturbing, assessment of whether genetics or environment, nature or nurture, plays a part in the development of a psychologically tormented individual. Unlike *Elephant* and *Dark Night*, the narrative is not based on or inspired by a particular incident, yet references the phenomenon of school shootings and its apparent randomness and its apparent refusal to provide answers, specifically in terms of whether the parents, chiefly the mother, shoulder some of the responsibility for the incident. Although frequently coined as an assessment of mother's burden within the context of mass shootings, Ramsay declines these perceptions of her agenda, as conveyed when asked by *Indiewire* whether she had «any interest at all in this movie playing a role in the conversation about real teen shootings»:

> This is not an issue movie. "Elephant" is a brilliant film that dealt with that. I wasn't interested in that. I wasn't trying to make an issue-based film; I'm trying to pose a set of questions. I was really interested in the mother-son relationship. I thought it was the last taboo in a way: You can love your kids, but do you like them? To me, that was an interesting proposition. I haven't really seen anything explore that. (Ramsay, quoted in Kohn, 2011)

Moreover, the very incident in question is carried out by using a bow and arrow, thereby eliminating any apparent connections to real-life incidents of mass shootings; yet, as the public continuously search for patterns of explanation for these senseless acts of violence, it is a natural reaction to include this film within the discourse, regardless of Ramsay's intentions. Additionally, as there is an evident lack of these films, the public will to a certain extent be inclined to search for the meaning of mass shootings within *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as well – as if there is an agenda, echoing the observations of John Sayles. The phenomenon of mass shootings is not the foregrounded issue here – however, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* demonstrates how all fictional contributions – whether intentionally sociopolitical or not – matter to the extent that they may influence the ongoing debate. Further, while it demonstrates how certain recipients may assign sociopolitical value in terms of specific perspectives relevant to the debate on mass shootings, primarily the factor of parental neglect, other perspectives of concern may unintentionally arise within such narratives. In this incident, there are issues related to mental illness to be examined. As in the case of films addressing bullying within the context of mass shootings, what filmmakers may implicitly insinuate while fronting a particular issue may be of importance as well, in terms of their potential subconscious effect on the overall perception of mass shooters. If perceived as a sociopolitical film, all potential implications will be assessed. Due to the nature of its «widespread» reception and its partial status as a sociopolitical contribution – first and foremost a social sentiment – it will be assessed

accordingly. On the basis of its circumstances, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is, compared to *Elephant* and *Dark Night*, a work of fiction in which interpretation and ambiguousness is of a more definitive factor in terms of its rhetorical effect.

Nature versus Nurture

Among those investigating the topic of mass shootings, there are a few who aim to examine the role of the parents who easily form a target in the aftermath of such an incident. *Beautiful Boy* addresses the emotional and psychological journey ahead for the parents of a campus shooter, forced to tackle the social repercussions following the incident. As advocated by one of the Columbine petitioners, this would be the story of desire, in its focus on «the truly important people» in these events and «the healing of the families». These aspects of the story rarely form the main point of focus in the news media, and are certainly worthy of attention by acknowledging the devastating effects of the loss of a child, the circumstances of this loss and public scrutiny. Films such as *Beautiful Boy* encourage the viewers to appreciate their personal networks and excess support towards the families attempting to cope in the aftermath of a mass shootings – whether those of the victims or the perpetrators. There are incidents in which the parents reassess their traits both in terms of parenting tactics and personalities as a response to feelings of guilt and shame, particularly imposed by the media. However, *Beautiful Boy* is ultimately a love story about the ways in which tragedy profoundly affects a relationship. Like several other films in which the concept of mass shootings is addressed, the sociopolitical rhetoric seems to cave in favor of ethically justifiable stories; moreover, they do not explicitly focus on the perpetrators. The phenomenon of mass shootings forms the context, but the film nevertheless avoids touching upon sociopolitical implications; it echoes the idea of assigning responsibility to the parents, but does not deeply examine the issue as a subject within the ongoing discourse or vividly challenge the public's perception of the parents' role in such incidents. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* vividly does.

As in the case of Shriver's book, the story is told from the perspective of the mother, Eva. The narrative jumps back and forth in time, in between her present life, in which the viewer observes her desperately attempt to cope in between her regular visits to the penitentiary in which Kevin is held, and her memories, presented chronologically, from her previous life before her son acts on his impulses – whatever they may be, wherever they come from and whether they are a result of nature or nurture. Through her memories, the life of Kevin is

depicted from infanthood to adolescence, to the point in which Kevin kills both his father and his sister, prior to the massacre at his school. The callbacks to her distant, yet haunting memories represent acts of self-scrutiny and continuous punishment, in which she aims to assess where she failed as a mother and when she should have known. Ramsay does not allow interpretive clarity in whether Eva is to blame for her son's actions; first of all, she does not immediately evoke sympathy and empathy in her weary appearance, thereby separating her from the mother in *Beautiful Boy*. By society's standards, she depicts non-maternal traits in her apparent coldness, and is overall a non-commercial embodiment of the atypical mother – however, at the same time, she may evoke sympathy for the same reasons. Immediately one knows that this narrative will not form a polemic approach explicitly aiming to shield the parents from scrutiny in the aftermath of such incidents, thereby challenging the audience from very start. Eventually it is evident that the lack of maternity and overall colorless expression are partially a result of her overwhelming shame. In between glimpses of the day of the massacre, the narrative continuously returns to the present day and her continuous struggle to shy away and remain unnoticed among others. Yet, her unsympathetic expression is detectable when the viewer is granted access to her memories, the defining moments in which her responsibilities as a mother are scrutinized and challenged. Before Kevin, Eva was an adventurist, expressing a passion for exploring the world in solitude, before running into her future husband, Franklin, with whom she falls in love, blissfully unaware of her future ahead. While she is evidently happy, there is nevertheless something about Eva distorting her innocence – there is ambiguousness, a lack of clarity, something preventing us from thoroughly assess her as an individual. Eva, as in the case of Eric and Alex, defy categorization. The depiction of Eva allows the viewers to acquire an omniscient position, enabling them to enforce scrutiny and judging her, or Kevin, accordingly.

As the memories unfold, the idea of Eva as the source of Kevin's overall personality traits, therefore his actions, is foreshadowed at an early stage. The narrative quickly establishes Kevin as a mere offspring as opposed to an individual developing a personality of his own. The distressful and tormenting mood is set from the very beginning of the era of Kevin. The moment of conception is not conveyed as a moment in which Eva and Franklin express intimacy – by contrast, given the fact that the viewer already has a clear idea of what is about to unfold, it may interpret as a moment that should have been avoided overall. In every sense of the word, Kevin is not planned, and it all lingers in Franklin's question: «are you sure?». In hindsight, the viewer judges her for being irresponsible and failing to thoroughly assess the situation, as if she were to already know that her inaccuracies as a mother would have fatal consequences, as if

she is some sort of Frankenstein about to create a monster. From that point on, Kevin will punish her for being his mother. From the inside of her womb, there is horror; she tries, yet fails to enjoy her pregnancy, comparing herself to other mothers. The expression in her face – a look that seemingly will remain throughout the rest of her life – suggest that ambivalence at best and regret at worst. There is a continuous psychological battle in which her denial and common sense opposes her instincts, a feeling of distress she is unable to shake. Giving birth to Kevin is nowhere near a happy occasion; she keeps resisting, subconsciously trying to prevent her son from entering the world. Postpartum, she feels disconnected from her son, yet, simultaneously, there is a natural bond that will connect them in ways that is only a mother and her son will know. Unlike Franklin, she is unable to prevent him from constantly crying; there is a prominent contrast between Eva and Franklin, as well as between Eva and her son throughout the story. He wears diapers beyond his toddler years, refuses to walk, opposes home schooling and does not develop as a normal child in the eyes of his mother, despite his doctor affirming the opposite. Fueling the frustration of Eva, thereby the viewers' frustration, Kevin is well-behaved around his father – he is manipulative, intelligent and makes use of every situation to remain in total control at the expense of his mother. The moments in which he explicitly aims to provoke her, whether deliberately soiling himself, placing his sandwich top-down on the living room table or breaking his crayons in half, bear symbolism in their ability to further stimulate confusion and the urge to detect reasons for why Kevin seeks to punish his mother. His behavior takes a turn for the worse as he comes of age; after the arrival of his younger sister, she is reduced to a piece of the same puzzle, as leverage in his apparent vendetta towards Eva. Her reluctance to inform neither Franklin nor Kevin about the pregnancy suggests fear; while Celia would be a positive influence in Eva's life, representing a chance to practice motherhood by the book, her hesitation signals awareness over the fact that Kevin will punish his sister accordingly. Upon meeting his newborn sister, he sprays her with water to make her cry; a few years later, he kills her guinea pig and partially blinds her by subjecting her to toxic cleaning fluids. While Franklin is convinced of his innocence, Eva knows, even though she never saw him conduct these actions, that Kevin is responsible. In between these defining moments, Eva and her son gaze upon one another – Franklin remaining unaware – in effect confirming Eva's assumptions. Yet, the viewer, as Eva, will never know with complete certainty before it is too late.

Given his manipulative behavior during his early childhood years, before theoretically developing a sufficient level of self-awareness and self-consciousness, his actions might suggest that he is a product of nature, that Kevin punishes her on a subconscious level, merely

because he is his mother's offspring. The similarities between them are portrayed both explicitly and symbolically through cinematic compositions. When inviting Kevin out for dinner and a round of miniature golf, Kevin makes a remark of her apparent harshness, to which she notes, «you're the one to talk». In accordance with his continuous aim of punishment, he sarcastically responds by saying «yeah, I am. I wonder where I got it», thereby explicitly establishing the phenomenon of nature as a plausible explanation. Moreover, while Franklin is the exact opposite, both Eva and Kevin embody the same physique in their tall and thin figures; their hair is raven black, pale in texture and they both convey a similar dark expression in their eyes, as if they both share a hidden secret. The idea of Kevin being made from the same mold is conveyed through juxtapositions, in which Eva and Kevin are symbolically equalized (fig. 9) Moreover, Eva is seen extracting fragments of eggshells from her mouth as she is having dinner, lined up neatly in front of her; similarly, Kevin is seen extracting fragments of finger nails from his mouth before lining them up as neatly as his mother on the table in front of him during his mother's visit at the penitentiary (fig. 10, 11). The ways in which they compare themselves to one another is evident when Kevin, both as a child and as a teenager, is outside practicing archery with his father, from whom he received the set. Eva gazes upon Kevin through the kitchen window while trying to figure him out (fig. 12); intuitive of her scrutiny, he turns towards her and gazes back with a slight smirk on his face (fig. 13). Unlike Eva, he figured her out a long time ago, well-aware of the fact that the mother bears the prime responsibility for his endeavors. The window may thus symbolize a form of self-scrutiny, through which Eva is watching a twisted version of herself; yet, there is something unresolved between them. A final meaningful juxtaposition is conveyed in their desire for attention; upon the release of her book depicting her previous travels, Kevin stops at a bookstore exhibiting her work, staring at the large portrait of her, displayed in all its glory (fig. 14). Her son's massacre forms the ultimate response.

As the story is told from Eva's perspective, the viewers may not necessarily position themselves accordingly and try to figure out Kevin for themselves; however, in one's everlasting quest to detect answers, the idea of nature as the primary cause for the existence of sociopaths is lacks definitive patterns, far too complex to address as an explanation for the occurrence of mass shootings. While there are reasons to believe that certain personality traits are inherited by one's children, it is not the mother who is willing to commit extreme acts of violence. Moreover, their daughter Celia embodies all the qualities of a normal, healthy child. Consequently, the film may encourage the audience to examine the idea of nurture as an explanatory factor, in effect scrutinizing the Eva's capabilities, or lack thereof, as a mother.

Questions of whether Kevin picked up on her ambivalent emotions towards him may arise, forming a more durable explanation for why Kevin keeps working against her. There are moments in which the audience is challenged in their assessment of Eva as a caretaker. Weary of her son's constant crying, she attempts to mute him by seeking out noisy construction sites; further, in a moment of weakness, Eva tells Kevin how she «was happy before little Kevin came along», how she wishes «she were in Paris». Even as a toddler, he looks at her as if he catches her discontent and resentment. Eventually, as he grows older, Kevin terrorizes his mother's office by spraying paint all over her walls, decorated with maps and tokens from her previous life as an adventurous globe-trotter, reduced to a memory of her previous life before motherhood dismantled her true identity as a free spirit – a lack of fulfillment that might have rubbed off on her son. Celia further complicates the matter in this context, particularly as Kevin is able to observe how much Eva loves her. As opposed to the day Kevin was born, she is happy, proud and content; in its simplicity, Kevin has been replaced by someone she adores. The newfound relationship between Eva and her daughter in effect becomes the ideal version of society's perception of motherhood. Celia evokes jealousy in Kevin, as if she is robbing him of a treasured possession; thus, Kevin's punishment of his mother comes to include her as well. The relationship between Eva and Kevin becomes toxic, a self-fulfilling prophecy in which Eva gradually becomes more inclined to dislike him on account of his behavior; by contrast, Kevin senses her disapproval of him, thereby maintaining the same destructive pattern of resentment. Whether nature or nurture shaped Kevin as an individual becomes a matter of the chicken or the egg; while Eva created Kevin, Kevin created Eva by defining her as a mother.

Before one is able to detect a plausible connection between their relationship and Kevin's final act of violence, Ramsay deprives the viewer of thorough analysis through narrative juxtapositions. The moment in which Eva lets her emotions get the better of her by pushing Kevin into the wall, consequently breaking his arm, is perhaps the most defining moment when assessing her qualities as a mother. However, when returning from the hospital, Kevin covers for his mother by telling Franklin that he brought it on himself; it creates an illusion of hope, suggesting that Eva is not the primary cause for Kevin's action. Another moment of affection occurs when Eva is reading him a book about Robin Hood, specifically the part in which he competes in an archery contest; contrary to the rest of the narrative, Kevin is hostile towards Franklin for interrupting the story when he enters the room. Eva is, for a very brief moment, accepted as a mother, and exhales relief and happiness in an otherwise gloomy, depressing and frustrating state of life. This is the point of time in which one wishes for the story to end; yet, well-aware of what is about to unfold, the story returns to the status quo, and

Kevin quickly resumes to his vicious, uncompromising and unscrupulous pattern of behavior, leaving Eva and the viewer equally frustrated and confused. After the accident, Kevin is in total control, and is able to thrive on her guilt. Eva is continuously attempting to practice motherhood by the book, unwilling to acknowledge the inevitable hopelessness forming her life; the accident, a symbol of her failures as a mother, is countered by the inherently sympathetic trait of self-consciousness and guilt. She raises him to the best of her knowledge, yet finds herself questioning every method and every move in retrospect. Her instincts are conflicted by her ever-optimistic husband, who threatens to file for divorce unless she is willing to deal with her own issues towards her son. She constantly reassesses the situation, whether there is something fundamentally wrong with her or whether Franklin's opposition is a matter of ignorance. The ambivalence of their relationship creates a constant state of confusion, in which nature battles the nurture; as Eva, the viewer will never access the true meaning of their relationship, nor the core of Kevin's behavior.

The Destructiveness of Scrutiny

Despite one's apparent inability to solve the puzzle of the nature-nurture problematics, the moments in which the present life of Eva is depicted in between her memories stimulate sympathy towards her. While Kevin is locked up, she will remain compromised and scrutinized on the outside; she is continuously punished by society and by herself, tormented by her own memories in which she retraces every step she has taken as a mother. She is by proxy responsible for the other parents' grief, as well as her own loss of her husband and daughter. Apart from being sued by one of the victims' parents – looking for someone to claim responsibility for the massacre – she has become socially unacceptable. The very first scene grounds the premise for the process of self-scrutiny and social punishment, in which Eva steps out on her way to a job interview, only to find her house and car vandalized with red paint, suggesting that the blood of the victims is on her hands. While simultaneously being observed by a boy in her neighborhood, she is desperately attempting to wipe off the paint from her car, yet unsuccessfully, as if she is never going to be able to escape her past. Red paint is stuck in her hair and under her fingernails, as visual manifestations of her memories haunting her while she is trying to blend in and move on with her life. At best, she encounters pedestrians, neighbors or coworkers who gaze upon her, whether trying to figure out who she is or whether aiming to judge her from a distance; at worst, she is slapped in the face on her way out from

her job interview and explicitly harassed by her coworkers. When rejecting her colleague at an office party, he asks her, «where do you get off, you stuck-up bitch? You think anyone else is gonna want you now?». She has seemingly come to terms with her new normal, being a social outcast forever associated with the day of the massacre, thereby attempting to walk about unnoticed. Moreover, she has accepted that she is to be blamed for Kevin's actions, thus reassessing her memories in order to figure out what she could have missed and exactly where she went wrong. At one point, two missionaries ask her if she knows where she is spending the afterlife, to which she responds by saying, cheerfully, «I'm going straight to hell», as if she is already there. Eva, previously a free-spirited bohemian explorer, is by society's standards reduced to a subject of horror, finding company in pills and wine, unworthy of sympathy for creating Kevin. She is forever framed as source of extreme violence; once a successful author, now a criminal by proxy. The question of whether it is at all constructive to punish her in retrospect – regardless of whether and how she deceives the image of «the perfect mother» – lingers throughout these moments.

Society's inability to look beyond the surface of these incidents is symbolically reflected through the layman's scrutiny of Eva (fig. 15); when driving to her job interview, the viewer is positioned from the inside of the car, looking back at a pedestrian walking by while she is attempting to wipe off the red paint from her windshield. The remains of the red paint blur the image of the pedestrian on the outside, preventing the viewer from retrieving a clear image of this particular individual; while one sees the contours of a person, the details are invisible. In the case of real-life mass shootings, the public is merely an audience, unable to detect or recognize the nuances and complexities that inevitably exist beyond the image to which they are subjected through the media. As the audience is granted access to the story through Eva, they know that this particular individual is an ignorant bystander who could not possibly comprehend the difficulties she has faced and is heading towards. While attempting to analyze the relationship between Eva and Kevin in search for answers, the window separating the two comes to bear symbolic value of the idea of scrutiny as well. The shifting points of view between Kevin and Eva signal confusion as to where one is supposed to look; the compositions challenge the viewers' comprehension of the situation. Even if Ramsay allows the audience personal access, one will never know, as Eva, where individuals like Kevin truly come from. As one is denied emotional access to the personal lives of both the mother and the perpetrator in reality, merely becoming objects of speculation, it is easy to criticize the mother for her inability to see, or act on, warning signs prior to these incidents. As she does not come across

as the ideal mother, it is easy to assign blame to her and judge the book by its cover – as symbolically conveyed when Kevin scrutinizes her picture at the bookstore.

Ramsay evidently wants the audience to ask these questions when they see Kevin screaming «die, die, die» when playing video games with his father, when he shoots an arrow at his mother looking at him through the window, when he downloads a virus at his computer aimed at his mother – causing her to spread the virus among her coworkers – for no apparent reason, and when she suspects that Kevin has blinded her sister and killed her guinea pig. These moments imply parental neglect. However, by contrast, she has tried reaching out to her husband, and she tried reaching out to the pediatrician; in accordance with the public's inability to access what lies beyond the surface, the doctor is unable to assess him on other accounts than those of immediate medical impressions, therefore giving him «the all clear». Even the director found herself asking these questions when reading the book (O'Hagan, 2011). Yet, Eva never saw Kevin kill the guinea pig or half-blind his sister; acting on his habit of playing violent video games would also be unfeasible, particularly when her husband continuously deems his interests as a natural part of boyhood and adolescent behavior. When Franklin threatens to leave her, she reassesses her judgement of the situation and whether her worries are a product of her own imagination, continuously fighting her own instincts as a mother. Her hands are tied, both due to opposition from her husband and herself. As everything else in the discourse of mass shootings, the reality of the matter is more complex than assumed by uninformed bystanders. It is inherently difficult to come to terms with the evident difficulties surrounding a family and the social repercussions that inevitably follow; while maintaining a certain façade of «the functioning American family» (O'Hagan, 2011), Eva tries to handle the situation, to the best of her knowledge, internally and domestically. Moreover, Eva's guilt may in part stem from her ability to see herself in Kevin; yet, she knows that she would never cause anyone harm. Safe to say, no one wants to believe that their child is abnormal, and no one wants to find themselves in a situation in which they have to reevaluate themselves as parents and their expectations of them, reassessing whether they shoulder some of the blame.

In the case of Sue Klebold, there was an incident in which her son expressed a form of aggression Klebold herself deemed to be a warning sign in retrospect, when retracing every step she has taken as a mother. When confronting him on his bad attitude, he responded by saying «Stop pushing me, Mom. I'm getting angry, and I don't know how well I can control it» (Brockes, 2016). Naturally, she did not act on his behavior at that point, yet, it constituted a meaningful moment in the aftermath, and formed a question mark as to whether she should have acted on this incident. According to his mother, Dylan Klebold eventually developed a

behavioral pattern she wishes she had addressed before, including submitting an essay containing violent imagery, vandalizing a few lockers at school with his friend Eric, exhibiting short-temperedness and «leaving his hair ungroomed» (ibid). However, in the midst of it, it is to various extents challenging to separate adolescent rebel, the «boys will be boys» perspective that Franklin seems to apply, from truly troublesome behavior. Sue Klebold further notes that she would be able to spot the abnormalities if she «had known then what she knows now». Although this sentiment might be accurate, one will nevertheless never, with certainty, know the potential outcomes of such behavior, and to which extent they are to be deemed alarming or dangerous; no parent will find herself, or himself, prepared for these incidents to happen to them. Even though these behavioral patterns might signal psychological difficulties, they do not suggest, and cannot be assessed to suggest, that a massacre will form a potential outcome. Moreover, the perpetrator will always be someone's son, and it is unfeasible to expect that the mother, or another family member, will administer the same analytical mentality – which often seems to fall short – prior to such incidents. Yet, due to the incomprehensibility surrounding these acts of violence, the inherent urge to assign responsibility and, to the extent that there are established cultural definitions of motherhood, the mother will tend to find herself in the center of the spotlight, and consequently punish herself for her inability to prevent such events from taking place, as in the case of Sue Klebold and Eva.

Thus, the audience is not supposed to acquire an omniscient position of knowledge – even if one, at first glance, is invited to do so – and enable themselves to answer the question of whether Eva is to be partially blamed for her son's action or not. What the film might convey, by contrast, is that it is generally irrelevant to pose these questions at all. By accessing the perspective of the situation through Eva, the audience is both being scrutinized as a mother and, paradoxically, as society as a whole, specifically by challenging the public's constant need to draw convenient, yet simple, causal connections. If nurture forms the preferred cultural narrative, one would evidently find oneself unable to explain the existence of unfit parents whose sons and daughters do not grow up to become mass murderers. After stealing electrical equipment from an unsupervised van, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were briefly taken into custody by the police; they were nevertheless quickly released as they exhibited a clean record and came from «good homes» (ibid). Debating the idea of nature, on the other hand, constitutes a deeply complex and incomprehensible topic within the field of psychology and biology, in which there will be no definitive and operational observations to apply when assessing the phenomenon of mass shootings. If genetics were to form a reasonable explanation, the son of Charlie Roberts – known for murdering five young girls at an Amish school in Pennsylvania in

2006 (Moorhead, 2015) – would have to be carefully monitored throughout his childhood and life overall, facing a future in which he will be socially punished for his father's actions, in addition to the inevitable personal, emotional struggles he is going through already. The idea of scrutinizing the parents when attempting to detect the origin of the perpetrators' psychological struggles, thereby fueling the nature versus nurture debate, will not stimulate progress. This perspective is symbolically manifested in Kevin's response to Eva as she is confronting him for infecting her computer with a virus: «There is no point. That's the point». In the final scenes of the film, Eva visits Kevin in prison, two years after the massacre, there is a brief glimpse of vulnerability in Kevin when he responds to Eva's search for the «why», as in the case of the audience: «I used to think I did. Now I'm not so sure». The final scene decodes the depth of a mother-son relationship, in which the otherwise steadily stern and controlled look in Kevin's eyes partially breaks down as he looks at his mother (fig. 16), before Eva hugs him on her way out. Kevin is ultimately her son, regardless of his actions, and one cannot possibly comprehend the challenges parents face in the aftermath of these events; there is ultimately no use in talking about Eva.

Finally, the ability to problematize the subject of scrutiny primarily lies in the overall stylistic approach and the ways in which it establishes a destructive mood, wearing off on the audience; *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a long, agonizing and disturbing story, leaving the audience in a rut when there are no answers provided. Ramsay herself has coined the film a psychological horror (Kohn, 2011). While the audience may be predisposed to expect a certain kind of story to the benefit of horror itself in «traditional» films within this genre, the idea of incorporating genre elements in an otherwise familiar narrative – those echoing the issue of mass shootings – may be efficient if the primary aim is to problematize the destructiveness of scrutiny. As the story is told from the perspective of Eva, the elements of horror mirror her experience of the situation and her reassessment of her memories. For instance, the color red is continuously reoccurring throughout the narrative as symbolism of her overbearing guilt and shame, suggesting that the blood of the victims is on her hands – both explicitly and literary, as she is attempting to remove the red paint from the front of her house, her car and ultimately herself, and implicitly, as in the moments in which she is drinking wine or the hiding behind a row of red cans of soup at the grocery store (fig. 17). Kevin embodies extreme qualities in order to stimulate reaction, and the overall mood fosters the instinctive need to draw conclusions and detect explanations, as in the case of Eva. The viewer becomes an extension of Eva herself, in which the suffocating environment she involuntarily finds herself within comes to include her audience; the scenes in which she is driving vividly embody a claustrophobic state, due to the

internal positioning of the camera, stimulating the sensation of suffocation, as in the case when she is attempting to pass through a sea of dressed up children who are out trick-or-treating on the night of Halloween (fig. 18). They surround her and run after her side-by-side, as physical manifestation of a past she cannot outrun. The musical elements, ranging from *Beach Boys* to Buddy Holly, create contrast and manifest themselves as genre elements, similar to the ways in which 1930s jazz bears symbolic value in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), recontextualized to emphasize the psychological battles that come to define the main characters. Words by Franklin and Kevin sporadically infiltrate her head while she is sitting at home in her dreary apartment drinking wine and popping painkillers in order to take the edge off. The horror lies in the overwhelming mood of psychological torment, present in the minds of Eva and the audience, in which there are virtually no moments in which they are allowed to come up for air.

The stylistic embodiment challenges the idea of escapism through the ability to capture the viewers and thoroughly incorporate them as an equal part of the narrative while, at the same time, provoking an urge to abstain from becoming a part of the narrative the viewers ultimately sought. As Eva, Kevin stimulates uncertainty, confusion and an overwhelming sense of frustration; unlike him, the audience is not in a position of control, despite one's continuous attempt to regain it, reflecting the reality of the situation and the surrounding discourse. As a viewer, one resents Kevin, and occasionally his mother, and one thrives on the single moment in which Eva and Kevin bonds through his bedtime story, providing a break from the destructiveness otherwise defining their relationship, the status quo to which the viewers are forced to return within a few minutes. As the audience is granted access to Eva's scattered mind, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a two-hour long psychological endurance test; yet, unlike their audience, the emotional torment imposed by being reduced to the mother of a mass murderer constitutes a reality from which they will never escape. Mass shootings quickly become yesterday's news; however, the mother is not. While the incidents are ultimately reduced to statistics and the shooters are locked up or dead, the mother is left behind to face the social repercussions. Thus, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* holds an ability to shake up the audience in ways that films such as *Beautiful Boy* does not. As opposed to merely protecting the parents of real-life perpetrators and avoiding the difficult topic of nature versus nurture, it illuminates the pointlessness of the discussion by inviting the viewers to fight a losing battle. Although Ramsay did not aim to offer an issue-based film, it questions the ways in which the public assesses mass shooters and the circumstances surrounding them, particularly as it is frequently interpreted as a film tackling the subject of mass shootings overall. The narrative may come across as destructive, yet, it is ultimately the nature of society's scrutiny that imposes destructiveness.

Examining the mother-son relationship may thus be assessed as means of portraying the overall complexity of mass shootings, in which there is no room for simplicity or convenient causal connections – in its overall stylistic approach, it adds depth to the «horror of inexplicability» (Collins, 2016: 112).

Framing Mental Illness

While the audience may settle with the pointlessness of fueling the nature versus nurture debate, some redirect their attention elsewhere in search for meaning; if the idea of scrutinizing the mother is irrelevant, it is only natural to enquire theories of relevance. David Thomson asks, «What about Kevin? Why is he like this? Why does he do what he does? I can't be because he fell in love with Robin Hood as a little boy. It's not because he was neglected» (2012). Philip French further seeks for answers in its «deliberately unclear» direction: «Where are the book's and the film's politics? Is it pointing at a creeping anomie, to a society without a moral compass? Is it a challenge to liberal complacency»? (2011). While some discredit the film for its inability to provide answers at all – including David Walsh (2012), who, as in the case of *Elephant*, resents *We Need to Talk About Kevin* accordingly – others attempt to dig deeper. Interpretation has moved beyond the original intent of Ramsay, being drawn to the mother-son relationship, discrediting the proposed existence of a political subtext in Kevin's actions. Yet, such an outcome is to be expected, as audiences may be subconsciously prone to search for answers within any form of commentary in which the issue of mass shootings is echoed. Although the complex issue of motherhood is examined through disturbing and compelling imagery, problematizing public scrutiny and certain aspects of prevailing societal perceptions, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* necessarily portrays the issue of mental illness within the context of mass murder. Problematizing perceptions of motherhood is the foregrounded subject, yet, the primary aim is to assess her influence in the development of a mentally disturbed individual. As illustrated, when the idea of punishing the mother becomes an issue of irrelevance, the focus is redirected towards Kevin and whether there is a polemic subtext examining the ways in which society assesses, portrays and oversees those suffering from mental illness. As stated by Alyssa Rosenberg in *The Atlantic*, «if we're actually to embark on a wrenching national debate about mental health care and murder, we need art that can provide us with perspectives on the unimaginable» (2011).

First of all, what the general aim of the film might suggest is that there are no one to blame for the massacre – Kevin was lost from the moment of conception, even though his behavior might have been stimulated by his mother's moments of weakness. In context, her supposed contributing demeanor might be perceived as irrelevant as the idea of assigning responsibility to the video game industry, those responsible for producing Kevin's bow and arrow, the manufacturers of the bicycle locks Kevin orders to prevent his victims from exiting the school building, or perhaps Robin Hood himself. Although his disturbing behavior might have been fueled, at best, by his interest in playing violent video games or practicing archery, these factors do not cause incidents of mass murder, even though it might be perceived as such by certain elements of the media or certain figures within the political sphere. These factors, otherwise perceived as elements of risk, are merely reduced to outlets of expression for his mental deviation, equalized with his long-lasting interest for Robin Hood. They are evidently incorporated within a narrative in which larger issues are of concern. Moreover, there is a more explicit form of criticism towards media sensationalism; the destructiveness of society's obsession towards framing mass killers and the idea of explaining the behavior of these individuals is conveyed through Kevin:

> You wake up, and you watch TV. You get in your car, and you listen to the radio. You go to your little job, or your little school, but you're not gonna hear about that on the 6 o'clock news. Because nothing is really happening […] I mean it's gotten so bad that half the people on TV, they're watching TV. What are all these people watching? People like me.

This perspective is further manifested in the scene in which Kevin conducts the massacre, raising his hands as if there is an audience, following by his exit in which one hears the sound of applause as he is being captured by the police. These moments may be interpreted as criticism towards inaccurate and simplistic patterns of explanation – primarily those of the mother, yet also towards the excessive focus on factors such as violent entertainment. This perspective echoes Roger Ebert's response: «if they are influenced by anything, they are influenced by news programs like your own». Whether perceived to be risk factors or not, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* may illustrate the inherent difficulty of acting on one's assumptions; he does not embody the warning signs of mental illness around his father, and, as far as the viewer knows, at school. When visiting him in prison, Eva signals that Kevin was able to work his way around the system by blaming the healthcare system: «You managed it all so well. Tried as a minor, out of your head on Prozac. You'll be out of there in a couple of years». Whether due to manipulative

behavior or not, many perpetrators may not embody any signs at all; Eva's inability to act on these signs might suggest that is it generally unfeasible to look for them. No one can sufficiently comprehend what goes on in their minds prior to any mass shooting, and every perpetrator forms a unique individual.

The avoidance of compensating for the apparent pointlessness by offering a feasible explanation is a tough sell; certain critics settle with the director's reluctance to provide answers: « … perhaps Ramsay has no intent, apart from shining light upon the sociopaths that live amongst us» (Howell, 2012). Others incorporate *We Need to Talk About Kevin* within their own cultural narrative, in which the film is assigned sociopolitical value in order to make sense of these incidents. Kevin is an extreme character, and does not, unlike Eva, defy categorization – it is easy to label him as mentally disturbed, whether a psychopath or a sociopath. There are certain scenes in which the severity of Kevin's illness is vividly portrayed, in addition to the continuous wave of manipulation defining their relationship; at one point, Eva walks in on her son masturbating in the bathroom – yet, he is unashamed, and keeps looking at her, and does not stop. His apparent disorder is not explicitly referenced in the film; rather, staying true to the genre of horror, he is reduced to a vividly disturbing character, tailored to the benefit of the film's pathos. Kevin might as well form a physical manifestation of the ways in which mass shooters are publically or politically portrayed, given the referencing of media sensationalism and scrutiny. However, due to his extreme traits and the overall context, the issue of mental illness will inevitably form a topic of discussion. Some may frame the film as a sentiment towards improving the healthcare system, in which the importance of thorough assessment is emphasized. As discussed, acting on Kevin's behavior is an obvious solution in retrospect, yet complex in the midst of it. If Eva is not to blame, the film might come across as suggestive of the fact that the focus is to be directed elsewhere. On these accounts, Franklin's ignorance could have symbolized the general failure to pick up on those posing a risk. For instance, Alyssa Rosenberg accentuates the value of conducting in-depth studies of mass killers: « … we need to report on killers and their lives to avoid falling into easy, false narratives about causation, if only because it often proves more important to fix existing safeguards than to impose new ones» (2012). Others address the film to draw attention to society's perception of those suffering from severe mental illness, as pleaded by professor Simon Baron-Cohen: «Do we show compassion for the killer because his actions are the result of his neurology, his low empathy? To do otherwise is to be as uncaring as the murderer himself. Having empathy for those who lack it is the ultimate challenge» (2011).

Based on the comments of Shriver and Ramsay, the primary aim of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is not to portray the typical mass shooter and generate discussion on mental illness and precautionary measures. Ramsay does not aim to comment on the situation of mass shootings at all: «Man, people are funny. They bring their own stuff. The thing is, it's not a realist film. That's where people seem to be getting their knickers in a twist» (Ramsay, quoted in O'Hagan, 2011). Yet, the general audience is inclined to search for answers, and the fact that it is framed as a story aiming to examine this issue is to be expected. When interpreted in the context of mass shootings, the importance of remaining socio-politically conscious should be accentuated. First, the ways in which the director problematizes the notion of scrutiny and challenges the audience's perception of the family unit may come across as means of conveying that the mother is in fact, or at least in part, to be blamed for her son's massacre: «Thousands and thousands of people have been directly affected by school massacres in the US, far greater numbers have felt an indirect influence. It is irresponsible, cruel and hypocritical to blame the parents – or any individuals – in such cases» (Walsh, 2012). Moreover, as there evidently does not exist a sociopolitical agenda behind the development of the character Kevin, there are certain pitfalls, in terms of reception, to be addressed. The film implicitly references the issue of mass shootings, and the audience may thus be prone to assess Kevin as an embodiment of the real-life mass shooter; this assessment may result in inaccurate assumptions. Ironically, the film does not explicitly talk about Kevin, yet, the audience seemingly wants to talk about Kevin.

Even though no form of diagnosis is made in the film, Ramsay, who, prior to production, confided in a child psychologist specializing in aberrant behavior, insinuates that Kevin in fact is a sociopath:

> … Sociopathy is now accepted as a condition that can be treated by drugs, but it's a very difficult territory. Even to make a diagnosis, the child's behavior would have to be so very extreme for a prolonged time. There are a lot of unanswered questions and different points of view, not least because even so-called normal kids can have abnormal tendencies for a while. I guess killing a pet would be a crossover moment, though.
> (Ramsay, quoted in O'Hagan, 2011)

When interviewed by journalist Marlow Stern (2011), child psychiatrist Alan Ravitz deconstructs Kevin and considers sociopathy to be the most plausible form of mental illness in Kevin's case, which also serves as an explanation for why Kevin, as far as the audience knows, does not embody any signs of risk in other environments. Yet, simultaneously, Kevin moves beyond the traditional perception of severe mental illness, thus beyond the point of treatment:

«This is sociopathy – where you're evil and you don't care about other people» (ibid). Knowledge on the concept of sociopathy would in part justify the behavior of both Kevin and his mother, as it constitutes a complex field within psychology; according to Ravitz, the case of Kevin is inherently rare, to the point where there is no sufficient degree of knowledge on how to treat individuals of this nature:

> If you're trying to treat a sociopath, you have to back them into a corner so tightly that there's absolutely no way for them to escape except to talk to you and open up. Dexter [from the Showtime series] is a sociopath and can't relate to people, and it's only when Dexter is backed into a situation of incredibly [sic] intimacy that he starts talking to himself, or people. So you try to build a relationship, but what's the likelihood that you're going to be able to do it? I mean, this kid is beyond treatment.

However, the general audience cannot be expected to label Kevin as a sociopath and acknowledge the fact that Kevin is a unique specimen, unfit to authentically depict the reality of mental illness among mass shooters. As Kevin in the end rejects any plausible explanation for his actions and personality overall – or lack thereof – he may not only come across as mentally ill, it may be easy to conveniently label him as «evil». Being sporadically compared to the monstrous offspring in *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Bad Seed* and *The Omen* (French, 2011), Kevin fits within a destructive cultural narrative – the idea of alienating perpetrators to the benefit of explanation – which Linder, among others, seek to discredit. Within the genre of horror, Kevin makes sense. Moreover, Kevin's extreme nature is imperative in order to stimulate the form of reaction on which the film's primary aim is built. However, as he is recontextualized, the idea of depicting Kevin as inherently evil may thus be problematic when *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is generally perceived as a film tackling the subject of mass shootings. On a subconscious level, such depictions may influence the general perception of mass shooters, particularly among those who hold no prior knowledge about mental illness. Assigning the qualities of a serial killer, in accordance with the ways in which they are portrayed in popular culture, redirects the attention in a non-favorable direction, thus preventing the audience from coming to terms with the reality of the situation:

> Ultimately, however, in the film as in the novel, it is Kevin that is the weakest element […] The problem is that the character of Kevin neither comes off as naturalistically plausible nor as mythically compelling: instead, he is a sour melodrama turn, a sullen pantomime villain, a demon from the wrong kind of horror film.
> (Fisher, 2012)

Kevin may be a demon from the wrong kind of horror film in his ability to equalize the notion of evil and severe mental illness. According to *Mental Health America* (MHA), a nonprofit organization aimed to improve discussion and assessment of mental illness, the discourse of severe mental illness is worthy of scrutiny, in which there is a general tendency in the media to label individuals accordingly in the aftermath of a crime otherwise perceived to be «evil», including both acts of terrorism and mass killings (2013). The various incidents occurring throughout the film are referenced as indicators of antisocial behavior – patterns commonly describing illnesses such as psychopathy or sociopathy. In itself, antisocial behavior will not necessarily indicate danger; violent video games or bicycle locks do not signal mass murder. However, «when put together with his killing spree», wrongful assumptions about mental illness may emerge. A discourse of this nature may consequently stigmatize mentally ill individuals by subconsciously assessing them as evil; moreover, it enables the public to «ignore what's going on without really taking a good hard look at why people act the way they do» (ibid). Through Kevin, severe mental illness gains the face of a mass killer, potentially suggesting that individuals suffering from severe mental illness are to be perceived as dangerous and «evil», as prospective mass shooters.

Moreover, by contrast, Kevin could be interpreted as an embodiment of the perception that all mass shooters inherently suffer from severe mental illness – a host of wrongful assumptions. For these reasons, it is an issue of concern that audiences may be inclined to question her reluctance to take him to a psychiatrist, thereby framing the film as an expression of the importance of improving the mental healthcare system. As already discussed, coming to terms with the fact that this is a necessity at all is easier said than done – particularly when most mass shooters do not embody these traits at all; most mass shooters are not «implausible psychos» like the Joker (Fisher, 2012). While many shooters exhibit some sort of mental deprivation, the idea of establishing a causal connection between mental illness and mass shootings is largely unjustified, coming across as means of grossly oversimplifying an otherwise complex issue in favor of explanation. As previously mentioned, curing all cases of severe mental illnesses would only lead to a rough 4 percent reduction in overall violence (Beckett, 2015). Reinforcing mental health assessment may cause more harm than good in its inherent plausibility of targeting the wrong individuals; while one is preoccupied by framing mentally ill individuals, mass shootings will, all things concerned, continue to occur. As the numerous, ultimately failed, attempts to generate a common profile convey, mass shooters cannot merely be reduced to a diagnosis, particularly in terms of severe conditions such as psychopathy or sociopathy. Even if one were to thoroughly assess every perpetrator, it is highly

unlikely that one would be able to detect reoccurring patterns feasible for practicing risk assessment in order to prevent future shootings from happening. Framing mental illness will not produce sufficiently operational results.

Severe mental illness in general is already – albeit wrongfully – to a large extent established as a specific cause of the occurrence of mass shootings; it forms a convenient pattern of explanation, therefore prone to be contagious. Moreover, as the subject of mental illness is heavily politicized, there is an overbearing need for sentiments aiming to discredit the idea of mental illness as a cause of mass shootings and oppose inherently destructive statements such as those of conservative commentator Anne Coulter: «Guns don't kill people – the mentally ill do» (2013). Mental illness is not perceived as an American phenomenon – however, mass shootings, to large extent is. Enforcing the debate on severe mental illness within the context of mass shootings may further legitimize other wrongful assumptions in terms of risk assessment, if perceived to constitute a criticism of the mental healthcare system, in which the discussed factors may be framed as indicators of psychological issues. A society of scrutiny, infiltrating both the educational system and personal arenas and settings, forms the primary tactic for preventing future shootings, as opposed to addressing the very factor enabling them to act out on their impulses in the first place. Certainly, Ramsay should not be criticized on these accounts; *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is rhetorically powerful in its ability to challenge the notion of scrutiny and shed light on a potentially overlooked social aspect of mass shootings. Moreover, its ability to spark discussion on the subject of mental illness is inherently a positive outcome, as the idea of framing this issue within the political sphere is worthy of scrutiny. However, it is ultimately a humanist look at a phenomenon that should be politicized within fictional film, especially when it is prone to be assessed as a sociopolitical commentary. It illustrates the complexities that may emerge from depicting this issue, whether deliberately or not, explicitly or implicitly, or whether it forms the key component of the story or merely as a backdrop. Moreover, its reception illustrates the inherent potential of fictional film – especially when its subject is largely underrepresented within the fictional sphere – and the importance of remaining socio-politically conscious. While Ramsay zooms in, Van Sant and Sutton zoom out, aiming to provide a clearer image of the situation of mass shootings and its political implications. Talking about Kevin, or Eva, should not be necessary; there is a need to talk about mass shootings, in which the bow and arrow is replaced by automatic weapons and assault rifles – indeed, there is a need to talk about the elephant in the room, and make use of the attention fictional film is able to attract.

Framing the American: *Dark Night*

As in *Elephant*, establishing a sense of realism is essential to the rhetorical value of Tim Sutton's *Dark Night*. The realistic portrayals of sensationalized events A. O. Scott seeks is fulfilled within *Dark Night* as well, through the environment it portrays, its narrative qualities, characters, aesthetics and overall atmosphere. Moreover, its realism is dependent on the establishment of relatability, and its relatability depends on its realism, in which the establishment of self-identification is imperative. The notion of relatability – the ability to recognize oneself in accordance with the traits of the various characters and the context in which they occur – forms the rhetorical gateway towards offering sociopolitical enlightenment. Sutton establishes relatability on a micro level in order to address the phenomenon of mass shooting on a macro level. This approach is manifested in the introductory sequence, in which the opening shot depicts a close-up of a young woman's eyes mirroring a flickering light in shades of blue and red (fig. 19), quickly establishing the immediate aftermath of the shooting. It invites a form of intimacy contrasted with the following sequence, taking the viewer back to the break of day, in which the community to which the viewer is granted access is depicted from above (fig. 20). As Van Sant, Sutton problematizes the discourse of mass shootings, yet goes further in his aim to mirror the American culture – he removes the phenomenon of mass shootings from the school corridors and reestablishes it within a familiar setting. Sutton thus reframes mass shootings as an issue of relevance in settings other than those of schools, as an act of violence that concerns all citizens across demographical and geographical borders. The suburban community observed holds symbolic value as the void of all that is American, whether the individuals, the environment or the activities in which they engage; it is the symbolic embodiment of ordinariness, reality as everyone knows it. As in the case of schools or theatres, an inherent sense of safety is established, only to redefine it as a platform on which the essence of American culture is reduced to a massacre.

Tim Sutton thus applies a significantly wider lens when addressing the subject of mass shootings, compared to its portrayal in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. *Dark Night* renders the sociopolitical consciousness Ramsay's film lacks, particularly when aiming to reflect the legacy of *Elephant*. *Elephant*'s status as a cinematic trailblazer in terms of examining mass shootings is confirmed through the release of *Dark Night*, as the director seeks to «continue a dialogue of direct artistic, cinematic response to violence» (Macaulay, 2016). Sutton acknowledges the potential of fictional cinema in his aim to provide «something thought provoking, something

meaningful, that could be seen as a document of the time we live in and an alternative voice on an important issue» (ibid). Contrary to the ways in which mass shootings are debated, offering a nuanced reassessment may come across as a story about «nothing» in its reluctance to offer explanations in accordance with the ongoing discourse, as argued by Alex Welch (2016) in his assessment of *Dark Night* as «a confused, lifeless picture». However, as in *Elephant*, the direct response Sutton aims to offer may paradoxically dive well beyond the surface of the phenomenon. As Sutton reframes mass shootings as a societal issue overall, as opposed to responding to the journalistic coverage of a specific event, *Dark Night* is a multilayered examination of the phenomenon, therefore complicated and challenging to deconstruct in terms of highlighting clear-cut issues of sociopolitical concern. Yet, it necessarily addresses all aspects worthy of enlightenment in one way or another, and poetically synthesizes the topics of discussion, both on account of established perceptions of the perpetrator and issues subjected to scapegoating and sensationalism. Moreover, the director demonstrates an ability to employ a humanist point of view while simultaneously offering rhetorical sentiments aimed at the ongoing discourse of mass shootings, thereby further emphasizing the contrast between *Dark Night* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Consequently, when addressed in context, the characters primarily function as embodiments of prominent issues themselves, and *Dark Night*'s sociopolitical value thereby emerges when analyzing the characters.

Reframing Aurora

This particular day unfolds as any other day, as if the viewers happen to find themselves within the community at a random point in their lives; apart from the event about to unfold, there is nothing, at first glance, suggesting that there is anything abnormal about this particular day. A young immigrant, Karina (fig. 21), is observed stroking her cat, watching the news, sunbathing with her friends and working at the local mall with her friend Rosie (fig. 22); a self-conscious social media addict, Summer (fig. 23), continuously takes selfies and makes workout tutorials; a troubled teenager, Aaron (fig. 24), shares his reflections on everyday life while interviewed with his mother; a rebellious punk-rock skater, Andres (fig. 25), hangs out with his friends playing video games or smoking marijuana; a war veteran attends a veteran's meeting and polishes his firearms (fig. 26), and a frustrated young student, Jumper (fig. 27), walks his dogs, visits his mother and roams around in his car; moreover, he has access to a firearm. To an American audience, everything is as ordinary as heading to the theatre. Aiming to portray the

American suburbia as a mirror of the status quo, Sutton sought to cast authentic archetypes with the potential to represent the environment in which shootings tend to occur – a recognizable setting and recognizable characters.

> I wanted to make a movie in which people could recognize themselves in the characters, and that meant including what I thought were archetypes of Americans in the suburbs today. I wanted to have a Latina who is trying to explore her new community, I wanted a vet, a [sic] wanted a troubled teenager, and I wanted someone who is obsessed with selfies and fitness, because there isn't a person that can't recognize himself or herself in at least one of them.
> (Sutton, quoted in Aguilar, 2017)

As one observes them roaming around in the open, indefinite landscape of an amorphous American suburbia, it becomes challenging to separate them from one another and sufficiently characterize them, as they all make up the environment within which they blend – which is precisely Sutton's aim in the end. None of them are professional actors; they are all individuals well-integrated in the suburban community of Sarasota, Florida, in which the film was produced (Buder, 2017). As in *Elephant*, the individuals exist within their own habitat, allowed to keep their own names. The choice of characters embodies the idea of blurring fact and fiction to the point where it becomes challenging to separate the actor from the individual. By altering the script in accordance with their predispositions and personalities, the actors were encouraged to portray versions of themselves, in which the essence of their daily routines and personalities were kept at hand: «I wanted to make it about these people's daily lives, no matter how boring or how strange or how disturbing, because the shooter is one of them» (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017). As in real-life incidents of mass shootings, the prospective perpetrator will function within a narrative in which their arc is yet to be defined, and difficult – if not impossible – to detect before the incident in question unfolds. As stated by Sutton, none of the characters in question exhibit an arc (ibid) – neither do real-life perpetrators.

The director seeks to offer a «clean portrait» of the phenomenon of mass shootings, as in the case of *Elephant*, from which its sociopolitical value may be extracted through active reflection:

> I think the overall message is just of observation. Specifically, a non-political observational eye in a corner of our country that I think stands for a great sense of isolation and nothing more […] I want people to see that this is what it is like […] It's not a documentary but isn't saying one thing or another politically about

guns. It's just showing that there is easy access and that guns are very dangerous and that people are very alone. Those are more important points to see than my political views.

(Sutton, quoted in Fairbanks, 2016)

While it may seem like Sutton aims to explicitly express a sociopolitical agenda, the fact of the matter remains, that pure observation best reflects the reality of the situation, that American society is based upon a certain perception of civil liberties. Reducing a work of fiction to a mere explicit political polemic, as in the case of *Miss Sloane*, is evidently fruitless when aiming to stimulate reflection and touch upon a rigid, underlying mentality whose roots are traced back to the ratification of the nation's constitution. The simplicity of a clean portrait evokes complexity; by contrast, its underlying complexity evokes simplicity. This simplicity nevertheless constitutes a source of explanation the political sphere refuses, or is unable, to acknowledge. Depictions of this nature represent a rhetorical potential one is largely unable to access within other forms of art – the ability to incorporate elements of documentary within a visual narrative that is ultimately fiction, yet authentic, relatable, believable and very real in its portrayal. More importantly, it holds the ability to depict stories centered around individuals and incidents prior to a mass shooting in ways the news media or documentaries cannot; when establishing a sense of realism – when «fact and fiction feed off each other» – they may become powerful in effect (Sutton, quoted in Fairbanks, 2017). Showing, as opposed to telling, is taken to another level within these depictions; there is depth to its shallowness and a sociopolitical critique through its very absence.

The observational tone grasps the ordinariness of everyday life, manifested in *Dark Night*'s aesthetics. As in *Elephant*, its cinematography, editing and overall stylistic embodiment mirror the community and the ways in which the various individuals merely exist within a specific environment. There is limited amount of dialogue, feeding the observational documentary-styled approach manifesting the audience within the narrative. The sporadic musical tracks, in which one hears the melancholy, soothing voice of Maica Armata, followed by segments in which one hears the buzzing sound of lightbulbs or crickets, elevates the hypnotic, poetic calmness of the community. The low-paced rhythm of *Dark Night*'s cinematography, often portrayed through long pans or tracking shots, as in *Elephant*, allows the atmosphere to rub off on their observers without interruption. While Van Sant invites scrutiny, Sutton welcomes voyeurism, in which the viewer and the characters are visually and stylistically equalized. The shifts in perspectives do not come across as means of denying of emotional access as portrayed in *Elephant*; they introduce and expose another individual with

whom one shares common ground, visually depicted by positioning the audience next to each character (fig. 28). As opposed to following them, the viewer walks along with the different characters, gazing upon them as they are engaging in activities defining their everyday lives. The viewer is also frequently positioned in front of them, enabling the audience to see them thoroughly and connect with them; point of view compositions further manifest this approach. Through voyeurism, the audience becomes a part of the community, as opposed to mere scrutinizers observing an environment and its individuals to which they cannot relate. Simultaneously, the stylistic embodiment and the notion of pure observation conveys isolation. At certain points, their paths cross, in which some of them appear in the background while the viewer is focusing on another character; however, unlike *Elephant*, the characters never encounter each other. These moments emphasize solitary existence, the sense of isolation Sutton is aiming to depict. The isolation of modern society is manifested through shifts between close-ups, as in figure 25, and wide, total shots (fig. 29). The characters do not come across as individuals expressing satisfaction, contempt and happiness. Despite the apparent differences between them as archetypes, and their disconnection towards one another, they come together through isolation, connected through disconnection. Moreover, their inherent sympathetic traits further connect them with the audience by whom they are observed.

Karina attempts to distribute her time among two groups of friends, and seemingly does what is expected of her. She comes across as an inherently caring person; yet, she embodies how isolation inhabits everyone, how isolation is ultimately an emotional state, regardless of one's network. Rosie is equally disconnected, feeling neglected by her best friend choosing her other friends over her; Summer constantly fights to prevent the persona she wishes to depict from crumbling down. She spends most of her time documenting the façade of perfection, whether taking selfies in her workout-gear in the bathroom or making workout tutorials. While desperately attempting to depict a deceiving image of perfection – an image breaking down piece by piece – the gap between reality and fiction becomes even greater, and the void of isolation and loneliness grows exponentially deeper. The skater, Andres, is continuously surrounded by his friends, seemingly contempt with the role he has been dealt; he is disconnected from the environment he inhabits, yet finds connection through others of his kind. However, there is a sense of ambiguousness to his character; he is isolated even when he is not. Eddie finds common ground as well by attending veteran's meetings, listening to others sharing their stories, crying, struggling to cope with the idea of returning to normal and functioning, productive members of society. Yet, Eddie merely listens, exhibiting the same, ambiguous expression throughout (fig. 30). As in the case of Karina, and partially Andres, there is isolation

among equals. Unable to communicate with his wife and his son, they alienate each other. Aaron expresses frustration and resent when claiming that everyone is against him, as if he cannot function in a traditional social setting. His classmates are «constantly fighting» him, portrayed as «faggots who can't control their anger», apart from one true friend, to whom he became acquainted online. His mother continuously emphasizes his artistic qualities and the uniqueness he exhibited growing up, as if she is reluctant to acknowledge the true nature of his struggles. The frustrated student, Jumper, is observed driving around alone in his car trying to cope with the emotional strain he evidently is experiencing. He is unable to connect with his mother, like Aaron, and seems to actively avoid encountering other individuals. The evident difference between them is nevertheless the ways in which they aim to counter the emotional repercussions of their isolated lives.

They are ultimately vulnerable individuals who struggle to find their own paths, suppressing their malaise of their existence behind a shield of isolation in different ways – therein lies the pathos of *Dark Night*. In *Elephant*, the characters occur as if they are a part of a video game – a stylistic element of rhetorical value suited to its overall aim – in which emotional access is overall denied. As opposed to merely depicting the characters are ordinary, the director emphasizes the inherent humanism of each character – a defining element within Sutton's sentiment, both grounded in ethical and sociopolitical concerns. The audience and the individuals observed are emotionally equalized, focusing on the victims of the story by portraying them as real, relatable human beings, as opposed to reducing them to unknown victims of a sensationalized crime. On these accounts, *Dark Night* acknowledges the public's urge to seek restorative narratives, as fulfilled through films such as *April Showers*. However, *Dark Night*'s incorporation of emotional juxtaposition forms its primary argument. Even though both *Dark Night* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* focus on the humanistic aspects of issue of mass shootings, *Dark Night*'s ability to stimulate emotional self-identification simultaneously enables the director to address important sociopolitical issues. The fact that the story portrays the final hours prior to the incident highlights the rhetorical importance of relatability: «Most media on this topic is about the aftermath – about grief and shock and then investigation and finger-pointing and punditry. *Dark Night* is about the lives we lead» (Sutton, quoted in Bosch, 2017). As discussed throughout, «crystal-clear hindsight» will not generate progress, and the ability to raise awareness of the distortedness of convenient patterns of explanation is worthy of critical examination (Fox & DeLateur, 2013: 133).

Relatability counters sensationalism, the idea of providing narratives that clearly coin these incidents as abnormal and exceptional. Referencing the Aurora massacre is therefore

particularly loaded in sociopolitical terms, as it constitutes a benchmark within the discourse of mass shootings and the distortive conclusions emerging from it. As argued by Fox and DeLateur (2013), the massacre, along with Sandy Hook, prompted familiar hot topics of public and political discussion. The inherently disturbing nature of the Aurora massacre would inevitably fuel familiar narratives in which the primary aim is to alienate mass shooters and disconnect them from the individuals by whom they are surrounded. Allegedly embodying the character of the Joker, James Holmes entered the screening throwing smoke bombs – to which the audience, specifically his audience, clapped, believing it was a part of the show – before opening fire (Macaulay, 2016). Holmes became a character within his own blockbuster, a character embodying a mass shooter, eventually perceived as an authentic representation of mass shooters by his ability to legitimize perceptions of external causal connections induced by moral panic. Sutton thus chose to reference a highly sensationalized real-life mass shooting from which vivid contrasts and contradictions may be detected and depicted through fictional examination. Despite its evident connection to the Aurora massacre, the real-life incident and the story unfolding in Sutton's narrative are juxtaposed, from which one can detect the evident differences between them. Karina is observed watching the news, depicting real footage from the case of Aurora, in which a mugshot of James Holmes briefly appears (fig. 31); moreover, while Eddie is driving, a news report on the *Trainwreck* massacre in Louisiana – another theatre shooting taking place in 2015 (Bennett, 2015) – is heard on the radio. As stated by the director, *Dark Night* is not meant to be perceived as a reinterpretation of Aurora; rather, it depicts and challenges the public's relationship to shootings of this nature, forming a specific story aimed to grasp a wider cultural narrative:

> I think the most important thing about the film to me is that it felt like a living document. While we were editing, the *Trainwreck* massacre happened […] Right before we premiered at Sundance, the San Bernardino shooting happened. When we played it at Bam Cinema Fest, the Orlando shooting happened […] It's important that this document doesn't feel like a remake or a specific interpretation of Aurora. It's something that's still being made.
> (Sutton, quoted in Fairbanks, 2017)

Perceived as a «truly horrifying piece of American performance art», the director was drawn to the symbolic value of the Aurora massacre, to the ways in which the theatre represented the ultimate decay of fiction versus reality (Macaulay, 2016). Towards the end of the film, the characters' paths intertwine as they are seated in the theatre, ready to put their lives on pause for a second. As everyone else, the shooter seeks to escape his personal reality, only

to define gun violence as an inherently real and unescapable aspect of contemporary society. The young woman's gaze upon the screen (fig. 32) merges with the close-up of her eyes occurring in the opening sequence – which might as well be perceived as a cinematic gaze – accentuating the symbolic value of the massacre. Through the «metaphysical experience» of the theatre in *Dark Night*, as coined by Sutton himself (Buder, 2017), the Aurora massacre is reframed as common ground. The screen, meant to separate the real from the fictional, breaks down, and the event about to unfold expands beyond it: «You could look to your left and see the characters in the movie. Or you could look up on screen and it would be yourself in the movie […] I wanted it to go further than being a movie – I wanted it to be an immersive experience» (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017). Depicting the poster of *Dark Night* towards the end (fig. 33) as if they are at the very same screening, further adds to the establishment of metaphysical experience. As in the case of the individuals they are watching on screen, gun violence forms an inescapable reality. By framing the audience through relatability, vividly manifested within the final minutes of the film, Sutton enables the audience to draw parallels between Aurora and everyday life, between the sensational and the ordinary – two different states that fundamentally share the same roots.

Establishing a foundation of relatability through self-identification and emotional juxtaposition thus forms a rhetorical weapon aimed at everyone sitting in the theatre, both behind and in front of the screen. When knowing the stories of the individual characters, one knows that the theatre in which they are sitting provides an opportunity to catch a break from their lives on the outside, which might be the case for the audience watching them. Sutton examines the metaphor of escapism and the notion of reality versus fiction to recontextualize mass shootings as an inescapable issue. Once the screen between the audience and the characters is torn down, the sociopolitical sentiments Sutton aims to offer may become more rhetorically powerful. Despite being a work of fiction, the phenomenon of mass shootings is grounded and reduced to an ordinary aspect of contemporary society. Summer adds symbolic depth in this context; she continuously attempts to escape her reality and through screens, yet, it is inescapable. She breaks down the barrier between fiction and reality by subjecting the viewers to an inescapable issue that ultimately involves everyone. *Dark Night* may thus be read as a critical response towards those claiming that mass shootings should not be assessed as an American issue, as argued by Shildkraut and Elsass (2016). While they offer insightful research on the phenomenon of mass shootings, they nevertheless legitimize the narrative of terror, encouraging a distortive image of the origins of the phenomenon – countering these perceptions is thus imperative. The metaphysical experience of *Dark Night* might intensify an already

established presence of fear, and it may seem somewhat extreme – yet, it is evidently important to change the prevailing mentality and make use of the notion of fear in favor of enlightenment.

Reframing the Perpetrator

The idea of providing emotional insight is not only motivated by reframing mass shootings as common ground; it invites psychological reassessment, encouraged to discredit established perceptions of the perpetrator. Social isolation may be interpreted as the factor defying these perceptions. In order to reflect American society for what it is, certain assumptions on a micro level must be discredited; redefining the relationship between the viewer and the perpetrator is the prime motivation. Sutton reframes the perpetrator by problematizing the general urge to categorize them, the issue of mental illness, and distortedness promoted by precautionary measures. As stated in part II, the idea of creating a psychological typology of mass shooters has occupied behavioral scientist in the attempt to provide explanations (Fox & Levin, 2017: 43). There are certain reoccurring elements describing their motifs perceived to be worthy of enlightenment, including a thirst for power, the motivation of revenge, loyalty in terms of protecting «their loved ones from misery and hardship», and on particularly rare occasions, financial profit or terror. However, these are exclusive to a few incidents, particularly the latter, and do not explain the concept of mass shootings on US soil. The underlying psychological predispositions causing them to assess these elements as motifs at all is further explained by examining the influence of overlapping environmental factors. According to Fox and Levin (2017: 46-49), these primarily include Social learning, in which violence is perceived to generate some sort of reward, whether induced by the media or social relationships, Strain Theory, focusing on the lack economic and social success, Routine Activity Theory, based on everyday situations perceived to cause victimization, Control Theory, describing how self-control is dependent on the existence of strong social ties, and finally, Biological predisposition, which roughly, for instance, establishes the foundation of discussing nature versus nurture, as portrayed in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Yet, again, these factors do not inherently explain why they would cause an individual to commit these crimes, particularly when there is no coherence on a case-by-case level. Naturally, the typology of mass shooters fits well within the narrative of *Dark Night*.

Prior to the moments in which Jumper is clearly defined as the prospective shooter, he is observed talking to his teacher behind closed doors; while the content of their conversation is inaudible, the viewer knows he is not performing in accordance with established expectations of him. In the following shot, he is determinately walking down the sidewalk, evidently struggling to cope with his teacher portraying him as a mere disappointment. There are dogs barking loudly at him, as if they represent the pressure imposed by modern society, echoing Aaron's perception of «the faggots who can't control their anger». He quickly turns around and walks in the opposite direction, as if he made a snap decision – eventually it will become evident that this scene embodies the idea of losing control, foreshadowing a decision that was long due. Jumper drives to the parking lot of the mall in which Karina and Rosie work; he parks his car and starts counting the steps towards the emergency exit – his gateway to the theatre – evidently acting out the narrative he will put into action. Later, he is encountered by his neighbor knocking on his door asking to borrow his Wi-Fi. She evidently hits yet another nerve; he whispers «asshole», collects his shotgun and approaches her house, aiming at her through the window (fig. 34), before backing down. There is a moment in which the director asks Jumper «is that your movie star face» as he smiles (fig. 35), to which he replies, «I sure hope so». As he enters the theatre, he exhibits the same smile (fig. 36), seemingly contempt with his decision. Prior to this moment, he denotes frustration and an inherent sense of anger. More importantly, he is terribly alone, isolated like everyone else.

Jumper, based on what the viewer is allowed to see, seems to fit within several of these narratives. There are no signs of popularity and social success overall – Strain Theory – emphasized by his neighbor failing to acknowledge him; there is an apparent lack of strong social ties – Control Theory – as he is never around others, perhaps causing him to lose a sense of self-control; his teacher's stern warning might suggest victimization – Routine Activity Theory; finally, his contempt towards the end might legitimize the theory of Social learning, as if there is a reward awaiting him in the theatre. However, they all blur in context. Several of the characters of *Dark Night* display signs that could be framed within this typology as socially isolated, and Jumper thus defies categorization as a mass shooter. For instance, by juxtaposing Jumper, Summer and Aaron – the characters who embody the most vivid signs of psychological strain – will discredit the idea of establishing a typology at all. According to Winegard and Ferguson (2017: 64), mass shooters tend to view themselves as victimized and react disproportionately to «perceived grievances», whether factors such as parental neglect, abuse

or bullying. To them, these factors become a part of their own, private narrative, and the lack of a hopeful outcome and feelings of social isolation becomes «the element of abuse or neglect», an emotional state imposed by the environment they inhabit. Thus, the idea of vengeance becomes their version of regaining control. He perceives the cause and meaning of isolation differently than the other characters, which ultimately enables him to perceive the idea of orchestrating a massacre as a solution. Naturally, Jumper is not observed as a victim of bullying or parental neglect; incorporating these elements would potentially fuel distortive perceptions of simple, causal connections. By contrast, when visiting his mother, she provides food and money before her son is off to prepare for his act of vengeance, and does not come across as a source of neglect. When Jumper is back in his car, he vomits the milk and cookies his mother brought him and screams in agony (fig. 37); perhaps this is the director's way of countering the perception the mother as a criminal by proxy, as depicted by Ramsay. This moment represents the sole moment of ambivalence when aware of the emotional strain he will inflict on his mother, as expressed by Harris and Klebold in their manifesto (Rich, 2012: 1310-1311). However, this is merely a subtext – if intended at all.

What is of importance within this scene is Jumper's scream, the peak of emotional chaos, echoing the scream of Summer (fig. 38) during the moment in which the façade of her personality breaks down. Prior to attending an audition, to which she has been invited by impersonating a manager, she nourishes her «alter ego» to the best of her knowledge. When comparing herself to another girl attending the audition, who perfectly fits within society's perception of beauty, her vulnerability and low self-esteem is vividly depicted, as if she is barely holding it together (fig. 39). Towards the end, before she is observed sitting by herself in the theatre – in tears – she breaks down, following her failure to complete a workout tutorial. She defies the category of Social learning, yet fits within the narrative of Strain Theory, as she fails at her attempts to uphold a façade of social success. Moreover, her version of losing a sense of self-control may be a result of a lack of social ties, thereby legitimizing the narrative of Control Theory. However, her scream is interrupted by a rough cut, taking her back to the bathroom mirror in which she attempts to rebuild her collapsed self-image. Unlike Jumper, her lack of control is not countered by conducting a massacre. They are not only juxtaposed to depict how social isolation may contribute to the destruction of self-control; they illustrate how the notion of isolation are assigned different meanings, how their screams ultimately embody different meanings. Summer makes it to the theatre as a spectator, in accordance with the other isolated individuals the audience has observed, while Jumper orchestrates the show. She could easily blame exterior factors for the malaise of her existence, for her inability to fit within society's

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expectations of her as a woman, and she could easily perceive herself as a victim of her surroundings. Summer ultimately accepts her reality for what it is, defying the category of Routine Activity Theory. If anything, the weapon of her «vengeance» is a camera. She adapts to the surroundings of her environment; in Jumper's eyes, the environment needs to adapt to him.

In accordance with the arguments of Winegard and Ferguson, Aaron further highlights how certain individuals may perceive isolation as social victimization, as the result of everyone else being against him. When interviewed alone, his disillusioned perspective of reality comes forth:

> […] the environment is not a person, the environment is not a human with a brain trying to resonate their ideas throughout the universe. Nature is true, nature is real. Humans are not real, humans are ethereal. Humans think they're real and it's all a bunch of bullshit.

Further, when observed playing video games, he discredits the idea of video games as an outlet for exploring another level of reality, an alternative story that may transcend and assimilate one's own:

> … kids can discern reality from a video game […] People playing are actually more immersed in what life isn't than what it is. That's pretty much why people play video games, it's just to explore their minds, explore reality, explore different possibilities, not so much to be warped in some twisted reality where you get to kill people over and over again.

The following shot nevertheless suggests that Aaron finds himself in the crossfire between reality and possibility (fig. 40). He pushes the boundary by imagining himself surrounded by paparazzi, in which he hears his spectators condemn him – those left behind following the crime he has hypothetically committed – thereby signaling that he is willing to allow fiction bleed into reality and contradict his own statements. The hailstorm of attention enters swiftly, but violently, before being quickly countered by complete silence, in which the sound of a screaming mother is replaced by the sound of birds humming. Isolation enters once again, and vengeance through bloodshed remains a fantasy, for now. Jumper and Aaron are continuously juxtaposed throughout; this scene is followed by a point of view composition of an interactive map appears (fig. 41), in which someone is maneuvering through the streets in the community, eventually leading the viewer to the parking lot outside the mall. The viewer might be inclined to think it is Aaron who is preparing for his attack, thereby framing Jumper as an extension of

him in his ability to act out on the anger they both share. Aaron is observed sitting on the pavement simulating shooting a gun (fig. 42); the following scene depicts Jumper collecting his shotgun and aiming it at his neighbor. They represent different outcomes that are similar in nature. Moreover, when encountering the paparazzi, Aaron's eyes are depicted in a close-up, as are Jumper's (fig. 43) towards the end prior to the attack. When contrasted with the close-up of the young woman's eyes in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, it becomes clear that both view the world differently. The psychological strain Aaron exhibits is projected through Jumper in the viewers' interpretation of him, and Jumper may as well constitute a violent manifestation of Aaron. Aaron fits within the narrative of Social learning due to his fantasy, Strain Theory, as he cannot function in traditional social settings, and Routine Activity Theory, as he seems to perceive himself as a victim of his surroundings. However, he defies the narrative of Control Theory. Unlike Jumper, and his classmates «who can't control their anger», he exhibits signs of self-control. Yet, there is no way of knowing whether Aaron is a prospective shooter in a different story.

By analyzing the characters in accordance with established typologies, *Dark Night* illustrates their shortcomings. It is fundamentally unclear which psychological predispositions cause Jumper to perceive himself as a victim and why Summer evidently does not; moreover, there is no way of knowing what separates Aaron from Jumper if they both consider their social isolation an element of abuse. Sutton does not allow interpretation beyond this point, and this is as far as one is able to psychologically assess them. A factor might be the long-term effects of continuous, reoccurring patterns of frustration induced by their surroundings; Fox and Levin argue that mass shooters are more inclined to suffer from depression as a result (2017: 51). However, they all embody signs of depression, and there is no causal connection between depression and mass murder. Evidently, one may perceive oneself as a victim of one's surroundings, yet, victimization ultimately becomes a part of an invisible, incomprehensible narrative within the minds of perpetrators, allowing them to perceive a massacre as a logical outcome. Diving into the psychology of these individuals, trying to detect the signs that separate the shooter from the others, thus becomes a continuous loop of contradictions, and Sutton provides sufficient insight allowing the viewer to discredit theories that may arise from it. Social isolation, which ultimately permeates every theory, allows every individual of observation to fit within the typology of mass shooters, and one is consequently back to square one. All of them, including the shooter, defy categorization by their ability to allow it altogether. How these individuals assign meaning to their solitary existence is beyond comprehensibility. The only matter of fact is that these individuals perceive reality differently, and are «ill-equipped to deal

with the stresses of everyday life» (ibid: 52). Social isolation does not describe the extent and nature of mental illness, and the symptoms they exhibit are not operational.

The inability to deal with the stresses of everyday life nevertheless seems to translate as severe mental illness. As they all may be categorized in accordance with established typologies in one way or another due to social isolation, the director problematizes the idea of equalizing mental illness and mass shootings. When typologies ultimately fail to reflect a specific diagnosis, it is easy to simply address mass shooters as subjects of severe mental illness and present a convenient pattern of explanation. By framing all the characters as socially and emotionally isolated individuals, Sutton paradoxically conveys that mental illness should be assessed for what it is, as opposed to contextualizing it within a narrative of mass shootings. Aaron represents how stigmatization is an element of concern, as the viewer may assume that his apparent distortive view on reality may cause him to commit an act of mass murder. As argued by Fox and Levin (2017: 51), these are yellow flags that only turn red in hindsight, and it would be unethical to consider them red when he remains innocent. His sentiments should be considered as elements of risk in themselves, as opposed framing them as sentiments foreshadowing a mass shooting. When comparing him to the other characters, particularly Summer, mental illness is reframed as an issue concerning the average American, unrestricted to the field of mass murder. Jumper does not evoke symptoms of severe mental illness, whether psychopathy or schizophrenia. He may denote signs of depression, like Summer or Aaron. These signs do not fit into the narratives of political figures like Wayne LaPierre, when claiming that «legislation works on the sane» (Gregory, 2012). As mental illness is reduced to leverage legitimizing the Second Amendment, it is imperative to offer a nuanced, realistic portrait of such events. Moreover, the perception of mental illness is redefined and grounded as a fundamentally human aspect of contemporary society; social isolation is merely a symptom of an inherent sense of malaise, which cannot be diagnosed. Thus, if mental illness is to be perceived as a cause, then everyone could be assessed as a prospective shooter. Further, as relatability forms the rhetorical pathway towards addressing societal and cultural issues, the audience is included. There is a threefold connection between the shooter, the other characters and the individuals by whom they are observed; the interactive map thus bears symbolic value, coming across as if the viewers are maneuvering through the streets themselves. In effect, the perpetrator is humanized, equalized with the audience in the theatre on both levels: We don't know anything about killers, but we know something about ourselves. We are the killer as well. We're all suffering or can suffer from the same malaise and the same isolation and the same feelings» (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017).

When there is no diagnosis to promote, the nature of their psychological difficulties is conveniently coined as evil. As in the case of Columbine, David L. Altheide argues that the Aurora massacre fits within a reoccurring pattern of social order and control, in which the discourse of «free-floating evil» is evoked (2012). As a research graduate and honorary student, Holmes defies categorization as an individual, as mass shooters often do; consequently, the perception of evil came to be reimbursed yet again. The character Holmes decided to embody thus carries symbolic value. Unlike Holmes himself, the façade of the Joker is easily categorized: « […] such loss is explained by popular narratives of "evil" borrowed from history, as well as decades of gun massacres – and borrowed even from Batman movies» (2012). The narrative of evil, as it occurs in *The Dark Knight Rises*, is adopted within the narrative of Aurora, as illustrated by witness Chris Ramos: «Like the true message in Batman, standing up against evil, against death … that is basically the message the Batman movies give out, standing up for something that's right …» (quoted in Altheide, 2012). Jumper discredits the idea of equalizing mental illness and the notion of evil. Unlike Kevin, Jumper does not come across as a demon from the wrong kind of horror film. Paradoxically, the «fictional» aspects of James Holmes as a mass shooter are discredited as authentic traits; *Dark Night* separates the man from the character he embodied, in effect humanizing the Joker:

> … he's acting out of his own volition and out of his own logic. But that logic isn't evil genius. I think the act *is* evil – what he does – but I don't know anything about evil. I think a lot of these shooters are trying to make their mark. They're trying to be special, and this is their way to do it.
> (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017)

Mass shooters may be stamped as subjects of evil precisely because one does not know anything about evilness – as one ultimately does not know anything about mass shooters, as the acts they commit are overall senseless – they are assessed accordingly. The narratives of evil springs out of the idea of mass shooters as inherently different from others, the paradigm of «us versus them». A mother reassessing her steps to figure out where she went wrong, as in the case of Aaron's mother, will be the primary example of how a mentality of this nature prevails – as she is clueless to why he feels isolated, there must be something she missed, something that separates her son from everyone else. The scene in which Jumper is observed trying on a collection of masks when preparing for the shooting, as if he is trying to figure out what type of person he wants to be, may bear symbolic value in this context. The collection of masks may indicate that anyone among the audience could find themselves unable to categorize the

perpetrator in accordance with established views. When wearing a mask, he is no longer human, easily categorized as a subject of evil. When removing them, he defies categorization – underneath, he is an isolated individual like everyone else. Unlike Kevin, he is born on equal terms. Furthermore, the Batman mask (fig. 44) challenges the narrative of good versus evil, as it occurs in Chris Ramos' remark. The following stare of his piercing, bright-blue eyes connects him with the audience and recontextualizes him as a human being, signaling that one of the viewers can be next, whether the victim or the perpetrator.

Discrediting Threat Assessment

The nature of Jumper could absolve him from the position of the shooter, particularly as he has a change of heart when aiming his shotgun at his neighbor. When comparing him to the other characters as well – particularly Aaron – the viewer may find himself or herself asking whether the primary aim of *Dark Night* is to challenge the idea of judging a book by its cover, that someone else will turn out to be the actual shooter. In his assessment of *Dark Night* as an «arty bore», Glenn Kenny argues that the director offers nothing beyond predictability: «Mr. Sutton is not above some "who's gonna do it?" manipulation. One character is an alienated teenager with a crew cut. I wonder how the system has failed him. And whoa, what's this? An Iraq war veteran cleaning his guns? Watch out for that guy! Or maybe not» (2017). Ironically, the discourse of mass shootings to a large extent favors simplistic causality, in which the primary aim is to create a representative image of a mass shooter, an individual failed by «the system», whether that of education or mental health. Matt Zeitz (2017) applies a slightly less harsh tone of voice, yet confirms the proposal of Sutton's aim as a mere «who's gonna do it» manipulation:

> The idea of structuring a moody, indirect art house drama so that you spend the whole film guessing which character is going to gun down a lot of people is problematic in its own way. It turns murder into a cinematic game. I doubt the filmmakers meant to do that, and would probably be horrified to see their work written about in that way, but absent of any sense of psychology – a sense that the characters have been thought about as human beings rather than as objects to be posed, directed and photographed – that's what comes across.

Again, what might come across reflects the discourse, which could be perceived as a «game» of its own – the very idea behind risk assessment and the idea of establishing a common profile is, strictly speaking, to prevent potential shooters from lashing out. Zeitz further argues that both *Dark Night*, while referencing *Elephant* in equal terms, prevents psychological insight,

which is imperative to gain «solid information with which to make an educated guess». The lack of sufficient grounds to make an educated guess is precisely what makes *Dark Night* authentic; there is little evidence of any educational coherence when attempting to practice risk assessment and label someone as the prospective shooter before the crime has been committed. While waiting for David Walsh's response, who will, all things concerned, most likely rekindle his own condemnation of a narrative in which no explicit answers are given, it is imperative to stress that the main point of *Dark Night* is not to challenge the viewers on their ability to target a future shooter. The film moves beyond merely experimenting with audience expectation and their urge to identify him.

Discrediting the idea of psychological generalization and the sensationalized perception of mental illness by reframing it as fundamentally human is not meant to suggest that one should simply perceive one's peers as prospective mass shooters. *Dark Night* conveys, by framing them all as socially and emotionally isolated, that a society of continuous scrutiny consequently emerges if these perceptions are legitimized. When assessing Aaron, Summer and Jumper, the audience is provided a certain extent of psychological and emotional insight to challenge established explanations of the psychology of mass shooters – however, when the other characters are considered, it becomes exponentially evident that one knows even less about them, even though they roughly receive an equal amount of attention. Rosie might as well have been observed pulling her hair and condemning her neighbor; yet, they are the only versions of a prospective mass shooter one is allowed to see. Summer's obsession with depicting a deceiving image of herself may be assessed in terms of its symbolism in this context as well. When living out the ideal version of herself, one never sees her face thoroughly (fig. 45), emphasizing the inauthenticity of her measurement of perfection, how one fails to acknowledge that there are certain aspects of every individual to which one can never be acquainted – a sentiment that is imperative to recognize within the discourse of mass shootings. By contrast, Summer's face is only depicted through close-ups when her act of performance collapses, when her vulnerability gets the best of her. On the outside, they come across like everyone else, illustrating how otherwise innocent traits and behaviors are recontextualized as elements of risk, from which distortive causal connections may arise. At least, Summer, Aaron and Jumper convey that social isolation is experienced and perceived differently by individuals able to conduct a massacre, even though one cannot explain why.

Dark Night criticizes the idea of pinpointing potential shooters in itself; the distortive belief in the fact that their inherently different perception of reality is reflected on the outside and through their behaviors. First of all, framing them as socially isolated discredits simple,

causal connections, thus coming across as more reflected than films centered around issues such as bullying. Rather, it suggests that there must be certain psychological predispositions – with which one can never be fully familiarized – allowing them to perceive such acts as promoters of extreme violence. Second, the character of Andres is a vivid embodiment of the distortedness of causality himself. Through him, media sensationalism gains a face; he stimulates reflection on the viewers' own predispositions in terms of prejudice, solely based on immediate appearance. He comes across as somewhat rebellious in nature by staying «off the grid», drinking and smoking marijuana with his under-aged friends while playing first-person shooter games; however, the presence of a façade is deceiving, and Andres is, to the extent that he is one at all, a rebel without a cause, in which his sole purpose is to march to the beat of his own drum. Their fascination for violent video games is reduced to a part of his own narrative which does not involve orchestrating a massacre – at least not within this story. If Sutton primarily aims to establish isolation as a form of psychological strain, Andres does not, compared to the other characters, fit the equation. Yet, due to the exterior qualities of the character, the viewer might be inclined to think it is him. The most vivid element of sociopolitical value is the moment in which he is seen dyeing his hair orange (fig. 46), following the segment of James Holmes, clearly manifesting the theory of copycatting. While the director does not aim to fully discredit the copycat theory, he suggests that strict, causal connection in terms of media exposition is far too simplistic. Copycatting may constitute a factor within a larger, cultural narrative of violence. As he is portrayed within a narrative leading up to a mass shooting, some will search for factors of risk – an analytical state of which Sutton takes advantage.

Moreover, framing Eddie as the prospective shooter would also fuel simple, ungrounded causal patterns of explanation. Although his primary purpose during his adult years involved handling firearms to the outmost extent, reflected in scenes in which he is thoroughly cleansing his guns, and the fact that many war veterans by definition have committed mass shootings during their enrollments, they are not perpetrators by cultural standards. There have been mass shootings conducted by war veterans on US soil, such as the 2017 Fort Lauderdale shooting in Florida (Jamieson & Luscombe, 2017) or the 2012 Oak Creek in Wisconsin (Yaccino et al., 2012). Events such as these may easily spark debate on mental healthcare, yet, veterans rarely form a topic of discussion within the general debate on mass shootings. Causality in terms of mental health and domestic mass shootings are generally discredited (Steele, 2017); as they form a specific group of individuals, it is easier to detect tendencies or a lack of them. If Sutton were to assign responsibility to Eddie, *Dark Night* would form a controversial story of a different nature, potentially interpreted as a plead towards improvement of the mental

healthcare system and the ability to support and treat veterans suffering from PTSD. Moreover, war veterans executing a massacre on US soil will potentially evoke theories of terrorism and radicalization; according to the FBI, the Fort Lauderdale shooter allegedly claimed he carried out the attack on behalf of ISIS (Sanchez & Conlon, 2017). As discussed, debating mass shootings within the context of terrorism will paint a destructive picture of the situation, and regenerate distortive and inaccurate assumptions, as argued by David L. Altheide (2012).

When searching for meaning within a meaningless situation, individuals may be wrongfully framed, thus stigmatized, while the true perpetrators – whoever they may be – are left behind. This is symbolically conveyed when Jumper is maneuvering through the interactive map – at one point, Andres is observed, in effect absolving him from the position of a prospective shooter (fig. 47). Moreover, the façade of Summer adds to the idea of jumping to conclusions; perceiving the immediate appearance of an individual, the façade, as an authentic representation of their true nature may be deceiving. Thus, Kenny does hit the nail on the head when he discredits Andres and Eddie as potential shooters. However, Kenny discredits them while believing that the idea of challenging one's ability to pinpoint the prospective shooter constitutes Sutton's primary aim. Interpreting *Dark Night* on these accounts ironically confirms the general assessment of mass shooters as embodiments of a set of predefined traits. Andres is not portrayed as a potential shooter because of his «crew cut»; he could constitute a potential shooter despite his appearance. Moreover, as opposed to signaling that Eddie might be the shooter, it conveys that he could have been the shooter, despite the obvious connotations a war veteran otherwise evokes. *Dark Night* is not meant to provide a «cinematic game»; Jumper is, by contrast, portrayed as the shooter fairly early in the story:

> If you really watch it carefully, there is never a doubt that that particular character is the shooter from the beginning. However, the audience brings in their own stereotypes and their own point of view … Some people see the teenager and say, "Oh, he is smothered by his mother, he lives in a fantasy world, he has no friends, he is addicted to violent video games; he must be the shooter", or "There is the veteran who can't get along with his family, has PTSD, and has an obsession with guns; he must be the shooter". The idea is that people come with their own thoughts and they have to then deal with those thoughts and wonder, "Why is it that I'm considering this person capable of being the shooter?"
> (Sutton, quoted in Aguilar, 2017)

While it becomes gradually evident that Jumper is the shooter, one is encouraged to draw a connection between the true perpetrator and the other characters, and the director aims to stimulate reflection on why these characters could constitute potential mass murderers in the

eyes of the individual viewer. There is no element of surprise to teach them a lesson. Rather, the film generates reflection on how one assigns certain qualities to individuals who embody traits that are otherwise meaningless, within the context of mass shootings. Dyeing one's hair orange becomes an element of risk and evokes the idea of copycatting, as expressed by Kenny, and a war veteran maintaining his equipment is redefined, from an act of duty, responsibility and patriotism to an act foreshadowing mass murder. It is quite obvious that Andres or Eddie are not prospective shooters; they nevertheless serve to reflect how symptoms are created by being surrounded by firearms, how the idea of a potential shooter is ultimately a product of imagination and prejudice, creating distortive assumptions about real-life perpetrators. The same accounts for Jumper; while driving to the parking lot outside the mall, he starts naming names of random individuals – perhaps previous classmates or a group of friends:

> I got that idea because when my mom can't sleep at night, to put herself to sleep and test her memory, she starts naming all the people she went to Kindergarten with […] I got it from something benign and innocent. But when you give that kind of idea to him and couple that with him counting his steps, it's like he trains himself.
> (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017)

Moreover, as Aaron is portrayed within a work of fiction, he becomes a different type of person, a version of himself, as he occurs within a narrative in which the issue of mass shootings is examined. While he comes across as a troubled boy, the setting of an interview may immediately signal that Aaron is a troubled boy who may have committed a terrible crime, that Aaron is responsible, or will be responsible, for the incident about to occur. As Andres, Aaron is an embodiment of ungrounded assumptions; his reflections on violent video games and the scene in which he takes is pet turtle out of his box before exiting the frame – suggesting animal abuse – constitute «key indicators» (Fox & Levin, 2017: 51). However, Andres shows a keen interest in violent video games as well – thus discrediting violent entertainment as an inherent cause – and Aaron might may as well have set the turtle free. In *Dark Night*, Aaron comes across as a ticking time bomb; in other contexts, he may be perceived as a troubled boy exhibiting signs of depression, without being labelled as a prospective shooter. The very idea of framing the different characters as prospective shooters within this narrative proves its point, that anyone could constitute potential shooters in real life if causal connections are to be legitimized. What makes sense is the nature of their humanity – the factors that are rigid and relatable no matter the context – regardless of the symptoms they may exhibit. In the end, it does not matter who the shooter is.

Framing the Second Amendment

Within the narrative of *Dark Night*, they are not only connected through disconnection – they are isolated individuals with access to firearms. Once establishing a sense of relatability, the director makes use of the established connection as a rhetorical tool aimed to mirror contemporary society, from which the most vivid sociopolitical sentiment may emerge. While there is no way of thoroughly accessing the mind of Jumper, the factor that is always visible is someone carrying a firearm in broad daylight; there is no way of knowing whether the individual in question is «a good guy with a gun» or «a bad guy with a gun». Sutton argues that the apparent randomness of mass shootings does not necessarily come across as random once reflecting on how American society promotes a culture of violence. Societal factors otherwise promoted to establish simple, causal connections occur within a larger cultural narrative in *Dark Night*. Within a culture of violence, certain people may lose touch with one's reality to the point where it becomes fatal; when granted access, guns may fall into the hands of individuals who should not find themselves surrounded by firearms in the first place. The externalities defining American culture overall may be fatal for them – however, from a realistic point of view, they are individuals one is unable to spot before it is too late. While Sutton claims that he is no expert on mental illness or gun control (Buder, 2017), it does not take an expert to depict contemporary society as it occurs – this is where complexity evokes simplicity. Mental illness within the context of mass shootings evokes complexity; once abolishing the idea of coining mental illness an inherent cause, the simplicity of the matter is unveiled. As mental illness should be assessed for what it is, gun violence and mass shootings should be assessed for what it is – the very legacy of the Second Amendment. While Sutton does not aim to assign certain factors the quality of a cause, he reframes them as potentially dangerous when they constitute aspects of a society in which freedom is defined by one's right to carry a gun. Through this approach, he partially legitimizes proposed factors potentially contributing to the occurrence of mass shootings, yet discredits the causality they promote.

Once the damage is done, those embodying a different perception of reality, aiming to counter social isolation through shooting a gun, finally become known, able to make their mark in the most disturbing manner of all. Within the context of media sensationalism, Aaron, Summer and Jumper are assigned specific roles. Aaron fantasizes of becoming famous for his ability to see society for what it is, and the true nature of his solitary existence; Jumper's «movie star face» is the most vivid embodiment of criticism towards media sensationalism. Whether fantasizing about it or not, a mass shooting becomes the only way for them to receive attention.

According to the director, the media fuels the importance of becoming the best versions of ourselves in the eyes of others (ibid), however misleading it might be, as symbolically depicted by Summer. The man behind Jumper was cast as the perpetrator of the story due to his background; he aspires to become an actor in real life, and considers himself as a performer (Fairbanks, 2017). When asked to recontextualize his aspiration in the world of a mass shooter, the pathway from reality to fiction is in effect shortened. The phenomenon of stardom and attention is emphasized as another fundamental need, constructed by modern society, shared by several characters of the story, including the shooter. Moreover, it is a phenomenon to which everyone can relate. Their path towards their definition of «stardom» differs, yet diverges from the same source. The screens mirroring the stardom one wishes to depict are equalized with firearms, as technological tools enabling the characters to reach the point of perfection:

> … I think there's this constant beautification that we're doing with our tools. We are becoming the star of our own pictures. I do think shooters – at least some of them – see people like Dillon Klebold [sic] as a martyr. In their own way, they're getting in line because they know at the end of that line there is stardom. There's notoriety.
> (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017)

What denotes rigidity, as opposed to the issue of mental illness, is the obsession with and dominance of technology – whether «the tools of communication or the tools of violence» (ibid) – within the environment portrayed in *Dark Night*. Further, the tools of violence are manifested in different manners, yet equalized in order to grasp the essence of contemporary society, defined by a legacy worthy of criticism. Aaron and Andres are depicted playing first-person shooter games; later, Andres is engaging in an arcade game in which he is observed aiming a plastic machine gun (fig. 48) towards his fictive target; Eddie shoots a gun at a shooting range (fig. 49) and cleans his firearms in his garage (fig. 50); Aaron simulates a gun when sitting on the pavement, and Jumper walks in the middle of the street carrying a shotgun. While it is theoretically easy to separate the inherently dangerous tools from those of entertainment, the perception of the fictional and the real may fuel each other when attempting to make sense of mass shootings, and the availability of both complicates the perception of reality. The transition from a plastic machine gun to a lethal weapon may be shorter than assumed, and the first-person shooter may easily transform into a living, breathing individual. Yet, there is no way of knowing what happens in between. Aaron and Andres challenge this fundamental distinction; while Aaron contradicts his ability to «discern reality from a video game», thereby coming across as receptive towards the violence promoted, Andres counters the

established perception of violent video games as an embodiment of ungrounded assumptions. At first glance, he comes across as an individual who would be receptive of the attitudes towards violence conveyed in entertainment; immediately prior to the shooting, his friends are outside on the parking lot alone (fig. 51). Based on what the viewer has seen of him previously, there is still a brief moment in which some may wonder whether there is an element of surprise, that Andres will in fact turn out to be the true perpetrator of the story, in accordance with Glenn Kenny's perception. Yet, the scene conveys a final counter-punch at ungrounded prejudice, how one allows the image of a textbook rebel infiltrate the overall perception of mass shooters; they are simply a group of minors smoking cigarettes, wearing harmless, rebellious t-shirts depicting the word «manifesto». When compared to Jumper, Andres becomes a caricature in context, as if he is John Bender from *The Breakfast Club* (1985), the last person who should be granted access to violent stimuli. Moreover, as one does not know whether there is a prospective shooter in Aaron, and the fact that Jumper is never seen engaging in these activities, the director discredits the idea of framing violent video games as an inherent cause; the idea of framing violent video games as a mere source of real-life gun violence forms a caricature in itself.

As everything else, it takes a certain type of individual to find himself truly influenced by the nature of violent entertainment; violent entertainment does not create mass shooters. In order to assign meaning to the issue of violent entertainment at all within the context of mass shootings, as in the case of threat assessment, the inherently impossible task of knowing the true nature of a mass shooter must be fully depicted and categorized. If the mere activity of playing a first-person shooting game is to be legitimized as a cause, as in the case of isolation, innocent individuals will be framed once again, as displayed by Andres. While they are similar in depiction, there is ultimately a long way from fiction to reality, thereby generating a distortive image when they are equalized. Rather, the true severity of the situation emerges when real firearms have made it into circulation, as an equal part of the cultural narrative of violence. A real threat is transformed into something benign through accessibility and the perception of civil liberties, while, paradoxically, factors that are fundamentally benign, as violent entertainment or Jumper's random namedropping, are transformed into real threats. Perhaps it is the public who has lost touch with reality, as opposed to Aaron. Sutton encourages the audience to dismantle the inherently «malignant» from the inherently benign, assess the source of the notion of danger, the core of the established fear of becoming a victim, and come to terms with how gun violence to a large extent makes up the environment in which they live. When paired with individuals able to orchestrate a massacre, whoever they may be, both violent video games and firearms become dangerous. As in the case of violent entertainment, real firearms

do not create mass shooters – the obvious difference, however, is that the latter enables a person to transform fiction into reality, to reduce a cultural phenomenon into sheer bloodshed in a theatre. Violent entertainment is merely a symptom, while the issue staring them in the face is its source.

Eddie constitutes a rhetorical element within this context as well, how the benign is recontextualized into something dangerous – yet, for a different purpose. The idea of framing war veterans such as Eddie within a narrative of mass shootings could potentially interpret as means of countering perceptions of them as heroes of the nation. They are the true symbol of patriotism, and there is a tremendous amount of respect and admiration directed towards veterans in the US. They represent the idea of the nation as an inherently benevolent force, the idea of «us versus them», echoing the theories of Matthew Alford. Naturally, assigning Eddie the role of the perpetrator would be far too controversial in its ability to counter the very purpose of the film, becoming its own antithesis as in the case of *Carbine*. Rather, he challenges the overall perception of gun violence through contrasting patriotism and senseless violence. He represents the idea of gun violence within a generally accepted context, establishing a contrast to the issue of mass shootings on US soil; they are similar at their core, yet different in perception and meaning. Whether coined as symbols of patriotism or civil liberties, they are ultimately lethal tools regardless of context, and the individuals holding them may potentially exploit their opportunity to do so in the least patriotic manner of all. When brought back on US soil, Eddie is expected to return to society as everyone knows it, and there is essentially nothing that makes him different from the individuals by which he his surrounded; he becomes an isolated individual with first-hand access to guns. Yet, the established image of the Veteran prevents him from being assessed as anything else but «a good guy with a gun». There is nothing suggesting he is not a fundamentally «good» human being, but there is, at the same time, nothing suggesting that he will not let his humanity, as it is portrayed, get the best of him, and there is no «hero assurance». The paradigm of «us versus them» and «good versus evil», reducing mass shootings into abstract dualisms, distorts the image of the situation. In effect, massacres occurring on US soil tends to be framed within a narrative of terror. Through Eddie, Sutton encourages reassessment of the perception of weapons through contrasting the idea of the «heroic protagonist» and the mass shooter, grounding them both as human beings on equal terms. This approach is manifested in editing, while maintaining continuity in its visual style of pure observation, thereby emphasizing the similarity between the tools of violence they employ; the depiction of Andres playing a violent video game is immediately followed by the

scene in which Eddie is cleaning his firearms, further equalized with Jumper aiming his shotgun at his neighbor, immediately prior to the scene in which Eddie is at the shooting range.

Once mirroring how depictions of violence constitute a dominant factor within American culture, Sutton portrays how mass shootings are integrated as a predictable outcome, to the point where it becomes ordinary, due to the ability to redefine the benign into something lethal. There is an equal amount of focus dedicated towards every element of violence within the narrative, and a troubled young man carrying a shotgun outside is as normal as someone playing a video game – this is where sociopolitical legacy of *Elephant* is particularly visible. Throughout the narrative, the scenes truly foreshadowing bloodshed is equalized with the ordinary. First of all, while the scene in which Eddie is at the shooting range denotes an accepted form of gun violence, the moment in which Jumper aims at his neighbor is framed as accepted by proxy as well, merely due to the fact that society's perception of civil liberties enables everyone to roam around armed on the streets. When Jumper is trying to decide whether to shoot his neighbor or not, she is singing *You Are My Sunshine* while tutoring a student – signals of bloodshed enters a frame of mere innocence. Walking back to his house, Jumper is framed from within another neighbor's living room (fig. 52); while the neighbor is watching TV in blissful ignorance, Jumper walks past his window for everyone to see. His inability to detect Jumper may represent both the reluctance to address the elephant in the living room – somewhat literally portrayed in this particular scene – and the mere acceptance and ordinariness of gun violence. Whether he had noticed Jumper or not, the outcome could have remained the same – as far as he knows, carrying the shotgun is Jumper's right. While it is easy to pinpoint what is fundamentally abnormal when one is thoroughly observing the incidents occurring on screen, the elephant in the room remains unnoticed, or rather, ignored. As Van Sant, Sutton pleads for the audience to acknowledge it.

Finally, relatability is manifested to emphasize the dominance of violence within familiar settings. The director aims to create atmosphere in which the threat of a shooting lingers in the air, regardless of the context in which it occurs. The sense of isolation the various characters embody further evokes disturbing connotations, as if their paths yet to intertwine in the theatre is equalized with the idea of walking the green mile, continuously aware of the everlasting lack of safety among them, whether imposed by themselves or others. There are elements, whether visual, audible or symbolic, foreshadowing inevitable violence. *Dark Night*'s poster logo, the skull, appears from time to time on random spots, and constitutes the element in which this approach is most vividly depicted (fig. 53). Some elements are manifested in an artistically violent manner, in which the otherwise poetic calmness of cinematic observation is

unexpectedly and abruptly interrupted. Apart from Aaron's moment of fame, the scene in which Summer is conversing with the casting bureau is interrupted by a loud, terrorizing scream, before reframing its source of innocence – a girl startling her friend for amusement. Aaron's condemnation of his classmates is interrupted by himself throwing a missile at the wall (fig. 54), denoting the inability to foreshadow physical manifestations of the sense of violence polluting the air – it remains invisible until blood has been shed. Furthermore, the sound of Jumper counting his steps remains throughout the following scene, in which Karina is sitting on the bus on her way to work. She is listening to music, unable to sense the immense danger by which she is surrounded and acknowledge her vulnerability. Eddie shooting his gun at the range bears symbolism once again. The camera pans by others firing their guns – «good guys» practicing in case a «bad guy» comes along – framing Eddie in the end. While the viewers hear shots being fired as the camera pans, it returns to complete silence once Eddie aims and shoots. Apart from signaling that he could be «the bad guy» at which the others are aiming and how the origin of gun violence has been silenced, it further manifests the inherent latency of violence yet to be unveiled and acknowledged for what it is. *Dark Night* is the suppressed, silenced version of Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009); what comes across as poetic calmness is merely a façade as everything else – underneath, chaos reigns.

The malaise embodied by the characters and elements of violence become symptoms of a larger issue, further legitimizing the film as a «document that is still being made». Its continuous topicality and the idea of incorporating the audience within the narrative by allowing them to become the individuals they observe is best revealed. This is where the American in contemporary society is clearly unveiled and framed, reduced to another mass shooting. The final destination in which the characters are connected only by the event about to unfold, is portrayed as a place of warmth and safety, poetically visualized through low-paced pans, where individuals come to escape their reality, echoing the public's inability to come to terms with the core of mass shootings and gun violence overall. As opposed to depicting the massacre about to unfold, Sutton applies another anti-cathartic endnote. Accompanied by the sound of *You Are My Sunshine* – already redefined as an element of danger in itself – and poetic compositions of the theatre from behind the screen, the reality behind the façade of fiction, is followed by Jumper smiling as he is walking towards the backdoor. As in the moment in which he is staring at the audience through the mirror, he is staring at the audience, as if he is coming for them. One will never know whether the individuals one has observed will make it out of there alive; the characters are left in a rut, and the audience is left in a rut. Jumper might as well enter the screening of *Dark Night*, and there probably would be no applause following his

entrance: «I want you to leave the movie theatre with no catharsis – with that feeling still inside you that violence could be happening as we speak» (Sutton, quoted in Buder, 2017). This is where the metaphysical experience of *Dark Night* is at its rhetorical peak, where sensationalism becomes realism, reestablishing mass shootings as an issue that concerns everyone – particularly those embracing their constitutional rights. This is the American Dream pursued by Karina and Rosie, and this is the America depicted on the young woman's shirt in the immediate aftermath (fig. 55). Gun violence is a part of a larger narrative, and the issue of mass shootings is merely the epilogue.

V. CONCLUSIVE NOTES

Part II elaborated on the sociopolitical complexities and controversy surrounding the public and political debate on mass shootings, focusing on distortive public perceptions and the political foul play emerging in the aftermath. Compared to the overall violence in the United States, mass shootings may be considered rare. However, mass shootings undoubtedly constitute a major national issue compared to other nations, functioning as the primary symbol of the prevalence of gun violence and its constitutional source. Mass shootings tend to receive widespread attention as they are highly disturbing, tragic and traumatic, challenging the general perception of human nature and behavior. When children and adolescents are frequently found among the victims of these events, the primary aim will necessarily be to prevent future shootings from occurring. Scholars dedicate significant amounts of time to the assessment of mass shooters, trying to develop a profile in which the identification of common characteristics is of primary concern. Particularly within the school sector, there have been numerous attempts aiming to implement precautionary measures. The various attempts to develop typologies, both in terms of demographics and psychological predispositions have overall failed when there is no coherence to detect and no statistical data perceived to be operational. As the occurrence of mass shootings expand beyond the school sector, they become even more complicated to assess; the nature of the incidents in question change, and the already blurred image of the «typical» mass shooter diminishes. As Gary Kleck (1999) argues, every mass shooting is unique, and every mass shooter is unique – there is a wide range of potential contributing factors present on an individual level, thereby reducing the concept of threat assessment and the ability to target all prospective perpetrators to wishful thinking.

Realizing one's inability to foresee future shootings is a difficult obstacle to overcome when perceptions and measurements are continuously countered by widespread bloodshed. Amidst the distress prevailing in the aftermath of another shooting, the public demands action. The news media constitutes a significant influence in the development of general perceptions of mass shootings. The mass media, serving as agenda-setting institutions, shape the public consciousness by covering the most controversial and horrifying incidents – if they bleed, they lead – and redirect the attention towards specific issues considered worthy of scrutiny. The mass media may fuel the demand for answers and the overall state of distress; moral panics further infiltrate the political sphere, subjected to tremendous pressure through expectations of action. However, action is overrun by the everlasting debate on guns, coined as a symbol of American liberty and freedom. The urge to provide solutions is continuously undermined by political disunity, in which the Second Amendment and gun control meet head to head. Consequently, the debate becomes a matter of pointing fingers and assigning blame, both due to the pressure of providing answers to a question that seemingly cannot be answered, and the fact that the debate is reduced to a matter of one's individual right to carry a firearm.

Unsurprisingly, a wide range of these alleged causes and proposed solutions have been wholly or partially discredited and criticized by scholars. Threat assessment becomes a matter of organized stigmatization, and the ability to avoid framing the wrong people is largely impossible. Still, politicians are keen to assign blame to issues such as the healthcare system, the media and violent entertainment, legitimizing causal connections that are more or less ungrounded. Fox and DeLateur (2013: 141) argue that the proposed measures such as expansion of psychiatric treatments and enhanced background checks would pose some sort of positive effect on safety and overall violence; yet, they are nevertheless limited in their ability to prevent future mass shootings – «crime in its most extreme form». The issue of mass shootings is reduced to a subject of the political conflict between opponents and supporters of gun control, in which the Second Amendment holds a firm grip; redirecting attention constitutes the prime political motivation. Consequently, providing sufficient funding for excessive research on mass shootings and gun violence overall is withheld by Congress, heavily influenced by gun lobbyists. Following a failed attempt at resuming studies into firearm violence by the Obama administration in 2013, the block on federal funding remains (Towers et al., 2015: 9). As opposed to addressing mass shootings for what it is, factors that should be assessed in solitude are thrown into the continuous circulation of allegations, and scapegoating becomes a matter of fact, employed to legitimize the idea of self-protection. Without sufficient resources to conduct research into gun violence, ungrounded and potentially harmful speculations thrive. Phenomena

such as bad homes, bullying, mental illness and obsession with violent entertainment are not inherently American – however, public mass shootings and gun violence overall, due to its legacy, to a large extent is.

> Eliminating the risk of mass murder would involve extreme steps that we are unable or unwilling to take – abolishing the Second Amendment, achieving full employment, restoring our sense of community, and rounding up anyone who looks or acts at all suspicious. Mass murder just may be a price we must pay for living in a society where personal freedom is so highly valued.
> (Fox and DeLateur, 2013: 141)

Naturally, as discussed in part III, it is fundamentally risky for others to enter the arena, and Hollywood finds itself reluctant to implement the subject of mass shootings in production. The political and ethical controversies surrounding mass shootings are difficult to counter if the overall aim of mass appeal is to be fulfilled. As a topic heavy with political subtext, it becomes gradually evident that it cannot be addressed without abandoning established norms, whether those of narrative requirements, ethical considerations or political conventions; if aimed to address the political context of the issue at all, politically partisan views will potentially come across – depending on one's interpretive predispositions – thereby going against the grain in terms of Hollywood standards. The complexities of the debate are thus mirrored within the borders of Hollywood. Mass appeal may be assessed as ideologically and financially systemized within rigid boundaries of expression, to which commercial filmmakers are required to adapt, whether by studio executives or the audience themselves. Whether a subject of interest among these filmmakers or not, mass shootings prove to be a poor bet from the start when there are no ways in which it can be addressed as a subject restricted to a specific era in time, or associated with specific political entities, in addition to the ethical repercussions inevitably realized when pursuing the issue in fictional cinema. When examining the outlet of political content in Hollywood, other ideological narratives, apart from those of mass appeal, potentially decisive in terms of the evident lack of these depictions, seem to emerge; the self-inflicted image of the US as a universally benevolent force, as discussed by Matthew Alford (2010). Alford argues that the paradigm of «us versus them» traditionally has, to a large extent, prevailed in Hollywood production for years; certainly, this sentiment may be worthy of nuancing, yet makes sense when real-life mass shootings are to be screened. There is no moral catharsis in which the US may stand tall once the epilogue is portrayed. Conservative critics such as Michael Medved (1992) illustrate how countering perceptions are considered destructive and ethically unjustifiable, seemingly in coherence with the objections made by the

public, if the case of Dave Cullen, among others, forms an authentic representation of this mentality.

Part IV nevertheless illuminates how certain filmmakers are willing to face hateful condemnations in favor of sociopolitical enlightenment, allowing rhetorical value to push through at the expense of ethical requirements. As independent filmmakers step onto dangerous territory, it is easy to alter the stories and dedicate focus towards the victims of these events, thereby avoiding coming across too radical and exclusively political. Simultaneously, it is easy to legitimize partially distortive perceptions of inherent causes, particularly the issue of bullying, when school shootings are examined. The importance of remaining socio-politically conscious is imperative within this context, as Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* reflects. The film nevertheless addresses controversial aspects of importance – specifically the discussion on biological predispositions and the downfall of prejudice – and further illustrates how audiences will find themselves inclined to search for answers within the fictional sphere as well, even though fictional cinema may not be perceived as a source of factual insights. Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* and Tim Sutton *Dark Night* examine and problematize the distortedness of the ongoing debate – aspects subjected to political scapegoating, as well as the media's inherent urge to provide causal explanations.

While Van Sant primarily focuses on the journalistic coverage of Columbine, it proved to be a living document, as pursued by Sutton, when the same patterns of discussion are continuously redeemed. Acknowledged for the ways in which *Elephant* necessarily deceived cinematic expectations and its ability to shed light on important issues, Tim Sutton revives the perception of fictional cinema as «a wonderful landscape to assess the social concerns of a nation» (Denton, 1992: xv) by reflecting the legacy of *Elephant*, while simultaneously aiming to reframe the nature of mass shootings as inherently American by juxtaposing the audience and the event unfolded. Although the concept of mass shootings is not restricted to the borders of the US, it is nevertheless the most disturbing symptom of a larger issue that is fundamentally American. Critical depictions of the Second Amendment cannot be sermonized, and *Elephant* and *Dark Night* seemingly raise the bar as high as it may go if aiming to reach out to the audience. Radical views on current gun policies cannot be preached if their recipients are inclined to perceive them as propaganda, as films with an apparent agenda; the ambiguousness of Hollywood cinema has infiltrated the independent sector when the issue of mass shootings is to be assessed. Attempting to stimulate change in the deeply rooted, destructive mentality surrounding mass shootings will potentially, in the long run, be more fruitful than explicitly educating the audience on where to draw the line between «good or bad, right or wrong, strong

or weak, just or unjust» (Denton, 1992: xiv). By contrast, in different ways and to different extents, the filmmakers in question encourage the audience to draw the lines themselves; both Van Sant and Sutton present a clear portrait of the situation in which the audience must detect the element by which it is distorted.

Thus, there is arguably nothing to lose, and everything to gain – once abandoning the idea of financial success – in terms of changing the prevailing mentality surrounding mass shootings. The problems already arise when elements of the political sphere, the media or the general public paradoxically attempt to fictionalize the concept of mass shootings themselves, while criticizing filmmakers for doing the same thing; there is nothing fictional about this issue and its prevalence within the US. The media partially accentuates the most disturbing outcomes of mass shootings for their ability to legitimize established explanation; yet, they are a matter of priority, and there are hundreds falling out of the loop. However, they have ironically been criticized for framing mass shootings as an American issue, as illustrated by Jaclyn Shildkraut and H. Jaymi Elsass (2016). This is where fiction truly merges with fact, and how mass shootings are framed in order to escape thorough, critical reassessment of how the nation's definition of freedom is mirrored in bloodshed. This is where the distortive, fictional paradigm of «us versus them», an aspect of Hollywood conventionalism, is reframed as factual. The subconscious dominance of this paradigm within the prevailing mentality clouds the overall perception of the issue, resulting in narratives of evil and narratives of terror. The prevailing mentality generates stories in which Columbine is compared to Utøya and Orlando is reduced to political leverage to legitimize a national ban of Muslims. The situation welcomes fictional narratives, in every sense of the word – apart from those depicted on screen – enabling Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway to cite a mass shooting that never took place – «the Bowling Green massacre» – to further legitimize the war on terror, or rather, Muslims (Phipps, 2017). By contrast, right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones – a strong supporter of Trump – fictionalized mass shootings to the outmost extent by labelling the Sandy Hook shooting as «completely fake» (Sommerfeldt, 2016).

The perception of a good guy with a gun or a bad guy with a gun echoes the perception of evil that Van Sant and Sutton break down; it becomes exceedingly difficult to implement operational, moral dualisms when a police officer fatally shoots an unarmed ninth grader (Emily et al., 2017) or a couple of prison guards murder an inmate by subjecting him to scalding, hot water for two hours, only to blame it on his mental illness (Hawkins, 2017: 159). There is no way of targeting the man or woman behind the gun on the basis of good and evil, particularly when the concept of evil is fundamentally incomprehensible and irrelevant when firearms are

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circulated. The line must necessarily be drawn between the guy and the gun, and there is no escaping the Second Amendment – whether in fictional cinema or in reality – which lingers in Obama's utterance when addressing the case of Australia: «We know there are ways to prevent it» (The White House, 2015). Some may address other issues of concern when aware of the fact that the Second Amendment constitutes an elephant in the room remaining forever unacknowledged; yet, alternative perspectives, in which fictional cinema is of rhetorical value, may influence one's self-consciousness and, ideally, one's perception of civil liberties, core values and their repercussions. All things concerned, generations will pass before the Second Amendment is reframed as a mere product of its time; for now, Eric Harris certainly struck a chord when claiming «I am the law» (Larkin, 2007). To the hypothetical frustration of both Michael Medved and David Walsh, there are no moral epiphanies or restorative narratives to detect within this thesis either. *Elephant*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Dark Night* merely represent small – yet important – steps in the right direction. Hopefully, directors will be fighting over their stories.

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Zodiac (2007) [Film] David Fincher. dir. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Appendix B – Figures

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

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Fig. 13
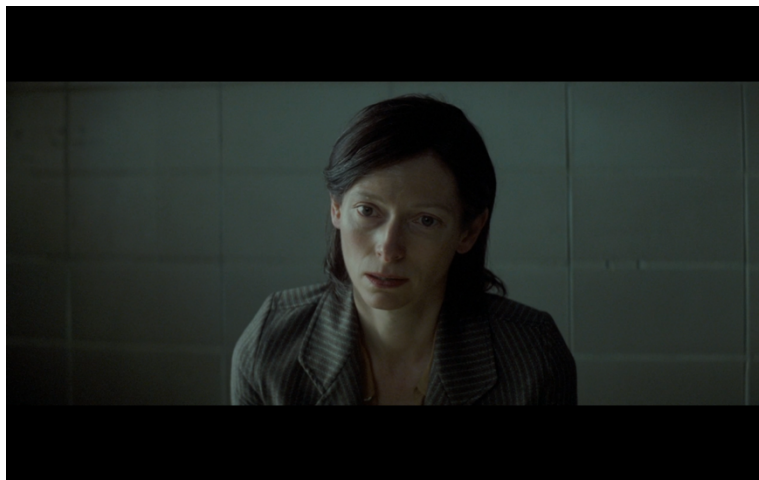
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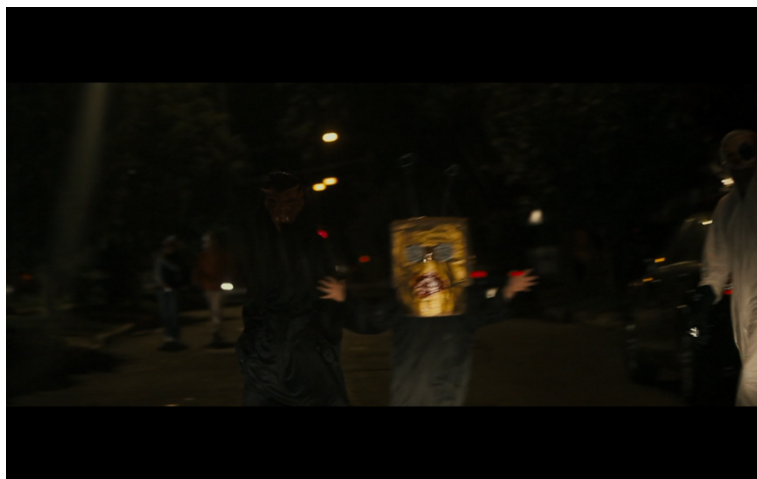Fig. 15

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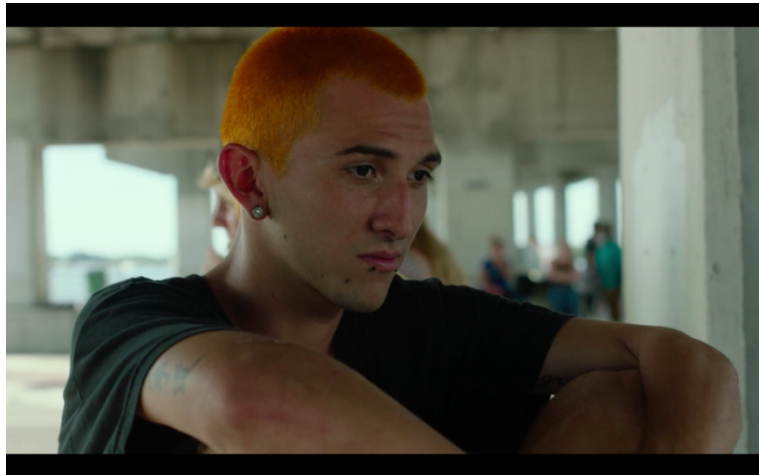
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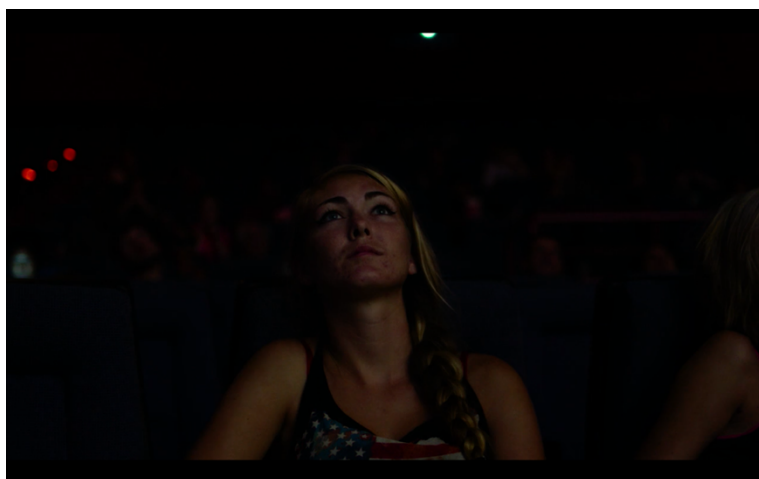

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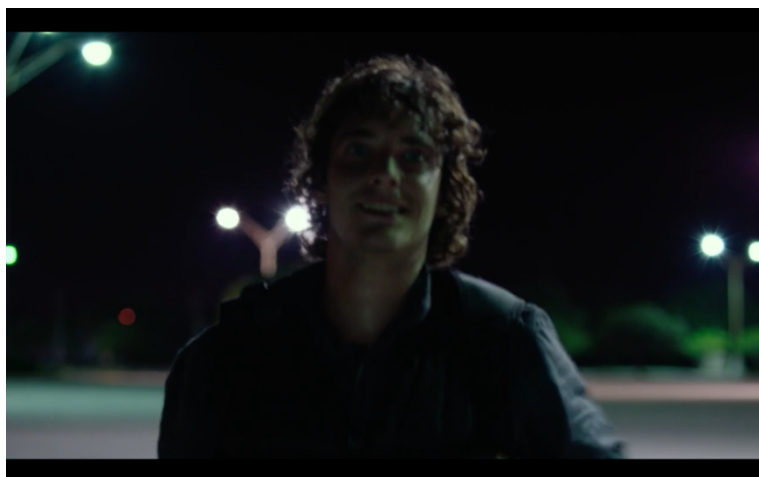
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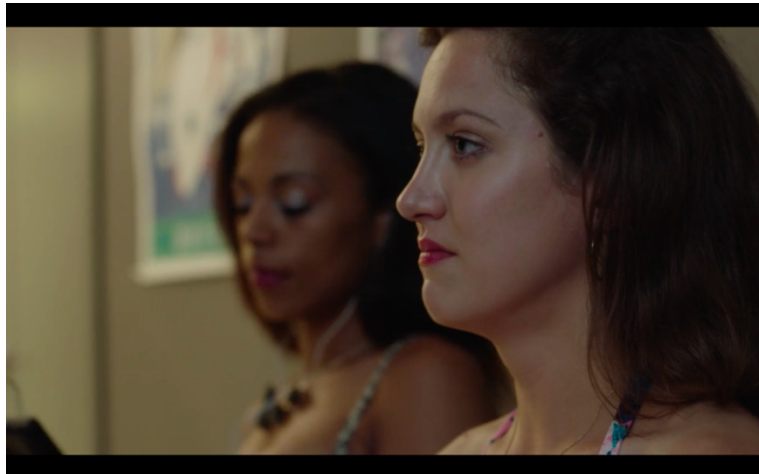Fig. 40

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