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Gus Van Sant, *Elephant*, and Beethoven

~~Music as an Organic Whole~~

Music and Sound as Key Constituents in Filmic Sensemaking

Abstract

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* constitutes a sort of reenactment of the Columbine School Massacre. By making use of neorealist forms and strategies, the director avoids simplistic explanations and obvious moral judgments by deconstructing and contradicting the most common, predictable explanations of mass shootings. The soundscape, apparently diegetic, plays a vital role in this film. Surprisingly, two ~~complete executions~~ of famous piano pieces by Beethoven, *Für Elise* and the iconic first movement of the *Moonlight sonata* are played in their entirety by a professional pianist. These executions are nondiegetic. Both pieces are played as well by one of the perpetrators. Beethoven's piano pieces are foregrounded within the signifying framework of the film and oblige an attentive moviegoer to reconsider the importance of the soundscape as a protagonist of the whole film: what seems to be natural, diegetic sound, within closed spaces, appears to be *musique concrete*, and therefore artificial and nondiegetic. While at diegetic narrative level, this film appears to be inconclusive, as many critics and reviewer have stated, this is not the case at enunciative level.

Keywords: Gus Van Sant, *Elephant*, Columbine, Semiotics, Film Music, Soundscape.

Beethoven's Moonshine Sonata: Some Introductory Remarks

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*¹ (USA, 2003) could be mistaken for a modern take of a neorealist film that reenacts a historic event that impacted the masses in the U.S.A. and all over the world on April 20, 1999: the Columbine High School Massacre². Van Sant opts for a straightforward «show, don't tell» strategy, with-

¹ We will refer to the free copy of *Elephant* that can be downloaded from <https://archive.org/details/elephant.-2003>.

² The extensive global news coverage, in newspapers, TV, or social media was beyond imagination. The Massacre inspired pop culture – e.g., pop/rock/rap – as well as countless documentaries, plays, novels, books, and films: for instance, Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Ben Coccio's found footage film *Zero Day* (2003) or Dave Cullen's award-winning non-fiction book *Columbine* (Apple Books, 2009). There are even black comedies: *Duck! The Carbine High Massacre*

out explaining or judging apparently and, therefore, without offering his audience a «naïve» way of being shocked and outraged by referring to a simplistic and predictable Manichean value system.

The soundscape is an important filmic constituent for evoking realism. It is essentially *diegetic*³: no *nondiegetic* musical accompaniment connotes the plot and affects the expectation frames of the audience. All the noises, sounds, words, and music the audience hears, the characters also hear at plot level. An audience, triggered by many filmic constituents besides the soundscape and confirmed by many interviews of the producers, expects an essentially realistic film, almost a documentary. It comes therefore as a surprise that after eight minutes and seventeen seconds, in an uncommon, long, uncut sequence filmed with a Steadicam that follows a character, Nathan, from the sports field into the school building, the spectators hear the complete iconic first movement of Beethoven's Sonata in C-sharp minor, marked *Quasi una fantasia*, Op. 27, No. 2, known as *Moonlight sonata*. This section lasts for exceptional five minutes and forty-seven seconds and is foregrounded. Filmic constituents (sound engineering, etc.) make clear, after a few seconds, that the music is *nondiegetic* as the characters do not hear the music, nor *metadiegetic* (metadiegetic refers to music that «emanates from a character's mind and therefore is part of the story» and cannot be perceived by bystanders of the character

(1999) directed by William Hellfire and Joey Smack. There are countless studies on Columbine and school massacres; e.g., K. Marsico, *Perspectives on the Columbine High School Massacre. Murder in the Classroom*, Marshall Cavendish, New York 2011.

³ In most performative narrative artforms that combine sound and vision (opera, musical, movies, music video, etc.), or only sound (radio drama), the relation between sound and the represented plot can be categorized according to their relation at plot level or at enunciative level. Usually, in movies (and most performative narrative artforms like opera, music videos, or radio drama), *diegetic* sounds (music, noises) are distinct from *nondiegetic* sounds. Diegetic sounds are any form of sound that characters within the fiction could and should hear: in *Some like it hot* (Billy Wilder, USA, 1959) the orchestra rehearses in the train *Runnin' Wild and Lost Control* sung by Marilyn Monroe. All the characters on screen, obviously, hear and perform the music the audience sees and hears as well. Nondiegetic sounds are not heard by the characters: they mostly work as comments, as filmic modifiers that enhance and direct the experience of a perceiver by arousing precise emotions: the high-pitched strings in the famous shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (USA, 1960), composed by Bernard Herrmann (*A narrative for orchestra*), arouse in the audience an effect of suspense, shock, terror, but are not heard by the killer and his victim. Nondiegetic music can be connotative or an authorial directive of the filmic addresser to the addressee (the audience). Some scholars have introduced the term of *metadiegetic* sound: the audience, by filmic strategies (camera, images, sound engineering, etc.) «hears» sound the character himself imagines. Cf. the classical study by C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies. Narrative Film Music*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1987, and M. Chion, *Audio-vision. Sound on screen*, ebook, second English edition, Columbia, University Press, New York, 2019. For a broader and more comprehensive discussion see the excellent V. Sbravatti, *Story Music/Discourse Music: Analyzing the Relationship between Placement and Function of Music in Films*, in «Music and the Moving Image», 9.3, Fall 2016.

within the plot)⁴. Beethoven plays an important role in the economy of this film as his music reappears several times in this movie: after 46 m, Alex, one of the shooters plays *Für Elise* from the beginning to the end and then, 49 m 40 s, the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*. This is *diegetic*. At the end, when the closing titles appear, the audience hears again *Für Elise*, this time played by an accomplished pianist: the music is again *nondiegetic* as it was in the first occurrence. This very particular, unexpected use of Beethoven within the expectation frame created for *Elephant* allows understanding that the music is an important, central actor that does not only connote the plot, the action, and the moving images, but has a clearly prominent, sensemaking dimension.

A Movie as an Organic Whole

Some reviewers claim that the use of Beethoven in *Elephant* has no deeper meaning⁵. Interviews with Gus Van Sant seem to confirm this: «We were going to hire a Seattle jazz musician to compose music. But one day during the shoot, Alex⁶ was playing piano in the high school cafeteria. Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* was one piece he'd learned, so we used that for the film»⁷. While perhaps the choice, at the first moment, was purely accidental, the way the film was cut and put together suggests that the *Moonlight Sonata* and *Für Elise*, both very popular, have been integrated into a meaningful semiotic strategy as they are clearly foregrounded⁸. The deceptive simplicity of the film and the use of a seemingly diegetic soundscape do veil the complexity of how noise, sound, and music are treated in this film. What seems to be diegetic noise and sound (people talking, birds chirping, and so on) can be an excerpt from a radio drama by Burroughs or *musique concrète* by composers like Hildegard Westerkamp. Studies by Couprie or Guillou give an exhaustive and convincing overview over

⁴ V. Sbravatti, *Story Music/Discourse Music*, cit., p. 19.

⁵ For instance, «the music was not necessarily emotive so it supported the heartless, detached nature of the killers. A haunting contrast in the film is the inclusion of Beethoven's «Für Elise» and Piano Symphonies Nos. 14 & 2. I don't think that there was any strong meaning behind this music selection, beside the fact that the actor who played Alex just happened to be able to play these songs», [https://tenistoldvf.wordpress.com/2008/09/19/elephant-audio/September 19, 2008](https://tenistoldvf.wordpress.com/2008/09/19/elephant-audio/September%2019,%202008).

⁶ Alex Frost was the actor who impersonated Alex, one of the shooters. Many characters in the film have the same Christian name as their actors. These were mostly amateurs. Using their own name helped them, probably, to perform naturally.

⁷ Gus Van Sant and Gerald Peary, *Elephant*, in «Boston Phoenix», November 2003, <http://geraldpeary.com/interviews/stuv/van-sant-elephant.html>, retrieved January 12, 2022.

⁸ In movies, it is not common to insert complete pieces (cf. C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, cit., who quotes a few movies who present a complete musical piece): when it is the case, these sequences are foregrounded and easily perceived by the audience as such.

Elephant's intricate entanglements of the soundscape (noise, sound, music) and the plot⁹.

Audiovisual texts are the most efficient sensorial human-made semiotic systems¹⁰. While written texts rely on the capacities of words to evoke non-verbal dimensions (sounds, noises, emotions, smells, and tastes), audiovisual texts combine language, sound, noises, and emotions stirred by noises and music. Only taste and smells must be rendered through the soundscape, noises, visual effects, and mostly spoken words. It is still quite common to consider sound and music as a form of add-on to the visual component and the plot. Ambient sound tends to be considered as circumstantial, as logically implied in the plot that is shown, while film music is mostly seen as a connotative dimension that comments, hints, prepares the audience for things that are coming. But it is still not often the case to consider the ~~whole~~ soundscape of a movie as an intrinsic constituent of an organic whole¹¹. This holds still partially true in many fields that study signification and semiotic systems, despite the pragmatic turn in the Humanities. Many still tend to ignore the importance of the voice and the sense-making and sense-altering dimension of intonation.

Unsurprisingly, when referring to the enunciative instances in film studies, terminology is not entirely convincing from this point of view, as most terms foreground only one dimension: notions like *narrator* or *monstrator*¹² are not appropriate for an all-encompassing analysis of a movie as an *organic whole* that includes vision, words, actions, and soundscapes. For this reason, in this paper, we will call this instance *filmic addressor*, that is, the instance that offers the addressee an *acoustic*, *visual*, and *narrative* whole, that selects sound, vision, plot, and defines in which order and form sound, vision, enunciative levels, and plot are combined¹³. Within this framework, the long quote of Beethoven obtains a

⁹ P. Couprie, *Les paysages sonores dans Elephant de Gus Van Sant*, in L. Stranska, H. Zénouda, *Son-Image-Geste. Une interaction illusoire?*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2015, pp. 135-147; F. Guillou, *Figures beethovéniennes dans Elephant (2003) de Gus Van Sant*, in *Fabula, Les colloques, Figure(s) du musicien. Corps, gestes, instruments en texte*, <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document4045.php>, retrieved January 23, 2022.

¹⁰ C. Maeder, L. Spaziant, *Sensorial effectiveness. Sensoriality, Immediacy, and Presence in Audiovisual Media*, in «Verus», 1, 2017, pp. 3-16.

¹¹ Linguistics and semiotics, before the pragmatic turn, tended to ignore the sense giving aspect, for instance, of the voice. Intonation can radically change utterings.

¹² A. Gaudreault, F. Jost, *Le récit cinématographique*, Colin, Apple Books, Paris 2017. In chapter 1.5, *narration et monstration*, they mention another suggestive term: «imagier», to wit a creator of «images» (introduced by A. Laffay, *Logique du cinéma*, Masson, Paris 1964). But as it is the case for narrator and monstrator, the soundscape is not addressed.

¹³ The term has been used by G. Pollock and M. Silverman (eds.), *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog (1955)*, Berghahn Books, New York 2011.

special significance that goes beyond the purely authorial depiction of mood or the realistic description of the setting.

Truthfulness and Being There

Gus Van Sant originally planned to make a documentary before opting for a sort of docudrama, a fictionalized interpretation of the massacre that closely followed the known facts¹⁴. The movie plays with filmic strategies that refer to (neo)realism in its most extreme form. The director and his team trigger this reaction by making use of many filmic constituents typical of this movement, for example the camera work, the reliance on non-professional actors, the importance of improvisation, as well as the obvious historic reference. Accordingly, the soundscape of *Elephant* is essentially built on a diegetic soundscape: the beginning of *Elephant* records only sounds that a character in the film could hear, e.g., ambient noises, voices of people who are playing, the engine noise while the camera follows a car. People talk, make noise, without any nondiegetic comment, be it musical or not.

The makers of *Elephant* often stressed their intention to use an unfiltered direct take of reality. They used what the microphones recorded while shooting. Van Sant, for example, states:

As for the sound, since everything was in long takes, we were able to mic in MS stereo, where you use two mics and can dial the stereo in and out when you want it. There was always a stereo mic right above the camera following us around¹⁵.

The voices, noises, and sound are immediately recorded, evoking a sense of *truthfulness*. The director reveals in this interview that, sometimes, an attentive audience could hear sounds and noises made by the filming crew, because they opted for the authenticity of the recordings made during the filming than a polished sound added later in motion pictures by foley artists, musicians, the

¹⁴ D. Alm, *The Banality of Evil. Rewatching Gus Van Sant's Elephant 20 Years after Columbine*, in «Forbes», April 10, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidalm/2019/04/10/the-banality-of-evil-rewatching-gus-van-sants-elephant-20-years-after-columbine/>, retrieved January 22, 2022; A. Doland, *Shades of Columbine*, in «Associated Press», May 21, 2003, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/2003-shades-of-columbine/>, retrieved January 22, 2022.

¹⁵ G. Van Sant and S. Macaulay, *Agitating the Information: Director Gus Van Sant on his Long-Take Columbine Drama, «Elephant»*, «Filmmaker», Fall 2003 (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/105593-agitating-the-information-director-gus-van-sant-on-his-long-take-columbine-drama-elephant/>, retrieved on January 23, 2022). In *On the Set of «Elephant»: Rolling Through Time* by Felix Andrew (2004), the sound mixer of the movie, we can see how the Steadicam with the two mics follows the characters. The documentary can be seen on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJjc5HKPcoI>.

actors, speakers, or sound engineers. ~~This~~ is necessary because, while shooting a film, directors, assistants, or the crew comment, give advice and shout instructions. All this, together with the noises from the equipment as well as from the environment outside the set obviously must be eliminated in the final cut.

The camera work is characterized by long traveling shots made with a Steadicam that accompany the characters mostly from behind. This creates the sensation, in an addressee, of *being there*, of being a direct, but nevertheless detached and unstirred witness, even an accomplice of the perpetrators that does not run the risk of being shot¹⁶. Other elements that evoke neorealism are the use of underage, non-professional actors or the choice of an old-fashioned 1,33:1 ratio, instead of a wide-screen, cinematographic formatting (usually 1,85:1 ratio). This reinforces the idea of real video footage made by laymen, by causal witnesses, and, as Van Sant stated, it reminds as well of high school educational films. This formatting is particularly apt for filming corridors and for traveling shots¹⁷.

In movies, the use of diegetic sounds as well as the absence of nondiegetic sounds, underlines that the *filmic addressor* only makes us see and hear what is real or could be real, while at the same time hinting that it is not evaluating and connoting what is happening on the screen, making the addressee believe that he or she is not manipulated. Music is seen by many authors as an art form that manipulates a listener: it can make one unwittingly move one's feet, it can make sprout tears, it can make one shiver, and feel joy. And this happens, apparently, not on reasonable grounds. In a realistic film, diegetic music and sound contributes to create the illusion of reality. ^{text} What is seen and heard on the screen could be real, credible, verisimilar¹⁸. One of the producers, Dany Wolf, revealed that it was the deliberate choice of the team to avoid a traditional sound design that overlays everything with sounds or music. As for the film as such, it was

¹⁶ A. Taubin, *Blurred Exit*, in «Sight and Sound», 15(9), 2005, pp.16-19; R. Jordan, *The Ecology of Listening while Looking in the Cinema: Reflective audioviewing in Gus Van Sant's Elephant*, in «Organised Sound», 17, 2012, pp. 248-256.

Many have stated that *Elephant* is exceptionally «cold», «detached». This effect stems from the particular soundscape and camerawork. Van Sant creates a framework that transforms the viewer into a witness. *Being there* is a key effect. However, the camera that follows the character, as it is the case in *Elephant* by Clarke, creates clear images, without translating «shock» or «emotions»: it does not «shake» as it would be the case if the recording witness were confronted with an unexpected, frightening

¹⁷ G. Van Sant, S. Macaulay, *Agitating the Information*, cit.

¹⁸ In many novels, music is seen as something dangerous because it makes people do things they cannot control. Cf.

C. Maeder, *Sciascia e la musica*, in M. Picone, P. De Marchi, T. Crivelli (eds.), *Sciascia, scrittore europeo*, Birkenhäuser, Basel 1994, pp. 209-227.

the main intention not to convey with music or sound what the audience must feel or think¹⁹.

Another element that evokes realism is how Gus Van Sant and his crew referred to the *Columbine high school massacre* (Colorado, April 20, 1999) where two twelfth grade students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, murdered twelve students and a teacher, injuring another twenty-one people. They prepared their killing spree meticulously, although several bombs they placed in the building did not explode. This massacre, not the first, was the deadliest in the history of the U.S.A. at that time. It met an incredible attention in the news (newspapers, television, radio), as well as on the Internet²⁰. Many documented elements, episodes, events, facts that most people knew, are integrated in the movie: even without mentioning Columbine or the true names of the perpetrators explicitly, the reference to the massacre is self-evident. Here an unexhaustive list of correspondences between the massacre and the movie:

- Klebold and Harris warned a fellow student not to enter the building (in *Elephant*, Alex and Eric warn John).

- They entered the school with duffel bags, one of the killers wore a baseball cap with the bill backwards (some sequences in the film narrowly reenact the CCTV footage of the massacre).

- The bombs they placed in the building did not detonate.

- A scared female student was not able to flee, like Acadia in the movie.

- In the film, Alex, while menacing Nathan and Carrie, teases them by reciting *Eeny Meeny Miny Moe*, a children's counting-out rhyme. Witnesses of the massacre reported that one shooter said *peekaboo*, referring to another children's game, when finding victims under the tables.

- The perpetrators played violent computer games.

- They were interested in Nazism.

- One of the perpetrators had issues with his body. In the film, this is not the case, but Michelle, one of the victims, has such issues.

- Some thought the perpetrators to be closeted homosexuals, in the movie the two exchange a kiss in the shower.

¹⁹ This statement can be read in an interview published on the German website dedicated to *Elephant*, published by Kinowelt GmbH, the German film distributor of *Elephant*. It that has been acquired now by StudioCanal, *Produktionsnotizen*, <http://elephant-derfilm.de/produktion.php> (now, available through <https://web.archive.org>), retrieved January 21, 2022.

²⁰ Many websites, books and documentaries are dedicated to Columbine. Several tapes made by two perpetrators have been released, as well as many term papers and poems written by them. A term paper by that discussed the ease with which guns can be purchased and introduced into schools can still be read on the world wide web. Ultimately, the weapons were bought by friends because the two perpetrators were too young. Several teachers expressed concern about the violence in Klebold's and Harris's videos and papers. Cf. *The Aftermath of Columbine on Student Writing*, in G. Oltman, *Violence in Student Writing: A School Administrator's Guide*, Corwin, London 2012, pp. 1-10.

- The shooters were apparently victims of bullying.
- They meticulously planned their killing spree.
- They ordered their weapons.
- As in the movie, one of the shooters, after the killing, drank from a cup in the «canteen».
- It was thought that one of the killers shot the other. In the movie, this is also the case²¹.

Surprise and Deconstruction

The long traveling shot accompanied by Beethoven's first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*, however, undermines drastically this apparent realism. It is the first time that the soundscape contradicts Wolf's and Van Sant's statements, but not the last, as a close reading reveals.

Diane Keaton, in an interview aired together with Gus Van Sant, tells us to *listen* to this film²². One of the contradictions of most docudramas and true crime series consists in the apparent realism that defies traditional fiction: one «maxim» could be that these films try to tell the true story, the facts of a crime, without typical narrative and filmic gimmicks. They rely mostly on the reenactment of «facts», often combined with CCTV footage, declarations of witnesses, footage of interrogation of suspects, confessions of murderers, as well as scientific digressions. However, counterintuitively, docudramas and true crime do not rely on the power of this data, but they transform everyday crimes into fiction: the film-makers appropriate traditional narrative structures and opt for highly connotative and emotionally laden extra-diegetic music that tells the audience exactly what they are supposed to feel: moralization is mostly key²³. Victims and parents and friends of victims reveal their feelings, the narrators voice judgments. Most films are highly ideological and rarely show inconsistencies or difficulties in the reasoning or the truth finding: what matters is foremost that at the end, the culprit has been jailed for as long as possible or is even on death row and, secondly, that the audience feels that justice has been served, while empathically arousing deep emotions about the fate of the victims and their friends and family. The narrative structure is straightforward and could be analyzed

²¹ Only forensic investigation showed later that Klebold and Harris committed suicide individually. In the film, Alex kills Eric.

²² This interview can be watched on YouTube. Gus Van Sant shared this video. <https://charlierose.com/videos/14983#> offers a transcript of the interview.

²³ C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, cit., states that from the outset, cinema, made extensive use of music, even in the most realist films, probably influenced by opera that has prepared the audience to integrate sound in sensemaking.

by — with very traditional approaches, e.g., Propp²⁴, ~~a study on the narrative structures of folk tales~~. Most of these films use nondiegetic music, diegetic ambient sound, and noise, in a very traditional way: for creating suspense, tension, and emotive connotations, as well as to manipulate the audience to opt for one precise interpretation. Or, as Dany Wolf asserts, sound, noise, and music heavily influence the audience's reaction in a way Gus Van Sant and his team rejected.

In *Elephant*, the approach is radically different: as set out before, most events in the film are very similar to what had been documented and known by the public. But many filmic strategies, e.g., the presence of a few foregrounded nondiegetic sound cues, interfere with the apparent realism claimed by the producers: the «truth» is multifaceted and the filmic addressor does not judge. This does not come as a surprise: the massacre cannot be understood, condoned, or «accepted». But a simple Manichean approach would not help to grasp the entity of this massacre. Blaming the family structures, the lack of moral, violent video games, or weapon legislation is simplistic and predictable.

In this sense, we must investigate more deeply what Diane Keaton means when she says that we must listen, step back, without imposing, overlaying our preconceived opinions and values on what happened if we really intend to change perhaps the conditions that favor one of the *elephants in the room* of the American society. The title of this movie has been analyzed many times, and we will not delve into it again²⁵. Suffice to recall that it refers to *Elephant*, a short film by Alan Clarke, because of its close connection to Van Sant's movie. In 1989, Danny Boyle, the director of *Trainspotting* (UK, 1996) or *Slumdog Millionaire* (UK, 2008), produced for the BBC, Northern Ireland, Alan Clarke's take on the violence in Northern Ireland. In about 38 minutes, we see a plethora of killings: eighteen to be precise. The soundscape is purely diegetic. We hear cars, the sound of footsteps, shots. The camera is subjective (Steadicam and tracking shots), as if it were the eye of a witness or an accomplice who follows the killers as they approach their victims and then shoot them. After the killing, the camera rests for several seconds on the body of the victim before a new killing is shown. The killers do their job without showing emotions: it is just normal. Nobody, neither bystanders nor neighbors (when present), seems to react; nobody shows interest in what is happening. The film starts with the following white text on a black screen: «For some of us "The Troubles" is the elephant in our living room». The film creates an effect of extreme realism. Shooting the movie with a grainy 16 mm film enhances this effect: it evokes the idea that a

²⁴ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Indiana University & American Folklore Society, Bloomington 1968.

²⁵ See for example D. Alm, *The Banality of Evil*, cit.

witness or an accomplice is documenting with his or her camera what is happening. Filming in CinemaScope would change the effect of the movie.

The *Troubles*, as the Northern Ireland Conflict was called, which started in the late 1960s and ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was a sort of «low level», «irregular» war that caused the death of more than 3,500 people and left more than 47,500 injured. For a long time, nobody acknowledged the presence of this elephant in the room. Gus Van Sant, in his film, borrows many elements: for example, the long walks and the camera that follows perpetrators and victims. Clarke creates a soundscape that focuses on diegetic sound alone. However, the sound is manipulated in such a manner that the footsteps evoke the idea of time that is passing: an audience feels menace as well as inevitability. In fact, the film does not present any outcome: it shows only eighteen killings, without judging, moralizing, or blaming the institutions, the police, the Church, or the Northern Irish society. The terror and the shock that this film induces in the audience reside in this emphasized repetition and in the absence of an outcome and an evident moralization. The audience is left alone with what it has seen and heard. This narrative strategy has been used by many authors and directors who have created similar realistic films, for instance, Matteo Garrone and his *Gomorrah* (Italy, 2008). The shock triggered by *Elephant* or *Gomorrah* does not arise because the audience did not know what was happening in Northern Ireland, or in regions under the dominion of the Mafia. Everybody who read or watched the news in the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties knew exactly what happened in Northern Ireland. Everybody in Italy knew and knows the brutal crimes of the Camorra, the Mafia, the 'Ndrangheta, or the Sacra Corona unita. The shock consists mainly in the fact that, apparently, we accept this situation as normal. Offering any form of conclusion, a «real», causal ending, as most narrative does, implies that there are solutions to the very problems a film refers to and that therefore no real action has to be taken: it suffices to implement the law or to act. However, Mafia criminality and mass shootings are endemic, without any apparent solution. Not offering any purifying, accommodating solution is probably far more effective and realistic, as it obliges an audience to question their (own) predictable and often conventional response to crimes and social (and today ecological) crises.

Van Sant (and Garrone) use strategies developed by Verga. According to the latter, a narrator should not comment and/or judge what he or she is telling («show, do not tell»). A narrator's task is to show what happens and to record what people say. Verga investigates what is usually considered as secondary, less important, but that has a major emotional effect on the bystanders, victims, and perpetrators. These small-scale events have a direct emotional impact. A writer

must cope with this, and not the exceptional, as do classical literature or today most Hollywood movies. Consequently, he states:

We gladly sacrifice the narrative's climax and its psychological effect, grasped through a kind of divine instinct by the great artists of the past, to the logical and necessary development of the passions and events leading up to the climax, which is thereby perhaps rendered less startling and dramatic, but no less inevitable. We are more modest in our ambitions, but no less humble, believing that the discoveries we make about psychological truths will certainly be no less valuable to the art of the future²⁶.

This implies that in many of his texts, what usually is considered important in a narration, is avoided. For instance, in *La lupa*, the *She-Wolf*, a reader does not see whether she will be killed or not: we see only how one character raises a hatchet. The effect is the same as in Garrone and Van Sant. The reader/viewer is destabilized. Reducing the act of narrating to the pure facts without comment and judgment forces the reader/viewer to be active, to feel strong emotions that are apparently not induced by the author's comment. Giovanni Verga was an experienced photographer and at the end of his career experimented with silent movies as well. And yet his veristic work is not simply a «transcription» of reality, but a narrative, artistic strategy that induces a perceiver to be empathic, feel true emotions that are not the consequence of a short-lived climax.

After WWII, his laconic, lackluster way of conceiving realist literature and film (Verga was one of the first writers who wrote scripts for silent movies; he was even a shareholder of Silentium Film Milan) heavily influenced Neorealism and filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni and the first movies by Pier Paolo Pasolini.

But as it was the case with Stendhal²⁷, the «absence» of an explicit narrator or a filmic addresser does not imply that they do not exist. The very visual,

²⁶ There are many translations of this seminal short story. In 1895, Dole translated the novel with the title *How Peppa loved Gramigna*. It is included in G. Verga, *Under the Shadow of the Etna*, translated by N.H. Dole, Joseph Knight Co., Boston 1896.

²⁷ In a famous passage of Stendhal's seminal novel, *The Red and the Black*, Modern Library, New York 1984 [1830], p. 446, it is stated that a novel must mirror reality: «Ah, Sir, a novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet. And the man who carries this mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shews the mire, and you blame the mirror! Rather blame that high road upon which the puddle lies, still more the inspector of roads who allows the water to gather and the puddle to form». Stendhal's metaphor, however, does not at all «de-authorize» a writer: it is not necessarily a hymn to an absolute form of realism where the author is only a sort of robot that transcribes mechanically what reality imposes. He or she shall keep the mirror and does still choose what the mirror reflects by changing the position of his or her hand. It suffices to include a microphone in this metaphor to adapt it to realist filmmaking. Any film, even the most realistic that only makes use of sounds, noises, and voices which can be heard and seen by the characters acting and living within the

verbal, and sonic choice and selection reflect this structuring and signifying instance.

Accordingly, Van Sant's choice to conclude the film with Alex choosing whether to shoot Nathan or Carrie is not different from Verga's choice not to show whether la Lupa, the she-wolf, will be killed or not: it is not important to know whether Nathan and Carrie are killed or not, whether the police will save them, whether the assassin will be arrested or shot: all these endings would be typical of classical narrations. Van Sant does not want the audience to feel any sort of relief: the killings took place, everybody knows how the shooting ended, there is no place for banal complacent emotions or simple moralizations and judgments, as blaming the absence of God, moral laxism, teachers, parents, communism, the availability of weapons, video games, and so on.

Beethoven, the Moonlight Sonata, and Für Elise

Formally, Van Sant segments his film with chapters titled with the names of the respective main characters of the different sequences. While in a first moment, this segmentation seems to make sense, an attentive addressee will soon notice some contradictions: the last chapter, *Benny*, shows only at the beginning, how the character tries to stop the killers. After his probable demise, the camera follows the perpetrators, and the audience sees how others will die. The title, *Nathan and Carrie*, appears at the end of Nathan's long walk, apparently still belonging to the chapter *Elias*, the photographer. There are at least two other segmentation strategies used by Van Sant that contradict the apparent, however inconclusive, subdivision with chapter titles: three sequences of the sky seen from beneath and the pieces by Beethoven.

The representation of the sky and treetops, greenish blue, seen from beneath, starts the movie while the opening credits are screened. The audience hears natural sounds and people talking and playing. A similar sequence is shown from 51m 20s to 52m 40s, before the massacre starts, and at the end, when the credits are shown, after Alex cruelly teases Nathan and Carrie. These short sequences are differentiated from the others through colors, sound, and perspective. The middle sequence starts with a greenish-blue sky. Wind is heard, and (obviously) a rainstorm starts: within seconds the sky turns dark. The beginning sequence and the ending sequence show a similar greenish-blue sky and the sound of the

possible world created by this very film, is authorial because even when it portrays and reconstructs reality, it always will show a selection of it in the function of the frame of the camera and the direction of the microphones: the filmic addresser is necessarily present as an authorial entity who chooses, selects, and therefore manipulates its audience.

wind and leaves. The first sequence shows the opening credits, the last one the closing credits.

The soundscape structures the film as well. Beethoven plays a major role in this regard. Beethoven's first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*, played by a professional artist²⁸, starts the above-mentioned sequence that follows Nathan. Before the mid-sequence of the sky begins, Alex plays at home *Für Elise* (46 m) from the beginning to the end. At 49m 40s, he begins to play the first movement of the Moonlight sonata as well, but apparently, it is too difficult: at 51m 1s he stops and shows his middle finger, frustrated, to the piano and the partition. During the final sky and tree sequence with the closing titles, the filmic addressor proposes again *Für Elise*, this time executed by a professional pianist.

Both segmentation strategies coincide at the end.

A closer look of the long walk is certainly useful in this context. After 8 m 17 s, the movie cuts into a sports ground: students work out or play football while the perceiver hears the beginning of the iconic first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight sonata*. ~~This comes as a surprise, as usual in movies music pieces are only quoted, and not played in their entirety.~~ In a first moment, a perceiver will interpret the music as diegetic, according to the expectation frame built before: someone on the pitch could listen to it from a portable stereo-device. But soon the audience understands that the music is nondiegetic: the camera moves along, but the sound does not change or vanish, as other sounds do when the camera follows the characters. This is not even *metadiegetic*: we do not hear what a character hears in his mind. The camera follows Nathan, but not from the beginning: first, we see Benny and then Michelle. This comes as a calculated surprise. In contrast^{to} what many interviews and statements declared, we see that Van Sant and his crew really built the soundscape. In the documentary by Felix Andrews mentioned before, starting from 1 m 34 s to 2 m 12 s we observe and hear how Michelle is instructed by Van Sant and his crew. Obviously, in this case, the sound recorded by the two mics²⁹ cannot have been used: not only Beethoven's movement has been added, the other sounds (ambient sounds, the other playing characters) as well. This alone is not the only surprise, even though it is the first time that it happens in this film. The very fact that the perceiver will hear the complete first movement, more than 6 minutes, is even more astonishing. This is rarely the case in movies³⁰ that are not musicals and is

sound-tracks

non: soun-dtracks



²⁸ The name of the pianist is not mentioned in the credits, only the company that offers soundtracks: FirstCom Music, inc. On the website, the sound files are listed, but without mentioning the pianist.

²⁹ See footnote 15.

³⁰ Cf. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, cit.

therefore foregrounded: this obliges an attentive perceiver to make sense of this passage and this use of music.

At the beginning of this sequence, one of the players is Benny, who will be a protagonist at the end of the film: at this stage, a spectator will identify him as a figurant in the film. Then Michelle appears on the screen: the audience sees her running and stopping in front of the camera. She is probably more of a «nerd», and certainly not one of the cheerleaders of this school. She looks around, up to the sky, and a kind of a smile plays about her lips, then she continues her run while the camera focuses again on the football players. One of them, Nathan, stops, walks to the camera, puts on a sweater with Lifeguard written on it. He walks across the field to the school building. The camera follows him from behind. He goes into the building, crosses different areas. Young people are chatting, typical sounds someone could ^{expect} hear in a school building can be heard. However, the Beethoven movement dominates. At the end of the sequence, Nathan walks past three girls (Brittany, Jordan, and Nicole). The camera closes on the three girls who apparently long for Nathan, then the camera turns again in front of Nathan, the camera shows that he is aware of how the girls are staring at him, while continuing and finally joining Carrie, his girlfriend. For more than six minutes, the camera follows essentially Nathan while Beethoven is playing. After this sequence, an apparently diegetic soundscape dominates again. Only at this moment the title *Nathan and Carrie* is displayed: afterwards, ^{later} after a few seconds, they disappear from the screen, while John is anew the main character before meeting Acadia.

Why this long passage? Why do we hear Beethoven? Who hears Beethoven? A fictional witness who follows Nathan and is wearing, who knows, headphones? Or plays the music in Nathan's head. Or is the music a statement of the implicit narrator, the «monstrator», the filmic addressor?

Most critics, probably due to the dominance of the written word, and language as such, the most effective semiotic systems when it comes to information transmission, rely on what they can describe with words, words that focus on what is seen and observed. However, sensemaking is heavily influenced by all the senses. Films, for material reasons, rely mostly on showing, telling, listening. We see characters acting, talking, and we hear sounds. However, the soundscape is often neglected: many consider sound as a descriptive constituent that helps to understand the action. When it is not diegetic, then music comments and/or triggers or describes moods. To a certain extent, sound simply «enhances» what is heard, said, and seen in most films.

However, we humans are sentient beings: we hear, feel, talk, touch, smell. These classical five senses are essentially exteroceptive, they function as an in-

terface with/to the outer world³¹. Intonation, for example, can not be ignored in an utterance: it can radically change what is expressed by syntax and lexemes and therefore the sense. When someone says «I am not angry» with a clearly angry voice, then the message differs obviously from what the semantics and the syntax reveal: this sentence can reveal that the utterer is not aware that he is angry. When the utterer, however, is aware that he or she is angry, the sentence means that the he or she offers to the addressee the possibility to change his or her behavior, considered insulting by the addressor. In this sense, the prosodic dimension of the utterance is not a connotation of what is said, but an important semantic, signifying part³².

The importance of the soundscape built in a movie should therefore not be underestimated: any film must be understood as an organic whole. While in written texts, the fact that many forget to consider the voice, the narrating voice, the sounds, and therefore the utterance as such, and prefer to focus on the plot and the characters is to a certain extent understandable, this is less the case for films, where not only the moving pictures are essential but the sound as well. Movies dubbed in a foreign language sometimes differ impressively from the original: Amy Fowler Kane, the character played by Grace Kelly in *High Noon* (USA, 1952), has a firm, bold voice that shows that she really sticks to her beliefs and that she is a strong character. In the German version, the voice is high pitched and very girly, to put it mildly. Grace Kelly was dubbed by Margot Leonard, the German voice for Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot. The effect on the audience, and therefore the whole significance of the movie, changes completely. While in the original version, Amy's reaction, at the end, comes perhaps as a surprise, but, however, it is more consistent with her determined character; in the German version it is hard to accept that this naïf girl really believes in what she is saying, and the fact that she kills one of the gang members and then is able to free herself from Frank Miller, allowing Will Kane, impersonated by Gary Cooper, to shoot the gangster, is really far-fetched and unlikely. ~~Sound is never an accessory only. In *Elephant*, the very soundscape is fundamental. Or to recall what Diane Keaton, one of the producers, said: we must listen to this film, and not only watch the moving images.~~

~~The choice of Beethoven was apparently casual, according to Gus Van Sant. He heard the young actor Alex Frost play the piano during a break and thought to integrate this in his film. However, the dominance of Beethoven in the final~~

³¹ Other senses are less commonly known but are as essential as the exteroceptive senses: proprioceptive and interoceptive senses. They deal with how our body reacts emotionally and physiologically to events within our body or to what has been experienced through the five traditional senses.

³² Cf. D. Kumbier, F. Schulz von Thun (eds.), *Interkulturelle Kommunikation: Methoden, Modelle, Beispiele*, Rowohlt, Hamburg 2009, and F. Schulz von Thun, *Parlare insieme*, TEA, Milano 2005.

cut shows that it plays a fundamental role. These two pieces, *Für Elise* and *Moonlight sonata* trigger different expectation frames in the audience. Most young people who start to play the piano will sooner or later try to play these. They form a sort of *ideal*, a sort of pianistic landmark for learners of this instrument³³. The sonata triggers other expectations and emotions as well. While Beethoven himself did not name it, very early listeners referred to it as *Moonlight sonata*, as many documents from the 19th century confirm³⁴. The critic Rellstab, apparently, has stated that this first movement in C-sharp minor, marked as *Quasi una fantasia*, reminded him of a romantic boat trip on a calm Lake Lucerne, surrounded by the famous dramatic, wild mountains³⁵. Others, at the time, liked the first movement to a calm funeral march. This has been revived by contemporary performers: Edwin Fischer likens the first movement to a solemn dirge. Both images have a high parabolic valence: the free flowing first movement that announces the outbreak of hell, to wit the stormy third movement (*presto agitato*) that is significantly more demanding technically with its *sforzando* notes, the *fortissimo* passages. Or as Charles Rosen has stated: «[the third movement] is the most unbridled in its representation of emotion. Even today, two hundred years later, its ferocity is astonishing»³⁶.

The filmic addressor creates the following succession:

1. An accomplished pianist plays the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata, NONDIEGETIC. Starting after minute 8.
2. Alex plays Beethoven at home, DIEGETIC (45m 40s)
 - a) *Für Elise* —the piano is not excellent and purely tuned. The execution is acceptable, typical of non-professional and not too gifted piano learners.
 - b) Alex plays the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata (49m 20s), but he does not have the ability to end it properly. He shows both middle fingers to the piano (50m 50s).
3. An accomplished pianist plays *Für Elise* during the closing credits, NONDIEGETIC. Starting at 1h 17m 55s.

³³ Just for explanation: the author of this text has a classical piano education and has obviously played both pieces. His sons and daughters as well. At every end of the year concerts of musical academies, one or more pupils played *Für Elise*. Many consider these iconic pieces as *kitsch*, because of its overuse and banalization in pop culture (P. Wehle, *Beethoven: von allem mehr*, Amalthea Signum, Vienna 2020). *Für Elise* and the first movement of the moonlight sonata are often coupled, as YouTube shows. There are rock versions of these classical pop songs, e.g. by Tawher (2008: the album *Beethoven Creation Moonlight Sonata* contains as well a song called *Für Elise with a Tease*) or Vanilla Fudge (1968: *Beethoven's For Elise And Moonlight Sonata*) who covered, adapted both.

³⁴ See F. Guillou, *op. cit.*, for a thorough discussion of the fortune of the Moonlight Sonata.

³⁵ However, there is no trace in Rellstab's writings about this remark.

³⁶ C. Rosen, *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion*, Yale University Press, Yale 2002, p. 157.

Wish and Reality: Longing for Perfection

There is an important turning point after 2a: the viewer notices that the execution of Beethoven is more and more inaccurate: at the end of 2b, Alex shows both middle fingers to the piano. When talking, Alex often refers to perfection, the perfect day, the ultimate experience. However, when analyzing what the two assassins intended, then we notice that their plans ultimately fail. Failures form an important discursive isotopy.

Alex and Eric They concoct to detonate bombs, without success. Alex sits in the canteen, drinks from a cup. Eric badgers him, reminding him that he will «get herpes of something» (1h 16m). Alex asks him then how he did. Eric starts to recount what he has done. His voice reveals pleasure, euphoria. At least for him it was a success. Alex kills him without notice, as if he was displeased with this very fact: first, he was corrected by Eric, then he must acknowledge that Eric is happy, albeit the plan did not work out. Alex, the frustrated piano player, cannot accept his defeat, the failure of not being able to experience perfection. He notices then that someone is hiding: he discovers Nathan and Carrie. The film stops before the audience knows whether he will kill them or not. The last sequence with the closing titles shows again the sky, the ideal that is and stays far away, inaccessible and elusive: the perceiver sees the sky, the sky another character unhappy with her life looked at and made her smile, Michelle. And the perceiver hears what can be intended as «perfection»: an impeccable execution of *Für Elise* that the character Alex will never be able to match.

The soundscape ultimately narrates and comments the failures of Alex and his search for the sublime. The sudden, unaccomplished ending denies any possible positive outcome to Alex's program. While nondiegetic music accompanies Nathan and Elias that overlaps natural sounds, this is not the case for Alex: when at the end he sits in the canteen, silence reigns. The audience hears natural sounds, birds are chirping, as if he had finally reached a truce with his demons, attained the perfection he was searching. But these sounds come not from outside, from nature, but stem from a music piece by Westerkamp. What we hear, and perhaps Alex as well, is *nondiegetic*: it is fake, a reenactment of natural sound, but not the «real» thing. The closing credits reveal that most sounds are not natural, as hinted in interviews by Van Sant and his crew, and many perceivers inferred probably from the outset

Nature, *Musique concrète* and Space

Frances White's and Hildegard Westerkamp's compositions are ascribed to *musique concrète*, a genre that makes use of recorded sounds as raw material.

Sounds are modified by audio effects and montage. They offer an alternate view on reality. Closely following Nathan or later Elias, we notice that something changes sensibly when they enter the school building. From the beginning, apparently, the sound is natural, diegetic, probably really recorded with the two mics, even when the Moonlight Sonata starts after 8 m 6 s. Even while we hear Beethoven, there is still diegetic sound. However, when entering the school building, the situation changes drastically: sounds are no longer natural and diegetic.

We hear excerpts from Hildegard Westerkamp's *Türen der Wahrnehmung*, from *Meeting of the international conference of technological psychiatry*, written and performed by William S. Burroughs, a jazzy part of *Supernatural infinite space (Kawabata) Waikiki easy meat (Mano)* written and performed by Acid Mothers Temple and the Melting Paraiso U.F.O., *Walk through resonant Landscape #2* written and performed by Frances White, *Beneath the forest floor*, written and performed by Hildegard Westerkamp.

What we hear is not what we believe to hear. While Beethoven's first movement is clearly nondiegetic, this is the case for the other sounds within the buildings as well, which could be mistaken to be diegetic. Is this Burroughs who is talking, or do we hear a teacher? Or does a class listen to Burroughs? Is a group rehearsing a jazz piece? Do we hear real birds chirping? The soundscape does not offer any certainty to the filmic addressee, who is probably manipulated by his or her expectations triggered by the beginning of the film or the press announcements and reviews.

Within walls, inside, people rarely communicate truly in this film: John and his father in their car, the principal and John, Eric and Alex, Acadia and John, or the three bulimic friends. The principal does not know what John feels, John does not tell the principal that his father was again drunk, the father and John do not communicate in the car. Acadia tries to soothe John, but he does not explain his situation. Alex's mother apparently says only what is necessary. Even Eric and Alex do not really exchange deep, empathic dialogues: Eric seems to do what Alex says. When talking to his friend, he uses commonplaces: for example, when he comments Alex's piano skill, he says «awesome», in a rather distant way, before playing a videogame.

Outside, communication is more successful. John makes his father stop the car, steps out, and is in control of his actions and communication. Alex, 1 h 5 m 19 s, before entering the building, sees John and tells him not to go inside: in this context, he communicates truly. John, outside, tries to warn people. Then he sees his father in front of the school, who is sober in the meantime. Dialogue is now possible: his father listens and shows empathy and feelings. Outside, Michelle is in control of her emotions (8 m, 34 s) when she is alone, for exam-

ple while watching the sky: she smiles, seems euphoric. Inside, when talking to teachers or running through the corridors, she is not herself: she hates her body, she appears inhibited, she looks mostly downward. Inside, everything is conventional and fake. Outside, Elias can dialogue with a young couple of lovers, inside dialogues seem more artificial, conventional, polite exchanges. The three girls are gossiping. They do not eat as most people do, because they need nutrition. They only fake eating: after lunch, they go to the restroom to throw up what they have eaten.

However, other aspects of the film do show contradictory approaches and contribute to the disruption of relief, the deconstruction of preconceived opinions. The massacre has originated a series of diatribes: many blamed violent videogames, others the fact that anybody can order dangerous weapons on the Internet³⁷. Both Klebold and Harris were apparently bullied by peers for being closeted homosexuals, unable to cope with their orientation. As is the case with the soundscape, what seems to be «true», a simple and banal explanation, cannot be seen as such. When playing the piano, we see many trophies on the instrument. Alex has received some recognition. In another scene, a girl talks to him and seems interested. The teachers, even when making wrong decisions, e.g. the principal, are seemingly comprehensive and sympathetic. Alex and Eric may be closeted homosexuals, but what they say in the scene where they kiss under the shower hints to the simple fact that they did not have any form, whatsoever, of a close, physical contact. While Alex certainly has been bullied, the audience sees that Michelle has to cope with similar or even worse problems: but she does not react the way Alex and Eric do. In the film, Alex's mother apparently is «distant»: she says what is necessary. But the film does not imply that this mother does not bother about her son and his friend. Perhaps she is a single parent: the film does not explain her behavior, there is no accusation or implicit reproach. She is not violent or abusive, on the contrary. As for the soundscape, the references to possible explanations of Alex's and Eric's massacre, as discussed openly and passionately at the time, are subtly deconstructed: the film avoids simple elucidations that could have triggered overwhelming, self-explaining consensus, as blaming video games or the fascination for fascism and weapons as well as bullying and the lack of recognition.

³⁷ See for example J. Webber, *Beyond Columbine. School Violence and the Virtual*, Peter Lang, New York 2017.

To Bridge the Sound Gap

Beethoven is played three times in this film: first at the beginning, when one of the characters from outside wanders into the building. As long as the young people are simply playing outside, the music accompanies them, as if the free-flowing musical patterns and the melody would never stop. Even Michelle feels happiness outside. After entering the building, the ideal, is no longer mixed with real natural ambient sound, but with conventionalized sounds, recordings, etc., that only hint at nature and a life that is consonant with nature. Inside, people experience conventions, abide by politeness rules, are confronted with fake sounds, imitations of nature, but not the «real thing». Alex wants to achieve perfection, when playing the piano or, counterintuitively, the massacre, but being inside, as the film hints, this is not possible: Alex is not able to end his programs successfully. This is closely tied to the fact that neither Alex nor Eric can really dialogue, communicate inside. This is true for the other characters as well, but John or Elias, outside, can have successful communicative acts. Perhaps, it is far-fetched, but the soundscape, tied to the communication strategies within the film and the spatial constructions hint that school and family, in this case, did not favor dialogue. In this sense, *Elephant* is truly a tragedy in the classical sense: as Barthes would say, in his study on Racine³⁸, the tragic does not reside in the violent acts and their representation³⁹, but in the impossibility of dialoguing that enables terrible events. Even in Columbine, the perpetrators have communicated their feelings several times in journals, on-line compositions, and videos⁴⁰: they have revealed in class works on how simple it is to get arms, they fantasized about violence. In videos, they announced their intentions, but these communicative acts were not interpreted as such, but reduced to a pure sequel of signifiers, written, sounding and visual, without true ^{signifieds} ~~signifieds~~ and true intentions: «Harris and Klebold also used their schoolwork to foreshadow the massacre. They both displayed themes of violence in their creative writing projects. Harris wrote a paper on school shootings and a poem from the perspective of a bullet. Klebold wrote a short story about a man killing students, which worried his teacher so much that she alerted his parents»⁴¹.

³⁸ R. Barthes, *Sur Racine*, Seuil, Paris 1963.

³⁹ In classical theatre, action takes place outside, and not on the stage, according to the rules of *bienséance*. Violent actions are told, for ex. by messengers, or narrated through teichoscopy: a character describes what he or she sees what is happening at the very same moment beyond the space of the stage.

⁴⁰ Marsico, *Perspectives on the Columbine High School Massacre*, cit., *passim*; M. Margaritoff, *The Full Story Behind, Columbine High School Shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold*, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/eric-harris-dylan-klebold-columbine-shooters>, retrieved January 25, 2022; T. Davis, *Forensic Psychology: Fact and Fiction*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London 202, p. 296.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 296. Cf. D. Altheide, *The Columbine Shootings and the Discourse of Fear*, in «American Behavioral Scientist», 52(10), 2009, pp. 1354-1370.

And it does not come as a surprise that even several years later, colleagues and friends recall that «Harris in particular never gave [Jennifer LaPlante] any reason to suspect that he was even capable of such violence. “I think he was the greatest actor I’ve ever known”, she confessed in May 1999. “He never [...] deviated from the character I knew – a bright, smiling kid⁴².”».

In *Elephant*, music is not connotative, it does not have an authorial directive function that tells the spectator what will happen and what he or she must feel. Music and the other constituents of the soundscape are an intrinsic, vital part of the filmic addressor’s argumentation and sense construction as well as of his or her emotive response to the enunciated events. The enunciative level forms, as well, a narrative and argumentative program: the filmic addressor talks to the addressee and offers him or her a plot enunciated with a particular soundscape. This soundscape is argumentative and teleological. While creating a seemingly diegetic soundscape, we notice that the music at the beginning and the end, Beethoven’s pieces, do neither stem from a character’s mind (metadiegetic) nor from within the plot (diegetic), but are chosen by the filmic addressor: this choice is not connotative, but is the vital part of the argumentative process. According to theories by Watzlawick, Grice, and later Schulz Von Thun⁴³, any addressor reveals his or her value systems, beliefs, as well as his or her image of the addressee. ~~From perfection, the ideal, situated in his or her own enunciative space, the addressor opposes this to the diegetic imperfection of Alex and his inability to play the piano.~~ The fact that at the end, we do not see the outcome, according to typical neorealist and verist choices, implies that the outcome of Alex’s intention, his program, is by definition not important as it will never be perfect, as he will never reach the ideal he longs for. The sequence with the closing titles is therefore not a simple add-on, a superfluous fade-out, but the last part of the filmic addressor’s reasoning and expression of his or her feelings.

The addressor opposes its ideal, its vision of perfection (nature, Beethoven) to the imperfection of Alex, to wit his inability to play the piano, to reach perfection, and to access the sublime.

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⁴² Marsico, *Perspectives on the Columbine High School Massacre*, cit., p. 16.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

