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Note from Roger â?? Tower

Description

Dear Cinephiles,

TOWER is flat out brilliant. One of the best documentaries of the year. And itâ??s also the most visually immersive unique visual experience.

I cannot recommend this spellbinding film more. Iâ??m attaching the NY Times review below which was a Criticâ??s Pick.

It plays tonight at 7:30pm at the Riviera Theatre.

See you at the movies!
Roger Durling

Click here for tickets

â??Tower,â?? About 1966, Before Mass Shootings Became Routine
By Manohla Dargis â?? The New York Times

The haunting documentary *Tower* revisits a 1966 mass shooting at the University of Texas at Austin that shocked the country. It may be difficult to comprehend the reaction to the horror of Charles Whitman, a 25-year-old student who shot more than a dozen dead, wounding more than twice as many. A cover story in Life magazine suggested just how alien the carnage seemed at the time, noting that during the rampage Whitmanâ??s actions were â??so outrageous, so hard to grasp, that people could not believe it.â• Many more mass shootings later, itâ??s now tragically easy to believe.

You get a sense of just how brutal and absolutely foreign that violence must once have seemed in *Tower.* Directed by Keith Maitland, the movie is partly based on â??96 Minutes,â• an article by Pamela Colloff that ran in Texas Monthly in 2006, the 40th anniversary of the shooting. Most of the article was an oral history based on interviews that she skillfully pieced together for a mosaiclike remembrance. Mr. Maitland borrows this approach, drawing on first-person accounts, as well as archival and original sources. Heâ??s also turned much of this material into walking, talking animations with the help of actors, an ingenious stroke that â?? at least at first â?? helps create some needed critical distance.

Whitman was one of the yearâ??s big news stories alongside Vietnam. Time magazine put him on its cover, running a banner (â??The Psychotic & Societyâ?•) across a photo of him â?? just another smiling guy in glasses â?? reading a newspaper, with a small dog at his side. In time, he was transformed into a popular culture touchstone in Peter Bogdanovichâ??s *Targets,* a 1968 thriller that drew on the incident; â??The Ballad of Charles Whitman,â• Kinky Friedmanâ??s 1973 satirical song that frames the blood bath as an all-American story; and â??The Deadly Tower,â• a 1975 made-for-TV drama. By important contrast, *Tower* isnâ??t about Whitman; he isnâ??t its subject, star or selling point.

Tower also isnâ??t about why Whitman committed his atrocities or even how. Thereâ??s little information on him â?? his background, beliefs, history or health â?? in the documentary. His name is barely mentioned. Heâ??s there throughout, though, represented as the unknown shooter in the frightened recordings of people phoning in reports; in police dispatch calls; in intermittent gunfire; and in

the eerie puffs of gun smoke emanating from the university tower where he took position. He is a question mark, a lethal void whose immateriality makes an agonizing contrast to the men and women he shot, those who died as well as those who suffered and survived.

This shift in focus â?? from the perpetrator to the victims â?? doesnâ??t read as especially American or cinematic. (One of Hollywoodâ??s most durable genres is the gangster movie, after all, not the victim picture.) And while there may be all sorts of sociopolitical and psychological explanations for why movies are so violent, itâ??s also just an easy way to keep people nervously waiting and watching. Mr. Maitland put in time as an assistant director on the TV series â??Law & Orderâ?• and he understands how to narratively string out violence. The movie begins with Neal Spelce (Monty Muir), a journalist gutsily reporting from the scene while driving closer to it, an opener that creates instant tension.

The scene then shifts to Claire Wilson James (Violett Beane), a heavily pregnant freshman who is just finishing a coffee break with her boyfriend, Tom Eckman (Cole Bee Wilson). As theyâ??re walking across campus, they are both hit. Claire goes down first, followed by Tom. They remain where they fall for an unbearably long time, creating a ghastly spectacle that becomes an emblematic tableau that Mr. Maitland returns to again and again, at times using news footage. He soon adds other victims and voices, including that of Aleck Hernandez Jr. (Aldo OrdoÃ±ez), a teenager on his paper route riding past the campus, his cousin perched on his bike.

The expressive animation was done via rotoscoping, a technique that involves tracing moving images by hand (as in Disneyâ??s *Snow White*) or through software (as in Richard Linklaterâ??s *Waking Life*). The results in *Tower* are extremely liquid, with each line incessantly ebbing and flowing, creating a vivid sense of life. The animation gives Mr. Maitland a lot of creative freedom, allowing him to take Expressionistic leaps. When Ms. James and Mr. Eckman are shot, their bodies briefly transform into wrenching, twisting white silhouettes while the backdrop becomes a blast of bright red. You are spared the blood, even as the horror creeps in and then floods you.

In her article, Ms. Colloff noted that, surprisingly, perhaps, outside of some bullet holes, there were no physical reminders of the shooting at the University of Texas until 1999, when the school created a memorial garden. â??No plaques had ever been displayed, no list of names read, no memorial services held,â?• she wrote. In 2007, the school finally installed a plaque observing the shooting, and this Aug. 1 , the 50th anniversary, it dedicated a new memorial. Using a limited frame, Mr. Maitland does his own commemorating, inherently raising questions about terror, the nature of heroism and what it means to really survive. He also does something even more necessary: He turns names on a plaque into people.

Category

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