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Boys and Their Toys

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Boys and Their Toys

How Masculinity is Tied to Gun Violence as Shown Through Film

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Abstract

Gun violence and mass shootings are talked about a lot in today's media. Guns are also used frequently in many films. America has an undeniable problem with the frequency of mass shootings, and gun control has been at the forefront to try and solve this problem. However, this thesis examines how masculinity plays a role in these shootings and gun violence in general. This study aims to look at how guns are represented in film and media and how this is tied to masculinity, specifically by closely analyzing three films: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), and *Loves Her Gun* (Geoff Marslett, 2013). Guns play a central role in the classic western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and masculinity is put into question and regained by the use of the gun. One of the most infamous mass shootings in American history is recreated and explored in *Elephant*, which also has masculine implications. *Loves Her Gun* looks at how masculine power is attained by a woman who has been attacked on the streets of New York. This thesis aims to explore and argue that America's gun violence problem has more to do with masculinity, but first-and-foremost needs to be looked at in a different light and discussed more thoroughly.

Chapter One: Introducing Masculinity and Media

Columbine, Aurora, San Bernardino, Fort Hood, Virginia Tech, Santa Barbara, Charleston, Newtown. Everyone knows these names and automatically associates them with their horrible massacres. Mass shootings have become a reoccurring tragedy that are at the forefront of media today. Gun control has become a seriously debated topic and almost every day a news outlet posts a new article about it. Guns are inherently tied to our culture and we have one of the highest per capita gun ownerships of any country. Gun use is often depicted and holds a central place in countless films, in both positive and negative ways. This thesis aims to analyze the use of guns within film and will examine how, in each case, masculinity plays a critical role in this use. Many explanations have been offered by the media for why America has so many shootings, including mental health and easy accessibility of guns.¹ However, an often-unexplored reason concerns gender roles, specifically cultural norms of masculinity.

Men perpetrate the vast majority of America's shootings, yet the reason why this is the case is rarely questioned.² This thesis argues that masculinity and how our society teaches men to be men is a major cause of our gun violence issue. Three films will be analyzed with special attention to their depictions of gun use, and how that is a part of the overall, cultural construction of masculinity. The films under consideration are *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) and *Loves Her Gun* (Geoff Marslett, 2013). Each film uses guns as a central plot point, and in each case this

¹ Such as in "Dear America: Here is Your Gun Solution" from the 2015 article in *The*

² This is talked about in Dana Britton's book, *The Gender of Crime* and the article by Jeffery Kluger, "Why Mass Killers are Always Male."

use is connected to masculinity. The films demonstrate the thesis that gun violence, and gun use in general, is a key component of a traditional masculine identity.

Masculinity is a difficult concept to unpack. However, in this thesis, masculinity is defined as the behavior through which males adhere to “the guy code.” Michael Kimmel outlines the guy code in his book, Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men in 2008. Kimmel poses the question “what does it mean to be a man” to a large number of young men, and he comprised a list of 10 answers that were often repeated. They are as follows:

1. Boys Don't Cry
2. It's Better to be Mad than Sad
3. Don't Get Mad – Get Even
4. Take it Like a Man
5. He Who has the Most Toys When he Dies, Wins
6. Just Do It or Ride or Die
7. Size Matters
8. I Don't Stop to Ask for Directions
9. Nice Guys Finish Last
10. It's All Good.³

This list lines up well with psychologist Robert Brannon's four basic rules of masculinity, to which Kimmel also subscribes. The first rule is “No Sissy Stuff,” which means that in order to be a real man you cannot be a sissy, or seen as weak, effeminate or gay. Kimmel says, “Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.”⁴ The second rule is “Be a Big Wheel,” which equates to the importance of success and power. “Masculinity” notes Kimmel, is measured more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part.” The third rule is “Be a Sturdy Oak,” which means, “What makes a man is that he is reliable in a crisis... A rock, a pillar, a species of tree.” The last rule is “Give 'em Hell,” meaning

³ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York: Harper, 2008, 45.

⁴ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York: Harper, 2008, 45.

“Exude an aura of daring and aggression. Live life out on the edge. Take risks. Go for it. Pay no attention to what others think.”⁵ These four rules are what define a masculine man.

Masculinity is about power, but also proving that power. Kimmel points out that,

Men subscribe to these ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men. American men want to be a ‘man among men,’ an Arnold Schwarzenegger-like ‘man’s man,’ not a Fabio-like ‘ladies’ man.’ Masculinity is largely a ‘homosocial’ experience: performed for, and judged by, other men.⁶

Being a masculine male is about acting out gender roles in order to create a high standing in society. Our society teaches, preaches and upholds these values for men, which causes acts of violence without thoughts of consequences. Teaching boys that they must be aggressive, pay no attention to what others think, and must have more power than others leads to thinking about how to be powerful with little thought of the negatives. Often times, the only way to show power over someone is through physical means, or violence. Kimmel also points to this when he writes, “Violence, or the threat of violence, is a main element of the guy code... They (men) use violence when necessary to test and prove their manhood, and when other’s don’t measure up, they make them pay.”⁷ When a man’s masculinity is put into question, he must take drastic measure to reinstate his masculine status.

⁵ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York: Harper, 2008, 46.

⁶ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York: Harper, 2008, 47.

⁷ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York: Harper, 2008, 57.

This thesis also explores how media represents and influences the gun debate. Media is a very broad term and can mean many different things. However, in this thesis, media is intended to correlate to public corporations of mass communication, such as *CNN*, *Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Times*, etc. At no point is this thesis attempting to argue that all forms of media are necessarily negative or supportive of a political stance. Rather, the goal is to show that it media is an influential form, which possesses significant power that can easily be biased or simply misinformed. John Thompson points out in his book, *The Media and Modernity* (1995), that “communication media have an irreducible symbolic dimension: they are concerned with the production, storage and circulation of materials which are *meaningful* for the individuals who produce and receive them.”⁸ Thompson also points out that media industries have a form of power that is symbolic and “have shaped the ways in which information and symbolic content are produced and circulated in the social world.”⁹ Mass communication media is an influential and unavoidable source of information for the public and functions as a key part of day-to-day life. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini argue in their book, *Comparing Media Systems* (2004) that,

In the United States, no one could coherently map the politics of the media in this way (concretely say that one newspaper or newscast is right or left centered); those

⁸ Thompson, John B. *The Media and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. Walker, Jeffery T. and Robert M. Bohm. *Demystifying Crime and Criminal Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 11.

⁹ Thompson, John B. *The Media and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. Walker, Jeffery T. and Robert M. Bohm. *Demystifying Crime and Criminal Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 17.

on the left of the spectrum are likely to tell you that all the media slant to the right, and those on the right that they slant to the left.¹⁰

Mancini and Hallin point out that the America media follows a liberal model, which is “characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media.”¹¹ Media is our dominant form of communication and information. However, the information given can be misleading even though it often is a representation of how society feels and functions. Media is an example of the chicken or the egg dichotomy in which we are unsure whether media is merely a reflection of the views of society or if they influence those views. However, the key focus on media in this thesis concerns its influential power and how it functions in the argument surrounding gun use, gun violence, and gun control.

In order to create an argument about how media and film represent guns, one must understand the facts about how guns operate, what laws already exist, and how they are presented. A secondary goal of this thesis is to debunk some myths about guns and to provide another way of looking at the arguments both for and against gun control. Education and knowledge about guns is an imperative component of this thesis’ argument regarding how masculinity plays a crucial part in gun violence. The subsection which follows is meant to provide a thorough analysis of guns and gun laws in order to increase knowledge on this particular subject, and thus to provide additional context for the analysis of the representation of guns as signifiers of masculinity and power in the three films under examination here: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Elephant*, and *Loves Her Gun*.

¹⁰ Hallin, Daniel C. and Paolo Mancini. Comparing Media Systems. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 27.

¹¹ Hallin, Daniel C. and Paolo Mancini. Comparing Media Systems. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 11.

Guns

In writing a thesis about the representation of guns within film, it is important to note the use and laws of guns in today's society. Today's society and media are highly concerned with the issue of gun violence, for obvious and substantial reasons. Almost every day there is a new story relating to gun violence and its devastating impact on American lives. In this day and age, mass shootings have tragically become almost a regular occurrence, and every major news publication has written innumerable articles about both the use of guns and violent crimes such as mass shootings. Most of these publications and popular media outlets are pro gun control, such as *The Huffington Post's* blog, "Dear America: Here is Your Gun Solution,"¹² and articles from *The New Yorker*, such as "The Simple Truth about Gun Control."¹³ However, my thesis argues that the way in which media portrays gun violence is biased and does not examine the larger picture. The media tends to argue that gun violence is linked to gun control, or the lack thereof, and ceases to explore any other potential arguments. A key argument that has been largely ignored by popular media is that gun violence is directly connected to what society teaches about masculinity. This idea will be explored within this chapter.

There is no question that mass shootings have become a major problem today, as some sources have pointed out. *The Huffington Post*, for example, writes, "There have been more mass shootings than there have been days in the year."¹⁴ A mass shooting is generally classified as a shooting in which four or more people are shot, but not necessarily killed.

¹² Benincasa, Sara. "Dear America: Here is Your Gun Solution ." *Huffington Post* (2015). Boyle, Karen. *Media and Violence*. London: SAGE publications, 2005.

¹³ Gopnic, Adam. "The Simple Truth about Gun Control." *The New Yorker* (2012).

¹⁴ Wing, Nick. "There Have Been More Mass Shottings Than There Have Been Days in the Year." *Huffington Post* (2015).

However, some publications or statistical databases will classify a mass shooting as four or more people killed by gunfire. The statistics that *The Huffington Post* uses in this article employ the definition of people wounded rather than killed. This would also, therefore, include gang related shootings and other criminal acts as opposed to a random and seemingly senseless murder of innocent citizens.

In these all-too-common acts of random violence, there is a 98% chance that the mass shooting is done by a male.¹⁵ This fact has been left out of many articles about gun violence, such as those mentioned earlier, revealing a bias within media. This bias is recognized by a given article's absence of the whole story, and often the lack of clear data and misused quotes. Exploring the phenomenon of mass shootings is a difficult task, as there is no clear definition of a mass shooting. However, articles such as those written in *The Huffington Post* exploit this grey definition to their advantage in order to create more morbid stories with flashy headlines and to influence the public. By failing to tell or show the full story, specifically about gun violence, it is easy for readers to arrive at uninformed conclusions about gun laws. Articles like the one from the *Huffington Post* create sorrow and anger in the reader, which might lead to wanting to take action against guns, but in an uneducated way. *The New York Times* in 2015 ran an article that questions the merit of these articles and also questions their statistics, titled, "How Many Mass Shootings Are There, Really?"¹⁶ Follman argues that there have been 73 actual mass shootings since 1982. He argues this by stating that a shooting that is related to gangs is completely different than a man walking into a classroom and shooting as many people as he can. We call these acts "senseless" since their motivation is inexplicable and illogical, stemming from deranged

¹⁵ Kluger, Jeffrey. "Why Mass Killers are Always Male." *Time Magazine* (2014).

¹⁶ Follman, Mark. "How Many Mass Shootings Are There Really?" *New York Times* (2015).

thinking. By this account, shootings have only constituted the 72 he counts. This is not to say that mass shootings are not an actual problem. People are being killed by gunfire, and that matters. However, the way in which a lot of media outlets are presenting the issue can seem biased and used as an attempt to scare the public into - potentially ignorant - action.

Before passing stricter gun laws, however, it is important to know what laws are in place today. Talking about gun laws gets very tricky since each state has different laws and definitions. I will focus on broad gun laws and discuss Colorado's gun laws in particular, since it is important to know what each state's laws are. First and foremost, no matter what state you live in, you cannot legally buy a gun without a background check through a federally licensed dealer. As for personal sales, one third of states still require background checks.¹⁷ Generally, it is illegal to purchase a firearm without a background check. People who advocate for passing stricter gun laws like to say that there are gun show loopholes that allow you to purchase a gun without a background check. This is mostly a false statement, due to the fact that most sellers at a gun show are federally licensed and therefore do require background checks. Second, there are several factors that restrict someone from legally buying a gun; such as: being convicted or suspected of committing a felony, being diagnosed with a mental illness, any involvement in a domestic violence case, having too many DUI's, or if they are addicted to drugs.¹⁸ Many people argue that it is easy for a felon or domestic abuser to buy a gun, but legally it is rather difficult. Another misconception, and third on our list, is you cannot buy a fully automatic weapon, unless it

¹⁷ Cook, Philip J. and Kristin A. Goss. The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 110.

¹⁸ Cook, Philip J. and Kristin A. Goss. The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 113.

was made before 1986 when the ban on automatic weapons was put in place.¹⁹ The fourth law is that you are not allowed to carry a gun, even if you have a concealed carry permit, on any federal property, public K-12 schools or any place that has a security check at every entrance. In order to obtain a concealed carry permit, it is mandatory that you take a specific class and go through a thorough background check. However, some states do not even allow citizens to obtain a concealed carry permit, even though there are no specific laws against it.²⁰

Laws about carrying a gun and the use of deadly force vary from state to state. These next few laws are specific to Colorado. Law 18-1-704 describes the use of physical force in defense of a person. It states that the use of physical force is justified if someone else is using a stronger physical force against someone who is reasonably believed to be unlawful. It also states that deadly physical force may only be used if it is reasonable to believe that a lesser degree of force is inadequate and that the person under attack or another person is in imminent danger of being killed or experiencing great bodily injury; or if they are reasonably presumed to be using physical force against an occupant of a dwelling or business establishment while committing a burglary; or it appears that that person is committing kidnapping, robbery, sexual assault or assault.

The laws are slightly different, however, for the use of deadly force against an intruder in your dwelling, as outlined in law 18-1-704.5. This law states that deadly physical force is justified if the other person has made an unlawful entry into your dwelling

¹⁹ Cook, Philip J. and Kristin A. Goss. The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 101.

²⁰ Cook, Philip J. and Kristin A. Goss. The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 106.

(home), and the occupant has a reasonable belief that the person intends to commit a crime against a person or property, or the occupant reasonably believes that such other person might use any physical force no matter how slight against the occupant. This means that in public, before using physical force, you must be certain that your or someone else's life is in danger. However, in your own dwelling, you only need to believe that they are going to use any form of physical force, even if the intent is to not kill you. This applies to the use of guns, as well as the use of any other way to kill someone. Colorado is an open-carry state, which means that you can carry a handgun that you have purchased legally, in visible sight. However, Denver and few other cities have passed a city law saying that open carrying is not allowed. You may only "concealed carry," meaning carrying a gun so that no one else can see it, if you have obtained a concealed carry permit through your county sheriff office. However, as mentioned before, there are still areas in which you are not allowed to carry. Public universities, such as the University of Colorado at Boulder, allow concealed carry. However, private universities, such as Denver University, have banned them.

It is also important to know what some basic gun terms mean, such as what the classifications of automatic and semi-automatic weapons mean. A semi-automatic weapon means that another round is automatically loaded into the chamber and the weapon is cocked back and ready to fire. However, each time you want to fire a round you must pull the trigger. Fully automatic means that once you have loaded and cocked the weapon, when you pull the trigger many bullets can be fired with one trigger squeeze. The majority of guns bought and used today are semi-automatic. This excludes revolvers, which are mostly depicted in western-genre films. A revolver functions on a double or single action trigger mechanism. A double-action means that each time you pull the trigger, the squeeze is hard,

and it also cocks back the hammer and fires. A single action means you cannot pull the trigger without manually cocking back the hammer, which is why you see in many old films the men using two hands and quickly cocking back the hammer and then firing. Another often-misused term is “magazine” versus “clip.” A magazine is what holds the bullets and feeds them into the gun using a spring. A clip is another form of holding bullets, but uses a gravity fed system to load them into the weapon. A clip can also be used to feed a magazine, multiple bullets at a time, rather than one at a time by hand. However, the part of the gun that holds the bullets and loads them into the chamber is called a magazine. There is only one real weapon that uses a clip mechanism, the M1 Garand. In the case of a revolver, the area that holds the bullets is called the cylinder. It is common for people who do not know a lot about guns to refer to a magazine as a clip, and this is usually an indicator that discredits their knowledge. For example, Alexander DeConde wrote a book entitled Gun Violence in America, and he states, “It also included a ban on importing high-capacity ammunition clips.”²¹ Here, he is actually referring to a magazine.

It is also important to note that almost no source is completely trustworthy. Many politicians have been known to talk incorrectly about guns and the laws surrounding them. For example, in an interview with Joe Biden, he is asked whether he believes that banning certain weapons and high capacity magazines will leave law-abiding citizens unable to protect themselves. His answer is that, as he tells his wife, all you need is to use a double-barrel 12-gauge shot gun and fire two shots into the air, and who ever is trying to come into your home will run away. He also says that a shotgun is much easier to use than an AR-15

²¹ DeConde, Alexander. Gun Violence in America. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001.

style weapon. First of all, the first thing he tells you to do is illegal. Warning shots, or shots fired into the air, are a federal offense. In 2013, a CBS news article was titled, "Fla. Mom Gets 20 Years for Firing Warning Shots." This woman in Florida was sent to prison for firing warning shots at her abusive husband, which is what Biden ignorantly advises. On a second note, a shotgun is not easier to use or fire than an AR-15. Shotguns have a much harder recoil that can knock someone – especially a woman - to the ground, and are more difficult to aim. Shotguns are also not nearly as accurate, so in a life-or-death situation, if you don't hit your assailant, you stand a greater risk of being killed. It is also unreasonable to assume that everyone would run at the sound of a shotgun firing.

In another instance of ignorance regarding gun laws and logic, California Senator Kevin De Leon, in a public address about gun control, held a gun up and said, "This is a ghost gun." A ghost gun is a term that means a gun that is untraceable. De Leon uses the term as if it refers to a class of gun, which it does not. He then goes on to say; "This right here has the ability with a 30-caliber clip to dispense with 30 bullets, within half a second. 30 magazine clip in half a second." This is a word-for-word quote, which makes no sense. What he probably meant by "30 caliber," was .30 carbine, which is a 7.62mm caliber bullet. This is the closest thing he says to be correct. As discussed above, clip is not an accurate term, and the gun he is talking about does not dispense 30 rounds in half a second. It most likely is able to release 12-15 rounds per second. His last sentence, "30 magazine clip in half a second" makes no logical sense. Although not being knowledgeable about guns is not a bad thing, what is bad is attempting to use your power as a Senator to scare the public by spouting false information. De Leon holds up a particular kind of gun and ignorantly tries to tell people how bad it is in order to convince the public to pass an anti-gun law. These are

only a few examples of politicians spouting false information about guns in attempt to pass anti-gun laws.

Of course there is also bad information from both sides. *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article in 2015 entitled, "4 Pro-Gun Arguments We're Sick of Hearing." The four arguments include, "Guns don't kill people. People kill people," "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," "But, mental health!" and "Second Amendment, baby."²² Mental health seems to be a recurring theme of both pro and anti-gun arguments. The problem with this argument is that it is not mental health that is causing shootings. The majority of people with mental health problems are not killing people, but it does seem to be a recurring issue of the shooters to have some sort of mental problem. Amanda Marcotte, the author of this article says,

Also, the 'mental health' gambit, in this context, is always vague. What exactly is the plan? Round up everyone with mental health issues and put them under lock and key? That amounts to 1 in 5 Americans, the vast majority of whom have no violent tendencies.²³

Marcotte is right in saying that most people with any form of mental health are not violent. Using mental health as a way to argue for or against gun control is risky and points to a whole separate issue that takes away from a common sense argument. Let us also not forget that mental health is something that is looked at in a background check when buying a gun. The American mental health system is flawed and definitely needs to be fixed, but shouldn't influence the conversation about guns. We need to help people with such problems, not try and make assertions about their mental health in relation to a shooting.

²² Marcotte, Amanda. "4 Pro-Gun Arguments we're Sick of Hearing ." *Rolling Stone* (2015).

²³ Marcotte, Amanda. "4 Pro-Gun Arguments we're Sick of Hearing ." *Rolling Stone* (2015).

It is also important to point out that the anti-gun argument is correct in stating that more guns equals more gun deaths. Gun accidents happen and it is difficult to say that someone possessing a gun would always stop someone else with a gun. However, another argument is that guns bring down crime rates in general. It is hard to overlook the fact that America has one of the highest rates of gun homicides. However, when you look at violent crime in general, the rates are relatively lower. Australia, for example, banned guns in 1996 and then saw a significant increase in violent crime even while it saw a decrease in gun crime. The *NCPA* looked at these statistics in an article in 2009 entitled, "Australia: More Violent Crime Despite Gun Ban." The article points out that from 1997-2007, "Assault rose 49.2 percent... Australia's violent crime rate rose 42.2 percent... (and) Australian women are now raped over three times as often as American women."²⁴ President Obama said in his most recent address on mass shootings that,

And what's often ignored in this debate is that a majority of gun owners actually agree. A majority of gun owners agree that we can respect the Second Amendment while keeping an irresponsible, law-breaking feud from inflicting harm on a massive scale.²⁵

Pro-gun advocates often cite the second amendment to defend their gun ownership and argue that they do not want their guns taken away because it is their right to own them. However, as President Obama notes, there is a way to appease both sides and prevent

²⁴ NCPA. "AUSTRALIA: MORE VIOLENT CRIME DESPITE GUN BAN." National Center for Policy Analysis. 13 April 2009.

²⁵ Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President on Common-Sense Gun Safety Reform." 5 January 2016. whitehouse.gov. 16 March 2016 <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/05/remarks-president-common-sense-gun-safety-reform>>.

violence. Both sides pose valid arguments that need to be looked at more carefully, but understanding the big picture is extremely important.

In looking at gun violence in relationship to gun control laws, there are many stances. Most argue that creating stricter gun laws or banning guns altogether can reduce or eliminate gun violence. However, the problem with this argument is that banning the legal use of guns does not prevent the illegal use of guns by criminals against an unarmed public. Another problem with increasing gun restrictions or banning guns is that these solutions may not work. It is much easier to pass a law than to remove a law. If banning guns actually increases gun crime, then there may be no way to reverse the trend. Many studies have already shown that some of the laws that have been passed do not actually help. One such instance is the restriction of high-capacity magazines. A high-capacity magazine is one that holds more than 10 rounds. However, as outlined in a *Washington Times* article in 2013, "The High-Capacity Magazine Myth," the ban on high-capacity magazines does not help reduce crimes or death rates, but only reduces the efficacy of self-defense. It takes less than two seconds to drop a magazine and reload, which is not enough time to stop an assailant. However, if you use your own gun in self-defense, it often takes multiple rounds to kill someone, which is then harder with lower-capacity magazines.²⁶ It is also important to note that the majority of mass-shootings occur on "gun-free zones" or in cities with high gun control. A school like in Newtown is "gun free," a movie theater like in Aurora is "gun free," and a military base like in Fort Hood is "gun free." California is a very gun-restrictive state, yet was the location of one of the most recent mass shootings in San Bernardino. Putting up signs or passing more laws does not stop people with the intent

²⁶ Miller, Emily. "Miller: High-Capacity Magazine Myth." *Washington Times* (2013).

to kill from committing the crime of carrying a gun in a gun free zone, or finding a way to buy a gun in the first place. This does not suggest that the public should be able to get a gun without a background check, but rather that passing more laws is unhelpful.

A more compelling argument can be made that looks at the masculinity issues inherent in gun violence and crime. In 2005, nine people were shot and killed in Minnesota; in 2006, five girls were killed in Pennsylvania; in 2007, thirty-two students were killed in Virginia; in 2008, six students were shot dead in Illinois. Each of these shootings were school shootings and done by males.²⁷ This pattern also shows up in mass shootings in general. Of all of the shootings in the past 20 years, a woman committed only one.²⁸ There is only one other single instance in which a woman was the perpetrator. This was in 1979, and a woman killed two people in a school.²⁹ Men committed all the rest of the mass shootings. So what is it that makes men in particular want to shoot people? Men are not the only people who own or use guns in America. In fact, 12% of gun owners are women, and 30% of women live in a household that owns a gun.³⁰ Women have equal opportunity to own or just simply get their hands on a gun, yet only two have committed a mass shooting. Nothing about a gun in particular is masculine or just for men, nor do our gun laws restrict women from purchasing the same guns as men. However, our society today has created a stereotype of guns that is linked to masculinity. Movies, television and media have created iconic images of masculinity and guns. The use of guns has been tied to gaining power and

²⁷ Britton, Dana. The Gender of Crime. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield , 2011, 1-2.

²⁸ For example, there is an article in *USA Today* in 2006 about a woman who shot five people at her work place, written by Martin Kasindorf.

²⁹Staff. "1979 School shooting in San Diego." 2009. History.com. 17 December 2015 <<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/school-shooting-in-san-diego>>.

³⁰ Son, Jaesok and Tom W. Smith. General Social Survey: Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2014. Survey. Chicago: NORC at the University of Chicago, 2015.

therefore asserting masculinity has been depicted in film after film, including old gangster films, such as *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), western films such as *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966), crime dramas such as *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), action films such as *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) and newer big budget films such as *2 Guns* (Balthasar Kormákur, 2013).

Film plays an important role in creating the positive image of a masculine man with a gun. Just looking back through time at the role models within American culture reveals a great deal. In the 1930's, the iconic male man was a smooth-talking, suit-wearing gangster. In the 1950s and into the 60's, it was a gun toting, horse-riding, and macho man like John Wayne. Then in the 1960's emerged the arguably constant and overarching male role model, James Bond, who is also a rich, sexy, handsome white male who wears a suit and has a gun. Boys grow up watching hours upon hours of movies and television that glorify shooting, killing, stabbing, rape, and other criminal activity. Creating this image of criminal behavior is not leading us as a nation to valuing kindness, responsibility or the education in boys needed to create a civilized society.³¹ On top of this, violence in media or movies and television is enjoyable to many viewers. There are films and directors that are associated with violence and guns, and those directors or films are known to provide pleasure through the uses of violence.³² Media is also responsible for the moral panics around violence and more generally: "The media also fuel moral panics about crime."³³ A moral panic is "a situation in which a condition, episode, person, or group of persons comes to be defined as

³¹ Miedzian, Myriam. Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence. New York: Lantern Books, 2001, 291.

³² Boyle, Karen. Media and Violence. London: SAGE publications, 2005, XI.

³³ Walker, Jeffery T. and Robert M. Bohm. Demystifying Crime and Criminal Justice. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 13.

a major threat to society.”³⁴ The media has shown gun violence as an increasing threat to everyday life. However, due to the increase in frequency of mass shootings, this moral panic has become a real issue. Still, the accessibility of guns - to which to the amount of mass shootings attributed – still qualifies as a moral panic, since there are many unexamined issues associated with shootings. Modern concepts of masculinity contribute to the continued threat of shootings, even though the media glosses ignored this root cause of the problem.

Now that the significance of guns in contemporary society has been explored and some key myths about guns perpetuated in and through media have been debunked, we can move on to examine how guns are depicted in three specific films: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Elephant*, and *Loves Her Gun*. One goal of this thesis is to analyze how guns are linked to masculinity and power in film. Film is a highly influential medium, and individual films represent and reinforce various aspects of society, gender roles and expectations among them. Another goal of this thesis is to make the reader think about the gun argument in a new light and realize that there is more to this issue than media is presenting, as can be seen through the films that are analyzed here. Guns play a critical role in our society and the debate has become a heated argument. However, responsible gun ownership provides a lot of potential good for our society, but the idea of “common sense gun control” does not seem so common sense. The need for education and a reasoned analysis of the big picture is the dominant reason for this thesis, and the films examined

³⁴ Walker, Jeffery T. and Robert M. Bohm. Demystifying Crime and Criminal Justice. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 13.

herein help shed light on the complex interrelationship between guns, masculinity and power.

Chapter Two: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

When discussing masculinity within film or media, it is almost impossible not to discuss films in the western genre. In John Ford's 1962 classic, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the idea of guns defining masculinity is a central theme. In westerns, it is typical for guns to be inherently tied to the men in charge. Both the "good guys" and the "bad guys" carry guns at all times. However, in Ford's film, he adds a character that wants to fight the bad guys using law and initially opposes carrying or using a gun. Throughout the film, Ford questions what makes a hero, what makes an ideal macho man, and how both are tied to the use of a gun. Throughout the 1950's and '60's, John Wayne was regarded as the epitome of masculinity. Wayne was the gun toting, strong, commanding hero that every man wanted to be and every woman wanted to be with. However, Ford's film challenges the normal western genre of easily identifiable good guys versus bad guys. He then adds an extra character that goes against the norm of what makes a good guy and questions whether or not this man needs to use a gun. The answer to this question, however, ends up being yes.

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) is a senator who returns to the town of Shinbone with his wife Hallie (Vera Miles) to attend the funeral of their old friend Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), who once saved Ransom's life. The film opens with a long shot of a train rounding a hilly corner, blowing its horn. Steam is pouring out the top of the train as it makes its way through the empty landscape. The film then cuts to an old man watching the railroad, with a match cut of the train pulling into the station with a sign reading "Shinbone" in the top right of the frame. When Hallie and Stoddard first get off the train they are met by a nervous looking old man, Link Appelyard (Andy Devine), whom Stoddard greets as Marshal. Link is fiddling with his hat as Stoddard and Hallie

approach, and greets Stoddard in return as Senator, which Stoddard corrects to Ranse. As the three of them head over to Link's horse drawn carriage, a newspaperman trying to get an interview stops Stoddard. Stoddard leaves with the newspaperman and editor, leaving Hallie with Link. Hallie remarks, "The place sure has changed - churches, high schools, shops," to which Link responds, "The railroad done that." Hallie and Link take a ride out to see a bushel of cactus roses. As Hallie sits in silence, Link picks the prettiest one for her. The film cuts to Stoddard pacing in his nice black and white suit and is smoking a pipe while talking to the newspapermen, all of whom are sitting around an elegant desk. As he departs, the men ask Stoddard why he has come to town. He responds with "I am here to go to a funeral... (for a) man by the name of Tom Doniphon." The men look confused, as they have never heard that name before. Stoddard exits to join Hallie and Link to visit Doniphon's body, and the newspapermen quickly follow to try and figure out who Doniphon is.

The idea of guns being positively tied to masculine identity is introduced rather quickly. As Hallie and Ransom leave the newspaper office they slowly and sullenly walk over to Doniphon's body. Doniphon is being kept in the carpenter's workshop, which is the place of business owned by the man who made his coffin. As they walk into the workshop Ransom takes off his hat. The camera follows the three of them walking further into the shop until Hallie looks shocked and takes a few steps backwards. The film then cuts to an eye-line match of what Hallie and Ransom see - Doniphon's plain wood coffin through a doorway taking up the majority of the frame. They walk into the room with Doniphon's coffin and look over it with grief as slow and minor string music plays softly on the soundtrack. Ransom opens up the coffin to look inside and as he shuts it the first thing he

asks is “Where are his boots?” The carpenter nervously responds that his boots were fairly nice and new and that they shouldn’t go to waste. Ransom replies in command, “Put his boots on Clute! And his gun belt. And his spurs.” Link however, responds by telling Ransom, “He didn’t carry no handgun Ranse. He didn’t for years.” It is typical when burying someone to bury them with items that reflect their identity, Ransom remembers Doniphon as the man with the gun. Doniphon’s gun is central to his character, as is masculinity. Ford specifically cast John Wayne in this role because of his famed prototypical masculine persona.³⁵ At this point in the film John Wayne has not yet been seen, though the audience knows that masculinity is closely tied to each of his film characters.³⁶ It is well known that he wears a gun belt. Within *Liberty Valance*, Wayne’s character is slightly different than his usual roles because he does not end up winning. The idea of masculinity is changing within this time period and Wayne’s “roles increasingly reflected a nostalgic construction of his masculinity, seeing him as an older figure who doesn’t fit into the changing times rather than as a heroic figure whose masculinity provides a model for modern life.”³⁷ Doniphon has mostly been forgotten and apparently amounted to nothing in his life, dying as a lonely and forgotten man. His masculinity and gun are all he has left. The film lets us know from the beginning that this kind of man and the idea of masculinity he represents have changed. However, he is no less important.

³⁵ Horne, Abigail. "The Color of Manhood: Reconsidering Pompey in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*." *Indiana University Press* (2012).

³⁶ Such as in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960), *North To Alaska* (Henry Hathaway, 1960), *Big Jim McLain* (Edward Judwig, 1952).

³⁷ Meeuf, Russel. *John Wayne's World: Transnational Masculinities in the Fifties*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013, 184.

The film is constructed with a framing narrative and the flashback sequence constituting the majority of the film. Ransom is convinced to tell the story of Doniphon to the newspaper men, which begins the sequence as he says, now in voiceover, "I had taken Horace Greeley's advice literally – 'Go West, young man, go West, and seek fame, fortune and adventure.'" This is the only time when Ransom is heard in voice over. As the film fades into the flashback with Ransom coming into town on a dark night in a stagecoach, mirroring the image at the beginning of the film of the train approaching Shinbone, which gets robbed by Valance and his men. As the stagecoach presumably turns the same corner as the train, Valance pops into frame, fires his gun into the air and says "Stand and deliver." More men emerge from behind rocks and trees wearing cowboy hats and handkerchiefs tied around their faces. Valance commands the drivers to toss out the cash box, and as Ransom and the other people are ordered to exit the coach, the film cuts to a close up of the cash box as one of the men shoots the lock off. In a medium shot of Ransom, an old lady from the stagecoach as well as Valance and one of the other robbers, the robber attempts to steal a brooch the old lady is wearing. The woman tries to object in a cowering plea. Ransom attempts to defend the woman and exclaims, "What kind of man are you?" to which Valance responds, "This kind, dude," and backhands him. In a close up of Valance's face, asks Ransom, "Now what kind of man are you, dude?" as he looks over at Ransom lying on the ground. The question that Ransom and Valance ask about what kind of men they are becomes the central question within the film. What makes a man? Ransom's definition of a man relies on law and justice without violence. However, Valance and his men subscribe to a different set of rules – lawlessness and brute force. Valance says, "I'll teach you law. Western law." Valance's idea of a man differs entirely from Ransom's.

Ransom wants men to be educated and to follow the laws without violence. This is what masculinity means to him and this is his vision of the future of the West. However, this naïve attitude nearly gets him killed. Valance severely beats Ransom and leaves him dying and alone on the ground. Defenseless, with nothing but law books, Ransom learns what Valance thinks a man should be. Doniphon rescues him for the first time.

Doniphon and Pompey (Woodey Strode), Doniphon's black servant, bring the beaten Ransom to Hallie to take care of him and dress his wounds. When Ransom becomes cognizant, he quickly wants to enact revenge and arrest Valance. Ransom's inclination is to fight back with the law. However, Doniphon opposes this idea and tells Ransom he needs to pack a gun; Doniphon describes the way of the West as, "a man settles his own problems." Doniphon aligns his concept of manhood with Valance's and claims that a man needs to pack a gun and defend his own honor. This idea of masculinity is more closely tied to modern views, as outlined by Hans Toch in his book Hypermasculinity and Prison Violence in 1998; "Worthy Men are presumed to defend their own honor when it is assailed or impugned; they are obligated to 'take care of their problems' and they are expected to deter victimization through demonstrations of pugnaciousness."³⁸ Men are taught to fight their own battles and take what they want and this is what Doniphon represents. However, Ransom opposes this as he describes Valance as a "no-good, gun-packing, murdering thief." He also seems to be describing men like Doniphon.

In the western genre, guns were a crucial part of manhood and identity, as John Cawelti notes in his book The Six-Gun Mystique in 1971; "The Western hero is also a man

³⁸ Toch, Hans. "Hypermasculinity and Prison Violence." Bowker, Lee H. Masculinities and Violence. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998. 170.

with a gun.”³⁹ Ransom attempts to fight this, but fails. Ransom wants to go against carrying a gun and act in a masculine way by using law. While Ransom is attempting to get back on his feet, he goes to work washing dishes for Hallie at her parents’ restaurant. While Ransom is washing dishes in his apron Doniphon enters with Pompey, dressed up in a nicer suit and white cowboy hat. Doniphon brought Hallie a cactus rose in an attempt to woo her. As Hallie goes back to work as a server, Doniphon gets a quizzical look on his face and moves closer towards the camera. He begins to say, “Ransom Stoddard Attorney at Law,” as the film cuts to a wooden sign resting on the bookshelf, stating exactly what Doniphon has just said. Doniphon turns and walks closer to Ransom, and asks if he really means to hang the sign up. Ransom responds to Doniphon, “That’s why I painted it,” with the camera placed over Doniphon’s shoulder looking at Ransom. Doniphon tells him, now with the camera over Ransom’s shoulder and relatively tight on Doniphon’s stern face, “If put it up you’ll have to defend it with a gun. But you ain’t exactly the type.” This line is a jab at Ransom’s masculinity. The ability to defend oneself, or perhaps more importantly to defend a woman, is crucial to being a masculine man. The only way to defend oneself in the west was with a gun. The bad guys had guns and are experts at using them. The only way to fight back, as Ransom learns, is with a gun. The law does not protect a person in the moment of attack, especially against a gun. Valance is only scared of Doniphon because he knows he is a better and quicker shot. Doniphon is characterized as a good guy, one who is well respected and liked. He also has all of the characteristics attributed to a macho man.

³⁹ Cawelti, John G. The Six-Gun Mystique. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971, 57.

The whole town is afraid of Valance, including the sheriff. Everyone runs and cowers at the sight of Valance and his men, except for Doniphon. In the scene following Doniphon telling Ransom that he will need to defend his sign with a gun, Valance comes into town to drink and eat. He walks into the restaurant and rudely and aggressively makes people move from their spots and takes their food. Valance is wearing a black leather vest and black hat, and his whip is twisted around his finger. As the men whose seats he just took leave, he says, "Well now that's right neighborly of you, partner." Valance turns and in a point of view shot, the camera shows Doniphon sitting at his table. As Valance stares at Doniphon, he pours himself a drink and finishes his sentence with, "Especially after all the lying things I hear folks been sayin' about Liberty Valance." As Ransom comes out to deliver Doniphon's food, Ransom notices, in a close-up shot, Valance's whip on the table. Valance slams the whip on the table, then the camera zooms out to Valance's buddy getting his attention to notice Ransom. Valance and Ransom look at each other and Valance says while laughing, "Looky at the new waitress." Ransom tries to act brave and confident and continues on to deliver the food when Valance trips him, spilling Doniphon's food all over the floor. Doniphon stands up; Valance and his men stand up as well. Doniphon confronts Valance and says, "That's my steak Valance." The confrontation leads to a standoff and as Valance is feeling confident in his odds – "three against one" – Doniphon points to Pompey, who is standing in the doorway behind Valance with a shotgun in his hand. Doniphon and Pompey ultimately scare off Valance and his men. As Valance is leaving he fakes going for his gun, turning back to Doniphon, who says, "Try it Liberty. Just try it." Valance is defeated and angry as he leaves. He gets on his horse and shoots his gun around the town. After Valance is gone, Doniphon asks Ransom, "Now I wonder what scared him off?" The editor

of the Shinbone newspaper, Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien) makes fun of Ransom and jokingly answers, "You know what scared him? The spectacle of law and order, here, rising up out of the gravy and mashed potatoes." Ransom responds and concedes that "It was the gun that scared him off."

Valance, Doniphon and Ransom are in a constant masculinity battle. They want to prove who is the biggest man, and this includes demonstrating who is the best with their gun and has the ability to stand up for themselves. Doniphon is definitely the most masculine of the group, and is the ultimate victor, even though in the end he does not profit from it by winning the girl or the hero title. In fact, he does not want the credit and allows Stoddard to gain from the false idea that he committed the crime. This makes him even more of a noble hero. Being able to defend oneself and one's honor is also a crucial element in masculinity. In Michael Kimmel's book Guyland, published in 2008, as outlined earlier, he sites how in 1976, psychologist Robert Brannon broke down masculinity into four main rules; no sissy stuff, be a big wheel, be a sturdy oak, and give 'em hell. Kimmel states that "masculinity is measured more by wealth, power and status... (and) what makes a man is that he is reliable in a crisis."⁴⁰ To be masculine means adhering to these rules, and being able to back them up.

After Doniphon scares off Valance and Ransom admits that it was attributed to the gun, he is angry at Doniphon and exclaims, "Nobody fights my battles" in an attempt to maintain his own ego. He does not want anyone standing up for him, but cannot fully stand up for himself either. Doniphon says "votes won't stand up against guns," which points out how Ransom cannot stand up for himself against Valance. Each man has their own ego and

⁴⁰ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland. New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, 46-47.

doesn't want to admit their faults. Doniphon's masculinity is tied to his gun and being the strongest, fastest, and best shot. He is able to defend himself and the town against bad men like Valance with his gun. However he does not want to admit that his attitude on masculinity may be old school and that education and law have their place in society. Ransom's masculinity is tied to the law and his attempt to modernize the west, using the votes and law, but he cannot admit that he can't win and gain law and order without a gun. However, this is why Ransom in the end tries to learn how to use a gun. He learns that he cannot win with law and must maintain his ego and masculine identity. Ransom admits to Doniphon that he knows how Doniphon feels and that he must "buy a gun or get out of the territory," to which Ransom claims, "I'm staying and I'm not buying a gun either." However, Ransom has to go against what he says in order to maintain his ego. He is conflicted between wanting to fight his own battles and doing it without a gun. Ultimately, maintaining normative masculinity wins against the peaceful, reasonable, law-abiding citizen. Masculinity is too important to give up, and even Ransom would rather murder than give it up.

Throughout the film however, Ransom's masculinity is undermined. He is given very feminine attributes and tasks. During most of the film Ransom is wearing an apron, even when he faces Valance. He is asked to serve food, which is unheard of at the time for a man, as the film points out. While Ransom is washing dishes Hallie gives him a hard time for not going fast enough because he is trying to read his taped together law book, which Valance tore up, while working. He finds out Hallie can't read and hurts her feelings. As Ransom and Hallie are having a conversation about Hallie's dreams shortly after this encounter, Hallie's father calls for her to come take food out to the guests. The father then asks Ransom,

“Ranse, when you finish with dishes will you help Hallie wait on tables?” Both Hallie and her mother are stunned at him for asking. Hallie says, “Who ever heard of a man waiting on tables?” Ransom doesn’t mind, but waiting on tables goes against the norm for a macho male in the west. Ford also specifically chooses to cast James Stewart as Ransom due to his reputation of a new and feminized type of man. Robert B. Ray associates the qualities of the east in *Liberty Valance* with Ransom, and also links weakness, roses, idealism, and the apron as parts of the eastern/Ransom’s identity.⁴¹ In addition, Dennis Bingham notes that, “Stewart’s career ended as it had begun, with an affirmation of sanitized, non-threatening masculinity and of the harmlessness of dominant ideology,” and notes how Stewart’s identity is partly “a tortured, vulnerable emotionalist, a ‘feminine’ hero albeit one who displays inner pain in masculinity, a screen figure who proves the ‘manufacture’ of the phallus and the illusion of idealism.”⁴² Stewart is scrawny and feminine looking and typically soft and well spoken. He represents the lawful order, but also someone who takes orders and usually lets people fight his battles for him – such as in *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954). His actions, such as failing to shoot a paint can when Doniphon finally tries to teach him how to shoot, or when he is tripped and shown from a high-angle shot laying on the ground, actually make him appear “weak.”

In the end of *Liberty Valance*, Ransom arguably ends up as the hero. He gains votes for governor based on his new identity as the man who shot Liberty Valance. When he is on the train back to Washington with Hallie, he is given special treatment. The last line of the

⁴¹ Ray, Robert B. *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 220.

⁴² Bingham, Dennis. *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994, 85.

film is by the conductor of the train who says, “anything for the man who shot Liberty Valance.” Ransom does not gain respect in the end because he is a Senator or a lawman, but because he defended himself with a gun. Although he is not the man who actually killed Valance, he keeps the secret that he did it. When Doniphon tells him that it was actually Doniphon who killed Valance, he does not argue with the people who say it was he. He keeps it as a key part of his identity. It is even unclear as to whether Hallie knows it was Doniphon. Ransom wants to keep being seen as masculine and a defender of his identity, even though it is a lie. If Hallie doesn’t know, which she most likely does not, he even gained the girl because of his new masculinity. Ransom does not honorably win the girl but wins her based on a lie. Furthermore, Doniphon actually gives Ransom the girl. When Doniphon is telling Ransom that it was he who actually shot Valance, he says, “Hallie is your girl now.” Ransom keeps this part of his identity to maintain his masculinity and win the girl.

An interesting part about this western, and how masculinity is shaped by guns and the correlation to good and evil, is Valance’s whip. The gun does not make someone good or bad, as people like to say today. There are good guys with guns, like Doniphon, and bad guys with guns, like Valance. The gun has little correlation with good or evil, only masculine identity. Until the ending shootout between Valance, Ransom and Doniphon, Valance doesn’t pull out his gun. Valance does, however, always carry and use his silver tipped whip. Both the gun and the whip are phallic, but in order for Valance to gain even more phallic power he has to use something that a man like Doniphon doesn’t have – the whip. Guns are the equalizer within the masculine society, but do not inherently make some one do good or bad things. What this means is that men like Valance and Doniphon can be on

the same plane. If everyone has a gun, and can shoot as quickly and precisely as the other, then you end up with a stand off, like between Doniphon and Valance. Valance doesn't want to go against Doniphon because he knows he may not win. However, Valance knows that Ransom does not know how to use a gun and poses no threat to Valance. He can therefore pick on Ransom and attempt to kill him. However, if everyone was like Valance and Doniphon, then there would be a constant stand off, and men like Valance would lose their power. The gun only brings Valance power because he can use it better than others or against others who do not have one. If everyone had a gun, it would be up to them to decide whether or not they were a good guy or bad guy. However, the good guys can use their gun as a form of self-defense. The whip is linked to cruelty, not self-defense.

The definition and root identities of masculinity, such as those proposed by Robert Brannon, remain relatively constant over time. However, the presentation of masculinity changes within film and media. By 1962, the era of the John Wayne as the masculine trope has begun to fade.⁴³ As John Wayne ages and the times change, he becomes regarded as old school and his masculine identity loses appeal. However, the one aspect of his masculinity that stays constant is the gun. His form of law and ruling may be outdated, but without his gun, Stewart's character and real men like him, would be dead. Ransom – representing a newer, gentler form of masculinity – learns to use a gun and needs it to maintain his masculinity. In order for the new idea of masculinity to come about, his gun is necessary. But in the end, when he returns to Shinbone, he sees that the town has blossomed, all because of him.

⁴³ Such as his drunken character in *True Grit* (Henry Hathaway, 1969).

This question of what makes a man is important when looking at the character of *Liberty Valance* and ultimately deciding whom the hero of the film actually is. Who is the bigger or better man and what does the word “man” mean in this context? Arguably, both are the hero – together. As Ray also points out regarding the double hero complex, “the movie’s plot was another version of the outlaw hero-official hero story.”⁴⁴ One cannot exist without the other and both have important qualities that the other lacks. Ransom has the education, idealism, hope and morality, whereas Doniphon has the toughness, the gun, and the strength. Combined, it could be argued that they would make the perfect man. Doniphon represents self-reliance and Ransom, reliance on the law of the land. Law would not need to exist if crime did not, and violence would not offend if it were not for law. But together, they can maintain some sort of order. *Liberty Valance* takes place when two opposing ideas about the future of the West are in battle. Ranchers wanted the land to remain free range. Farmers and homesteaders wanted fences, peace and the protection of statehood. Without men like John Wayne or Doniphon, the civilized West would not exist. Doniphon provided the muscle that was able to fight against the outlaws. However, the new West could also not exist without men like Ransom. He champions American ideals, and the value of individual rights. Together they create a new kind of hero, and a new kind of American identity, as Ray suggests:

By redirecting the western’s focus from the present to the past, *Valance* implied an erosion of the progressive vision that Americans had historically assumed as their birthright. Replacing this vision was a new nostalgia, not merely for the precivilized

⁴⁴ Ray, Robert B. *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 215.

state, but for the brief moment when *both* were possible, the power and freedom of Tom, the decency and wisdom of Ranse.⁴⁵

These two seemingly conflicting ideals of power/freedom and decency/wisdom apply to masculinity as well as America. Men are conflicted in being dominant versus courteous, and assertive versus intelligent or reasonable.

⁴⁵ Ray, Robert B. A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 238.

Chapter Three: *Elephant*

On April 20th, 1999 one of America's greatest tragedies occurred. Two high school students massacred their school in Columbine, killing 15 and injuring 23 more. In 2003, Gus Van Sant released a film loosely based on this tragedy entitled *Elephant*. The film closely follows a handful of students on the afternoon of the massacre. Using mostly tracking techniques, the camera acts as an objective third party viewer simply observing the course of the day. However, Van Sant is not completely objective and provides a few plot points and cinematic techniques that imply the reasons for this shooting. These points include masculine and feminine identities, homosexual relationships, and the feeling of the "other" for the characters.

Columbine was a heavy topic to cover, and Van Sant did it differently than others such as Michael Moore in his 2002 film *Bowling for Columbine*. Van Sant wasn't definitively looking at the reasons that this shooting occurred, but rather examining the situation of high school life surrounding this attack. In an interview by Sara Switzer with John Robinson, who plays one of the students named John, says, "We aren't explaining anything. We are showing a detached view of the situation that lets the viewer decide, because who are we to say what happened and why?"⁴⁶ However, film as a medium always has some sort of angle or bias. Van Sant chooses what to show, whom to show, and how to show them. He creates characters in a specific way and decides how to depict them and decides what to show them doing. Van Sant's film is unique in its depiction by not creating an obvious argument, but rather presenting information and characters and lets his audience decide

⁴⁶ Switzer, Sara. "John Robinson" *EBSCO publishing* (2003), 84.

why the massacre occurs. A lot of what he shows is a question about the mentality behind the attack and how a human could commit such an atrocity. When Sara Switzer asks Robinson how Columbine affected him, his answer is that "It was so frightening. And the media took off with it, like everything else, so it instilled more fear in people."⁴⁷ The way in which the media, and other films like Moore's, depicted the shooting increased the panic in the public. However, Van Sant's film is not about fear, but rather the humanness behind both the perpetrators and the victims.

The film begins with the camera tracking in from above on a car recklessly driving and nearly hitting a bicyclist. Throughout the film, a title card introduces characters with their names written in white across the black screen. The first character introduced is "John" who is initially in a car being driven to school by his drunk father. He has his father pull over and John takes over driving. Obviously annoyed, John is not surprised at his father's drunken state. As they drive to school, his father asks if he wants to go hunting this weekend. At first it seems as though because of the talk about guns, that John will be one of the shooters, as we know he has access to guns and knows how to use them. However, John ends up being one of the survivors. This points to the fact that there are people who own or use guns who do not use them to kill people. It is not the gun that is bad, but the person and the context in which they decide to use them. John is depicted as sensitive as he gets to school and goes into an empty room and begins to cry. Typically, boys are taught that they are not allowed to cry or show emotions. But since John allows himself to feel those emotions and cry, he is able to escape the fate of violence. As Michael Kimmel states in his book Guyland,

⁴⁷ Switzer, Sara. "John Robinson ." EBSCO publishing (2003), 83.

The guy code... demands a lot - that boys and young men shut down emotionally, that they suppress compassion and inflate ambition... Violence is how they express all that disappointment. Rage is the way to displace the feelings of humiliation, to restore entitlement.⁴⁸

Instead of responding with rage about his troubles at home, he allows himself to express and release emotion. This also might be what ultimately saves his life.

The next character to be introduced is Elias (Elias McConnell). His narrative is attached to his camera, as he takes and develops photographs. We first see Elias walking across a park and ask a couple if he can photograph them. The next characters introduced are Nathan (Nathan Tyson) and Carrie (Carrie Finklea). Nathan's introduction begins with the camera in a static shot of the high school field with boys playing football in the foreground, including one of them being tackled to the ground. Boys this age are taught that sports are a key part of masculinity, which is linked to violence. The camera watches the field for a while, until Nathan stops in front of the camera and puts on his Lifeguard sweatshirt. The camera follows Nathan as he walks into the school, and then the camera shifts focus to a group of girls gazing at him and commenting on how cute he is. The camera continues to follow Nathan as he reaches his girlfriend, Carrie. Nathan is set up to be an idealized male, by showing first showing him playing sports, and then being admired by girls. Nathan is presented to be the stereotypical jock, which is associated with masculinity. This is the beginning of the theme of masculinity and its effect on the shooting within the

⁴⁸ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, 55.

film. In Robert Lightning's essay entitled "Two Approaches to School Violence" he discusses the use of masculinity within *Elephant*. Lightning states:

Patriarchal gender construction is one system implied as causing the massacre in *Elephant* and the film offers a detailed critique. The Nathan/Alex dichotomy is central here, with Nathan offered as the cultural ideal of masculinity (competitive, social, aggressive) and Alex his opposite (self-critical, asocial, passive/hyper-aggressive). That the two forms of masculinity operate within a hierarchy rather than in isolation becomes clear in their two encounters...⁴⁹

Alex (Alex Frost) is one of the shooters in the film. One of Nathan's first interactions with Alex is when he is throwing spitballs at Alex in class. In the beginning, Nathan has the power and the social standing. However, in the end Alex takes that away from him.

Power dynamics and acquiring manhood also play crucial points in this film. The transition from boy to man is undoubtedly a difficult one and is part of the trajectory of this film. Anna Backman Rogers states in her book, American Independent Cinema: Rites of Passage and the Crisis Image, "However, as noted earlier *Elephant* is not really a moralistic or message driven film; rather, it centres (sic) on bodies in transition in which the passage from childhood into adulthood is allegorically mapped onto the passage from life to death."⁵⁰ *Elephant* looks at the perilous trajectory of high school students in an intimate manner. This is something that Michael Kimmel looks at carefully in Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. In it he discusses school shootings and Columbine specifically. In discussing Columbine he states, "School shooters are malicious because they

⁴⁹ Lightning, Robert K. "Two Approaches to School Violence." Cineaction (2014), 58.

⁵⁰ Rogers, Anna Backman. American Independent Cinema: Rites of Passage and the Crisis Image. Cheshire: Edinburg University Press Ltd, 2015, 51-52.

are miserable and angry. Tormented by their peers and marginalized from the mainstream culture, they use violence as a way to restore their manhood which has been challenged.”⁵¹ As Rogers’ points out, the film is about the transition from boy to man, and Alex and Eric (the other shooter, Eric Deulen) are affected negatively by this transition. Alex is bullied by Nathan and needs to “restore his manhood” as Kimmel would state. It is said that the actual Columbine shooters were not bullied, but Van Sant decides to include this scene in his film. Van Sant puts Alex in this environment in which his manhood is questioned and he needs to gain power over the man who has been established as the masculine ideal.

The depiction of Alex and Eric by Van Sant is not only a lack of masculinity but also has homosexual implications. While Alex and Eric are getting ready for their massacre, the camera watches as Alex gets into the shower. Shortly after Alex enters the shower Eric comes into the bathroom, gets naked and joins Alex. In the shower they begin to kiss, after discussing that neither of them has ever been kissed before. In an interview with Gus Van Sant by Amy Taubin in a 2003 article entitled “Part of the Problem,” Van Sant says the kiss is not necessarily meant to suggest that the characters are homosexual but that it is just something that guys do. However, it is important to note that the actors did not really want to do this scene and it was a huge decision on the part of Van Sant to include it. Van Sant also says in the interview, “Their (the two actors) idea was to gang-rape a girl instead.”⁵² This is crucial because the actors were in high school at the time themselves. They were in that period of life and did not think the kissing scene was a good idea. They did not want to

⁵¹ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, 90.

⁵² Taubin, Amy. "Part of the Problem: Stepping into the Arena of High School, Gus Van Sant's Elephant Confronts the Spectre of Columbine." Film Comment Vol. 39, No. 5 (2003), 33.

be associated with homosexuality, but would rather perform an act of power – rape. However, the kiss can be seen as more than a homoerotic scene, but rather another reference to Eric and Alex’s social context. Robert Lightning states,

Certain victims (Nathan and Carrie, the bulimic girls, Elias), being young, white, social and sexually appealing, approximate the heterosexual social ideal epitomized in the film by Nathan and Carrie and thus symbolically represent the social world from which Alex and Eric are excluded.⁵³

Eric and Alex are not part of the ideal social world that, Nathan is for example, and therefore have not been able to enjoy parts of growing up, like being kissed, because of it. This may also be one of the reasons why they decide to shoot up their school. The kiss is not about sexuality, but rather about their social environment. They feel as though they have been denied the pleasures of manhood that they would like to experience. Eric and Alex’s kiss is not romantic and there is no other indication that they are homosexual, especially since Alex kills Eric in the end. Therefore, one could assume that they do not kiss because they are attracted to each other or have a romantic relationship, but because they know they are about to die and want to experience what is deemed an important part of becoming a man and being social. Alex and Eric feel ostracized from the social world in their school and therefore feel inferior. In order to feel like normal men they want to gain back power by killing the people that have excluded them from socialization. Michael Kimmel points out in Guyland, “Hooking up may have less to do with guys’ relationships with women and more to do with guys’ relationships with other guys.”⁵⁴ Hooking up or

⁵³ Lightning, Robert K. "Two Approaches to School Violence." Cineaction (2014), 59.

⁵⁴ Kimmel, Michael. Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, 206.

making out is less about the actual act with women, but gaining social status with other men. Hooking up was just another component of social environments that Alex and Eric were excluded from, and just added to their feelings of inferiority.

In contrast to masculinity, the film also puts a slight emphasis on its counterpart, femininity. One of the characters in the film is Michelle (Kristen Hicks). Michelle refuses to conform to the characteristics of femininity. For example, during her gym class she is the only girl wearing sweatpants instead of shorts. Her gym teacher comes up and asks her why she isn't wearing shorts and insists that she has to wear shorts next class. Within the film there is no positive image of femininity. As Lightning states, "The feminist politics of both films' are clearly evident from their shared critical view of patriarchal masculinity. In *Elephant* this is continuous with a critique of the objectification of women."⁵⁵ As well as Michelle, who is told to be more feminine by showing her legs, there are three girls who are the classic representation of femininity. Their conversations mostly include talk about boys and how they should be putting their girlfriends first. Then after their lunch the three go into the bathroom together while discussing how fat they feel after eating. They then simultaneously regurgitate their meals. Becoming what society deems as an ideal woman by being ultra-feminine is no less hard than becoming a hyper-masculinized male. However, it is also important to note that each of these women who are characterized in the film do not make it out alive. Femininity is squashed by the desire to be a macho man in power. The shooters are not targeting any one in particular and it is not a gendered shooting, however, it is still thought provoking that no central female figure is alive in the

⁵⁵ Lightning, Robert K. "Two Approaches to School Violence." *Cineaction* (2014), 58.

end of the film. Part of masculinity is asserting dominance over women, and Alex and Eric accomplish this by killing them.

A compelling component to *Elephant* is its cinematic choices. This film does not have particularly gorgeous cinematography, but the camera work is nonetheless impressive. Continuous tracking shots are used throughout the entire film, and the camera remains relatively close to each of its subjects. This effect creates a claustrophobic and almost nauseating effect, which foreshadows the impending doom. As well, the tightness creates a sense of closeness to the characters even though we get very little narrative information about them. The audience is literally thrown into the story (remember the opening shot coming in from above) and then catapulted out – the ending shot being the camera lifting into the sky as the clouds rolling by and the credits begin. Dennis Young, in his article “Dis/affected: The Sense(s) of Violence in Dennis Cooper and Gus Van Sant,” states,

Instead of forming itself around key moments of affective intensity, which is what narratives are conventionally designed to deliver, the narration of *Elephant* – by which I simply mean what the camera shows us, and when – is unfazed by the characters’ affective or moral journeys, their ‘arcs’, and instead seems motivated almost entirely by its own aesthetic concerns.⁵⁶

The point of Van Sant’s film is not to give backstory, because that would imply giving more of an answer as to why Alex and Eric decide to shoot up their school, but rather to aesthetically show you what the day looks like. The film is almost a reenactment of the security footage from the actual Columbine massacre, but provides a more human element

⁵⁶ Young, Damon. “Dis/affected: The Sense(s) of Violence in Dennis Cooper and Gus Van Sant.” *Continuum* (2005), 499.

– emotions. The key parts in this film are the emotions experienced by each character as the camera follows them closely as they move through the hallways, the social environments of the school (friend groups, clubs and sports), and how the characters find their identities based on social construction, such as what it means to be a man and how to fit in. Alex and Eric struggle to fit within the confines of their environment, so they respond violently. Eric is never shown inside the school until the shooting, which shows his separation from school's social environment. As well, the only time Alex is shown in school is in class when he gets spitballs thrown at him and in the cafeteria where he is planning his attack and the noise becomes unbearably loud for him. Van Sant's choice to physically separate the attackers from the school setting resembles their separation from society. Even though Van Sant is not explicitly giving an answer to why, he is aesthetically showing us by throwing you into the environment. Young's argument is that Van Sant cares more about the aesthetics of his film than his character, but it is almost the opposite. He uses the aesthetics to give you an intriguing view of his characters.

The way in which the film is shot also creates a form of exclusion. Although the audience feels included into the life the characters, the film also isolates the characters themselves within the narrative. There are rarely any establishing shots and within the context of the school, most of the characters are seen interacting in a social manner. However, Alex and Eric are never seen socializing in school until they are shooting. Michael Sofair discusses the idea of violence within the school setting in his article, "Elephant: The Physics of Violence." Sofair states,

If the school is mapped in terms of its violence, the 'elephant' at its centre is the violence of unsocialised male couple against the heterosexual couple. Abstracting

from the particular content, its form is the violence of the excluded against the included... This logic is what is common to all dimensions of the school's space, and of our society, not just the psychosexual, but the political, whose fundamental is the division into those with the capital and those without, and of the traditional moral order, which divides us into good and bad according to conformity or non-conformity to prescribed identities.⁵⁷

The way in which Van Sant depicts his characters dichotomizes them, not necessarily into good and bad, but into the conformed and non-conformed. Van Sant does not clearly make Alex and Eric look evil, but he makes them look on the out side of normal social interactions. Alex and Eric seem to only have each other, but they are only seen together in Alex's home, and not at school. The tight camera on each of the characters shows a form of isolation. However, characters like Nathan and Carrie are shown tightly with other people in school, or the three bulimic girls who are always together.

The filmic technique of the close following and observing camera also emphasizes an "us" vs. "them" mentality. Michael Sofair later sates in his article,

If, as the way it is filmed suggests, an independent perspective is unsustainable and we are implicated in a situation of violent interaction, then how are we to decide which changes in such a situation are preferable? ... And moralizing has yet to get beyond the naïve ambition of remaking all violent individuals into non-violent, or the self-contradictory goal of taking over society to impose non-violence. It may even be considered part of the system of violence, producing and 'us' vs. 'them'

⁵⁷ Sofair, Michael. "Elephant: The Physics of Violence." Cineaction (2006), 16.

mentality in which 'they' are unthinkable and unnegotiable that sustains cycles of violence and counter violence.⁵⁸

Alex and Eric are seen as outsiders that do not fit into the social order, which makes them an 'other.' Van Sant does not want to explicitly state why Alex and Eric did what they did, but rather wants the audience to decide. However, Van Sant presents Eric and Alex as outsiders, suggesting that this status is at the root of their willingness to commit acts of violence. They are forcing their way back into the social hierarchy by taking back control with the use of violence. As well, if they are seen as the other, then they are also seen as "less than" and therefore non-masculine. What they did is considered unthinkable, and that level of violence is immoral, yet our society is formed upon dualities. You cannot have peace without having violence. If we did not know what violence was, there would be no need to promote peace. Eric and Alex are simply enforcing this duality by promoting violence, and fulfilling their masculine roles.

⁵⁸ Sofair, Michael. "Elephant: The Physics of Violence." Cineaction (2006), 17.

Chapter Four: *Loves Her Gun*

In 2013, Geoff Marslett directed a provocative film entitled *Loves Her Gun* that encapsulates the issues of gun violence and comments on the connection between guns and masculinity. Marslett's film follows the main character Allie (Trieste Kelly Dunn) as she is violently attacked blocks from her home in Brooklyn and decides to flee to Austin, Texas with a band called The Karate Kids. Feeling powerless and violated, she attempts to regain control of her life by learning how to shoot a gun, and ultimately buying one for herself. Throughout the film, Marslett poses a few main questions about gun violence and gun culture, but remains relatively in the middle, showing both sides to the argument for and against gun control. *Loves Her Gun* provides a new and interesting way to look at the effects of masculinity on gun use.

The film opens with Allie leaving her apartment, talking on the phone with a friend about her deadbeat boyfriend who ditched her, and walking through the empty streets of Brooklyn. After a few blocks, it begins to rain. She opens her umbrella, and as she comes around a corner, she looks lost. She ends up at the Karate Kids concert during their last song. During their song, the film shows close ups of their hilarious costumes with fake arms and legs in a karate kick position. There is a shot of the fake foot, followed by a close-up of Allie's face as she chuckles. The film cuts between the lead singer (Geoff Marslett himself) and the drummer as she happily sings along. The song ends and as they bow, the film shows the smiling keyboardist as his fake hand plays a note on his keyboard. The film cuts to them hanging out and chatting on the roof and drinking beer. The camera stays close to its characters, panning back and forth. Allie's boyfriend, Johnny (Geoff Lerer), finally shows up and they share an awkward hug and he steals her beer. Allie introduces him to Clark the

keyboardist (Francisco Barreiro) and Johnny makes a bad joke about Clark's name. Allie retorts by telling him that Clark is in the band that he just missed, but Johnny defends himself by saying Allie didn't answer her phone. Johnny egotistically talks and name-drops and the camera stays in a medium close-up, as he tells Allie he got tickets to a band to make it up to her. As they leave to go to this concert, the camera pulls in close to Clark's face as he says, "What a fucking asshole." On the walk, now that they are alone and Johnny doesn't have to assert his masculinity, he apologizes to Allie who doesn't seem to believe him. Johnny gets a call and falls back as the camera pulls in to Allie's annoyed face as she waits for him to get off the phone. He tells her that he actually only has one ticket for the show they are going to, and ends up leaving without her. He asks for her umbrella as she mockingly beats him with it, foreshadowing what is about to happen, but as he begs for the umbrella (a symbol of protection) she gives it to him. She begins to walk home alone, and the camera follows from the front, switches to a side view, and then follows her from behind. She glances back briefly, and then from behind the camera two guys appear and attack her. The camera begins to get shaky and out of focus. It cuts into a blurry low-angle shot of one of the guys in a pig mask. Then it cuts to another blurry close-up of a knife in one of the attacker's hands. They punch her in the face, beat her to the ground, kick her prone body, and steal her purse. The film goes black for a second, then shows her lying on the ground gasping for breath. One of the men, as they are about to walk away, leans over Allie as she lies on the ground and says, "You're just lucky I didn't want to fuck." In this moment, Allie is completely powerless and violated. She has lived in Brooklyn for six years, but fear has never been as real for her as it is in that moment. Some may consider Allie lucky because she was not raped. However, she easily could have been, and the lack of

control she felt in that instant is debilitating. The men who attack her even point out to her that they could have done more with her and she had no choice in the matter. They have all the power and there is absolutely nothing she can do about it.

The masks play a critical role in this scene, because they represent the animalistic power and anonymity that men have over women. Men can be invisible and appear out of nowhere, like they did when they came to attack Allie. Marslett chooses not to show the men coming around the corner, or approaching, but just simply appearing and attacking. Allie, however, is closely followed with the handheld camera in a lot of tight close-up shots. In an interview that I conducted with Geoff Marslett, he said, “Women do not have to luxury of being invisible entities.”⁵⁹ Women are constantly the object of the male gaze and in the spotlight of their attention – wanted or unwanted. This is also a form of loss of control. Women cannot slink into the shadows and walk down the street unnoticed. This also creates fear for women in urban environments. Marslett said that part of his interest in writing this script was because his co-writer, Lauren Modery, felt this fear as a woman. Allie was a target and her brutal assault reminds her of her vulnerability and visibility.

Not only does Allie not have any power in the moment of the attack, she also is powerless when she is questioned during the aftermath. After the attack, Allie goes back to her apartment where her roommate lets her in. The film cuts to Allie sitting on the couch slouched over with her head in her hands being interrogated by a male police officer standing above her. The officer is pacing back and forth over her and says, “We’ve got a 28 year-old young woman walking by herself at 1:30 in the morning in, you said, East Williamsburg?” Allie mumbles, “yes” to the officers’ accusatory retort, then the film cuts to

⁵⁹ Marslett, Geoff. Interview with Geoff Marslett Naomi Weingast. 26 February 2016.

a close up of the officer's face as he chews gum and looks down on her. He asks her what address she was at, and when she tells him the street name, asks if that is a street or an avenue. He said he has worked in that precinct for three years and has never heard of Normand Avenue, but asks if she means Normand Street. He asks if there were any witnesses and if there was anybody with her. After he asks about the masks, he asks how much had she been drinking, what kind of beer it was, if it was from a keg or bottle. After that he says, "and you were attacked by a kangaroo?" Allie tells the officer that yes, one was a kangaroo and the other was a lighter colored animal, to which the officer says, "you mean like a lighter colored black animal. Or a Latino animal?" Throughout this whole interrogation process Allie is shown sitting on the couch feeling attacked again and acting as if she is being prosecuted. Her responses are somewhat hesitant and in a quiet voice. The camera throughout the scene is cutting between the police officer annoyingly smacking his gum with the camera tight on his face. The police officer gives Allie no respect and treats her like she is guilty, instead of the victim that she is. Not only does Allie have to go through the trauma of being beaten and robbed, but has to deal with the doubt from another hyper-masculine presence. This makes her feel even more fear and victimization. This kind of scene has played out similarly in other films, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, 1999). After Brandon Teena was attacked and raped, the cop makes it seem as though it was his fault for "lying" about his gender. The media has also often shown rape victims being blamed, either for being a slut, having sex beforehand, or for what they were wearing. Allie feels the same sort of victimization here because she is a woman. The cop makes her feel as though it was her fault because of choices she has made, such as drinking and walking home alone late at night. After the cop questions her, the film shows her

shaken up in the shower and looking at her bruises in the mirror. She stands there feeling defeated and hurt. She cries with her roommate when she realizes she can't even call her mother because she doesn't know her number. She says it sucks because not only did they steal her shit, but they beat her up too. They made her feel powerless and alone on so many levels.

Shaken by her attack and fed up with her deadbeat boyfriend (a somewhat emasculated figure because he holds power over her, treats her like an object and selfishly leaves her) who adds insult to injury by taking her umbrella, Allie accepts the invitation to join the band on their road trip back to Austin. Allie is fleeing from her fear in an attempt to regain her sense of self. Upon her arrival in Austin she stays on the couch in the house of one of the band members named Zoe (Ashley Spillers). The first morning she is woken up by the loud noises of Sara (Melissa Bisagni) doing work on the yard. Sara offers Allie a job in landscaping, which Allie reluctantly accepts. Sara is portrayed as a more masculine woman who drives a truck, dresses androgynously and has a labor-intensive job. Sara also becomes the woman who introduces her to guns and helps Allie regain her sense of power. For Marslett, Sara was created as the character that represents the responsible gun owner. This is an interesting choice. The fact that Sara owns and uses guns is an addition to her masculinization. There are no strong men present in the film, but instead there is Sara. It is intriguing that Marslett chose to portray the character who uses guns responsibly as masculine. Allie lacked the masculine presence and power that Sara has. The person who Allie decides to gain power from could not be a man because that is who took it away from her. However, guns are seen as masculine because the possession of them is associated with power, which is linked to masculinity. Therefore, choosing to make Sara a masculine

character is rooted in the idea of guns equaling power and masculinity. Having the guns and the ability to teach Allie how to use them is a form of control that Allie wishes to gain. Sara seems to have a sense of power in her life and does therefore not desire that power from men. She has learned to be able to defend and protect herself by owning guns.

Soon after Allie moves to Austin, she finds herself at a pool party that has an interesting twist. While Allie is hanging outside of the pool, drinking beer, a few people are skinny-dipping. The camera shows a close up of one of the girls in the pool, who says, "Hopefully I will never have to use it. But it's what I have my gun for." The guy she is talking to doubts that she has a gun, so she pulls it out of her purse. The girl fires a few rounds into the air, and everyone around the pool freaks out. One person says, "You are more likely to get shot if you have a gun." The naked girl with the gun - symbolically vulnerable and blatantly female - is unfazed and doesn't understand why everyone is so upset. Drunk on her own power - and just plain drunk - this girl thinks her actions are normal. In fact, she responds to the question of why she has a gun with, "Why don't you have one?" Another partygoer says, "It's a proven statistic that 80% of people who have guns get shot." This is not a proven statistic but points to the ignorance of the laughable facts that people often spout when they have strong opinions about guns. During the interview with Marslett, he said he wanted this scene to point out the ridiculousness of both sides of the anti and pro-gun control arguments. There are people in this world who are irresponsible gun owners, like the naked girl in the pool, and there are also people who are ignorant of the facts about guns like some of the other people at the party. However, whether or not the arguments about guns are ridiculous, this point in the film becomes a turning point for Allie, and opens her mind about guns. Zoe profusely apologizes to Allie and calls the girl a "crazy hick." But

Allie laughs at the absurd yet somehow liberating excitement of the moment, and says, "It's actually pretty cool."

One morning, Allie has trouble waking up for work, and ends up being rather late to meet Sara at the job site. Allie apologizes, but complains that she doesn't feel safe and is having trouble sleeping. Sara responds by saying, "You're scared in Brooklyn, you are scared here. You should just get a gun... It's Texas, everyone has a gun." Allie disregards this advice and says she does not want to get a gun. However, she is intrigued and soon submits and goes shooting with Sara. To Sara's credit, she is a very good teacher and goes through all of the safety of the firearm and shooting before letting Allie even hold it. Allie is nervous at first, but once she fires the pistol, she smiles and seems genuinely happy. As Ted Scheinman says in his review of the film, "When she first shoots, Allie exudes a goose-pimpled sense of power and self-possession. More important, she can sleep for the first time in weeks."⁶⁰ Firing the gun brings back Allie's self-determination. She no longer feels like a victim, and perhaps even imagines herself an aggressor. There is some irony in the film, which links Allie's feminine liberation to her claiming a man's weapon. Throughout history, both in film and society, guns have typically been shown to be used by men. However, there have been recent films that do show women in power with guns, such as *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000), *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), *Laura Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001) and *Underworld* (Len Wiseman, 2003). There is nothing about a gun specifically that makes it a man's weapon, other than the socialization of its link to power and therefore masculinity. However, men are more likely to use guns as an act of violence,

⁶⁰ Scheinman, Ted. "SXSW Notebook: On Geoff Marslett's Film "Loves Her Gun"." [Los Angeles Review of Books](#) (2013).

such as mass shootings, whereas women are more likely to use a gun in self-defense. In society, men are both more likely to be shot and to be the shooter. Women are not often seen as the perpetrators of violence, especially with a gun, but that doesn't mean they do not use them. Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss point out in their book, The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know, that in relation to mass shootings, "shooters are almost exclusively male."⁶¹ There have been relatively few headlines of women committing homicide with a gun, but almost every day there is one about a man. Guns are just a tool for power that have typically been used by men.

Allie, in the moment of shooting the gun, feels empowered, but her fear still haunts her. Allie wakes up hung-over once again, and calls Sara and gets the day off. Allie roams around alone and finds herself in a clothing store. She sees a leather jacket, which doesn't seem like her normal form of attire and can be seen as a more masculine item of clothing, and tries it on. However, when she turns around the camera shows the animal masks of the attackers with the rest of the frame out of focus and the score plays sharp jarring sounds that were also heard during the attack and inaudible dialogue presumably from right after her attack. Allie is overwhelmed with anxiety and the film cuts to an establishing shot of "Red's Indoor Range." The film cuts to a male gun store clerk asking how Allie and Sara are as the camera pans over to them. The man asks what he can do for them, and Sara answers that Allie is looking for a handgun. The clerk asks what she wants to use it for, while the camera remains on Allie and Sara. Allie answers that she wants to use it for self-defense. The film pans back over to the clerk as he asks about her experience level and if she has

⁶¹ Cook, Philip J. and Kristin A. Goss. The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 50.

shot before. They joke about how Allie hasn't shot too much and Sara explains further about how she took Allie shooting as the camera stays on the clerk. The film then cuts to the glass case with a few handguns in frame. The clerk grabs the 357-magnum revolver and tells her a little about the weapon. He pushes out the cylinder where the bullets go and hands Allie the gun. The camera maintains a close shot of the gun as it exchanges hands and Allie holds it. Allie messes with the gun a little while the camera pans up to her face and she says the gun feels really good. The film goes back to showing the gun as Allie looks at the price tag. Allie asks if there is anything they have that is cheaper and the camera goes back to the clerk as he tells her that a cheaper gun is not reliable. The clerk says, "The major question we ask everybody is, what is your life worth?" Sara offers to help Allie pay for it because she says, "It is important that you feel safe," and helps her buy it. The film cuts to Allie loading the gun and a high pitched ringing starts. There is a close-up of Allie's face before the film cuts to a shot from behind as she takes aim to shoot. Before she fires there is a cut to the camera in front of Allie, with the gun blurry in the forefront, Sara blurry in the background and the focus on Allie's face with one eye closed trying to get the sights of the gun in view. As she begins to shoot the sound is muffled and all you hear is the high-pitched ringing and a faint sound of the gun firing. The film cuts in closer as the sound becomes louder and more normal. After Allie has shot off a few rounds, it cuts to another view of her satisfied face and then a shot of the target full of holes. As they walk out the store, Allie is joyful and exhilarated. As they get to the truck, Sara and Allie share a passionate kiss. Sara makes Allie feel safer and gives Allie confidence and the capacity for power.

Unfortunately, Allie has now gone from feeling un-empowered to overpowered - and is still driven by her fear and possibly rage over her assault. After purchasing her gun,

Allie goes over to visit Clark. When she pulls up, Clark's neighbors are having a heated fight. The husband is beating and dragging his wife and yelling at her, putting her in a powerless situation like the Allie experienced as the victim of violence. Allie loads her revolver in her car and goes to confront the couple. She points the gun at the husband and commands him to get on the ground. The wife is now screaming, "Don't shoot him. Don't shoot him. It's my fault. Please don't shoot him." Clark comes out and tries to pull Allie away and tells her to put the gun away. Allie yells at the guy, "How does it feel to be scared? Doesn't feel good, does it?" Because Allie now has a gun, she is able to exert her own threat of violence and frighten others just as she had been scared.

Men typically have physical strength over women, but the gun acts as transference of power. In my interview with director Geoff Marslett, he discussed the idea of the power men have over women and their ability to inflict harm through violence. He said there is an unfair balance of power in relationship to violence. However, if you put a gun in a woman's hand, her ability to perpetrate violence shifts completely. Allie feels this power and likes it. If she didn't have the gun she would have been unable to intervene in this context because she is a weaker woman. Marslett wanted to see how a gun could change her fight-or-flight response. Prior to her gun ownership, Allie had to take the beating, but now she can decide to fight, and on a more fair ground. However, this power that she now has may be put into the wrong hands. The responsible gun owner Sara is very angry with Allie for her actions. Sara feels that she cannot trust Allie with the gun, even though Allie is confident and happy with her behavior. In their argument, Sara exclaims, "Not only did you point a loaded gun at someone, but you scared the shit out of his wife. And now she is in the same position as you!" Sara tries to take the gun away from Allie, but she does not want to give it up. Allie

says, "Do you know what you have given me?" Sara gave Allie power and a new sense-of-self that feels good to Allie through the use of the gun, and she doesn't want to give that up.

Sara wanted to trust Allie and thought that since she is a responsible gun owner, Allie would be too. However, unfortunately, that is not always the case. Allie runs away from her argument with Sara and goes back to Clark's house, using the key she was given earlier in the film. Allie rummages through the cabinets and finds some alcohol, which she drinks. This scene is intercut with Clark drunk at the bar, where the bartender takes away his keys. He walks home and is locked out of his own house. He goes around back to climb in through the window. While Clark is doing this, Allie is frightened inside and grabs her gun. She hears someone at the window and points her gun at it. As Clark opens the window, the film only shows Allie as she pulls the trigger, the gun goes off, and the film ends.

Marslett discussed this ending as a way to show that Allie made the decision. It was not about the repercussions of her actions, whether or not Clark was dead, but that in that moment, Allie decided to pull the trigger. Her choice is a representation of her regaining of power. Though in the moment, she is scared and potentially being led by her fear, she is no longer the target of attack that she was in the beginning. That idea is what she is referring to when she asks Sara if she knew what she gave her. She was given the ability to choose her own fate, and that is an incredible feeling that a lot of women are not granted.

Although this film centers on a strong female lead character, masculinity still plays a huge role within the film. The idea of violence and power is often associated with men. Men are viewed, and potentially rightly so, as the perpetrators of violence, with or without a gun. Myriam Miedzian writes about this tendency for violence in her book Boys Will Be

Boys, as she states, “Today we all know that most acts of violence are committed by men.”⁶²

She also writes,

To criticize men, the way so many men have criticized women, is consciously or unconsciously perceived as aggressive, emasculating behavior. So while we all know that most acts of violence are committed by men, many of us refuse to allow ourselves to focus on it. To do so would imply criticism of an aspect of male behavior which is at the core of some of our most serious domestic and international problems.⁶³

So since we know that violence is a male-dominated behavior, what does this mean for Allie? She is the victim of this male violence, and decides to regain her own assertion of power. Her use of the gun becomes a criticism of men that emasculates them and therefore masculinizes her. Her violence is also driven by masculinity because she would not have fallen into gun culture if it weren't for being violated by men. However, the only way for her to gain some semblance of power is through the use of a gun.

Guns can be seen as an equalizer. As discussed in the chapter about *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the gun functions as a way to equalize the power of men, and in this case, women. Marslett also discussed this in our interview. He noticed that throughout history men have been able to behave violently through means of physical force, and women are powerless over this. It is an unfortunate fact that men are typically stronger than women, both in status and physical strength. One of the only ways in which women

⁶² Miedzian, Myriam. Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence. New York City: Lantern Books, 2002, 5.

⁶³ Miedzian, Myriam. Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence. New York City: Lantern Books, 2002, 8.

can physically overpower a man is by using a gun. Marslett points out that a gun is the only tool that does not require physical strength, unlike a knife or baseball bat. When a gun is involved, there is no element of strength. Guns can be used equally between men and women. This is how the gun functions within Marslett's film. Men used physical violence against Allie, and in a form of retaliation, she decides to use a gun. Even though she does not retaliate against the specific men that caused her harm, she strikes back, becoming more powerful as a woman in general. However, as Marslett said in the interview, the gun acts as an equalizer but not a fix or a Band-Aid. However, the gun could actually be seen as a "fix" because it does instill in Allie a new sense of confidence. Being able to feel empowered with her gun makes her feel safer, even though the people around her might not be safe. The fact that the people around her aren't safe is connected to Marslett's statement that the gun is not really a fix. However, her confidence is still important, and also the reason that Marslett ends his film with Allie simply making the choice, and not the repercussions attached to it.

Loves Her Gun is an interesting and refreshing look at gun violence because it is not the about a mass shooting, but an individualized form of violence. Most of media today is focused on the mass killings with guns and not the use of guns in a one-on-one attack or in domestic violence cases. Marslett finds it interesting that most pro-gun people who see the film think it is anti-gun, and anti-gun people think it is pro-gun. However, Marslett sees his film as more of an exploration into both sides of the argument, and wants to tell a real story about a woman who finds her power in a gun and how that affects gun violence. In his research, he noticed that most shootings or gun deaths do not occur during mass shootings, but rather in the context of more personal attacks, and he wanted to bring attention to this

particular issue, rather than that of mass shootings. Marslett shows both the positives and negatives of gun ownership by contrasting his characters, such as Sara and the naked woman in the pool. One would not automatically assume that Sara has a gun and she does not necessarily make this public knowledge. This is unlike the woman in the pool who brandishes, and unlawfully and unsafely, fires her revolver. However, Marslett did want to look at the repercussions of owning a gun, though not specifically the repercussions of Allie's choices. There are different outcomes of gun usage, which do unfortunately often involve loss of life.

An immense credit to Marslett's film is the realistic nature of both the use of guns and the story. As a woman watching the film, I found Allie easy to identify with. Most women have been put in a position of feeling defenseless and vulnerable. Marslett pointed out some of the criticism of the film was by men who found Allie's trajectory in the film after her attack to be an overreaction. They seem to think that since Allie was not raped, she has no ground to have the response she did. But just because she isn't raped does not mean she was not violated and suffered. The important fact is that Allie felt powerless and vulnerable, and the magnitude of the attack does not matter. She is still justified in her fear and it is her decision on how to cope with the pain. In addition to the emotional reality of the story, the use of guns is extremely authentic because it is actually real. Each time a gun is fired, except for in the pool scene, it is a real gun with real bullets. It was also both Trieste Kelly Dunn and Melissa Bisagni's first time shooting a pistol. Marslett wanted to stay away from the typical 'Hollywoodized' use of guns and make it sincere. The gun store where Allie buys her revolver is an existing establishment, and the retailer who sells it to her actually works there. Marslett had a gun advisor on the film to make sure everything was authentic.

He also talked to the police about how they would react in a situation like when Allie pulls her gun on the husband beating his wife. The actors also improvised most of the script and were mostly from Austin originally. Marslett succeeds in making his film realistic, which adds to the power behind the story. Another way Marslett makes his film feel realistic is through the camera work. The hand-held but not overly shaky camera that remains close to the characters at all times makes the audience feel as though they are in the heads of each character. The camera really reveals the intensity of emotions and was a very humanizing way to shoot his film.

Marslett believes that we are definitely in a place where we need to figure out our gun laws better, but thinks that banning guns completely is not the answer. He wants to ask the question, can you fix gun violence? Education is key to finding this answer. If we, and specifically our politicians, act like the guy in the pool who spouts an incorrect gun fact, we will not decrease violence. Marslett doesn't have the answer, but his film aims to make people question their beliefs, and it does so very effectively.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored how guns and masculinity are tied together. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Elephant* and *Loves Her Gun* are analyzed and examined as presenting different ways in which guns are used in three American films from different eras. Throughout each film guns play a critical role, help drive the story line, and are linked to power. The films represent diverse time periods and each explores the interconnected themes of masculinity, power, and violence.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance shows how the western genre deals with masculinity and its strong ethos of the law of the gun. In the Hollywood Western, guns are a major aspect of the story and everyone - both good guys in white hats and bad guys in black - has them. These law and order dramas often include shootouts, with the good guys winning. John Ford's film gives guns an even more central role. One of the main characters, Ransom Stoddard, initially opposes guns and the use of them. He believes that men should be civilized and cultured and follow the law. Rivaling Ransom's views are those offered by the two other main characters of the film, Liberty Valance and Tom Doniphon. Valance is the villain who not only carries a gun but also a silver tipped whip. Doniphon is the macho male who keeps the town safe from Valance. Doniphon asserts his power by being the best man with his gun, and Valance represents lawlessness - the second best shot - a man who is powerless when facing the sharp-shooting Doniphon. When Ransom moves to the town of Shinbone, he finds that his civilized "sissified and city-fied" idea of what a man should be puts him in a dangerous position, and he must ultimately learn to use a gun and fight Valance in order to assert his masculinity and maintain his ego. Only then will he command respect and go on to do good through politics.

The *Liberty Valance* chapter explores how Ford presents an argument about guns and masculinity both cinematically and through key plot points. Throughout the film, different forms of masculinity are presented and Ford's film poses the question of what makes a man. Ultimately the ideal man becomes a combination of Doniphon and Ransom's characters. Doniphon provides strength and excellent marksmanship with his gun, and Ransom contributes morality and law. Together they create law and order. However, law and order cannot exist in this way without a gun. A major component to this idea is that the gun acts as an equalizer. When Ransom comes to town he has a strong desire to defeat Liberty Valance, and at first attempts to defeat him with the law. However, Ransom learns that the only way to be on an equal level with Valance and overthrow him is by using a gun himself.

In addition to defeating Valance with a gun, Ransom gains a new form of masculinity and power. People respect him and look up to him as the man who shot Liberty Valance, even though that is a lie. As well, Ransom wins the girl in the end because of it. Ironically, even though Doniphon is the person who shoots and kills Valance, he loses a bit of his masculinity. In the beginning of the film the Marshall points out that he no longer carried a gun or asserted himself as the protector of the town after Ransom left. In a sense, Ransom takes the masculinity that Doniphon had. Ransom takes the title of the man who shot Valance as well as Doniphon's love interest. Ransom becomes the hero of the film by picking up a gun and defending his honor. However, Doniphon is the one who saved Ransom, and therefore his honor.

The next chapter on *Elephant* provides a look into the mass shooting at Columbine. Guns in this film are presented more as a form of violence and destruction than in *Liberty*

Valance. Guns here are the weapons that take away innocent lives instead of allowing for the protection of people's lives, or the killing of someone who is not as innocent. However, *Elephant* does still deal with the notions of masculinity and, in the film, guns act as a way to regain masculinity and power. Alex and Eric are two high school students who are excluded from masculine socialization in school and decide to shoot up their fellow students as a way to regain their power.

Gus Van Sant's film utilizes many tracking shots that really throw the audience into the middle of the story. The camera acts as a character within the film; and this makes the audience feel more emotions for the characters without providing much back-story. The film only takes place over the course of one day, the day when Alex and Eric massacre their school. However, Van Sant succeeds in providing just enough details and humanizing emotions and context to pose a question or argument about what happened in Columbine High School on the day of the slaughter. Van Sant does not want to question why the kids did what they did, but rather explore what that day would have felt like for everyone involved. However, by choosing who and what to show, Van Sant points to a few possible reasons for Alex and Eric's behavior. These reasons include: trying to maintain a masculine identity, the place of possible homosexuality within that identity, and Alex and Eric's shared feelings of being outsiders.

Eric and Alex are excluded from the idealized social circles, both physically and emotionally. Eric is never seen in the school until the shootings, and Alex is only shown in negative contexts, such as being picked on by the popular jocks, or planning the attack. Alex's character is juxtaposed to that of Nathan. Nathan is the stereotypical jock who is athletic, cute and popular. In a high school setting, someone like Nathan is seen as the ideal

man or a real male's male. However, Alex is outside of this and is more of a recluse or nerd who is seen in a negative manner. Not feeling masculine or in power can be debilitating, especially for younger people, and Alex and Eric feel the need to regain control and power. Guns are an easy form of power, and for Alex and Eric possessing guns seems like a simple solution to their social problems.

This chapter also analyzes the scene in which Alex and Eric share a kiss in the shower. This scene is not meant to be a representation of homosexuality, but rather another way to show that Alex and Eric are excluded from social norms. Before they kiss, they mention that neither of them has been kissed before, showing their separation from what is deemed as an important rite of passage for teenagers. An integral part of this chapter is the exploration of how emotions are experienced, how social environments affect identity, and what it means to be a man. Van Sant's selection of characters and how he presents them gives the audience a more aesthetic analysis of the massacre. Guns in this film are depicted as evil, but a significant form of power. The representation of the guns themselves was not very accurate. Some of the inaccuracies, for example, include the film showing the guns being purchased online and delivered straight to the home, which is highly illegal and unlikely. After that, Alex and Eric go into the closed garage and fire the weapon without any ear protection and it sounds relatively quiet. If they had done this in real life, this would be extremely painful for their ears and the neighbors would have definitely heard this and raised concern. However, the point was more about the characters rather than the guns. However, the guns play a large role in the creation and destruction of the characters.

In the final chapter, the film *Loves Her Gun* looks at how a woman is affected by masculinity and is led to find her own power through the use of a gun. Instead of a mass shooting, *Loves Her Gun* provides a look at a more personal attack and shows how guns become a way to regain control over one's own life. The main character, Allie, is beaten and robbed and made to feel powerless and vulnerable on the streets of New York. The only way she feels she can regain some control over her life is to use and buy a gun. The beginning of the film shows Allie being pushed down and put down. Her agency is completely taken away, both by the men who beat her and the cop who questions her. Allie is left only with trauma and no way to feel whole again. The only thing that exhilarates her and, potentially somewhat ironically, fills her holes, is a gun. Guns in this film are tied to masculinity in a more un-conventional way. Power is tied to masculinity, guns correspond to power, and therefore guns are tied to masculinity. For Allie, men who exert dominance over her take her power away and she needs to reclaim it.

A crucial part to this chapter is, again, the idea of guns as an equalizer. Men always have physical strength and status over a woman, and a somewhat easy way to combat that is with a gun. Women constantly feel watched and under a microscope and in potential danger. However, when a woman carries and uses a gun, she gains confidence and the ability to defend herself. Allie is traumatized, and even though she ends up not being able to handle the responsibility of a gun, she is able to regain control over herself and her life. Allie is able to feel powerful again and not at the mercy of men who are stronger than she is. Guns provide her with a sense of euphoria that she has never experienced, and having the authority to govern her own life is an extremely significant feeling.

This thesis aims to bring attention to how guns are represented in film and media. By examining three different but connected films, I hope to prove that guns and masculinity are inextricably linked. The information provided by a lot of media is not necessarily true, or it only shows part of the story. Mass shootings and gun violence have become a hot topic within today's society, and it is important to know all the facts about guns and their effects and uses before making new laws. Guns and gun laws are not necessarily the only thing we as a society need to look at when responding to shooting tragedies. An often overlooked fact is that an overwhelming majority of mass shootings and shootings in general are committed by men. This thesis aims to explore a potential reason for this, namely that masculinity plays a huge role in gun violence and is taught and perpetuated by film and media. Another key point is that guns are not necessarily or inherently bad. Guns have a lot of important potential usages, such as self-defense and the possibility of being an equalizer. Women constantly feel in danger, and a quick and easy way to put them in higher positions of power is to put a gun in their hand. Gun education is extremely important and should not be taken lightly. It is true that guns are dangerous. But if they are put into the right hands, they can do a lot of good as well. The most important thing is to look at the whole picture, ask questions, and open your mind to the possibilities of new options. The movies examined in this thesis show that there is more complexity to gun violence than the media depicts. We need to know the reasons behind the violence – which everyone opposes – before agreeing on strategies to decrease gun violence. Film has the power to reveal behavior and give us insights into the complications of social and psychological factors contributing to our nation's gun controversy.

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