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EVERYTHING IS GONNA LEAD TO THE SAME PLACE: DOGME
95 AND GUS VAN SANT'S *DEATH TRILOGY*

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To Antonio João Teixeira, who introduced me to
the wonderful world of cinema

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"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be."
Douglas Adams, English humorist and
science fiction novelist (1952-2001)

ABSTRACT

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2011

Supervising Professor: José Soares Gatti Junior

The objective of this work is observing the possibility of dialogue between the rules proposed by the Danish film movement Dogme 95 and three films directed by American filmmaker Gus Van Sant—*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005), which constitute his *Death Trilogy*. In order to fulfill this objective, I analyze Dogme's foundational texts, the *Dogme 95 Manifesto* and the *Vow of Chastity*, taking examples from the three first Dogme films: *The Celebration* (1998), directed by Thomas Vinterberg; *The Idiots* (1998), directed by Lars von Trier; and *Mifune's Last Song* (1999), directed by Søren Kragh-Jacobsen. Then, I analyze the *Death Trilogy*, taking into consideration the previous analyzes of the Dogme films. In the *Death Trilogy*, Van Sant seems to maintain a dialogue with Dogme's approach to film realism in his use of natural lighting and location. I also address the use of editing strategies by Gus Van Sant and the Dogme directors, which constitute the main contrast between Dogme realism and those works by Van Sant.

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RESUMO

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O objetivo deste trabalho é observar a possibilidade de diálogo entre as regras propostas pelo movimento cinematográfico dinamarquês Dogma 95 e três filmes dirigidos pelo americano Gus Van Sant—*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), e *Last Days* (2005), que constituem a *Death Trilogy*. Para atingir esse objetivo, eu analiso os textos fundadores do movimento Dogma, o *Dogme 95 Manifesto* e o *Vow of Chastity*, obtendo exemplos práticos dos três primeiros filmes Dogma: *The Celebration* (1998), dirigido por Thomas Vinterberg; *The Idiots* (1998), dirigido por Lars von Trier; e *Mifune's Last Song* (1999), dirigido por Søren Kragh-Jacobsen. Então, eu analiso a *Death* Trilogy, levando em consideração as analises anteriores dos filmes Dogma. Na *Death* Trilogy, Van Sant parece manter um diálogo com a abordagem Dogma ao realism fílmico em seu uso da luz natural e da locação. Também abordo o uso de estratégias de edição por Gus Van Sant e os diretores Dogma, opois a edição constitui o principal contraste entre o realismo Dogma e os trabalhos de Van Sant analisados neste trabalho.

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Introduction

The title of this work comes from a line in the film *Gerry* (Van Sant 2002), delivered when two characters, (played by actors Matt Damon and Casey Affleck[1]) are deciding which direction they should take to see the "thing" at the end of the trail they are walking.

> GERRY/AFFLECK: How far is the thing?
> GERRY/DAMON: I don't know. We're like halfway there. Let's go this way, man. It's gotta… Everything's gonna go to the thing. Everything's gonna lead to the same place.
> GERRY/AFFLECK: Just loop around? Do our own fresh route? (00:09:59-10:03)

The direction they take happens to be the opposite to the one chosen by a group of people who had very recently passed by them. Eventually, these two characters get lost and the film follows them in their search for a way out of the desert. One of the characters dies along the way and the other is able to walk to the road that crosses the desert and escape. However, the film's end is inconclusive. Are the two men being led to death, or to personal rediscovery? Are they both going to the same place, or each one has a different "place" to reach? What are these "places"?

The questions I make when thinking about *Gerry* follow the same line of thought of the questions I make when thinking about the film movement Dogme 95. Are Dogme 95 ideas going to lead filmmakers to the same place? Which are the paths they follow and which are the different places they reach? Are those ideas fated to death or rediscovery? Perhaps some of the ideas die along the way, like Affleck's character. And perhaps some of them can survive it, like Damon's character, and be transformed by the path they have followed.

This work aims at observing what some Dogme 95 ideas have led to—whether they have been forgotten or are still remembered by filmmakers; and, if those ideas are still remembered, whether they look the same or have been modified. In order to do that, I intend to analyze the possibilities of dialogue between Dogme 95 principles and three films directed by Gus Van Sant: *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and

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[1] As the characters call each other "Gerry", I have chosen to call each one "Gerry" plus the last name of the performer in order to differentiate the two men: GerryAffleck and Gerry/Damon.

Last Days (2005). My tentative hypothesis is that the style of *Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days*—films which will be referred to as *Death Trilogy* when mentioned as a group—dialogue with the stylistic rules proposed by the Dogme 95 movement.

By "style" I mean the personal decisions a director makes during the production of the film concerning the final form of the film, which includes decisions about mise-en-scène and editing, among others. Mise-en-scène is "the director's control over what appears in the film frame" (169), as defined by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film Art: an Introduction* (1997).

What appears in the film frame, in the case of Dogme realism, are the actors, the settings, and the natural light that illuminates those elements. It is with this material that the Dogme director must create meaning, since s/he is not allowed to include anything else to objective reality. From the main aspects tackled by the "Manifesto" and, mainly, the "Vow of Chastity"[2] (qtd in Stevenson 2003),—settings, sound, lighting, optical devices, and authorship; from those items—, I highlight settings and lighting, because I believe those two aspects play an important role in the Dogme films and in Van Sant's Death Trilogy.

Editing, the other item that Bordwell and Thompson (1997) mention in their definition of style, is, still according to those authors, a "very powerful" technique that has an important role "within an entire film's stylistic system" (270). They say: "[E]diting strongly shapes viewers' experiences, even if they are not aware of it. Editing contributes a great deal to a film's organization and its effects on spectators" (270).

This passage makes clear that editing must be taken into account in a stylistic analysis of a film. In the case of this work, because the viewer's experience of filmic realism happens in a certain way in the Dogme film and in another way in Van Sant's *Death Trilogy* films, as it is going to be explored in the next chapters.

The films that are going to be analyzed in this work are the three first Dogme films, which constitute the so-called "first wave" of Dogme (Stevenson 16) and the three films from Gus Van Sant's *Death Trilogy*. The Dogme films are *The Celebration* (Vinterberg 1998), *The Idiots* (von Trier 1998), and *Mifune's Last Song* (Kragh-Jacobsen 1999); and the *Death Trilogy* films are *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last*

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[2] The mentions to the *Dogme 95* Manifesto and "Vow of Chastity" refer those texts as published in Jack Stevenson's *Dogme Uncut—Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang that took On Hollywood* (2003), due to the fact that the original source, the Dogme 95 website, went offline.

Days (2005).

Dogme #1, *The Celebration*, was released at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998, and tells the story of a family that reunites for the patriarch's birthday, Hegel (Henning Moritzen). During this party, Hegel's son, Christian (Ulrich Thomsen), tells to all the guests at the party, including his brother Michael (Thomas Bo Larsen), his sister Helene (Paprika Steen), and his mother (Birthe Neumann) the history of sexual abuse involving him, his younger sister Mette (Lene Laub Oksen) and his father.

Critic Dustin Putman (1998) praised Vinterberg's film, considering that the Dogme style contributed to express the family's dysfunction:

> [t]he camerawork and cinematography […] was done with a hand-held camera, which was a smart choice, since the shaky, unsettling movements reflect the family's gradually crumbling relationship in the film. (5)

For Putman, the Dogme aesthetics provided *The Celebration* with "an air of instinctivity and naturalism that has never been caught in a fictional film before", resulting in a film that "felt more like a cerebral experience, than a normal film". For Ebert (1998), the Dogme style "would be tiresome if enforced in the long run", but it did work in *The Celebration*. However, some critics did not appreciate the Dogme aesthetics. Arthur Lazere (1998) considered that the film

> assaults the eye with an extremely nervous hand-held camera, episodes so underlit as to be unintelligible, extreme close-ups, occasional slow motion, and an unappealing, grainy film stock in many scenes. (2)

For Lazere, Vinterberg exaggerates on the shakiness of the hand-held camera, "distracting from, rather than furthering the story or its meaning" (2).

The Celebration won a total of 24 awards, among them the Amanda Award for Best Nordic Feature Film (1998), the Bodil Award for Best Film (1998), the Audience Award at the Canberra Short Film Festival (1999), the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival (1998), the European Discovery of the Year for Thomas Vinterberg (1998), the award for Best Director at the Gijón International Film Festival (1998),

the Guldbagge award for Best Foreign Film (1999), the Independent Spirit Award for Best Foreign Film (1998), the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Foreign Film (1998), the Audience Prize of the "Lübecker Nachrichten", the Baltic Film Prize for a Nordic Feature Film, and the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury from Lübeck Nordic Film Days (1998), the Silver Clod at the Norwegian International Film Festival (1999), the Robert Award for Best Film (1999), the Audience Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival (1999), and the Honorable Mention of the International Jury Award at the São Paulo International Film Festival (1998).

Dogme #2, *The Idiots*, was released in 1998, and directed by Lars von Trier, also uncredited. The story revolves around a group of young men and women (played by Bodil Jørgensen, Jens Albinus, Anne Louise Hassing, Troels Lyly, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Louise Mieritz, Henrik Prip, Luis Mesonero, Knud Romer Jørgensen, Trine Michelsen, and Anne-Grethe Bjarup Riis) who believe that, in order to provoke and challenge societal norms, they should find their "inner idiots" by pretending to be mentally and/or physically disabled. *The Idiots*, the film made by the main creator of Dogme, is probably the most disrupting and daring of all Dogme films. The narrative structure is also disrupting, as Ove Christensen ("Spastic Aesthetics—*The Idiots*" 2000) notes. The author recognizes "two different narrative threads" (37), one related to Stoffer's project and the other related to Karen's (Bodil Jorgensen) family situation. However, although it is possible to recognize those threads, the viewer does not get to know clearly what Stoffer's (Jens Albinus) and Karen's stories are about (37).

The film provoked much controversy for its sexual explicit content and its fictional depiction of mental disability. At the film's first screening at Cannes, critic Mark Kermode (2002), from the BBC Radio Five Live, was removed from the audience for giving his opinion about the film out loud from the back of the auditorium: "*Il est merde! Il est merde!*" (17). Peter Stack (2000) writes that *The Idiots* "has the strange effect of being brilliant and despicably smug at the same time" (2). For A. O. Scott, von Trier has used the Dogme "techniques to produce a two-hour, semi-pornographic Mentos commercial" (2), referring to the commercials where young people "perform pointless actions that scandalize and amuse snooty old ladies, uptight yuppies and other guardians of social property" (2). That is, Scott sees *The Idiots* as a naïve attempt to offend the moral sensibilities of the viewers.

About the style, the critic writes that, "[u]nfortunately, *The Idiots*, shot in smeary, hand-held digital video, has nothing on its mind

besides the squirming discomfort of its audience, the achievement of which it holds up as a brave political accomplishment (4). However, despite the controversy, the film was critically acclaimed and von Trier won the FIPRESCI Prize, at the London Film Festival "for its attempt to rethink film language and social rules from scratch and willingness to accept the limitations of both its method and cultural assumptions" (Roberts, Wallis 2002).

Dogme #3, *Mifune's Last Song*, was released in 1999, directed by the also uncredited Søren Kragh-Jacobsen. The film tells the story of Kresten (Anders W. Berthelsen), who left his family behind in a small Danish island in order to pursue a successful career in Copenhagen. Kresten gets married to the daughter of a rich businessman and becomes his successor in businnes, without letting them know about his poor country past. When Kresten's father dies, he has to come back to his family's property in order to decide what to do with his mentally impaired brother, Rud (Jesper Asholt).

The plot has been compared to *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson 1988), in which Charlie (Tom Cruise) a self-centered car dealer in Los Angeles discovers he has an autistic brother (Dustin Hoffman) who got their father's inheritance. For some critics, *Mifune*'s plot is too common, although the film is aesthetically beautiful (Breslin 2000). Other critics, such as Ebert and Schwartzbaum, "the story is immensely satisfying in a traditional way" (Ebert 6) and Kragh-Jacobsen manages to turn the crudeness of Dogme style into an advantage for his film, making it free and natural (Ebert 2000); for Schwartzbaum, *Mifune* "manages to look good and feel good, too" (1) (Schwartzbaum 2000)

For *Mifune*, Kragh-Jacobsen received the European Film Award at the AFI Fest (1999), the Amanda Award for Best Nordic Feature Film (1999), the Reader Jury of the *Berliner Morgenpost* and the Silver Berlin Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival (1999), the Baltic Film Prize for a Nordic Feature Film at the Lübeck Nordic Film Days (1999), and the Audience Award at the Norwegian International Film Festival (1999).

The first film in Gus Van Sant's Death Trilogy is *Gerry*, released in 2002. It was written by Matt Damon, Casey Affleck, and Gus Van Sant, directed by the latter. Damon and Affleck play the leading roles in the film that is about two young men in their twenties who get lost in a desert. After spending days wandering around the desert without any food and water, the strongest of the two, Gerry/Damon, kills the weakest, Gerry/Affleck, since he believes Gerry/Affleck is not going to survive anyway. Shortly after killing his

friend, Gerry/Damon hears noises from a road, which is not far from the place where he has killed his companion, and is saved by a family in a car. This story was inspired by the true story of two men who got lost in a desert in New Mexico, in 1999; only one of them survived, Raffi Kodikian, after murdering his friend David Coghlin.

Gerry's lack of plot annoyed some critics, who, although they praise the beautiful cinematography by Harris Savides and the soundtrack by Arvo Pärt, thought of *Gerry* as an "excruciating experience" (Kelemen 14); for Ebert, *Gerry* "is so gloriously bloody-minded, so perverse in its obstinacy, that it rises to a kind of mad purity" (4). Despite the criticism about the film, Van Sant received for *Gerry* the Visions Award at the Toronto International Film Festival (2002).

Elephant was written and directed by Gus Van Sant, and released in 2003. The film was inspired by the various incidents of school shooting that happened in the nineties in the United States, specially the one that took place at the Columbine High School in 1999. The film takes place in the fictional Watt High School, where two students (played by Alex Frost and Eric Deulen) perform a massive school shooting. The film follows several characters during their day-by-day school lives, unaware of what their colleagues are about to do.

Roger Ebert (2003) highlights Van Sant's approach to the events depicted in the film, which

> offers no explanation for the tragedy, no insights into the psyches of the killers, no theories about teenagers or society or guns or psychopathic behavior. It simply looks at the day as it unfolds, and that is a brave and radical act; it refuses to supply reasons and assign cures, so that we can close the case and move on. (1)

The director achieved such effect "by draining violence of energy, purpose, glamor, reward and social context" creating what critic Ruth Stein (2003) called "a haunting elegy on the unpredictability of life" (4). That is, *Elephant* does not aim at showing violence as a spectacle, but at showing the beauty of lives that can be interrupted abruptly by a tragedy engendered by those lives themselves.

For *Elephant*, Van Sant received the awards for Best Director, the Cinema Prize of the French National Education System, and the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival (2003).

Last Days, also written and directed by Gus Van Sant, was

released in 2005. The film portrays the last forty-eight hours in the life of a rock star, Blake (played by Michael Pitt), before committing suicide. The story was inspired by Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994, in Seattle.

While critic Brandon Judell (2005) calls *Last Days* a "meditative masterpiece" (1), Jonathan Trout (2005) considers it "unfocused, despairing, and dull", writing that the film is "[m]elancholic, abstract, and stripped almost completely of narrative and dialogue". Steve O'Hagan (2005), however, sees those characteristics in a more positive way, writing that *Last Days* offers "[a] mesmeric experience, [as it] carries the effect of a cinematic mantra" although the slow pace "can induce stupefaction rather than meditation" (2). For Louise Keller (2005), *Last Days* "is almost a voyeuristic experience" (1), a window through which the spectator can observe the last days of someone's life.

The development of this investigation shall proceed in the following organization: in Chapter One I present the ideas proposed by Dogme 95 and proceed with an overview of three selected Dogme films—*The Celebration*, *The Idiots*, and *Mifune's Last Song*—with a special attention to the use of lighting, settings, and editing in the Dogme 95 aesthetics; in Chapter Two, I introduce the director Gus Van Sant and his works up to now; In Chapter Three, I analyze the *Death Trilogy*, highlighting the stylistic aspects brought forward in the analyses of the Dogme films; in the last chapter, I intend to observe in which ways the *Death Trilogy* dialogues with Dogme 95 and present my conclusions and suggestions for future research that may develop taking this work as a point of departure.

Chapter I
Dogme 95

An approach to Dogme 95 must start by taking a closer look at the Dogme's foundational texts: the "Manifesto" and the "Vow of Chastity". The signing of those documents, written by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, in 1995, initiated the movement that criticizes commercial film, arguing that cinema should not rely on illusions created by the technological apparatuses. Dogme creators, or "Dogme Brothers", as they have been called, also criticize the position of the film director as auteur: for them, "cinema is not individual" (qtd in Stevenson 21) and, thus, the director should refuse to receive credit for the work, preferring not being credited at all.

Their irony relies on the fact that the text of the Dogme 95 manifesto keeps a dialogue with (or attacks) François Truffaut's text published in the Cahiers du Cinema, "Une Certaine Tendence du Cinema Français" (1954), in which Truffaut initiates the discussion that gave birth to the Auteur Theory. Briefly, this theory defends the position of the director at the center of film production, as the individual responsible for the authorship of the film.

One of the main reasons for the imperative rules proposed by Dogme 95 is that, according to the writers of the manifesto, as technology becomes more accessible, more people become able to make films. The excessive use of technology in the making of films, have, according to the manifesto, "cosmeticized [cinema] to death" (qtd in Stevenson 22) a clear concern about aesthetics. Conrich and Tincknell (2000) see such concern as

> a stripping back to the improvisation, resourcefulness and immediacy of much early cinema, and an excoriation of the conventions of a prevailing filmmaking practice which has manufactured conformity to a series of recognized stylistic and aesthetic procedures. (172)

In order to try to impede the new generation of filmmakers of following the "illusional" Hollywood tradition, in which films wear a mask of cosmetics and superficiality—the "series of recognized stylistic and aesthetic procedures" pointed by Conrich and Tinknell—, the Dogme 95 group proposes a set of ten rules for filmmaking. These rules have been released as the "Vow of Chastity" and they guide an aspiring Dogme 95 film director to produce a film committed to the goals

presented in the Dogme 95 manifesto. The rules include, for instance, instructions for the mise-en-scene (filming on location, using only natural lighting, among other topics) and plot (no genre movies, for instance, are allowed).

In its last paragraph, the "Vow of Chastity" commands the director to "refrain from personal taste" (qtd in Stevenson 23) - once again, the idea of the auteur haunts Dogme discourse—, and to have the "supreme goal [...] to force the truth out of [her/his] characters and settings" (qtd in Stevenson 23). The commitment to Dogme 95 is, then, a commitment to the "truth" as seen by the creators of the movement. Truth, for them, is the cinematic representation of reality with the minimal intervention of technology. In sum, Dogme is about relinquishing the manipulation of the cinematic representation of objective reality, in productions in which the director counts only with the essential apparatus for the existence of the film: the camera.

This way, the Dogme director would have her/his realism. Again, according to Conrich and Tincknell (2000), Dogma sees "the representation of 'reality' as an empirical process precisely because of a belief that the real exists concretely and manifestely" (173). The authors then connect such idea to the ideas of André Bazin, who, according to them, believes "it was the filmmakers' duty to depict reality as truthful as possible" (173).

Many cinematographic movements have shared the concern with the amount of illusion (as opposite to realism) that should be present in the making of a film. Such illusion would consist of manipulating the mise-en-scene in order to conceal the various stages of film production, with the objective of making the filmmaking process pass unnoticed by the spectator. Those cinematographic movements shared a concern towards the concealment of the technical aspects of filmmaking in order to create a self-sufficient diegesis, upon which no "artificial" work has been made upon.

Peter Schepelern, in "Film According to Dogma–Restrictions, Obstructions and Liberations" (1999), contextualizes the Dogme 95 movement with other movements that also suggest sets of rules to film production in order to reject the idea of a cinema of illusion (commonly represented by Hollywood) and tackle the concern with a cinematic product engaged with avoiding the spectator's alienation from reality. The author does this contextualization by tracing parallels between Dogme 95 and movements as, for instance, Dziga Vertov's manifestos in the Soviet Union in the 1920s; Italian Neo-realism, after the end of World War II; the Oberhausen manifesto, in West Germany in 1962

(which was only fully put into practice in the 1970s by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders, for instance); the French "Nouvelle Vague" in the 1960s and Cinema Novo in Brazil in the 1950-60s. Other authors, such as Stevenson (2003) and Mette Hjort (2003) do the same contextualization, relating the Dogme 95 "Manifesto" with the manifestos and film movements abovementioned.

The making of the cinematic product involves the director's aesthetic choices, choices that will engender the style of the film. According to Bazin in his essay "An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation" (1971), when cinema intends to create a representation of reality there is a fundamental contradiction that surrounds those aesthetic choices. On the one hand, as art does not exist without aesthetic: it is necessary to make modifications on objective reality in order to have reality represented in cinema—filming is always already transformation. On the other hand, as the desired representation should be as realistic as possible, it would be unacceptable to change objective reality to put it on the screen, since the changes imposed by cinema to objective reality put the representation and reality itself farther from each other. Jean-Louis Baudry affirms that reality in film is a reality "worked upon", transformed by a process described in his article "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" (1985). This process of transformation is what makes the filmed objective reality a finished product –the film.

The transformation seems to be inevitable: the presence of the camera is an intrusion in itself. This is one of the contradictions pointed out through the analysis of the Dogme 95 proposals. Gabriel Giralt discusses this paradox in the essay "Whatever Happened to Reality: Dogme and the Reality of Fiction" (2008). For Giralt, the camera, being an "artificial device" (9), is a type of interference (as I wrote before, filming is always already an intervention). Its use, therefore, already contradicts the claims by the Dogme 95 manifesto that technology must not interfere with reality. By proposing their own "realism", Giralt suggests, Dogme ends up "reinventing a new fiction (7), that is, a specific aesthetics. As a result, Dogme 95 group's attempt to free their work from the artificiality that "can wash the last grains of truth away" (qtd in Stevenson 22) from film is a kind of failure which eventually creates a new artificiality.

Schepelern, rather than emphasizing the contradiction in the "Manifesto" discussed by Giralt, highlights other aspects of the Dogme group's approach to cinematic realism. For Schepelern, "Dogma aims [...] to challenge the conventions of the fiction film in order to create a

dialectic relationship between fiction and the search for truth" (10). Instead of calling the aesthetic results of Dogme 95 a "failure", Schepelern calls the relation between the technologies involved in making a film, especially the camera, "dialectic". He supports his point of view with the fact that Dogme 95 deals with "truthful portrayal[s] of reality within the bounds of fiction", since Dogme 95 does not desire to produce documentaries (10).

For the purposes of my research, to consider the results of Dogme 95 proposals a "failure" because of its contradictions seems limiting. Shepelern's idea of a "dialetic relationship" between reality and fiction, therefore, sounds more appropriate. Even more appropriate would be to say that this relationship between reality and fiction is dialogic: the technology involved in making films is a means for sustaining the dialogue between "the real" (objective reality) and the product of the filmic work upon that real. Besides, to consider this relationship as dialogic is important for my research given that I intend to observe the dialogue between Dogme 95 principles and the *Death Trilogy*: the relationship between reality and fiction of Dogme 95 dialogues with the *Death Trilogy* in the sense that Dogme's voices can be heard in the three films of that trilogy without that explicit commitment with the Dogme brethren.

Even though Dogme 95 principles might be criticized as naive, they seem to accept Bazin's fundamental contradiction about aesthetics, and Baudry's idea about the process of transformation of reality (Baudry 1958). Dogme 95 deals with the inevitable restrictions to a cinema completely free from aesthetics and transformation by proposing a minimal interference on objective reality using only the most basic technology without which there would be no film at all. The aesthetics of Dogme 95 is thus the result of the minimal interference. Ove Christensen discusses this matter in "Authentic Illusions–The Aesthetics of Dogma 95" (2008), stating that "the brotherhood of Dogma 95 tries to minimize the distance between the filmed and the finished film" by proposing a "desired amateurism" (3). This "amateurism" is achieved through the use of the hand-held camera, which results in "badly composed images, shaky pictures and the like" (11). Since the shooting procedures become visible on the final product, the spectator is aware that s/he is watching a film–a "reality worked upon".

In the beginning of this work, I proposed three questions: 1. Are Dogme 95 ideas going to lead filmmakers to the same place? 2. Which are the paths they follow and which are the different places they reach? 3. Are those ideas fated to death or rediscovery? Now, I try to answer

the first two questions by looking at the three first Dogme films: *The Celebration*, *The Idiots*, and *Mifune's Last Song*.

The first question I intend to answer—"Are Dogme 95 ideas going to lead filmmakers to the same place?"—refers to the sixth paragraph of the "Manifesto", where it says "we must put our films into uniform" (qtd in Stevenson 22); and to the last paragraph of the "Vow of Chastity", where the aspiring Dogme director says: "I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste!" (qtd in Stevenson 23). From those passages, one could interpret following the Dogme 95 rules in a way that the films would all look the same, provided they advocate the same aesthetic choices. However, that is not what can be perceived when watching Dogme films: each director interprets and uses the Dogme rules according to their own preferences, experiences, and intentions.

According to Ismail Xavier (1977),

> all realism is always a matter of point of view, and it involves the mobilization of an ideology whose perspective before the real legitimates or condemns a certain method of artistic construction (83, my translation)

In the context of Dogme 95, on the one hand, there is the point of view expressed in the "Manifesto" and in the "Vow of Chastity"—the point of view of the creators of the movement in theory. In it, "they condemn a certain method of artistic construction", and propose another method according to their ideology. On the other hand, there is the point of view that emerges from the work itself, which reveals the view of the director in the process of creation. Such view is personal, and is made from the director's interpretation of that theoretical point of view.

The answer for the question is, thus: No, the Dogme filmmakers are not led to the same place. The films differ from one another; this brings forward my second question: "Which are the paths the directors follow and which are the different places they reach?" The answer should emerge from a closer look at the three Dogme films selected to serve, in this work, as examples of the Dogme realism in practice.

The thought of the French film theorist André Bazin, once again, emerges in the context of Dogme. As it is pointed out by Conrich and Tincknell, (2000) "[f]or Bazin, it was the filmmakers' duty to depict reality as truthful as possible"; they also stress that "Bazin regards a film to be truthful if unaltered by human intervention or manipulation", that

is, "[t]he film spectator's relationship to the image should be faithful to the experience of the image observed by the spectator in reality" (173-4)

The "Vow of Chastity" addresses these issues of intervention or manipulation directly when it reads: "My [the director's] supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings" (qtd in Stevenson 23). Dogme's commitment with the "truth" is a commitment with experience, much like Bazin's belief on experience. The third rule in the "Vow of Chastity" says that "shooting must take place where the film takes place". The wording must be looked at carefully: "to take place" relates to "to happen", thus, to experiencing. Such commitment with experience is expressed throughout all the rules in the "Vow of Chastity", which reflects the concern against "illusion" in the "Manifesto".

The Dogme director's "truth" is centered on not modifying—or interfering with—what is being filmed with the use of pre-production means or on the finished film with the use of some post-production means, like enhancing the image with filters or adding extra-diegetic soundtracks. Those concerns are what result on the aesthetics of Dogme; such aesthetics is raw, unrefined, and committed to the actors' experience during shooting. The director is free to center the attention of the crew in the action itself, not having to worry about technical arrangements. As Kristian Levring, the director of *The King Is Alive*, puts it,

> [t]here are restrictions [when following the Dogme rules], there always are when you make a film—but on the other hand there is so much liberty. It's because when you work this way you devote perhaps half an hour to technology, and the other eleven and a half hours to how the scene is evolving and the kind of emotions you're going for. (Roman 72)

So, if the Dogme rules provide the directors space and time to act with creative freedom—as long as such creativity is kept in the realm of objective reality—, they may take advantage of such liberty to convey meaning.

1.1 *The Celebration*

"Who would want to see such a dark and depressing film?" (87) was a first reaction to Vinterberg's film, as described by Stevenson (2003), after a private screening, before the film's public release. However, as the author continues, the film achieved great critical success, becoming "the most popular and money-spinning of the first four Dogme films" (87). The author goes on to explain some reasons that made the first Dogme film become a source of inspiration to young filmmakers: the low budget makes it easier to produce a film, and the prohibition of "props, sets, or tricks" (88), allows the focus of the filmmakers to go all to the acting and the telling of the story.

On what concerns the style of the film, Stevenson comments that some critics did not find *The Celebration* an original film—"not as brave as *The Idiots*" (88), since the story could have been told in another, more classical, format: "The stylistic conventions of Dogme ha[ve] given it a certain edge, but it was not a film that had to be told in Dogme" (88). Christensen, (2000) in turn, writes that the film reveals an "interaction between a classic drama and the aesthetics of Dogma" (91), "thus combining the strength of two genres [fiction and documentarism] otherwise kept strictly apart" (89).

Lauridsen (2000) offers an analysis of the structure of the film, in which his main concern is "the relation between the art cinema/ docu soap style on the one hand and the classical dramaturgy on the other" (64), concluding that

> [r]egardless of its otherwise classical dramaturgy, a few 'flaws' and especially the radically different cinematography and editing make *The Celebration* a highly unconventional theatrical feature film. This only goes to show that film makers constantly are able to renew film language and that there is no contradiction between a dramaturgically classic story and an innovative style. (74)

In *The Celebration*, the director combines the time of the day and the content of the scene being shot, this way "manipulating" natural light to organize the film's structure and to give visual cues of the characters' feelings during the action. He also seems to take advantage of the settings and of the handheld camera to convey meaning and create an atmosphere appropriate to the action.

An example of the use of lighting and settings to create

meaning happens in the film's opening scene, when the atmosphere created reveals the character's feelings. The film opens with a man walking down a country road under a blazing sun (see image 1). The atmosphere created by both the location—a desert road surrounded by planted fields—and by the use of natural light—the hot sun of late morning—anticipates the character's (who later the spectator learns to be Christian, the family's eldest son) uneasines at the family party. The uncomfortable sun, the long walk and the dry and monochromatic fields oppress him much like the figure of the patriarch is going to oppress him when they encounter each other. Also, the desolateness of the mise-en-scene exposes the effort Christian has to make to get to the party. The spectator does not know, yet, Christian's reasons to go to that party beyond celebrating his father's birthday; however it is possible to notice, from the very beginning of the film, that going to the party is not a pleasure for Christian.

After the three brothers, Christian, Helene, and Michael meet in the hotel, they go to the front door to welcome the guests. The sun is still very bright, and as the guests arrive, the camera shows many of them in an unorganized way. The shaky handheld camera enhances Christian's uneasiness and hesitation. The bright sun that illuminates—and also blinds—everyone anticipates Christian's attitude at the dinner as he opens up about the family secrets.

The private conversations between Christian and his mother, Elsie (Birthe Neumann), and then between Christian and his father are marked by changes in lighting—this time, controlled not by the time of shooting, but by letting the light enter the building or positioning the characters according to the elements of the location that could block the light, such as doors, windows, or walls. The light goes down during those encounters, which happen in dark and closed corners of the building.

Christian meets Elsie in a shady corridor, and they are framed opposite to an open door which, despite being open, does not let much light enter that corridor (see image 2). Leaving sunlight behind him, after talking with his mother, Christian enters a much darker room: his father's study. The light that comes from a window at Helge's left side illuminates half of his face; Christian, in turn, is kept in the shade. The lighting enhances the feeling that the father is the dominant figure in that house, and his oppressive behavior starts to be visually suggested. The framing of the sequence is also revealing. The oblique angles that the camera assumes, added to the aforementioned shaky images that stress Christian's uneasiness and hesitation, reveal the relationship

between this father and his son. Such relationship is marked by a discomfort, a *wrongness* that he handheld camera helps diagnosing (see image 3).

Image 1: Christian walks towards the hotel.

Image 2: Elsie and Christian talk in the corridor.

Image 3: Helge in the study.

Image 4: Michael beats Helge outside the house.

As Christian is sitting in front of his father, who sits at his desk, the sequence shot/reverse shot that convey the dialogue between them reveal the background behind each character, and such backgrounds could say much about their characteristics. Christian has behind him an open door, while his father has behind him a set of drawers. The drawers behind the father suggest the locking and hiding of secrets in drawers securely placed behind the father figure. The door behind the son suggests his desire of finding a way out of the painful memories of those locked secrets. The mother talks to them from the outside, as she comes to the door when called by Helge. Elsie demonstrates that she would rather be outside the conflict between Helge and Christian, and not be involved in the family secrets—a behavior that Christian will denounce during the dinner.

Image 5: The house reflected on the lake.

Image 6: The camera waiting at the gates.

The climax of the film occurs in the dinner scene, during which Christian reveals his family and friends that his twin sister, Linda, and him were sexually abused by their father, Helge. At the beginning, early evening sunlight enters through the windows, and the atmosphere in the dining room is still cheerful. Christian proposes the first toast, and by reading a speech he has prepared for the occasion, begins to denounce his father's abuses. After that, Helge asks Christian to talk with him in the wine cave, a dark room that serves for a dark conversation between father and son. As Christian talks again of the abuse, Michael, the older brother, then decides to take Christian out of the house. From this moment on, the evening begins to fall and the story also begins to get "darker". The natural lighting contributes to enhance the awkward feeling that will increase to the climax of the party, when Helene reads Linda's revealing suicide letter to all the family and guests.

In the middle of the night, Michael, the older brother, completely drunk, knocks at his father's door. He takes Helge outside and beats him. This is the darkest scene of the film; the action is only illuminated by the lamps on the outside walls of the house (see image 4). After Michael stops beating Helge, the day begins to break—that is, light begins to come back to that family; Christian and Pia arrive to stop Michael. In an interesting shot, the lake beside the house is shown reflecting the house (see image 5). This shot reveals a smart use of light and location, taking advantage of the position of the sun at that moment and of the location of the house, complementing the water imagery of the film[3] and representing visually the power inversion that happened in the house.

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[3]   Water is a constant symbol in the film. It is present since the opening credits and appears throughout the film in different manners, all related to Helge's baths after abusing his children and having its higher peak in Linda's suicide in a bathtub. Even though the focus of this work is not on the imagery of the film, the instance of the lake reflecting the house is meaningful at this moment because it depends on the use of the location and of the light.

From this moment on, the light of the day becomes gradually brighter, illuminating the room where all the guests are having breakfast.

In the beginning of the film, the blazing sun enhanced the feeling of discomfort of a terrible truth to be revealed. At the end of the film, the early daylight contributes to the atmosphere of lightness that involves the house after Helge and Elsie had left. Christian, who sits next to the open door, is now illuminated, not by the burning light of the beginning of the movie, but by a much softer light of tranquility. Helge and Elsie enter the room; they sit at the end of the table that is opposite to the door and receives less light. However, soon Helge is expelled from the enlightened atmosphere that has been created by the denunciation of his abuses and the room is free of his oppressiveness.

This brief analysis of some moments in Vinterberg's film demonstrates that the restrictions of Dogme, in practice, resulted in a film that uses aesthetic clues in the mise-en-scène in favor of the narrative, what reveals the director's high degree of control over "experience".

1.2 *The Idiots*

Schepelern, as mentioned before, highlights Dogme status as fiction films connected to a search for the "truth" commited to experience. Ove Christensen (2000) enriches this connection between "fiction" and "search for truth" when writing about Von Trier's *The Idiots*. According to Christensen, the narrative's focus on "roleplaying and being" highlights "the status of fiction in relation to reality" (40), making this a fim "about identity and character and thus also about film as medium and as art" (41).

Such duality inherent in the Dogme film is expressed in *The Idiots* in a style that differs from the style of *The Celebration*, which is already a sign that the attempt to "put [...] films into uniform" (qtd in Stevenson 22), that is, effacing the director's subjective choices, by "refrain[ing] from [the director's] personal taste" (qtd in Stevenson 23), is probably impossible. The stylistic conventions of light and location analyzed before on Vinterberg's film seem to be more difficult to identify in Dogme #2, *The Idiots.* Von Trier, one of the creators of the Dogme movement, seems to be the strictest of the three first Danish Dogme directors on what concerns "priviledging of content over form, of story and characterization over the virtuosities of technical modes of audiovisual presentation" (Hjort, MacKenzie 2003).

If in *The Celebration* one can easily recognize narrative purposes

in certain uses of lighting and objects in the mise-en-scène, (for instance, creating the dark and oppressive atmosphere over the relationship of the abusing father and the abused son) such use of the elements in the mise-en-scène are much less present in *The Idiots*. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the effort to get away from well-known, easily recognizable movie conventions seems stronger in Von Trier's film. Going back to Christensen's analysis of the plot in *The Idiots*, the film does not have a main focus and the narrative is not marked by stylistic conventions. The filming style does not include much use of the mise-en-scène for narrative purposes. According to Ove Christensen, "[t]he film rejects direct communication" ("Spastic Aesthetics" 35) with the spectator because of its style. Indeed, *The Idiots* is, of the three films analyzed in this work, the one that most causes disorientation on the viewer because of the use of von Trier's interpretation of the Dogme rules.

On the other side of the impeded direct communication between film and spectator aforementioned, is the comparison that Christensen makes between the handheld camera in *The Idiots* and the camera in home videos. He writes that "the use of home video style minimizes the distance between the story and the telling of the story in that the position of enunciation becomes, if not equivalent to, then very close to that of the spectator" (35). Such effect of the use of the handheld camera would approximate the spectator to the filmed objective reality. I take as an example the shot of Michael's car arriving at their father's hotel in *The Celebration*. The camera, positioned behind a wall, positions the viewer as a hidden witness of the secrets Christian is going to reveal (see image 6).

However, in *The Idiots* such visual clues for spectator's identification and comprehension are not present. For instance, it is not possible, throughout the film, to determine for how long the group lives in the house; at the end of the film, Karen's sister, Louise (Regitze Estrup), reveals she has been away from home for two weeks, but it is impossible to precise how much time she has spent with Stoffer and the others. It is possible to trace the chronological order of the events, but the clues come only from some dialogues and mostly from the development of the relationship among the characters. There are no visible demarcations of the passage of time in *The Idiots*, different of what happens in *The Celebration*, in which the passing of time is visually marked by the use of natural light.

It seems that the director's main aesthetic concern in *The Idiots* is to guarantee that the scenes are illuminated enough to be filmed, to the

extent that the "too direct lighting from windows disturbs the images" (O. Christensen 35). Much of the action happens during the day, what favors filming with natural lighting, and the location chosen has big windows that do not impede light coming from the outside. These choices are examples of how the restrictions of minimal interference allow the director to center the attention of the crew in the action itself, not having to worry about technical arrangements. This way, the story is told solely through the acting, with no help from aesthetic cues to develop the narrative. This justifies, to a certain extent, the "ugliness and apparent carelessness" of the images in *The Idiots*, that Ove Christensen considers "rough and at times directly unpleasant to watch" (35).

However, I would rather not restrict the possibility of constructing meaning, specifically in von Trier's film, by considering only the diegetic world of *The Idiots*. In turn, I would highlight the strong relation that this diegetic world has with the whole context in which the film is inserted. In Ove Christensen's (2000) words:

> Basically the film is about roleplaying and being. What does it mean to be someone and what does it mean to pretend to be someone? Is being a consequence of acting or does acting make a disguise of an individual's character? Is the individual a *persona*, a mask? This concerns the status of fiction in relation to reality. In this respect *The Idiots* is about identity and character and thus also about film as medium and as art. (40-41)

That is, von Trier, as the leader of Dogme 95, uses his film as the best example of what is said in the *Manifesto* and *Vow of Chastity*. If the Manifesto urges for distance from the Hollywood tradition, *The Idiots* does all it can do to stay away from it. The film is put together in a way that makes it impossible to characterize this film as, for example, a classical drama–what happens with *The Celebration* (Lauridsen 64), or the folk tale *Mifune* (Kau 139).

The only brief moment that may resemble the Holywood style is the opening scene, where first we have Karen in a fair, watching a game played with a star-shaped panel with many mirrors (see image 7), and then we see Karen riding a chariot, accompanied by diegetic music, coming from an instrument played in the chariot that comes after hers (see image 8).

The viewer may imagine in the first seconds of the film that

Karen is going to be presented to the audience in a familiar way. One can begin to create an interpretation of her expression at the fair and on the chariot, together with the music; however, this movement is stopped abruptly by the cut that takes us to somewhere not predictable by continuity. It seems as if von Trier is telling the viewer that s/he is wrong if s/he thought he was not going to follow his own rules.

Image 7: The mirror panel.

Image 8: Karen in the chariot.

1.3 *Mifune's Last Song*

Mifune gets closer to *The Celebration* in its interpretation of the Dogme rules, that is, the disruption with well-known film conventions does not go to the same extent that it goes in *The Idiots*—it is possible to recognize some of those conventions in the use of lighting, settings, and editing. The film begins with a familiar presentation of the characters and their initial situation: Kresten and Claire (Sofie Gråbøl) just got married, he has no family, and is subjected to his father-in-law–information that is conveyed rather conventionally both by the shot reverse shot sequence during Kjeld's (Kjeld Nørgaard) speech at the factory and by the position of the characters, being Kjeld above Kresten. Also, the viewer gets to know that Kresten is not satisfied with the marriage to Claire also by the shot reverse shot sequence in their sex scene.

Dogme realism functions in two ways in *Mifune*. On the one hand, there is the rawness of images obtained without special lighting arrangements or other direct changes in objective reality. On the other hand, there is the use of Dogme's possibilities to create symbolic moments which translate the characters' present situation or revealing "truths" about their inner selves. That is, even though Dogme wants the film to deal with *reality*, in *Mifune* there are two moments in which such reality becomes, on the one case, a visually symbolic of Liva's (Iben Hjejle) and the other prostitutes's situation; and, on the other case, an

oneiric moment in which Kresten anticipates what he is going to discover about what is important in his life.

The first of the aforementioned moments happens when the women are in a fair looking at themselves in a curved mirror which distorts their images (see image 9). Each of the women stands in front of the mirror, faces their reflections and tells something about the man they imagine they would like for themselves. They mention famous male stars, such as Bruce Springsteen, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Bruce Willis; then, they justify their choices. When Liva's turn comes, she does not want to participate, but ends up mentioning Boris Yeltsin, because he "doesn't drink"—what is ironic, because Yeltsin 's alcoholism is well-known (Columbia "Boris Yeltsin"). The other women go away, and Pernille (Paprika Steen) approaches Liva, inquiring about her anxious looks. Liva tells her she is receiving disturbing anonymous phone calls again. Then, we see Liva listening to one of these phone calls; we know about her problems with her brother, Bjarke (Emil Tarding); learn about her daily difficulties with her clients and the abuses of their pimp.

The mirror scene in *Mifune* reflects the women's distorted realities, how they are objectified and victimized—especially Liva. They cannot mention something about the men present in their real lives, because they are not good for them; they have to fantasize, to place their desires in a place that cannot be reached and spoiled. Liva hesitates before the mirror because, in her situation, the fantasy will not soothe her. She needs to go on a personal journey to change her life—as she in fact does, finding Kresten, new values and a new life.

Kresten's dream happens right after his marriage. He sees himself dressed as a samurai at the top of a building. Filming in what seems early day light, Jacobsen creates the atmosphere of Kresten's dream involving him in a blue pale light (see image 10). Kresten wakes up from that dream with a telephone call telling him his father has died; he has to go to the funeral and decide what to do with his brother Rud. Rud and Kresten have this game in which, in order to calm Rud down, Kresten pretends the Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune is in the cellar. He screams and makes noises, to Rud's enjoyment. Later on, Rud tells Liva and Bjarke that he knows that Kresten is Mifune:

> Rud: Happiness is when Mifune comes out of the cellar.
> Bjarke: Who the hell is Mifune?
> Rud: He's strong. He never gives up. The

seventh *samovar...* It... It is Kresten. (01:03:38)

Kresten's dream serves as a clue Kresten has to follow to find his real life—as opposed to the life of lies he has created in Copenhagen. It is a sign that he has to go back to Lolland and solve his problems with his origins.

Image 9: The distorting mirror.

Image 10: Kresten's dream.

In the aforementioned article by Claus Christensen, "The Celebration of Rules" (2000), the author highlights the "liberty" that minimal interference on the filming allows when he says that, referring to *The Celebration*,

> the strengtht [of Dogme restrictions] is shown in the argument about shoes between Michael and Mette, where the flexible, handheld camera creates intimacy while at the same time allowing the actors to improvise without having to think about the position of the camera and chalk marks on the floor. (96)

"[*Mifune's*] style is rich" (Roman 64) writes, thanks to the work of Anthony Dod Mantle, who became the "spokesman of the Dogme aesthetic" because of his work in previous Dogme films. The author explains that "with *Mifune* […], both Kragh-Jacobsen and Mantle opted for a sense of grace not evident in the restless style of the films antecedents" (64). Kau points out that, in opposition to those previous Dogme films, *The Celebration* and The *Idiots*, due to Kragh-Jacobsen's greater experience (being him the oldest and more experienced of the three filmmakers), *Mifune* reveals the director's artistic control over the film, which can be perceived "in the editing, use of light, framing control, as well as in other stylistic details" (139).

The style of Von Trier's Dogme film, The Idiots, differs much from the style of *The Celebration* and *Mifune*. The stylistic conventions of light and location analyzed before on Vinterberg's and Kragh-Jacobsen's films seem to be more difficult to identify in *The Idiots*. Von Trier seems to be the strictest of the three first Danish Dogme directors on what concerns "priviledging of content over form, of story and characterization over the virtuosities of technical modes of audiovisual presentation" (Hjort, MacKenzie 2003).

Those analyses illustrate that the paths the Dogme directors followed and the places they reached, at the end of their films, are somewhat different from one another. While some directors, as Vinterberg and Kragh-Jacobsen, use the disruptive Dogme proposal in a rather traditional way, other, as von Trier, extrapolate the proposal to the extent of making the highly disorientating film The Idiots, in which it is very difficult to recognize any of the traditional narrative conventions.

The main characteristic that holds those films together is their understanding of realism as a commitment to what is being experienced by the actors and crew on set, circumscribing any manipulation by the possibilities directly present in objective reality. However, such understanding of realism holds within it a significant silence within the Dogme proposal: the texts do not mention any rule concerning the editing of the films. The absence of a concern about the editing of a Dogme film results in freedom over such post-production manipulation of the filmed reality. *The Celebration* and *Mifune* are films that use traditional continuity editing—editing "supported by specific strategies of cinematography and mise-en-scene […] used to ensure narrative continuity" (Bordwell, Thompson 284-295); *The Idiots*, in turn, is disorientating in its editing style.

Eventually, the material that was filmed guided by a great commitment to the reality of experience ends up being presented to the audience as a fragmented reality: the spectator watches selected pieces of the filmed experience. Such fragmentation contrasts with the editing style chosen by Gus Van Sant for the *Death Trilogy*, whose films express not only a commitment to the experience but also with the continuous time of that experience. Such commitment presents a reality much different from that of the Dogme film, because the viewer, even though s/he is experiencing an edited and fragmented reality (or else s/he would watch an endless film!), the length of those fragments of reality is shared between the viewer and the actors, as I am going to discuss further on.

Keeping those thoughts in mind, the next chapter intends to

answer the third and last question proposed at the end of the first chapter: "Are Dogme 95 ideas fated to death or rediscovery?"

Chapter II
Gus Van Sant: Works and
Critical Reception

Gus Van Sant, who started his career as a painter, is now recognized as a prolific director, screenwriter, photographer, musician and author. His film career started, tells Roman, when the director "[fell] under the influence of avant-garde directors such as Stan Brakhage[4], the Kuchar brothers[5], Jordan Belson[6], Jonas Mekas[7] and Andy Warhol[8]" (Roman 171). After his contact with those filmmakers, Van Sant changed his major at the Rhode Island School of Design from painting to cinema, in the seventies. In 1976, he moved to Los Angeles, and while making his first film, *Alice in Hollywood* (1981)—which was never released—, he started to observe the marginalized population of Hollywood Boulevard. His observations resulted in his recurring themes: marginalized groups, alienated youths, and homosexuality.

His first film to be released is *Mala Noche* (1985), based on the autobiography of Portland street writer Walt Curtis. This "unabashedly romantic blast of beatnik lyricism, filmed in the inkiest black-and-white chiaroscuro and soundtracked to languid alt-country arpeggios" (Lim 5) tells the story of a homosexual store clerk and two Mexican immigrants. The film touches the subject of homosexuality in a non-judgmental manner, or, as Lim sees it: "*Mala Noche* is so openly gay that it may be more useful to think of it as incidentally gay" (Lim 9). That is, the film focuses on the subjects and their relationships, instead of using them for political statements. The author observes Van Sant's *Mala Noche* today as a work "far ahead of its time […] because it so blithely bypasses the identity politics and representational burdens of 'gay cinema'", being considered precursor of the New Queer Cinema of the nineties (Lim 8) gave Van Sant the Independent/Experimental Film and Video Award from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association (1987) and the Festival's Plate at the Torino International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival (1988).

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[4] American non-narrative experimental filmmaker. See Frye, Brian L. "Stan Brakhage". 2002

[5] Twins George and Mike Kuchar, American experimental filmmakers.

[6] American artist and filmmaker, known for his abstract films. See Keefer, Cindy. "'Space Light Art'—Early Abstract Cinema and Multimedia, 1900-1959". 2005

[7] American avant-garde filmmaker. See Frye, Brian L. "'Me, I Just Film My Life: An Interview with Jonas Mekas". 2007.

[8] American artist , the exponent of Pop Art. See Verevis, Constantine. "Andy Warhol". 2002.

However, the director could only get it released out of the festival circuit after the success of *Drusgtore Cowboy* (1989).

Lim suggests Van Sant's works can be divided into three phases, at least: "the Pacific Northwest films, the Hollywood dalliances" and the "born-again formalism of his recent 'death trilogy'" (Lim 15). The Pacific Northwest films would be the director's next works, *Drugstore Cowboy*, My *Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993), and *To Die For* (1995).

Drugstore Cowboy, based on a then unpublished autobiographical novel by James Fogel, stars Matt Dillon as the title character Bob Hughes, and also features Kelly Lynch, James LeGros, Heather Graham, and William S. Burroughs. In the story of the group of drug addicts who rob drugstores to support their habit, Van Sant gives the characters' drug addiction the same non-judgmental treatment he gives homosexuality in *Mala Noche*: he "neither glamorizes nor sharply censures his characters" (Holden 6). For Ebert, *Drugstore Cowboy* "is one of the best films in the long tradition of American outlaw road movies—a tradition that includes *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967, dir. Arthur Penn], *Easy Rider* [1969, dir. by Dennis Hopper], *Midnight Cowboy* [1969, dir. John Schlesinger] and *Badlands* [1973, dir. Terrence Malik]" (Ebert "*Drugstore Cowboy*" 1). The film, Holden writes, "offers a cool-eyed vision of young addicts adrift during the twilight of the counterculture" (Holden 4).

My Own Private Idaho, starring River Phoenix, Keanu Reeves, and James Russo, came next. The story of self-discovery of the two friends Mike and Scott (Phoenix and Reeves, respectively) is told in a "pillowy and caressing" style (Hinson "*My Own Private* Idaho" 2). Ebert sees in *My Own Private Idaho* some characteristics that will emerge again in Van Sant's more recent works:

> There is no mechanical plot that has to grind to a Hollywood conclusion, and no contrived test for the heroes to pass; this is a movie about two particular young men, and how they pass their lives. (10)

That is, the contemplative approach of the *Death Trilogy*, which is going to be discussed in the next chapter, begins to arise, creating a connection between this earlier work and the "formalist" films. There are even some symbols in *My Own Private Idaho* to reinforce that connection, especially with *Gerry*, such as the fast moving clouds in the sky and the conversation by a campfire.

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues, starring Uma Thurman as the main character, hitchhiker Sissy Hankshaw, Lorraine Bracco, and Pat Morita, did not have a good reception. About its premiere at the Toronto Film Festival, Ebert (1994) recalls:

> As one of the witnesses to that occasion, I remember the hush that descended upon the theater during the screening; it was not so much an absence of noise as the palpable presence of stunned silence. (11)

Ebert finds hard to believe that the director of *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, "both fine, strong-minded, creative films" (Ebert "*Even Cowgirls*" 3) made "one of the more empty, pointless, baffling films [the critic] can remember" (idem 2). For Caryn James, the film "can stand as one of the more intriguing failures of its day". She believes the main problem of *Even Cowgirls* is that the lack of focus of the film, as it "seem[s] to be about six things at once: Sissy, the 70's, pop culture, lesbians, the West and the mystical mumbo-jumbo about time and space" (James 4-5). However, James Brundage considers *Even Cowgirls* a very good film, "as a metaphor movie" and "[i]f [the viewer] can actually get past the [film's] oddities […], it's one of the funniest films you'll ever see" (Brandage 4).

To Die For is a comedy/documentary starring Nicole Kidman, Matt Dillon, and Joaquin Phoenix. Nicole Kidman won seven awards for this performance, including the Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture category Comedy/Musical (1996). After his failure with *Even Cowgirls*, *To Die For* brings Van Sant back to some of the success of his earlier works. As critic Hal Hinson writes, "*To Die For* is an entertaining, deftly intelligent bit of filmmaking. Though it may seem less individualistic, less personal than Van Sant's past work, you can feel his sensibility and his talent in every frame" (Hinson "*To Die For*" 4).

To Die For film marks a period of transition in Van Sant's career. The director, who started with noncommercial productions, recognizes his movement towards a more commercial style. He says:

> If you list all my films, the truth is, they are heading in that commercial vein, but also sort of stubbornly staying outside what one would think is the general, accessible Hollywood movie. (Roman 172)

Van Sant's "Hollywood dalliances" start with *Good Will Hunting* (1997), starring Robin Williams, Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Minnie Driver. Peter Stack (1997) says,

> [t]he film is a departure for director Gus Van Sant […] [t]hat may disappoint hard-core Van Sant fans, but it shows the director applying a sure hand to a more mainstream story without forsaking the offbeat. (3)

This way, Van Sant finally reaches the "commercial vein" and achieves great mainstream success. The film tells the story of Will Hunting (Damon), a troubled young man who works as a janitor at the MIT. With the help of psychologist Sean Maguire (Williams), Will pursues a better future through his gift for Mathematics.

With *Good Will Hunting*, the director wanted to test his theory that "it's easy to make a mainstream film—you just follow the formula" (Roman 172). The formula appeared to work: for this film, Van Sant was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director (1998), for the Golden Berlin Bear (1998), and for the Golden Satellite Award. For James Berardinelli, "*Good Will Hunting* is an ordinary story told well […], intelligently written (with dialogue that is occasionally brilliant), strongly directed, and nicely acted" (Berardinelli "*Good Will Hunting*" 1).

Matt Damon and Ben Affleck boosted their careers with *Good Will Hunting*. Their screenplay won the Academy Award (1998) the Golden Globe (1998), the Critics Choice Award from the Broadcast Film Critics Association (1998), the Florida Film Critics Circle (1998), and the Golden Sattelite Award (1998). Damon himself received the Silver Berlin Bear for Outstanding Single Achievement (1998), the Critics Choice Award for Breakthrough artist (1998), the Chicago Film Critics Association for Most Promising Actor (1998), and the Sierra Award Most Promising Actor (1998).

Good Will Hunting opened some doors for Van Sant, too. The director tells that Universal Studios only accepted the concept of his next film, a shot-by-shot remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) "because [he] made money on *Good Will Hunting* and they thought it might end up being like a *Scream* [1996, directed by Wes Craven]" (Roman 176). His attempt to produce a "filmic collage" in his *Psycho* (1998), instigated by artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol,

ended up a commercial failure and earned Van Sant two Golden Raspberry Awards[6] for Worst Director and Worst Remake or Sequel (1999).

Critic Roger Ebert (1998) highlights the experimental aspect of Van Sant's Psycho. For him,

> [t]he movie is an invaluable experiment in the theory of cinema, because it demonstrates that a shot-by-shot remake is pointless; genius apparently resides between or beneath the shots, or in chemistry that cannot be timed or counted. (2)

Van Sant seems to agree with this opinion, as he tells "it became clear that if you did it literally shot-by-shot, you destroyed what you were creating" (Roman 176-177). Jeffrey Anderson sounds more positive about Van Sant's *Psycho*. He believes the film "works as a grand, bizarre experimental film" and "actually deserves closer consideration than it received" (Anderson "*Psycho*" 1). Critic Godfrey Cheshire (1998) summarizes the reason for most critics' negative reception of the film:

> The reason the conceit backfires, basically, is that the original depended on narrative surprises that can't possibly be surprising now; on genre conventions that were superseded decades ago; and on material considered daring in 1960 that's long since lost its power even to raise an eyebrow. (3)

Cheshire also mentions Van Sant's insertions of "dreamy cutaway shots, including fast-motion views of clouds that recall similar shots in *My Own Private Idaho*" (9) in the famous scene of Marion Crane's (Anne Heche) shower murder, and in the murder of Milton Arbogast (William H. Macy)—as I wrote before, a symbol present in the *Death Trilogy*.

After *Psycho*'s negative reception, however, Van Sant soon achieved success again with *Finding Forrester* (2000), starring Sean Connery as the unsocial author William Forrester, who mentors gifted writer Jamal Wallace (played by debutant actor Rob Brown), an Afro-American high school student accepted in a prestigious preparatory school for his high score in standardized exams and his talent for

basketball. Critics (Ebert 2000; Schwartzbaum 2001) highlight that although there is a similarity between the plot of *Finding Forrester* and *Good Will Hunting*—both portraying the relationship of gifted though problematic youths and their older, more experienced mentors—the films are very different. As Schwartzbaum writes, in *Finding Forrester* Van Sant is "[l]ike a student copying over his homework and in the process improving his spelling and penmanship" (Schwartzbaum "*Finding Forrester*" 2).

Wesley Morris (2000), on the other hand, sees *Finding Forrester* as Van Sant's second attempt to make a cinematic collage:

> Talking about 1998's *Psycho*, Van Sant said he thought it'd be cool to treat Hitchcock's movie like Pop Art. There'd be a ghetto *Psycho*, a gay *Psycho*, a cartoon *Psycho*, etc. Instead, he must be applying that aesthetic model to *Good Will Hunting*, of which *Finding Forrester* is the black, New York version. (12)

Either way, *Finding Forrester* gave Van Sant the Prize of the Guild of German Art House Cinemas, in the Berlin International Film Festival (2001), a significant recovery from his *Psycho*.

After *Finding Forrester*, Van Sant leaves the Hollywood, big-budget experiments, revealing a "willingness to both react and build on what came before" (Lim 15). As a combination of the experimentalism from his early works and his experiences in Hollywood, begins the third phase of Gus Van Sant's work, as suggested by Lim. *Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days* are his next films, which were reviewed in the Introduction.

In 2007 came *Paranoid Park*¸ an adaptation of the novel of the same name by American writer Blake Nelson. Gabe Nevin plays Alex, a 16-year-old skateboarder who accidentally kills a security guard while riding clandestinely in a train with Scratch, played by Scott Patrick Green. The film gave Van Sant the Boston Society of Film Critics Award for Best Director (2008) and the Cannes Film Festival's special 60th Anniversary Prize. *Paranoid Park* shares some aesthetic characteristics with the *Death Trilogy*. As writes critic David Edelstein (2008),

> You could say that *Paranoid Park* is another in the series of experiments that began with Van Sant's *Gerry* and continued with his *Elephant* and *Last Days* […], in which narrative information

> was dispensed in tiny increments you could choose to arrange in your head (or not) […]. *Paranoid Park* is a supernaturally perfect fusion of Van Sant's current conceptual-art-project head-trip aesthetic and Blake Nelson's finely tuned first-person "young adult" novel. (2)

Similarly to the *Death Trilogy*, *Paranoid Park* has divided the critics' opinion. Some critics, like Kisonak, found the film unfocused and accused Van Sant of being "too preoccupied by technique to be much help in solving" the characters' problems, ending up placing "style over substance" (Kisonak 4-9). For Peter Schilling, "*Paranoid Park* is a grim, tedious and ultimately empty film […] [,] gorgeous but vacant" (2-4)

The film's lack of focus, for Andrew O'Heir (2008), constitutes a positive aspect: "[…] *Paranoid Park* is almost purely an aesthetic experience, to the point where Van Sant abandons any moral perspective or any coherent sense that acts have consequences" (3). For Ann Homaday, (2008), "*Paranoid Park* manages to reflect Van Sant's greatest strengths as an artist: his seemingly limitless fluency with his chosen medium, and his willingness to tell even the oldest stories in bold new ways" (7).

Van Sant's most recent work is *Milk* (2008), a biographic film about American gay rights activist and politician Harvey Milk. For critic Lou Lumenick (2008), *Milk* was made "with a minimum of stylistic tics after a series of avant-garde experiments" (3), and Berardinelli (2008) regards it as an "hybrid" between Van Sant's experiences with mainstream films in the nineties and his filmic experimentation of the 2000, being Van Sant's most accessible work since *Finding Forrester* (2). Anthony Venutolo (2008) suggests the director solved the lack of focus of *Paranoid Park*, being "clear and in control of his material" in *Milk*; the critic also highlights the director's ability to avoid being judgmental or sensationalist towards the character's homosexuality (10). For *Milk*, Van Sant was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Achievement in Direction.

Van Sant's most recent project, *Restless*, starring Henry Hopper and Mia Wasikowska, is to be released in 2011.

Chapter III
The *Death Trilogy*

The feeling of duality, manifested in many ways—reality/fiction, truth/illusion, intervention/realism—, that permeates Dogme 95 can also be perceived in Van Sant's work. In an interview with Paige Powell (1998), Van Sant says: "I don't know if [I'm] part of a young generation or part of a generation of people making new kinds of films" (13). Rodrigo Brandao (2008) situates the director's works "within the frail and tight intersection between commerce and artistic value, common sense and sophistication, and, ultimately, Hollywood and cinema" (2).

Gerry, *Elephant*, and *Last Days* are also in that intermediate place brought up by Brandao. The style of the films is a mixture of commercial filmmaking and art cinema, reality and fiction, technological intervention and Dogme realism. These films are fictions that dialogue with reality, taking part in the concern with "truthful portrayal[s] of reality within the bounds of fiction" (Schepelern 10). For Michiel Cotterink (2010), Van Sant does not try to offer answers or interpretations of the real events that inspired the films, like a contemporary docudrama would do. Instead, "the films seem to propose that definitive truths concerning the depicted events will never be found, let alone be grasped within a medium as film" (2). The answers and interpretations that are not there leave, in the Death Trilogy, a blank composed of space, silence, and minimalist images—the film's style.

The attempt to answer my third question—about the death or rediscovery of Dogme 95 ideas—starts with some questions about the films of the *Death Trilogy*. The first one is: Where does the dialogue between the *Death Trilogy* and Dogme 95 principles happen? With the objective of answering this question, first I want to look at Van Sant's three films individually.

3.1 *Gerry*

"The first thing Van Sant does", writes Jeffrey Anderson (Anderson, "There's Something About *Gerry*" 7), "is strip away the usual 'lost in the wilderness' conventions". The characters do not discuss what they are going to do when they get home or how they miss the people left behind (7). Instead, the director "has created a minimalist film, with long, meditative takes" that is "more about mood and emotion than traditional plot points" (3). Besides the absence of "lost in the wilderness conventions", Anderson points out another rather

unconventional characteristic of the film: "Normally a filmmaker guides your thoughts and feelings through carefully chosen angles and cuts. But without a cut, we're basically left stranded on our own" (12). This way, continues Anderson, "*Gerry* is truly a film that wants its audience to be part of the process"—the process of creating meaning (13).

In the *Death Trilogy*, Van Sant offers the viewer a series of events that gradually take control of the character's lives and converge, eventually, into the imminence of death. *Gerry*, more than a film about two guys who get lost in the desert and struggle for survival, is a film about the forces of nature showing their great and unavoidable power. The characters are trapped by the forces of nature in an open labyrinth, without walls, which closes in on them as they wander looking for a way out.

The main characteristics of this film's style are a combination of not interfering on objective reality and technical intervention, both working together to create meaning through time and space. Besides relying on long takes, in which actions such as walking or simply thinking are left on the screen without interruptions, suggesting that life is actually happening as it is being filmed (leading to an apparent naturalism), *Gerry* also conveys meaning through technical intervention, such as the musical soundtrack and modified projection speed.

In the beginning of the film, we see the back of a car as it goes on a road crossing deserted surroundings. This way, the film establishes the story's location as being the desert, although there are no signs of the exact place such desert occupies. Indeed, the director relies on the Kuleshov effect to create a fictional place from three existing locations, one in Argentina and two in the U.S.—salt plains in Utah and the Death Valley, California. All the spectator is informed about the place is that the young men are far from any signs of civilization and, as the viewer will soon learn, far from any communication with the human-inhabited world (see image 10).

After the location is established, the characters are introduced as the frame moves from the back of the car to its front, framing the characters through the windshield (see image 12). Sunlight comes from behind the car and reflects on the camera lenses and on the windshield; at some angles, sunlight blinds the camera lenses, revealing the presence of the recording device (see image 13). There is no attempt of avoiding such effects or concealing the presence of the camera off screen—the filming accepts what is happening naturally to the experience being filmed. The time spent with the characters on screen is not used for dialogues, not even for readily recognizable facial expressions. No

reasons for the characters' journey are presented. The spectator is left with her/his own interpretation of the men's situation, and s/he is given time to absorb and accept the diegesis offered as it develops itself on the screen.

The final step of the film's opening positions the framing at the characters' point of view (see image 14). At this moment, the film lets the viewer connect the two first steps of the film's establishing sequence. After seeing "where" and "who", the spectator may imagine the "why"—which s/he will probably negotiate throughout the entire the film.

Soon, the two men start their hike. They are followed in a sneakily manner, as if the spectator should keep a distance from the characters. The framing and camera movements offer the point of view of an entity peeking through the vegetation as the characters chat casually (see image 15). Nature, the power acting over the two young men, guides them patiently for the moment when they finally get lost. The positioning and the movements of the camera create the idea of invisible walls building a labyrinth around the two men, leading them not to the thing they wanted to see—although we never get to know what it is—, but where it wants them to be.

Image 11: The back of the car.

Image 12: Reflections of light on the windshield.

Image 13: Reflections of light on the camera lenses.

Image 14: The characters' point of view.

As the characters enter deeper into the labyrinth, the distance the spectator maintains from them decreases and, sometimes, the images start to get out of focus at some moments (see image 16), creating a

sense of confusion about what is being seen. This starts happening right before they realize they got lost, and continues happening as they get more and more distressed until the end of the film. In contrast, after they stop and try to figure out where they are, there is a cut establishing the place to where they have been led (see image 17). In this wide shot, the Gerrys are at the bottom right of the screen and the desert occupies the whole rest of the frame. Then, the camera zooms out and pans left—in the same direction the characters are walking—, highlighting how big and isolated that place is. The framings on these two moments contrast the intimacy with the characters brought by the close ups impose on the characters, going so close to them as to show they distress by going out of focus, to the increasing power acting on them through the greatness of the desert.

After these sequences, comes the first of the moments I will call "intermissions". There are various pauses in the narrative that mark the passing of time as well as stress the omnipotence of nature (see image 18). These pauses are characterized by increased projection speed and the framing, in which the sky occupies most of the frame.

After the men's first night is spent by the fire, Affleck begins to have more screen time. The spectator now focuses on him, watching his physical and mental conditions getting gradually worse. The first cue of the increased focus on Affleck happens during the fire scene, as Damon, who is beside Affleck, moves from sitting on the tree trunk to sitting on the ground. Damon's movement puts Affleck in the center of the frame, illuminated by the fire, while Damon rests in the shade (see image 19).

Some time later, the characters decide to split and meet again afterwards. Affleck gets trapped, or, as he says, "marooned", on the top of a high rock looking for the "spot" where he was supposed to meet Damon. He cannot climb down nor jump, because he could twist an ankle and complicate their situation even more. Damon wants Affleck to jump in his arms, but then both of them could get injured. So they decide to make a "dirt mattress" using Damon's shirt as a "shirt basket" to absorb Affleck's fall. This scene, apparently pointless, since much time is spent on the preparation of the spot for Affleck's fall, is a good example of the non-interfering, naturalistic approach towards objective reality that is a characteristic of the film. The feeling of anxiety created in this scene does not rely on traditional resources, such as close ups, easily recognizable editing patterns, or a tense musical soundtrack; instead, the director uses time and framing to create the desired tension.

Image 15: "Peeking" through the vegetation.

Image 16: Characters out of focus.
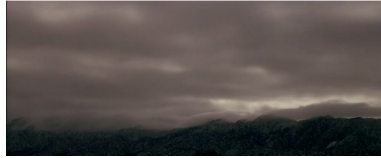

Image 17: The characters disappear from the frame.

Image 18: The clouds during an intermission.

The way the information about how much time they have walked until losing each other is given in an interesting way, counting on technical intervention, as opposed to the naturalistic approach highlighted earlier. Right after the characters split, the camera stays with Affleck, keeping the focus on him. After some time, a cut brings us a moment that marks the passing of time—similar to the aforementioned "intermissions": a shot of the desert without the presence of the two human figures. However, differently from the intermissions, the speed of the images is not altered. This way, the spectator becomes aware that some time has passed and learns the characters have lost each other by hearing Affleck's voice calling Damon from off the screen until the camera meets Affleck again.

Though we could already conclude that the men have missed the meeting spot, we do not get to know how Affleck ended up on top of that rock, neither he explains the situation clearly. First, we see Affleck on top of the rock and Damon below, coming towards him (see image 20). As Damon comes closer to the rock, the great distances the characters constantly have to cover are highlighted by a framing that covers an empty space until Damon enters the frame from the right side, walks towards the left side of the frame and finally gets to the rock (see image 21). The same framing continues for seven minutes, while Damon prepares the dirt mattress and Affleck waits anxiously. The next framing has the camera positioned at a low angle, showing Affleck and part of the rock (see image 22) as Damon continues working.

As I have said before, the director uses time and framing to

achieve an effect of tension in this scene. The naturalistic treatment given to the passing of time of this sequence almost brings disappointment: after all the time and effort, the scene is quickly resolved by Affleck jumping from the rock and falling on the ground uninjured.

Image 19: The Gerrys talk by the fire.

Image 20: Gerry/Affleck is "rock marooned".
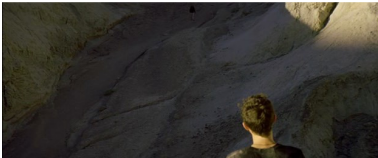
Image 21: Gerry/Damon gets near the rock.

Image 22: Gerry/Affleck on the top of the rock.

Damon and Affleck continue walking, but after the "rock maroon" incident the relationship between them starts to change. Damon notices Affleck's mental condition getting worse and starts being condescending towards his decisions. A distance begins to grow between them. This psychological distance is expressed through the material greatness of the desert. Affleck and Damon argue about which direction they should choose. Nervous, Affleck walks away from Damon (see image 23). From the moment in Figure 13, the camera goes left for some time, showing the empty land, until it gets to Damon (see image 24). Then, we see Damon walking towards Affleck, covering the ground that had been shown separating the two characters before.

Contrasting with the non-manipulated action time of the previous scenes, the second intermission happens, showing, as the first one, the sky and the ground in accelerated speed to mark the passage of time and the power of nature's forces. The power of nature becomes harsher over the characters. First, the night comes and they have to wander in the dark (see image 25). Then, the wind comes whipping them, and throwing tumbleweed at their backs (see image 26). The labyrinth has walls at this moment, as they enter a corridor formed by

high rock walls. These moments mark another change in the men's situation.

The spectator already knows that Affleck's reasoning is harmed. At this moment, the director uses technical intervention and editing in order to expose the character's confusion. Damon and Affleck draw a map on the ground trying to figure out which direction they should now follow (see image 27) based on what they remember having done until then. We observe them from a small distance, from the point of view of someone trying to listen to what they are saying. However, we get a private point of view as the characters are framed from a low angle as they discuss over the "map" (see image 28). Affleck occupies most of the frame; Damon is positioned somewhat outside, and his looks contrast with Affleck's worse condition. From this framing, similarly to the framing in the first fire scene, in which Damon's figure is dislocated to the edge of the frame and Affleck's figure occupies the center, and also from the increased screen time Affleck has had since the first fire scene, the spectator may conclude that the scenes alternated to the men looking at the map on the ground refer to Affleck's thoughts. Such scenes, in increased projection speed, show a car lost on the road, making various turns, finding many detour and stop signs (see Figure 19). Those shots anticipate that Affleck will not be able to leave the labyrinth.

Soon after this sequence, Affleck has a hallucination. Hallucinations are common in this type of film, in which characters are subjected to heat, thirst, and hunger in a harsh natural environment; however, Affleck's hallucination scene is significant because of its interesting construction. First, there is a preparation before the hallucination itself. We see Affleck alone, on the verge of collapse; we also see Damon sitting on a rock, tense, but in a better condition. Affleck sits on the ground and we get a 360 degrees turn around him. Then, there is a 360 degrees view of empty land. The time spent on these two shots give the spectators time to think about what is happening inside the minds of the two characters and to make up theories about what is going to happen to them.

After another intermission, we see Damon's back and a person on
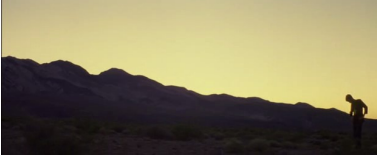
Image 23: The distance separating Gerry/Affleck...
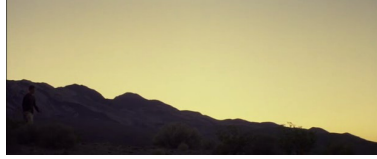
Image 24: ... from Gerry/Damon.

Image 25: The characters walking at night.

Image 26: The rock corridor.

Image 27: Drawing a map on the ground.

Image 28: Low angle shot of the characters talking over the map.
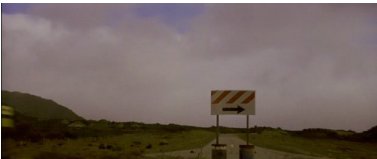
Image 29: The road sign.

Image 30: Gerry/Damon's back and a figure coming from the background.

Image 31: The distant figure is dressed as Gerry/Damon.
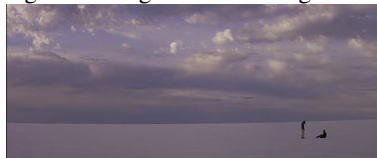
Image 32: The desert blends with the sky.
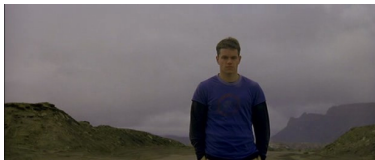
Image 33: Gerry/Damon as he
sees himself in his dream.

the background walking towards him (see image 30); Affleck comes and
sit by him. The camera changes position, showing their faces as Affleck
talks about having found water. There is a slow close up on him then a
cut leading back to the position behind the characters. The man coming
from the background is getting closer, and we can see that he's dressed
as Damon (see image 31). Then, there is a close up to Affleck's back,
until the Damon who is sitting by his side goes out of the frame. Then,
the Damon who is coming from the background starts interacting with
Affleck as if there wasn't anyone sitting by Affleck.

        In the beginning, one could start believing Damon was having
the hallucination and Affleck, though confused and talking about having
found water, was not seeing anything. However, at the end the spectator
learns the hallucination was, in fact, the Damon sitting beside Affleck,
and not the one coming from the background. Affleck's hallucination is
a result of the pressure the environment exercises over the two
characters. It is already possible to learn which one of the two men is
weaker and has more chances of succumbing to the desert.

   The film's final sequence starts at daybreak, after the characters
spend their last night in the desert. The appearance of the desert
changes: at this moment, the men are walking on a desolated white
plane. There are no mountains, rocks, nor vegetation; nature does not
need those "props" to subdue them anymore, because all their strength
and reason have been drained by various days of effort, thirst and
malnutrition. The visual emptiness of the desert gets to its peak at the
moment Affleck finally collapses completely (see image 32). The desert
from now on is characterized only by the greatness of its space and time.
It blends with the sky, in a demonstration of how great the power of
nature over the two men is.

        It is in this empty space that Damon kills Affleck, lies by his side
and falls asleep. Damon dreams and the images in this dream are similar
to those related to Affleck in the map scene. Once again, we see a car
speeding on the road. But this time it does not stop at road signs;
instead, it stops at Damon standing on the road (see image 33). Then, we

move back to Damon asleep, who wakes up startled as a quick camera movement closes up the framing on his face. This sequence happens as if a message were being delivered to Damon: he has endured and reached the labyrinth's exit. Damon is allowed to hear the noises coming from the road, gets up and walks to the road without looking back.

The film ends with Damon rescued by a family in a car. Looking out of the windows, he sees the desert as it was in the beginning of the film. The transformations that the place went through in order to exercise all its power over the two men are supposed to be kept in there, behind the walls of the invisible labyrinth that trapped those men.

3.2 *Elephant*

Critics offer two different interpretations for the film's title. One of them says it "refers to the aphorism about an elephant in a living room, and how if we refuse to face a problem long enough we'll no longer see it" (Anderson, "An *Elephant* Never to Forget" 11). The second interpretation links the title to a fable in which blind men touch, each one of them, a different part of an elephant. This way, "[e]ach man", says Garry, "has an inadequate understanding of what an elephant is" (Garry 5). There is also the reference to Alan Clarke's 1989 movie of the same name, about a series of violent killings in Northern Ireland.

In this film, the viewer follows some high school students as they move around at school on the day two of their colleagues, Alex and Eric (Alex Frost and Eric Deulen) are going to perform a massive shooting. The film's looping structure makes it possible to observe the experiences of many different characters at the same time, from different points of view. As Neera Scott (2005) writes,

> The cumulative impact of the slowly unfolding events leads viewers to a point where they are forced to examine *how* exactly it has all taken place, both by having to fit together the looping narrative, and placing it in the larger social context. (3)

For Geoffrey O'Brien, the "intimacy" between the actors, the characters, and the high school environment is "oddly complemented by a detached, contemplative approach that lingers on passing visual details as if each might be crucial, or final" (O'brien 1). In order to guarantee

the resources to perform such examination, the director relies on that "contemplative approach" and on the repetition of the various characters experiences, creating thus space and time for that examination to take place.

   Elephant presents information in excess, in comparison to *Gerry*, where the information given to the viewer is minimal. As writes Tony McKibbin: "What we have in *Elephant* is an overabundance of information, as though each step of the way Van Sant wants to offer motive only to cancel it out a moment later" (McKibbin 2). However, in both films the information does not come directly from conclusions contained in the dialogues or taken from the action directly.

   The conclusions should arise from the spectator's analysis of the depicted events. However, as the title implies, the beauty of that high school life and its students can lead to a loss of focus—one stops seeing the "elephant" but the problem keeps growing bigger and bigger. Also, the film offers the viewer so many possibilities—it touches many parts of that "elephant" separately—that, in the end, it is impossible to reach a definite conclusion to what led Alex and Eric to perform the massacre.

   Elephant can be divided into three narrative moments, the last one being that of the massacre. In the first moment of the narrative, the viewer watches an extract of the school's ordinary routine by following some students while they are involved in their daily activities. The narrative is marked by intertitles telling those student's names (however such intertitles do not determine a clear division into segments dedicated exclusively to character or characters named in the intertitle), long takes in which one student is followed by the camera as s/he walks in the school, the use of natural light, use of the location, the camera movements and focus to create meaning, and the aforementioned looping structure which serves to give the idea that the events are taking place simultaneously.

   The second moment of the narrative shows some events from the shooters' past, their relation to each other, to Alex's (one of the shooters) parents, some of their interests, personal lives and relationship with other students at school. The third moment of the narrative encompasses the shooting. It is important to remember that those three narrative moments are not separated from each other, as if presented in a strictly chronological order; the narrative moves from one moment to another, going back and forth in time and space as the film progresses and even repeating same events from different perspectives. As Garry (2005) explains,

> [t]he viewer is placed in a state of almost constant temporal dislocation. No punctuation identifying time shifts is provided, various scenes and pieces of action are repeated, and scenes are held in limbo and continued many scenes later. (6)

During the opening credits, the camera shows clouds passing on the sky in fast motion, while students in a sports practice can be heard off screen (see image 34). This shot (which is going to be repeated twice during the film—before the shooting and at the end of the film) is similar to those intermissions in *Gerry*, and can be seen as establishing a link between the films. Time passing in an increased speed for the image, but unaltered for the character's voices anticipates the feeling of repetition that characterizes school life in the film: despite the passing of time, the students' routine at school would always be the same if the tragedy were not to occur.

Garry (2005) writes that "[t]he film is composed primarily of lengthy, single take, sequence shots employing a mobile camera and wide-angle lens" (2), this way providing the viewer with the greatest amount of information possible. However, not all this information is essential for plot development. As the author puts it, "[t]he long takes depict dialogue interactions but also activity […] that would be normally edited out of a film. For him, this suggests that "every moment is precious" and the characters are not aware that those are their last moments (2).

As an example of the great amount of information given by a long take, the first scene after the opening credits establishes the space and time where the story takes place. First, the frame shows trees that, on the next shot, are situated in a suburban neighborhood. From the color of the trees' leaves the viewer learns it is autumn, and from the general appearance of the streets, houses and cars, s/he can deduce the social status of the characters (see image 35). In this scene, the framing is similar to the view from the back of the car in *Gerry* (see image 11). The long take of the car going along the street shows a series of events, in which, for instance, the driver hits a parked car and almost runs over a passing cyclist. The car soon stops and the first intertitle, "John", appears.

John (John Robinson) is the adolescent in that car, who is going to school with his father (Timothy Bottoms). The father is drunk, so John tells him he is going to drive the rest of the way. From the characters' conversation, it is possible to see that John and his father

have a distant relationship. The framing in this scene works in such a way that makes visible the distance between these two characters. The two figures do not stay together in the frame for long: the entrance of one moves the other out of the frame. The first time we see John's face, he has got out of the car to see the damage done to the car. He then briefly enters the car again to take the keys.

The characters are together in the frame for not more than a second, because right after taking the key John gets out of the car again and walks to the driver's side. However, the camera stays focusing on the father while John's voice is heard. They change seats, and as the father gets out of the car and John gets in, we see both characters on screen again. However, John soon closes the door, isolating himself from the father, who talks to John through the closed window (see image 36). The father gets, then, on the passenger's seat, and the camera moves from John to the father. As they continue the ride, the camera on the car (positioned similarly to the camera framing the windshield in *Gerry* (see image 12) stays on the father (see image 37). According to Garry (2005), "[p]hotographing two people sitting together in the front seat of a car is a very common type of shot, and Van Sant makes a special effort to keep them separated" (7).

The segment "Elias" presents the second student to be followed in his daily routine at school and gives another example of the use of the long take. In this scene, the camera stays fixed on the ground and moves only horizontally in order to keep the characters framed. Deep focus is used; as Elias (Elias McConnel) comes from far back, walks towards the couple he wants to photograph, the three walk around, until Elias leave, the figures are always on focus—all this happens without cuts. In the background, it is possible to see the school's sports field, towards which Elias walks (see image 38). The end of this segment establishes visual continuity between this long shot and the upcoming shot at the sports field, at the same time that the editing establishes continuity between "Elias" and "John", as we are led back to John after we are cut from Elias. Such clever structure of continuity begins to suggest that the events in the film are taking place at the same time.

After a scene showing John arriving at school and going to the principal's office, there is a long take of the school's sports field. Similarly to the segment "Elias", the camera in this scene stays fixed on the ground. However, this time it does not make any movements. This camera is completely stationary and records the events as they pass in front of it without dedicating attention to anything in specific (see image 39). This scene, which is unfolded through a long take, is a good

example of the commitment to experience that permeates the three Van Sant films analyzed in this work. Apparently without any concerns about plot development, framing, and figure movement, it is as if life is happening in front of the camera independent from its presence. Meaning depends only on the viewer, who may use time to relate this scene to the previous ones and find out his/her own interpretation.
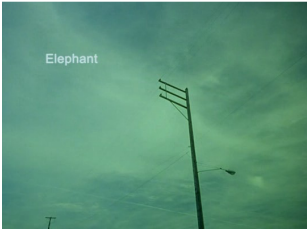
Image 34: *Elephant*'s opening scene.

Image 35: The car going down the road.

Image 36: Father and son separated by the closed door.

Image 37: John's father in the car.

As in Gerry, the location seems to constitute a labyrinth in which the characters become trapped. In the case of *Elephant*, rather than the labyrinth of the open desert, the characters are trapped in the rooms and corridors of the intricate school building. I note other two ideas that are conveyed with the help of the location in *Elephant*: the separated spheres adults and adolescents occupy, and the isolation and smallness of the students in the school environment.

When John uses the phone to ask his brother to pick up their father, during the first moment of the narrative, an astute combination of the use of natural light, location, and figure movement occurs. When John is talking on the phone, the viewer can see the reflection of John's father on the glass. Then a man (Matt Malloy)—who we will soon learn to be the school principal—approaches John and stands behind the glass, occupying the place where the father was before (see image 40). The

distant adult figure of the father is substituted by the distant figure of the principal when John enters the school. Besides, although the principal and John are together in the frame, they are separated by the glass, similarly to the way John sitting in the car is separated from his father standing outside. The distance between them is corroborated by their behavior in the principal's office, when neither of them talk—the principal only stares at John, who waits for the order to go to class.

Image 38: Elias walks towards the school building.

Image 39: The sports field.
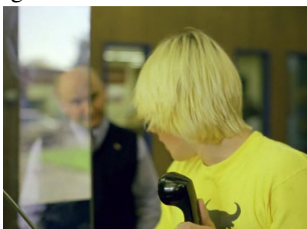
Image 40: John calls his brother, the director appears on the background.

The other idea conveyed by a combination of framing angle and location is the isolation of the characters at the school. One example occurs when John enters alone in a room and cries; the other example happens when Michelle (Kristen Hicks) enters the sports court (see images 41 and 42). In these two moments, John and Michelle appear to be impotent about all the incidents in their lives, incapable of knowing exactly what the problem is—the "elephant"—, as John tells Acadia (Alicia Miles), who enters the room after him and asks if something bad has happened, "I don't know".

The students' isolation is also conveyed by leaving part of the image in the frame in focus and another part out of focus. This happens in all the scenes in which a character is followed by the camera when walking in the school corridors (see image 43). Michelle's isolation is marked by such combination of focused/unfocused images when she is

in the lockers room hearing other girls talking about her (see image 44).

Image 41: John cries alone.

Image 42: Michelle enters the court.

Image 43: Nathan walking in the corridor.
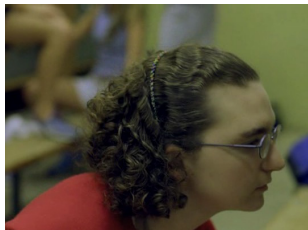
Image 44: Michelle in the lockers room.

Such resource also marks the separation between adults and adolescents, as shown in images 45 and 46. In figure 45, Nathan (Nathan Tyson) and Carrie (Carrie Finklea) are in the office asking to sign out. They are separated from the school employees and teachers both by the counter, which forbids them to enter that space, and also within the image itself, which has the adolescent couple in focus and keeps the adults unfocused. In image 46, we see a combination of focused/unfocused parts of the image in the frame with another framing resource. Similarly to what happens with John and his father in the car, when they do not stay together in the frame, John and the principal are separated in the frame by the glass by the telephone, and the physical separation placed between the adolescents and the adults established by the counter, in this scene Alex's parents are both left unfocused and partially out off of the frame, even though they interact with Alex and Eric as they have breakfast.

It is interesting to notice a change in the editing rhythm at the moment the shooting is on screen. When Alex is explaining their plan to Eric—a framing similar to the planning scene in *Gerry*, in which the characters are framed from the bottom (see image 47), the takes become shorter and the editing faster, and as Alex tells Eric about each step of

their plan, the viewer is taken to the moment in the future when that step has actually taken place.

Image 45: Nathan and Carrie in the office.

Image 46: Alex having breakfast.

Image 47: Low angle shot of Eric and Alex talking over the map.

The shorter shots and faster editing used when the shooting is being planned and presented establish a clear contrast with the rest of the film, which contained much apparently disposable action. However, this difference between the time spent showing the adolescents in the school and the planning and performance of the shooting—the actual climax of the plot—indicates an interpretation for the stylistic choices that permeate this narrative: the focus of *Elephant* is neither on the reasons that led Eric and Alex to shoot the people in their school nor on the attempt to transform the school tragedy in a moment of cinematic thrill. Instead, the focus of this narrative is in highlighting the fragility and beauty of the lives of the students—moments that, after the shooting, are lost forever.

Thus, Van Sant uses the greatest part of the film to show the adolescents' experiences in much detail rather than concentrating on traditional plot development. Such explanation also serves to interpret another aspect of *Elephant*: the apparent disperse camera, which, as Garry puts it, "often switches" subject during the long takes (2). There are many moments in which the camera, while following a certain

character or group of characters, turns its attention to other characters that happen to pass by and then goes back to the character (or characters) initially being followed. When the camera first follows Nathan, for instance, it turns its attention to the group of three girls—Brittany (Brittany Mountain), Jordan (Jordan Taylor), and Nicole (Nicole George) who stare at him as he passes by them in the corridor, and then resumes following Nathan. Another example happens when the camera follows those same three girls mentioned before.

Their sequence starts at the moment Nathan passes by them in the corridor. They walk to the cafeteria, where the camera, positioned behind the counter, frames them buying food, accompanying their movement to the left. However, instead of continuing with the girls, the camera moves away from them and enters the kitchen following the last attendant at the counter. There, the camera observes that attendant and other employee smoking a cannabis cigarette, passes by another employee, and then leaves the kitchen with another attendant, meets the three girls again and resumes following them. Still in the same take, the girls sit to lunch and see John outside the window. The camera turns to him and back to the girls, who talk for some more time. Then, they get up and walk towards the door. Before they leave, the camera's attention is briefly caught by a conversation about a girl's singing abilities, going back to the three friends right after. The take ends as they enter the bathroom and the camera closes up on the door sign.

This long take reveals more about the school's routine and its inhabitants, showing its richness a few minutes before the shooting starts—John sees the shooters entering the building right after he plays with the dogs outside, which is the moment the girls in the cafeteria see through the windows. It also shows how unaware of the "elephant" the students are, so concentrated on their own concerns that they do not see what is coming: had Brittany, Jordan and Nicole kept their attention on John for a few seconds more, they could have seen the shooters passing by.

As I said before, Van Sant makes an effort to register the moments before the shooting in their entirety. These moments are sometimes so simple and quick that may pass unnoticed by the viewer; thus, the director tries to make them longer by using slow motion. This happens three times: when Michelle stares at the sky, when Nathan stares at Brittany, Jordan and Nicole in the corridor, and when John plays with the dog (see images 48, 49, and 50).

With the same intent of prolonging some moments in the student's lives, the moment when John, Elias, and Michelle pass by each

other in the corridor is repeated three times, from three different points of view. The importance of the moment comes from the fact that this is the last time John, Elias, and Michelle will interact: right after he goes out of the building, John sees the shooters, Michelle and Elias go to the library, where Alex starts shooting.

Image 48: Michelle at the field.

Image 49: Nathan (out of focus) and the three girls (on focus) in the corridor.

Image 50: John plays with the dog in slow motion.

Image 51: Eric poiting the gun at Nathan and Carrie in the freezer.

The film ends when Eric finds Nathan and Carrie hiding in the kitchen's freezer (see image 51). The camera moves back slowly, and the shot of clouds moving in an accelerated speed, similar to the one in the opening credits, brings the final credits. The spectators do not know if Eric shot Nathan and Carrie or not. But the film's concern, as I wrote before, is not showing the violence of the two boys' action, the motives that led them to the shooting, or the consequences of their decision. Instead, the film's concern is showing how beautiful and fragile—and taken for granted—the moments lost were.

3.3 *Last Days*

The last film in the *Death Trilogy*, according to Sean Axmaker, is characterized by a "disturbing sense of isolation and alienation". For the author, the film is "in parts […] a powerful portrait of extreme

depression, to the point where Blake literally flees from everyone around him" at the same time that the viewer witnesses the "disturbing […] way everyone avoids him" (Axmaker 15). Blake's last days before committing suicide are presented in a style similar to that of *Gerry* and *Elephant*: the film is mainly composed by long takes and has a looping structure, although having less turns as there are fewer characters involved in the story.

The objective of the film, as the director explains, is to present his hypothesis of what happened in the "last couple of days that were missing" right before Kurt Cobain committed suicide, "where nobody knew what had happened to him" (Axmaker 10). For Van Sant, the film was not intended to be "literally about [Cobain]"; however, due to Michael Pitt's characterization of Blake (which was entirely composed by Pitt[9]), the settings, and the story, the connections between the main character and Kurt Cobain, and between the events depicted in the film and the end of Cobain's life, are immediate.

For John Lars Ericson, "*Last Days*, in many ways, is a reflection of the realist cinema in its most foundational level, perhaps even its purest state" (1). For the author,

> [d]eveloping a complex plot [is not] the purpose of realist cinema: the narrative that drives such films [is not] a 'plot', but what Kracauer calls a 'found story' [see Sigfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*], the story that emerges from filmmaking. (1)

Ericson considers *Last Days* a representation of the balance between the pure recording of reality (exemplified by Lumière—as Ericson puts it, "strict realist" cinema) and the transformation and abstraction of reality (exemplified by Méliès—"formative" cinema, according to Ericson). That is, in *Last Days* the spectator has access to a recreation of reality—in which, as I wrote before, the filming accepts what is happening naturally to the experience being filmed—, but also to transformations and comments on that reality—for instance, in the use of sound to convey the main character's mental disturbance and, at the end of the film, his liberation.

Last Days begins with Blake walking through some woods towards a river, in which he is going to bathe. We can hear Blake

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[9] See Axmaker 14

stepping on fallen leaves and branches, the water running, and Blake's incomprehensible mumbling, which will make up a great part of what the character says in the entire film. A cut takes the viewer some time ahead, when it is already night and Blake lights a fire in the woods. In the beginning of the film, the framing provides the view of a distant observer (see image 52); as the spectator spends more time with Blake, that distance decreases and the view offered is that of someone sitting with Blake by the fire (see Figure 53—in which the position of the figures reminds the fire scene in Gerry shown in Figure 19). As I mentioned before, there is a feeling of alienation and isolation permeating the film as Blake avoids others and is avoided by them. Such behavior can also be perceived in the framing choices and camera movements, as I am going to discuss further on.

The cut after the fire scene leads us to the next morning, when Blake walks back to the house. This scene is shown in a framing similar to that of the opening scene (see image 54). Up to this point, it is already possible to notice some characteristics that *Last Days* shares with *Gerry* and *Elephant*: the use of natural light and the use of long shots—displaying much action that does not contribute to plot development. Also, a pattern of repetition begins to appear. Such pattern can be noticed between scenes in *Last Days*, as shown in images 52 and 54, but also among the three films of the *Death Trilogy*, for instance, in the similarity between the fire scenes in *Gerry* and *Last Days*.

As Blake arrives at the house (see image 55), the place where these events take place is finally established. At this moment, the spectator could assume—and soon be sure—that Blake is living in a big isolated property, in a house near woods and a river. There is not, as in *Gerry* and *Elephant*, a traditional establishing shot with the sole purpose of defining where the story is located; instead, this information comes as the film progresses.

In *Gerry*, the characters are trapped in a labyrinth created by the forces of nature acting over them; in *Elephant*, such labyrinth is represented by the intricate school building; in *Last Days*, the house appears to be the labyrinth. However, as I am going to discuss in this analysis, Blake is not trapped in the house: he has access to exits any time he wants. Actually, the labyrinth/house helps him keep the distance from the other people there and also escape from visitors.

Image 52: Blake walks to the river.

Image 53: Blake by the fire.

Image 54: Blake walks to the house.

Image 55: Blake arrives at the house.

As Blake walks towards the house, besides his footsteps, the wind, and his mumbling, we hear bells, other musical instruments, and sounds of doors opening and closing. Such sounds are not diegetic, neither are they a soundtrack with the purpose of creating the atmosphere around Blake; instead, I would argue that they are creating the atmosphere *inside* his mind. The sounds, combined with Blake's figure, behavior, and his mumbling, bring the viewer his disturbed mental condition.

So far, I have pointed out the main topics of my interpretation of *Last Days*. In sum, they are: Blake's isolation and alienation conveyed with the help of the location, figure movement, framing, and camera movements; sound effects used to reveal Blake's mental condition; and finally, the idea that Blake is not trapped in the labyrinth/house.

Blake, after coming back from his night in the woods, walks to the property and enters the greenhouse. He was being framed from the back (see image 56); after a cut, he is framed from the opposite side and from outside the greenhouse, even though he leaves the door open behind him (see image 57). The spectator is not allowed to occupy the same space Blake does, unless he is lost in his thoughts as he was by the fire. A weird framing choice is that shown in image 58. As Blake climbs up the stairs, he only appears at the edges of the frame, which is mainly occupied by the stairway and baluster. Another prohibition affects the viewer: looking directly at Blake's face is not allowed at this moment.

The introduction of the other characters in the film happens

unexpectedly. Asia (Asia Argento) and Scott (Scott Green) are sleeping in a second floor room, while Blake is outside digging (see image 59). This scene introduces the new characters and suggests Blake's disconnection from the other occupants of the house. Such disconnection is reinforced when, some time later, Blake enters the rooms where the other occupants of the house are sleeping, playing with a shotgun.

Image 56: Blake going to the greenhouse.

Image 57: Blake in the greenhouse
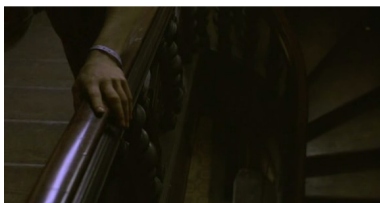
Image 58: Blake going upstairs.
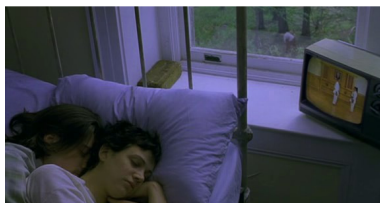
Image 59: Scott and Asia sleeping, Blake in the background, digging.

First, he enters the room where two more new characters sleep, introducing Luke (Lukas Hass) and Nicole (Nicole Vicius). Then, he enters the room where Asia and Scott are. The doors are very noisy and Blake points the shotgun to the head of the ones sleeping, but the couples do not notice his presence. Only Asia wakes up, after Blake has already left, and tells Scott, "There's someone here". This scene brings forward the second topic I mentioned about the sound effects being used to convey Blake's mental alienation. Although Blake is walking inside the house, on dry ground, the sounds of his steps are those of someone walking on a wet ground—such as the sounds heard when he is crossing the woods back to the house (shown in image 54); the door noises are exaggerated, as they do not correspond to the movements shown on screen. As I wrote before, these sounds are creating the atmosphere inside Blake's mind and do not correspond to the actual noises heard by the other characters.

After the scene with the Yellow Pages salesman, Blake goes into a room and closes the door. What Blake is doing in the room is interrupted by a cut that leads us to Asia getting up after noticing someone has been in the bedroom. She goes downstairs, hears some music coming from a room, opens the door and finds Blake, unconscious, lying in front of the door (see image 60). Asia's reaction to Blake is interrupted by a cut, so the spectator does not get to know what happens when Asia opens the door—he falls on his side, but the cut comes before we can see if he wakes up or not.

We are going to meet Blake again in that same room, but while he is still awake. He has turned the TV on, which is showing a music clip (*On Bended Knee*[10], performed by Boyz II Men). As Blake awkwardly starts to bend and eventually kneel on the floor, the music coming from the TV fades out and we hear, once again, bells and other noises similar to the sounds heard when he was walking towards the house in the beginning of the film. While Blake crawls towards the door, the music from the music clip starts to fade in again—finishing with the brief access the spectator had to Blake's internal world. It is possible to hear Asia's footsteps approaching the door, until we finally see her opening the door from the opposite perspective (see image 61). The repetition of events from different points of view, the main characteristic of *Elephant*, is also present in *Last Days*.

Asia checks Blake's pulse and puts him back on the position she found him. For a few moments, the viewer is moved out from the room (see image 62), and soon after Asia leaves, closing the door behind her. Blake is framed from inside the room again, but we do not see him for much time: we are shown the TV where the music clip is on, which we watch to the end (see image 63). As I mentioned before, the people in the house avoids Blake; the spectators must, also, leave him alone sometimes. This way, some of the framing choices, such as the one showing the music clip on the TV, represent an effort to give Blake privacy and isolation not only from the characters in the diegesis, but also from the spectators.

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[10] Boyz II Men. "On Bended Knee". *On Bended Knee*. Motown, 1994.

Image 60: Asia finds Blake sleeping on the floor, seen from outside the room.

Image 61: Asia finds Blake sleeping, seen from inside the room.

Image 62: Asia sits Blake up.

Image 63: The TV.

As I wrote before, Blake uses the house as a labyrinth to hide from the people who try to get in contact with him. For instance, after waking up in the TV room, Blake is walking outside and sees the two Last Days Saints missionaries (Adam and Andy Friberg) leaving after talking to Scott and Luke (see image 64). He observes them from the greenhouse, waiting for them to leave, while the spectator learns that there is a car coming to the house (see image 65, which shows the same framing of a car's windshield already seen in *Gerry* and *Elephant*, including the accepted light reflections on the glass also present in the other two films). When these two men arrive at the house, Blake can hear them as they pass by the greenhouse, but he does not go to them and Scott, who answers to Donovan's knocks on the door, sends them away, telling them he has not seen Blake lately. While Blake is in the greenhouse writing, we can once again hear the bells and noises that characterize Blake's mental state. When Blake is concentrated, we are allowed to stay very close to him, as the camera goes round him 360 degrees—similarly to the camera movement in *Gerry* when Affleck is alone thinking, and when Alex is playing the piano in his room in *Elephant*.

Some time later, Donovan and the detective go after Blake again, but this time Blake is inside the house. The spectator sees Donovan going upstairs calling Blake's name, and after that Blake appears leaving the house, sitting on a bench near the river. Right after that

scene, Blake is shown in the house again, entering the studio (see image 66). As he starts to play, the camera moves back very slowly, offering the spectator a framing that suggests, once again, an effort to give Blake privacy (see image 67).

Image 64: Blake flees from the LDS missionaries.
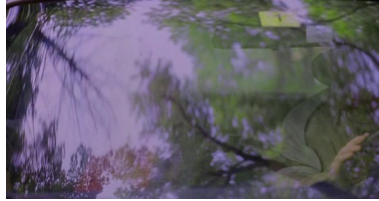
Image 65: Donovan and the detective in the car.

Image 66: Blake playing in the studio.

Image 67: The camera tracks back to get away from the studio window.

More than sixteen minutes after we saw Donovan and the detective leaving the house, we go back to the moment when Blake acknowledges their presence. This time, we are allowed to watch Blake running away from the two men, who are shown entering every room Blake has recently left (see images 68, 69, 70, and 71). The almost playful editing of this scene contrasts with the rest of the film, during which the editing sought to maintain a contemplative and slow pace.

After we see Blake going out of the house again, there is another jump back in time. Now, the spectator is taken back to the moment when Asia, Nicole, Luke, and Scott arrive after, apparently, a party. The first time we see this scene, the group arrives and stays in the living room, Scott puts on a record, sits near the stereo and sings along with the music (*Venus in Furs[11]*, by the Velvet Underground). He gets up and leaves. Luke goes after him and, in a scene that uses the deep focus artifice, finds out he is talking to Blake in the kitchen (see image

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[11] The Velvet Underground. "Venus in Furs". *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Verve Records, 1967.

72). Scott goes back to the living room and resumes listening to the record. When the song is over, Scott goes back to the kitchen but does not find Blake there. Blake is in the studio, where Luke is talking to him. Scott goes there, says something to Luke and both leave (see image 73).

The second time we see this scene, it starts with Blake in the kitchen preparing some food. We are able to know this is happening at the same time as the previous scene mentioned because it is possible to hear *Venus in Furs* playing in the background. Scott enters the kitchen, and this time we have the opportunity to hear what they say (see image 74). Scott leaves and goes back to the living room—the exact same shot we saw before, from the moment he leaves the kitchen to the moment he sits by the stereo and resumes singing. The cut at Scott singing leads us to Blake entering the studio; he is soon followed by Luke and we are able to listen to their whole conversation. Scott enters again and takes Luke with him, but we stay with Blake and hear that he answered Luke, telling him he will listen to the tape Luke gave him. When he is alone again, he plays and sings a song on his guitar.

Blake leaves the house, in a scene that resembles *Gerry* (shown in image 25) in the use of natural light in the evening (see images 75 and 76). He goes to a club, where a man (Harmony Korine) talks to him (see image 77), but soon leaves and returns to the house, going straight to the greenhouse (see image 78). While he walks, we can hear the sounds from inside his mind, now including a woman's and a child's voices. He enters the greenhouse and the sounds stop. A close up of Blake's face stays on the screen for some time (see image 79), as the bells and other sounds begin again.

After some time, Nicole, Luke and Scott leave the house—Asia's absence is not explained, and she does not appear in the film anymore. Before entering the car, Luke looks at the greenhouse and sees Blake there (see image 80). The next morning, a tree trimmer (Chip Marks) finds Blake's body in the greenhouse (see image 81). After the tree trimmer leaves to call the police, we see Blake's spirit rising from the dead body and climb up an invisible stairway (see image 82). Scott, Luke, and Nicole, who are at the girl's house, learn about Blake's suicide on the phone and on the TV. Fearing being involved in the event, they leave. The film ends with the police investigators at Blake's house working on the removal of the body (see image 83); these final actions are alternated with the final credits.

Image 68: Blake leaves the room...

Image 69**:** ... and Donovan and the detective enter the room after he left.

Image 70: Blake leaves another room...

Image 71: ... then, the men enter the room after him again.
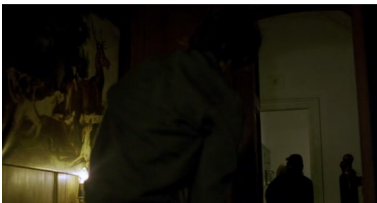
Image 72: Luke sees Scott talking to Blake in the kitchen.

Image 73: Luke, Scott, and Blake in the studio.

Image 74: Scott talking to Blake in the kitchen.
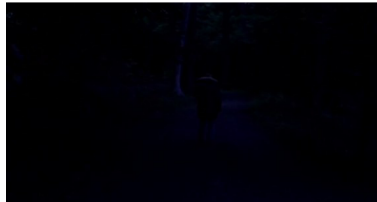
Image 75: Blake leaves the house at night.
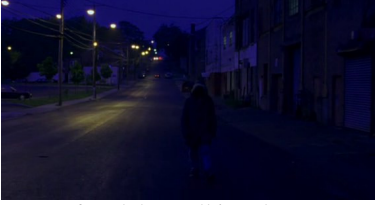
Image 76: Blake walking downtown at night.

Image 77: The man in the club talking to Blake.

Image 78: Blake returns to the greenhouse.

Image 79: Close up of Blake's face.

Image 80: Luke sees Blake in the greenhouse, for the last time.

Image 81: The tree trimmer finds Blake's body.

Image 82: Blake's spirit leaves the body.

Image 83: The police remove the body.

As I wrote before, the settings, framing choices, camera movements, figure behavior, and sound effects are used throughout the film to convey the isolation and alienation of Blake, a character in a state of profound depression who eventually commits suicide. I argued that the house, instead of serving as a labyrinth for Blake, serves as a

labyrinth for the other people around him, who get lost trying to have access to Blake and providing him an intricate structure that allows him to avoid contact with the others. Different from *Gerry* and *Elephant*, films in which the labyrinth is a cause of distress for the characters—the men in *Gerry* are trapped and led to an extreme situation from which there is only escape for one of them and death to the other; the characters in *Elephant* are trapped in an enclosed milieu that engenders the danger threatening them—, *Last Days*'s main character has means not only to use the labyrinth to achieve his purposes of being alone, but he is not trapped there himself because he has means to go in and out of the labyrinth as he sees fit: Blake walks freely from the house to the woods and the river; has access to all the rooms, whose doors are never closed to him; he can even go to other places, for instance when he goes to the club the night before his suicide.

If in *Gerry* there are the forces of nature imposing a harsh environment over the characters with the participation of the environment around them, and if in *Elephant* there are the various social forces acting over the characters until the consequences of such forces are finally unleashed on the students, there is not such movement of forces towards an objective in *Last Days*. If there were such forces acting over Blake, they are not shown in the film, because they have reached their goals before the events portrayed in *Last Days*: Blake is already decided to commit suicide—he even carries the shotgun with which he will take his own life since the beginning of the film.

This way, it is possible to conclude that, although Blake is apparently free to come and go, he is trapped inside himself—thus explaining his behavior throughout the film, with his mumbling and inability to communicate with people around him. Despite Blake dies, similarly to Gerry/Affleck in *Gerry* and many students in *Elephant*, for him death represents freedom: after his body is dead, Blake is able to be freed from his prison. However, Nicole, Scott, and Luke continue trapped looking for a way out of the labyrinth left around them, now represented by the possible involvement with Blake's death.

Chapter IV
Final Remarks

Having analyzed the three Dogme films—*The Celebration*, *The Idiots*, and *Mifune's Last Song*—, and the *Death Trilogy*—*Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days*, now I propose an answer to the question at the beginning of Chapter Three: Where does the dialogue between the *Death Trilogy* and the Dogme 95 principles happen? Such answer can be found by establishing connections between the considerations about Dogme 95 and the analysis of the *Death Trilogy*.

In the introduction, I provided a summary of the whole Dogme 95 proposal: "In sum, Dogme is about relinquishing the manipulation of objective reality, in productions in which the director counts only with the essential apparatus for the existence of the film: the camera". It is possible to say, after looking at those three Dogme films, that the Dogme director only put aside the direct control of objective reality, exercising other types of control in different manners. For instance, in the analyses *The Celebration* and *Mifune* we could see that, even though there is no direct manipulation of the lighting arrangements, there is an indirect manipulation of the lighting achieved through selecting certain times of day to film in order to achieve a specific effect on the screen— for instance, the creation of a gradually darker atmosphere in *The Celebration* and the oniric atmosphere of Kresten's dream in *Mifune*. There is, therefore, manipulation and control—there is transformation of reality.

Relocating that summary of the Dogme 95 proposal in the context of the *Death Trilogy*, it is possible to perceive that throughout *Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days* Van Sant relinquishes much manipulation of objective reality. Continuing with lighting examples, in *Gerry* it is almost impossible to see anything in the frame when the two characters are walking at night, as it was shown in Figure 25; the same happens in *Last Days* when Blake leaves the house at night, as shown in image 75. The difference between the examples from *The Celebration* and *Mifune* and the examples from *Gerry* and *Last Days* is that in the latter the director does not exercise that indirect control over natural light used to achieve certain purposes: the lighting arrangements happen naturally and are accepted as they are even if sometimes they disturb the visibility of the elements in the frame, as shown in images 12 and 65, similarly to what happens in *The Idiots*.

On what concerns the location, however, Van Sant seems to exercise more control than the Dogme directors. Although I have

highlighted some moments in *The Celebration* and *Mifune* that use the location to achieve specific effects during the narrative—for instance, the conversations between Helge and Christian in Helge's office and in the wine cave, during which the smallness and darkness of the rooms contribute to reinforce Helge's oppressiveness towards Christian in *The Celebration*, and the mirror scene in *Mifune*, in which an object present in the location serves the purpose of making the distorted realities of the prostitutes visual—, in the *Death Trilogy* the manipulation of the locations is essential for the development of those stories.

In *Gerry*, the changes in the desert's aspect demonstrate visually the power and the resources being used by nature to trap and subdue the characters. In *Elephant*, the location serves to reveal how complicated the high school milieu is and how, in that intricate structure, lives connect and disconnect routinely; but more than that, the location offers the characters the possibility of escape or the certainty of death during the massacre, since it is through the school's doors and windows that some characters can escape or not. In *Last Days*, the big house and its surroundings are essential to Blake because they provide him with opportunities to hide, flee from visitors, and be alone.

The aspects in which the Dogme films and the *Death Trilogy* differ to a greater extent are those related to the camera movements and the editing. The use of the handheld camera gives the cinematographer freedom to move in the set, but the cinematographer's movements imply a selection *in loco* of what to film at the moment of the action. The handheld camera of the Dogme films contrast with the camera used throughout the *Death Trilogy*, in which the camera is stabler and sometimes fixed on the ground, creating a stronger feeling of distant *contemplation* of the events rather than *presence* at the events as suggested by the home video style of the hand-held Dogme camera, as described by Christensen.

Dogme realism has, as discussed before, a commitment to what is being experienced by the actors and crew on the set. However, as I have previously pointed out, Dogme's commitment to the reality of experience presents the material filmed in fragments, that is, the spectator receives selected pieces of the experience. Those selected pieces are arranged in a quite traditional way in the Dogme films, and it is possible to recognize in them many well-known filmic conventions as, for instance, the establishing shots and the dialogues structured in shot/reverse-shots.

In the *Death Trilogy*, the concern with experience goes beyond not modifying the objective reality filmed, reaching also the length of

the takes. With the long takes, the director achieves more organic
scenes; as the director explains:

> […] [I]f you leave it as a single take, everything is
> actually happening during that one instance. So
> you get a performance that you usually don't
> really see in films because you're intercutting
> angles that are taken at a different period[s] of
> time. (Anderson 2005)

The editing of the *Death Trilogy* seeks to reveal the simultaneity of the
events; as a result, the narratives are not focused on specific characters
but attempt to look at each one of the instances involved in the
unfolding of the events. To achieve such effect, editing is used more to
alternate between the different long takes that constitute the scenes than
to alternate takes within the scenes themselves. In *Gerry*, the editing
strategy described is used to create the feeling that the desert is acting on
the characters and leading them through the labyrinth; in *Elephant*, it is
used to show the events in the day of various students, which will,
eventually, cross each other; in *Last Days*, the strategy is used to stress
Blake's isolation and alienation from the world around him.

  With all the previous analyzes in mind, it is possible to conclude
that the Dogme ideas were not led to death, death, but rather to
rediscovery and re-readings, such as Van Sant's naturalistic aesthetic
based on Dogme's principles. However, this research revealed that Van
Sant's relation to Dogme 95 is only one of many significant aspects of
the director's work. In Chapter Two, I have briefly talked about all
feature films directed by Van Sant; looking at those works, the most
prominent characteristic brought forth is the director's constant
experimentations.

  Those experimentations result in a trajectory marked by stylistic
changes, from the raw style of his first feature *Mala Noche*, the
representations of street life and marginalized subcultures in the Pacific
Northwest phase, the mainstream style of *Good Will Hunting* and
Finding Forrester, to the formalistic experiences of the *Death Trilogy*. It
would be interesting to observe Van Sant's more recent works,
Paranoid Park, *Milk*, and the upcoming *Restless* taking into
consideration the director's experiences in various different styles.

  Van Sant's works constitute also a rich material for research
concerning authorship, as Janet Steiger suggests (2004). As the author
writes, "Van Sant is a useful case to consider [in authorship studies]

because he is publicly ambivalent as to what his status is as an individual author" (2). Appropriation is a resource often used by Van Sant, who often re-works other author's texts and films into his own works. For instance, his appropriation of Shakespeare in *My Own Private Idaho*, which contains texts intended to be a modern-day adaptation of *Henry IV* (Rosenthal 2008, Staiger 2004); the road-movie format of *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*; the classic western in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*; the relation between *Good Will Hunting* and *Finding Forrester*; his attempt to produce a filmic collage in his shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho*; the parallel between Alan Clarke's *Elephant* and Van Sant's *Elephant*; and the influence of Béla Tarr's use of the long take and the long take in *Gerry*, *Elephant*¸ and *Last Days*.

Manohla Dargis (2008), film critic in The New York Times, considers Van Sant "[o]ne of the most important and critically marginalized American filmmakers working in the commercial mainstream" (2). As I could see during the development of this research, there is not much published material about Gus Van Sant's works in Brazil. This is a significant silence in film studies, as there is much to explore in both the director's early and current productions.

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