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Abstract

The thesis is a study of how Lynne Ramsay uses a haptic cinema approach to immerse the audience into an intuitive understanding of the trauma suffered by the main characters in three of her feature films: *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Morven Callar* (2002) and *We Need to Talk to Kevin* (2011). By analyzing each film's narrative, imagery, use of sound and the multi-sensorial presentations of character, I will describe how Ramsay invites the viewer to experience the main character's connection to the world of the film in an immersive, sensorial way, enabled by Ramsay's use of aural, tactile and visual details. I argue that Ramsay's approach to trauma, within the three films examined, puts her work into the category of artistic haptic cinema, as defined by film theorist Laura Marks.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce je studií o tom jak, Lynne Ramsay používá haptický filmový přístup k tomu, aby vtáhla diváky do intuitivního porozumnění traumatu hlavních postav ve třech jejích celovečerních filmech: *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Morven Callar* (2002) a *We Need to Talk to Kevin* (2011). Analýzou vyprávění, snímkování, použití zvuku a multisenzorických prezentací postav v každém filmu, popíšu, jak Ramsay zve diváka, aby zažil spojení hlavní postavy se světem filmu, působivým, senzorickým způsobem, který je umožněn použitím zvukových, hmatových a vizuálních detailů. Tvrdím, že přístup Ramsayové k traumatu v rámci tří zkoumaných filmů zařadil její práci do kategorie uměleckých haptických filmů, jak je definovala teoretička Laura Marks.

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I. Introduction

This thesis is motivated by my curiosity around the powerful effect that the films of Lynne Ramsay have had on me and the education about filmmaking techniques that I've learned from her work. It is also motivated by my strong conviction that the films written and directed by Ramsay are worthy of serious engagement and critical scrutiny to recognize different aspects of a sensorial cinematic experience and her place within artistic immersive cinema.

I am especially interested in how Ramsay involves the spectator into her films through sensorial means. I will look at three of Ramsay's films in this regard: *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Morven Callar* (2002) and *We Need to Talk to Kevin* (2011). Each of these films has a main character dealing with a particular traumatic event which has set the events of the film into motion, although not according to a classical narrative structure, but according to a structure which reflects the experience of trauma as jarring a person outside of a normal regularity, with the possibility for intrusive thoughts and memories associated with the trauma, emerging without warning or desire.¹ While everyone is affected by trauma differently, in a state of trauma, the victim's reality can often appear scattered and reflected back to the person with a certain distortion. Because the trauma can alter the victim's

¹ Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). "Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services." Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

² Ibid.

perceptions of herself and the world around her,² often, after a traumatic event, people need to re-establish their relationship with reality, and this is the case with Ramsay's characters in the films to be analyzed.

Ramsay's use of sensorial details allows the viewer to perceive along with the character. In this way, the viewer is drawn into the character's world and comes to a felt understanding of the character's experience. The film's narrative is experienced subjectively and emotionally. Ramsay depicts character in acute states of sensory activity, and this proves an effective approach to show the workings of character, while at the same time, impress a sensorial perception upon the spectator.

To study the sensorial in Ramsay's work, it is helpful to place her in the context of haptic cinema.

The Sensorial in Haptic Cinema

Since the famous *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (Lumière brothers, 1896) was first shown, cinema began to awaken senses. In early film theory, there had been a certain interest in exploring the role of physical sensations in connection to the cinematic experience³. There were different attempts made to understand the relationship between motion pictures and the spectator's body. Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bela Balasz, and Siegfried Kracauer were all intrigued by this subject.⁴

³ V Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles, London, 2004, p.54

⁴ L.U Marks, *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durhan, London, 2000.p.171.

According to Vivian Sobchack, although scholars have been concerned with this topic in the past, a strong theoretical basis with which to treat the issue was slow in coming. Towards the middle of the 20th century, the focus shifted from the different sensory dimensions of film to its symbolic meaning; scholars studied the visual aspect, 'figural' connotation, the language, and signs of cinema. Preoccupied with semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, researchers of the 1960s and 1970s on the whole privileged the act of seeing.⁵ Up until recently, film theory has ignored the cinema's sensual address and the viewer's corporeal-material being.⁶

Contemporary film theoreticians such as Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack recognize the role of embodiment in the film watching experience, and the importance of the 'haptic' in cinema. 'Haptic' is a term most associated with Deleuze. However, Deleuze was building on the work of another, Alois Riegl, who first coined the term. Alois Riegl (1858-1904) was an Austrian Academic formalist, best known for his work *Spätrömische Kunstindustr* (Late Roman art industry, 1901) in which he uses the term *Kunstollen*. This roughly translates as 'will to art' and describes the human desire to create art to express a desired reality, not just to imitate reality.⁷

His ideas in turn influenced Walter Benjamin, who stressed the importance of the haptic realm. Benjamin found that film can bring about sensuous experience, by rousing

⁵ Sobchack, p.59.

⁶ Sobchack, p. 56.

⁷ G Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York, 2002, .p. 247.

perception beyond the contemplative, the merely optical, and making possible a "tactile appropriation" of life. He wrote:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.⁸

Childhood also presented an important model of the tactile for Benjamin. Before we are trained into a consumer culture that says "Look, but don't touch," our engagement with the world moves easily between looking and touching. What Benjamin found in the child's consciousness is the connection between perception and action that distinguishes a revolution in consciousness taking place in adulthood. Benjamin used the term a 'crisis of experience'⁹ to describe the changing structures of the experience, from childhood to adult.

To understand experience in Benjamin theories, it's necessary to consider his distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*¹⁰ The English translation for both terms will give you "experience", but *Erfahrung*, is that which is connected to making and storing experiences, that which we can draw from to shape future behavior. It can be communicated

⁸ W Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968. p. 236

⁹ See W Benjamin, *Selected writings 1938-1940*, chapter: *On Some motifs in Baudelaire*, 1940.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and we do so. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, cannot be communicated. It is the experience while it is being made. It is about being in the moment, it is connected with the time and length of time of such experience. So, the meaningful experience in the sense of *Erfahrung*, involves an important learning component - an aspect of awareness – what you gain from an experience. This type of experience is prioritized in adulthood. *Erfahrung* differs from an experience in the sense of *Erlebnis* – the experiencing itself through the senses. This type of experience is prioritized in childhood. In the framework of having a meaningful experience (*Erfahrung*), a person dwells on the question of what a particular experience (*Erlebnis*) means for him. Ronald Laing (Glasgow, Scotland.,1967) even goes so far to defining person in terms of meaningful experience.¹¹ A person is the sum of his or her meaningful experiences. We will return to this notion when examining character in the films of Lynne Ramsay; arguing that *Erlebnis* is what dominates her characters' lives.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the human body is a field of perception constantly filled with a “play of colors, noises and fleeting tactile sensations.”¹² His insights about the sensual involvement of our bodies in the world (and in particular, about how the encoding of history in our bodies influences our perception) strongly inform Laura Marks' readings of sense memories in intercultural film. In her book *The Skin of the Film*, (2000), Marks defines the senses in their intercultural dimension. The book borrows its methodology liberally from Deleuze (as well as many other theorists) and becomes Deleuzian in allowing

¹¹ See: R. D Laing, *The divided self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, (1970), Penguin Books, new edition, 1990

¹² M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C Smith, Routledge, London, New York, 1995, p.55

itself to be taken ‘off course’ (that is to say in making “rhizomatic connections”).¹³ Rhizomatic learning takes its name from the rhizome, a type of plant which Deleuze and Guattari believed provided an interesting contrast with rooted plants. A rhizome does not consist of units or causal sequences, but of dimensions and directions.

It’s a semiotic chain like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals. A method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyse language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence...”¹⁴

Making “rhizomatic connections” is operative in haptic cinema, where the senses play a very important role. Marks states that haptic cinema is often the strategy employed in intercultural cinema, which she claims is a primary subject of her book.¹⁵ According to Marks, the condition of being in-between cultures initiates a search for new forms of visual expression and leads to the hypothesis that unlike Western ocular centrism (the prioritization of the eye as a sense for acquiring knowledge, truth, experience), intercultural cinema embraces the proximal senses (smell, taste, touch) as a means for embodying knowledge and

¹³ G Deleuze and FGuattari: "*Rhizome*" (1976), "A Thousand Plateaus" (1980)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ See Marks, 2000, Introduction.

cultivating memory. In valuing the proximal senses over the distance senses, cinema uses particular formal and textual strategies. Marks refers to this new strategy as “haptic visuality,” opposed to the “Western culture which traditionally privileged sight and put tactile sensation in the bottom of the hierarchy of senses”.¹⁶

Marks defines haptic visuality as containing some of the following formal and textual qualities: grainy, unclear images; sensuous imagery that evokes memory of the senses (i.e., water, nature); the depiction of characters in acute states of sensory activity (smelling, sniffing, tasting, etc.). She also notes that the haptic image is ‘less complete’, requiring the viewer to contemplate the image as a material presence rather than an easily identifiable representational cog in a narrative wheel.¹⁷ Like Rudolf Arnheim, who believed that cinema thrived on its inherent limitation of not being able to depict a perfect illusion of the world, Marks believes that intercultural filmmakers attempt to create memory-images out of the medium’s sensorial offerings (particularly, the proximal senses of smell, touch, taste).¹⁸

In discussing optic and haptic perception, Marks considers that the two types of visuality are not a dichotomy but a dialectical process. Haptic visuality allows the eyes to function not only as an organ of vision but also as an organ of touch, caressing an image on its surface, sensing its material qualities. Both optical and haptic visuality is needed so that the viewer experiences the image haptically and then regains control over it by building an

¹⁶ Bruno, 2002, p. 251.

¹⁷ <https://filmanalytical.blogspot.com/2011/08/touching-film-object-notes-on-haptic-in.html>

¹⁸ See: Arnheim, R, *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1969

interpretation. It could be understood as related to a movement between the two forms of experience that Walter Benjamin describes. Of the play between optic and haptic visuality, Marks says “the viewer is called upon to fill in the gaps in the image, to engage with the traces the image leaves.”¹⁹ This is a back and forth process and the viewer slides between one visuality and the other, and will be returned to later in discussing how Ramsay uses imagery in her work.

Lynne Ramsay:

Lynne Ramsay (b. 1969) grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, in a poor family, and it is this milieu that planted the seeds for her films. Since her very first short film, her coming-of-age *Small Death* from 1995, which took critics by impressed and received the Prix du Jury at Cannes in 1996, she kept on digging into family matters, as well as creating those characters who don't have the answers to life's greatest challenges yet. “I was at the National Film School and I felt that a lot of scripts there were calling cards for the industry; I didn't feel that people were there for three years taking risks and being experimental...”²⁰ She took a camera, left school and went to Glasgow. There she started writing, directing and sometimes, also shooting herself.

¹⁹ Marks, 2000, p.183

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/oct/28/features> / interviewed by Geoff Andrew

From the time of making her first shorts, Ramsay gets involved in everything, supervises everything, which establishes her strong stylistic elements that have remained essential and developed to further extent in her feature films. Ramsay's first feature announced her as one of the founders of the New Scottish Cinema in the late 90s and early 00s.

Ratcatcher, 1999, *Morvern Callar*, 2002, *We need to talk about Kevin*, 2011 are films made within different countries, within different film industries and trends. Even though they are very diverse, the three are representative of Ramsay's aesthetic approach which is very dependent on the haptic approach to the cinema. Since her cinema was never narrowed to a particular nationality, this strengthens the analyses to applying haptic quality to her cinema, understanding that Marks considered Haptic cinema as an intercultural cinema.

Despite being very diverse, each of Ramsay's films deals with clear recurring themes that radiate through all of her shorts and features: the way past trauma can weigh upon the present, how people can never truly shake loose of the grief, guilt, and horror they have experienced, witnessing the loss of childhood purity, fractured families and her questioning of reality and its relativity. It is this real-world grounding of her characters' states, a complex interiority rendered through almost purely external means, that gives Ramsay's films both their power and their singularity. Her characters, who are rarely conveyed through dialogue, are immersed in their world in acute states of sensory activity, in crisis and with questions about their identity.

Ramsay began as a painter, then studied photography at Napier College in Edinburgh, before she was accepted into cinematography at the National Film Television School (NFTS); but quickly upon discerning the limits of a film school, she decided to try her first “naive attempts”- and started writing and directing her own films: She brought together influences and sources from a wide variety of storytelling, and rather than following any template, she directed by intuition, making films which feel like they are on the boundary of something personal and social; a memory, an expression of what the process of remembering feels like.

Applauded by BBC producers, who at the time were aiming towards a renovation of national cinema, she was given a chance to make her first feature, something she never believed could happen, as she herself explained “...the longest film I'd ever written was 15 minutes long, so I thought, "Oh my God!" The BBC asked me to write and I didn't know if I could do that. They asked me for a treatment, which is normally 20 pages long, and I wrote 70 pages; it was like a script, because I didn't know what they expected. It was a bit messy, but they saw something in it. That was *Ratcatcher*”.²¹

Ramsay’s films are examples of fragmentary, oneiric pieces, photographic in the way they distil atmosphere within a single frame. It’s this ability to make us feel so deeply through the images, to mobilize the senses beyond the boundaries of story and performance, which “discourage the viewer from distinguishing objects and encourage a relationship to the

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/oct/28/features> / interviewed by Geoff Andrew

screen as a whole”.²² Often eschewing narrative coherence, Ramsay's “haptic images refuse visual plenitude...preventing an easy connection to narrative, instead encouraging the viewer to engage with the image through memory.”²³

Lynne Ramsay has often been analyzed as part of a Scottish New Wave, so different film critics have analysed Ramsay towards artistic movements such as Realism or Surrealism. Her films have also been analyzed in the framework of the Contemporary Cinema. But this thesis aims to contribute to research on Lynne Ramsay's "hapticity" with the understanding that haptic films have an intercultural, universal dimension.

As I examine her work in these next chapters, I am aware that sensation or visual stimuli differs among people, so I remain truthful to the description of how I, personally, felt the films studied in this thesis. In the following pages, I will treat the three films *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Morvern Callar* (2002) and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), systematically looking at each for how hapticity is present. An appendix follows with a detailed filmography of Ramsay's work.

²² Marks, 2000, p.72.

²³ Marks, 2000, p.177

II. RATCATCHER

Ratcatcher (1999) is Ramsay's directorial debut and the film that gave her international recognition. In this film, she sets forth a theme which will recur in much of her later work: the effects of trauma on a person's psyche. In this section, I will first give an overview of the story's context and development, then examine narrative elements, imagery, sound, and the character's multi-sensorial connection to the world. In this way, I hope to show how the film's aesthetically bold approach engages the spectator's senses so that she becomes immersed—not only visually, but bodily — in the main character's childlike point of view of the world.

Overview

Early in the film, during a good-natured but rough game, James, the main character, accidentally kills his friend. From this point on, the narrative does not unfold in a neat cause and effect way. Rather, an accumulation of images and events allows the viewer to follow James as he observes the people and the world around him, while trying to come to terms with the trauma of causing someone's death and re-connect with the world. As a result of it, the film progresses through a slow and methodical succession of events which don't rush to make conclusions but rather engages the character, and the spectator in sensorial experiences.

Ratcatcher is set during several weeks of a summer, in Glasgow's Govan neighborhood, infamous for its poor community. The story takes place during the garbage strike of 1973, (although this isn't made explicit until a news broadcast occurs an hour into the film.) Through imagery of the garbage accumulating, snatches of information in dialogue and the eventual entry of a special force to clear the garbage, the film juxtaposes historical diegesis into a fictional narrative content centered around a young boy's trauma. While the main character is James, the film's first image is of another boy, Ryan Quinn, as he emerges from the shroud he's made by playing with curtains. Through the window, we see, with Ryan, James playing by the canal. We follow Ryan as he is chased out of the house by his mother, to accompany her on a visit to her ex-husband. Ryan sneaks off however to join James by the canal. They start a game next to a murky water which ends in Ryan's sudden, shocking, death. Wracked with guilt, the surviving boy, James (William Eadie), returns to his family's dilapidated tenement, which has been rendered even less livable by the garbage strike that turned the building into a place for rats. While the family await a mandatory relocation to a new public-housing estate, James searches for some kind of redemption through people and places which take on different significance when organized in a way to stress, in particular, the story's sensorial quality. All the relationships create a mosaic of small stories and act as layers which overlap and exchange information, so that as the stories approach the end, the more thematically connected they become.

Narrative

Unlike a classical plot structure, the story emerges in bits and pieces, tied together by recurrent imagery of rats and water, garbage bags, infestation (rats, lice) and people needing each other but missing the connection. Like any other film by Ramsay, this is a character-driven film and it doesn't rely on the plot's progression but it proceeds by advancing different aspects of the character.

Shortly after Ryan's death, we are introduced to members of James' family – his two sisters, tired mother and unfaithful husband. The next day, we see a hearse arrive and James witness Ryan's parents as they grieve. The evening of the funeral, we see James behind Ryan's mother, "listening" to her silence, as if he is mourning together with her. The silence, the position of the characters, the numb face of James, reveal a lot more than any dialogue could. Soon, as if scared by a thought, James runs away and we next see him standing over his own sleeping mother, observing her. Then he leans towards her, arranges her torn stocking and covers her toe, a displaced act of comforting a mother. This is how the narrative progresses, constructed by moments which lead to associations, putting together emotions and mind-states of the character, which are not made clear or explicit, but allow the audience to feel and explore James' emotional arc. While James remains expressionless, this becomes a method of describing how James feels, not by having him act upon the situation or making explicit his expressions, but by engaging the spectator into a sensory perception together with James. James lives with his two sisters and his parents, but except for the same dream of moving to a new house, nothing much connects them as a family, although the potential is there, for the mother is depicting as loving and making an effort to keep the family together.

For example, she warns James to stay away from the canal, she treats her children for lice, and she is first seen carrying groceries home to them. The father is more problematic, first introduced as saying goodbye to another woman.

Ryan's family is eventually moved to a new house. Ryan's mother hugs James and gives him the sandals she had bought for Ryan on the day of his death. Even though they are too small for his feet, James keeps the sandals on. This scene is made of details which are a constant reminder of Ryan's death, for example, that James would put himself into Ryan's shoes and accept a hug from his mother, which heighten the tension by suggesting that James might reveal something more about his connection to Ryan's death and so advance that storyline further. But the narrative does not lead to any consequence or aftermath, instead the scene mingles the presence of James and absence of Ryan and engage the viewer into a sensorial experience, for example, in feeling the pain of Ryan's shoes upon James' feet. And because the consequence is delayed, the viewer becomes immersed in James' feelings, while paying attention to the clues given in the scene.

The edges of the canal are a popular play area for the children in the community, and the dramatic event upon which the rest of the narrative depends takes place here. James returns to the canal's murky water often throughout the narrative. Once he encounters there a gang of teenage hooligans from his neighborhood. They mingle in a game which resonates with the one James and Ryan were playing at the beginning of the film. The boys swing James' body through the air, towards the canal; and the viewer can identify the audio-visual clues which imply that "death" is close. As Marks suggests, that "the audio-visual image

necessarily evokes other sense memories.”²⁴ This scene then evokes the memory of Ryan’s death and other sensations connected to such fear. The viewer is left expecting something similar to happen. Marks suggests that “an image is not visual but multi-sensory, comprising all the information that one’s senses perceive about an object.”²⁵ Thus the image of James being close to this water triggers a response on many sensory levels: there is the risk of danger, of drowning; our sense-memory will enable us to feel the sensation of water as something dangerous. The boys however let James go. But the viewer is left with a certain mood that James is still in danger. Because there is no direct cause and consequence in the narrative flow, the narrative in *Ratcatcher* becomes understood through the workings of these moods.

A coherent experience is still felt in the narrative, not based on cause and consequence, but by how James is portrayed across scattered moments—moments which stress the parallels between him and Ryan’s death. Richard Menary, in his essay *Embodied Narratives*, writes “Affective experiences such as pains and perceptual experiences are ascribed to selves as subjects of experience, not to narratives...”²⁶ or as Campbell puts it “All ascriptions of pain...are conceptually dependent upon a level of thought at which there is reference to person.”²⁷ By embodying James (and all of the characters in *Ratcatcher*) in sensorial tasks and experiences, Ramsay engages us into a cognitive processing to get us

²⁴ Marks, 2000, p.213

²⁵ Marks, 2000, p.146

²⁶ R Menary, *Embodied Narratives*, University of Wollongong and University of Hertfordshire. 2017, p.72

²⁷ J Campbell, *Past Space and Self*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994, p.169

closer to the character. Using Richard Menary's words, Ramsay could be one of "the abstract narrativists who have a deep sense of the mind, experience and the self as being structured by narratives".²⁸

Ramsay's distinctive approach goes further as to create a narrative which immerses the viewer in a fluid, childlike experience because in de-emphasizing causality and emphasizing embodiment, she has freed the viewer from making judgments and engaged them into a more sensory experience. A good example of this is the scene when the hearse comes to receive Ryan's dead body; it's sad, disturbing but also ironically funny. The hearse door bangs against one of the garbage bags lying on the pavement, covered in rats. Ryan's mother sobs. The men from the neighborhood are gathered on the pavement, already drunk. They keep drinking the beers they hold in their hands while the children from the neighborhood climb into the hearse's open door, giggling and fooling around. The scene doesn't reveal any truth on Ryan's death, it doesn't become an opportunity for James to make a decision, or a chance for him to come to an emotional release. The scene rather invites the viewer to participate in this messy world, while seeing and thinking with James. And because James is a child, an age when opinions are not set yet, the world is shown without the baggage of moral judgement.

As the story progresses, James interacts with different people around him, but he can't deeply connect to any of them. His friendship with a teenage girl sexually abused by other boys, Margaret Anne, doesn't last. She betrays James by going back to the hooligans

²⁸ R Menary p. 72

and their molesting games. Another friend from the tenement, Kenny, seems too young to understand what James is going through. No one seems to offer the chance for James to open up and possibly heal his guilt. At one point in the narrative, James decides to take a bus and flee from his surroundings. He ends up on the outskirts of the city, where a new housing estate is under construction. In the scene, central to the film, James comes upon a window in a newly built house. From there he sees a sun-drenched field of wheat. The spectator is invited to look through the window together with James (James' point of view becomes the spectator's point of view). A field appears to be an endless open field shown in dream-like lighting and tone-color. As Barker suggests: "*the image is held long enough to transcend its narrative meaning and become significant solely as texture upon our skins*"²⁹ The moment invites a tactile immersion; James climbs through the window and escapes into the field. In leaps and tumbles, James literally traverses it. What is it that moved him so about this place? What does the field represent to him? The field might evoke different emotions in each spectator. As Marks notes: "in these settings the boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct: the rustle of the trees may mingle with the sound of my breathing, or conversely the booming music may inhabit my chest cavity and move my body from the inside".³⁰ So, each viewer might have a different interpretation of what James might have felt when seeing this field.

According to Elsaesser and Hagener: "In classical cinema, most scholars would conclude that narration, i.e., the filmic realization of the plot, is usually that to which all

²⁹ J M Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, University of California Press, 2009, p.42.

³⁰ Marks, 2000, 183.

other parameters (editing, camera work and primarily sound) are subordinated.³¹” Haptic visuality seems to work against narration: “the haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative”³². But haptic imagery can also be used as a tool of classical narration, for example as a trigger for viewer expectations. What’s next after this sensation? Where will this sensation lead (me, the viewer and) the character. What will happen now with this new house? James visits this place three times. With each time that James visits and explores the space, the story accumulates more information about character and progresses by advancing a different aspect of James’ emotional arc. In the second visit, James finds the house closed and the window locked, he can’t get through. Instead, he remains outside in the rain watching through the window. The third visit happens at the very end of the film, just after James has thrown himself into the murky waters of the canal. The viewer next sees James and his family walking through the cornfield, on their way to the house. But the way the scene is shown, this could be simply a dream, or the paradise James might reach as his life in the tenement ends. In *Ratcatcher*, places extend their primary significance and come to communicate a broader meaning. While the canal emerges as a place-character always haunting James and the entire storyline, the new housing estate presents what James wants, a far-away place which evoked dreamy sensations, a way to escape from the scattered reality.

In another sequence in the film, James meets Kenny and the gang from the neighborhood. Kenny shows them his birthday present, a white mouse. James seems to be

³¹ Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, Routledge, 2010, p.136.

³² Marks, 2000, p.163.

fond of the mouse, but the gang gives him no time to enjoy the pet, because they grab the mouse and starts passing the pet to one another. The scene takes an unexpected twist when Kenny ties the pet mouse to a balloon and releases it into the sky. Kenny wants to free the pet from this cruel world; he sends the pet to the moon. The balloon plus its twitching cargo are seen in outer space looking down on Earth; next, they land on the Moon where Kenny's pet joins other cavorting mice; finally this image is seen in black and white on the snow-flickering family TV and we zoom out to rejoin "reality." Scenes like this don't move the narrative further but instead prioritize James' sensorial youth. The film progresses with events such as James' interaction with Margaret Anne or Kenny's release of the white mouse that blur the boundaries between good and evil, between the real and imaginary. In this way, the narrative continues to prioritize sensorial experience. The narrative invites the viewer to engage with James, and the dream-like scenes are left to be interpreted by "sensors' connection between the very body of receiver and the perceived."³³ By the time the military comes to clean the neighborhood, much more has grown in James than the desire to have a new clean house. He loses his friend Margaret. His mother and sister appear to be abused by his father. Kenny taunts him that he saw him kill Ryan Quinn. Isolation and alienation override him, for he belongs neither in this world nor in the one he dreams of. He is finally ready to make, what might be called, a character's decision. Increasingly denied the horizons which he desires, James is subsumed by the horizon that haunts him. He drowns in the very same murky canal where Ryan had drowned before. Although the moment of James' drowning could also be interpreted as a dream, James' dream. The moment of James sinking

³³ see: M Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, 1993

underwater is then intercut with the scene of his family walking towards the new home which James has visited earlier in the film. A climatic sequence that could be interpreted in different ways. Quoting Jonathan Murray on this dilemma, the scene could be "an overarching dream on James' part; the boy's dying hallucination; an actual (and unexpectedly optimistic) narrative epilogue."³⁴ Considering the theme of trauma as developed in the film, James' plunge into the same murky waters which took the life of Ryan, could be interpreted as an ultimate choice made by James to deal with the source of his trauma by ending the guilt he feels over Ryan's death in suicide.

Images

Marks writes that "the opening credits sequences of many movies take place over haptic images, as though to ease the viewer into the story"³⁵. Marks also describes the tactile images as representations of objects that cannot be distinguished and recognized. It is worth analyzing the opening sequence of *Ratcatcher*, which invites the viewer to immerse herself in an image that has no clear distinction and to use Mark's term, prepare the viewer to watch "seeing with the mind's eye," and let the images appeal to the senses. The film opens as light fills the screen to gradually reveal a young boy shrouded in white, rotating slowly, twisting himself further and further into a pair of net curtains. The camera lingers, through muted grey colors, almost caressing this small detail of the child's face, framed in a tight shot which

³⁴ J Murray, *The New Scottish Cinema*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, p. 68

³⁵ Marks, 2000, p.177

then is abruptly interrupted as a hand enters the frame, and slaps the boy to a sudden halt. We come to know that this is his mom berating him for what he has done to her curtains. The feeling created by seeing the child's mouth as though gasping for breath, the interruption coming from a hand which changes the hypnotic rhythm of the moving image, somehow achieves to foreshadow a tragedy to come. Sounds of children playing outside the window, grow increasingly louder, guiding us towards the outside space, where the canal is, close to which James is soon revealed. Ramsay gives great importance to the space. In *Ratcatcher*, in a series of profound idea-image collisions, the canal and the estate-house emerge as a place-character. While most characters have their own specific space, in which their story unfolds, James is the only one who drifts in and out of spaces. It is the use of space that offers that sensorial quality of the film, especially because Ramsay constructs her images by giving importance to the creation of a nucleus or center of energy, capable of having different parallels circulating around it and requiring the viewer to be always attentive to make the connections. Such a nucleus is here found in the river-canal space, the source and end of James' trauma, which combine with components around it to spread a feeling of threat: the black garbage-bags which provide a harsh contrast against the pale gray palette, the endless dimension that the water takes by camera framing, the many rats around connecting the water to infestation, the staging of characters who travel close alongside the canal. These images keep the tension and the attention of the viewer who navigates through the space with James and responds to it on many sensory levels.

In this way, *Ratcatcher* not only has the spectator feel with the character on screen, the film tries to immerse the viewer into James' world. This is achieved primarily by an

approach which avoids establishing shots: The canal, like other places, is never mapped out. The viewer is left with no clear geographical idea about the space; the canal never shows its threshold, we don't know how far it is from other spaces. The way from "home" to the canal, is never clarified. Being clueless about the geographical orientation, we come to feel James' world as being disintegrated. Also, by eschewing the establishing shots, which emphasize the rationality of the space orientation, the place loses its wholeness and feels broken into its component parts; the geography becomes tied to emotions and inter-psychic connections instead.

Coming from a photography background, Ramsay's images show part of something that continues beyond the frame and she shows exactly those particular details which will evoke an emotional understanding for the rest: the veins on the hand holding heavy grocery bags, a finger moving through a mound of sugar to draw a flower, a comb scratching a head, a mouse trap, a toe sticking out of torn tights, some sparkling cheap food on an improvised party-table, an old-fashioned metal bathtub in the middle of the room. Her camera doesn't follow an action, it rather shows a moment in a specific time and space. It remains static long enough to allow the viewer to look deeper into what it shows. Such an approach then suspends time and invites the viewer into a tactile perception, "calling upon the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction and to be aware of her or his self-involvement in that process".³⁶

³⁶ Marks, 1998, p.342.

The scenes are organized with the same approach; A lot of things happens offscreen. For example, family scenes are always organized so as to not show them all in one single frame. This division also becomes an artistic strategy to highlighting a thematic concern: family members are portrayed as fractals of a disintegration process. Their individual shots barely communicate or interest with one another. They share the same space, the house, but not much more than that. For example, both James and his father are in the room, but Ramsay shows James and covers the father behind the door frame. The tension increases as James is seen to be looking at the father; he keeps looking, the silence between them extends. It gets even more uncomfortable for James and the viewer who are left in expectation. The static camera is then helping to highlight James' static body, isolating him inside the room, as he waits for what feels like a prolonged response. Then a cruel gesture surprises us, the father's pushes James with his feet: "*Bring me a beer.*" The camera reduces the figure of the father by showing only the gesture of his unsentimental feet. This creates a strong effect on the scene and on the way, we perceive their relationship. James then leave the room, goes to another room and closes the door behind, only then he can express his emotions by spitting on the beer that is meant for his father.

By avoiding establishing shots and other orientating techniques, by privileging the non-visual and off-screen space, the poetic touch to the visuals and dream-like images tends to immerse the spectator in a childlike and fluid experience. Laura Marks' comment seems relevant in the context of visual approach in *Ratcatcher* Marks says: "Haptic images can give the impression of seeing for the first time....represent the point of view of a disoriented

traveler unsure how to read the world in which he find himself.”³⁷ *Ratcatcher* tends to capture those images that feel “seen for the first time” or closer than ever before; a louse in a comb, a fresh wound dripping blood, a toe beneath nylon, a floating body beneath the water. At one point, the non-judgemental camera also shows the saliva dripping out of dad’s mouth in a tight close up, as if satisfying a child’s curiosity to see those moment, privileging the texture over the perspective, letting the viewer get immersed in the materiality of the images. This could also be a kind of sensorial epiphany, when seeing the things we know, but closer than usually. This approach to visuals resembles a childhood experience.

Marks argues that haptic images can also activate a kind of synesthesia and extend beyond sight to incorporate taste and smell. The visual approach of the film often tends to make the viewer think about how the place smells: Anne Marie, James’ young sister, eats bread and jam in the middle of garbage bags full of rats. This moment is held longer so as to transcend its narrative importance and tends to evoke the sensation of how the place smells, and of how the bread tastes. The camera often captures images of rats, seen not from an observing eye, but rather with a camera movement that tends to include those images in the overall dynamic of scene, as if showing that the smelly rats are part of this community and emphasizing the closeness of the danger: hands cuddling rats, hands killing rats, children playing with rats. All these moments keep us considering how this place smells....the viewer who has seen this neighborhood and thought of how it smells, is then able to understand what it must feel like for James to discover the new house with that golden corn field. There is no need for the dialogue or any acting trick, only by having had the sensation of two

³⁷ Marks, 2000, p. 178

places, the viewer can understand the hope that the new house represents for James. James is a character who doesn't express himself verbally; he doesn't emote, instead he is especially expressionless. The viewer then can empathize with him only by the film's aesthetic approach that requires a compassionate involvement of the viewer. The spectator goes through an experience, which mingles with mind, body, impulses of a kinesthetic memory, what Taussig refers to as, a "palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived,"³⁸ to be able to feel the character. It is through a sensory knowledge that we get to know and understand James. It is a becoming, a process of immersion between spectator and film. It engages the viewer by making him/ her find meanings through a sensory response to what is shown, which is not necessarily a response to the character but to the film itself.

Sound

While sound design in classical cinema often privileges the voice, lowering ambient sound in order to ensure intelligibility while creating an illusion of naturalism, in *Ratcatcher*, "natural" ambient sounds are made louder to the extent that they become almost de-naturalized. The sound of the environment is often increased to the effect that the spectator is freed from what is happening in the narrative, and instead encouraged into an embodied engagement with the sensuality of the scene. Sometimes and usually when the camera shows James, in his inexpressive attitude, there are dominating sounds coming from the outside,

³⁸ Taussig, 1993, p.21.

offscreen, that guides the viewer's attention to other story parallels, while making a connection between the sound to James' state of mind. The sound then becomes haptic, given that the listener cannot distinguish the source of it, so the sound integrates the spectator through an embodied response, in which distanced identification with the action offscreen gives way to an immediate bodily response.

Also, rather than just emphasizing the importance of what the images show, in *Ratcatcher* the music is used to open up possibilities to perceiving the image. The use of music brings a different film-tone within the scene and often the non-diegetic soundtracks contradicts the mood that the images present. This helps to create a possible 'voluntary' response in the viewer while perceiving the scene. For example, in one of the few family moments that the Gillespie family share together, 'What's New, Pussycat?' is being sung by Tom Jones on their black and white television, while George is already drunk. The song helps the viewer dismiss George's expression of his love to his wife as serious.

Other songs also contribute to the viewer's engagement: Eddie Cochran's rock and roll 'C'mon Everybody' is what James' mother like to hear on a party she throws for her children. 'My Boy Lollipop' can be heard at the moment when George comes home, with blood dripping out of his face. Frank and Nancy Sinatra's 'Something Stupid' brings the two parents together in a dance after the terrifying fight they have that night. These are all kitsch entertainment, music used to get quickly into any listener, since kitsch does not require a great deal of education or intellectual concentration,³⁹ so the music increases the immersion

³⁹ See essay: C Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, 1939 p. 22-25

and enjoyment in the listener. Kitsch, Kundera writes “is not about the thing observed but about the observer”⁴⁰. Kitsch is fake art, expressing fake emotions, whose purpose is to deceive the consumer into thinking he feels something deep and serious, when in fact he feels nothing at all⁴¹. In *Ratcatcher*, kitschy music is often used as a stabilizer or entertainment in a chaotic world. When juxtaposing elegiac tones with strong sarcasm, or disturbing moments with tenderness, such as “Something Stupid” after the parents’ fight, irony is usually created and allows music to also provide a dramatic twist.

Similar to the imagery, sound becomes haptic, evoking immersion into a scene that has no clear distinction. Doesn’t this then leave one feeling like a “*disoriented traveler unsure how to read the world in which he find himself*.”⁴² Couldn’t this describe a child’s experience in a world that doesn’t make sense to him? Even further, such use of music becomes a thematic *resonance* describing a world that has lost meaning for someone suffering within it.

The Character’s Multi-Sensory Experience of the World

Since Ryan’s death, James’s reality is rendered dubious and uncertain. Childhood, as viewed from this perspective, is highly complex. It is often claustrophobic and threatening,

⁴⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30439633>

⁴¹ Roger Scruton. A Point of View: The strangely enduring power of kitsch. BBC, Online Magazine <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30439633>

⁴² Marks, 2000, p.178

but at the same time, there is warmth and comfort associated to it. This uncertainty is brought about, in part, by Ramsay's cinema which tends to question the perception; Already, the viewer might question her perception of James as a main character, given how expressionless he is, which makes it hard for the viewer to define him straight away. The film also tends to build into a more ambiguous character-spectator relationship. Unconventionally, soon after establishing Ryan's character at the film's beginning, James enters the story-line and unexpectedly gives it a tragic end. Ryan thought to be the main character is quickly replaced by James. The viewer can't quickly empathize with James, they also can't quickly forgive him for "killing" his friend. It becomes a challenge to establish a stable point-of-view. James's life turns into disjointed fragments (which are made clear by the story-parallels and also the layered cinema which organizing the scenes), he himself is disjointed, even literary, when in minute 00:40:18 the camera splits him into two parts. James has been exploring an empty house in the new housing project, leans against the wall and the camera pans across the room to reveal him leaning against the opposite wall. Such fluidity of perception encourages a multi-sensorial engagement between the viewer and the character's state of mind.

Meanwhile, Ramsay's multi-sensorial approach disrupts clichés when presenting the characters. Her characters are presented in an unconventional, ambiguous way, which might suggest a childlike state of mind. In *Ratcatcher*, the viewer never gets to predict how a character will behave. George, James' father, seems a loser but rescues Kenny from drowning. He's called a hero but mistreats his wife and his children. James' little sister tells her dad that James spat in his beer, but later gives James a brotherly hug and crawls into his

arms. Margaret Anne's complex emotional greed and vulnerability is never clarified. There is no spoken reason to why she lets herself be molested by the local boys. There are a number of possibilities why a girl of her age behaves as she does, but there is no clear cause and consequence presented in the film. Relationships are built through haptic sequences; Margaret Anne shares a moment sitting next to James. They share some looks, then she says "you wanna touch it?" offering him to touch her knee or the wound upon it. The audience does not know what she means. Later, James is seen removing lice from her hair. Nothing much happens, yet it feels a lot has happened. The feeling comes from the looks and gestures, the distance between their two bodies.

Ramsay's relationships sustain compelling emotional atmospheres and have more thematic resonance than a dramatic one: Margaret Anne invites James over to help her get rid of lice. The scene starts with a tender tone, while James is picking the lice from her head. It gets sensual when Margaret Ann exposes herself naked in front of James. They share a playful bath, clean each other's bodies. It becomes slightly funny when Margaret Anne then sits on the toilet and urinates in front of the astonished James. Ramsay's approach to multiplying the meaning in different parallels, brings a closer attention and reveals those secondary sensory elements. Again, the scene works in a visuality that stimulates not only the sense of vision, but also the other senses, by emphasizing multi-sensory experiences that "aims to shift the discussion of visuality away from the optical terms that usually predominate"⁴³. We could then say that such visuality tends to provoke the unthinkable and tackle the unwatchable, so the twist in the scene becomes an example of such haptic

⁴³ Marks, 2000, p.131.

sensation: The viewer is presented with the unexpected when Margaret Ann immerses herself in the bathtub filled with water. The non-diegetic, womb-sound isolates the image even more. The tension is raised by prolonging the time-perception to that of a drowning body gesture. The scene adds another parallel to it when the image intercuts with the actual drowning of Kenny's body in the canal, and of course recalls Ryan's drowning of the beginning of the film. Margaret Anne, goes out of the bathtub. She breathes. Her breath merges with diegetic room's sound and we are back and isolated with the shock in James' close up shot. A tender, almost sexual moment crashes with the traumatic event that began the film. Layering imagery in this way of intercutting and recurrence of motifs calls attention to the emotional disjunction that James is experiencing and reminds the viewer of his trauma. By bringing Margaret Ann and Kenny into the water in drowning gestures, the theme of trauma might be extended to include more children, even all children.

III. MORVERN CALLAR

Morvern Callar (2002) is a film adaptation of the novel with the same title, written by Alan Warner (1995) and offered to Ramsay, while she was still in the process of editing *Ratcatcher*. Similar to *Ratcatcher*, Ramsay's second feature begins with a trivial incident gone traumatic: Morvern wakes up on a Christmas day to find her boyfriend dead, on the kitchen's floor. This event is then dispersed into fragments that increasingly tend to differentiate Morvern's body from the dead body next to her, that is, as a body trying to live again. Morvern's journey is a journey of self-definition. The film includes examples of the effect of what a character sees, hears, smells or touches. In addition to giving an overview of the plot, examining narrative, imagery, sound and character, I will also focus on how the film considers trauma's relationship to memory: particularly, the loss of memory. This chapter will pay close attention to how the body is presented on screen and becomes a narrative and thematic device. In examining the relationship between Morvern's body and viewer's body, I will argue that, *Morvern Callar* engages the viewer with a sensory experience in order to access the psychological processes of that character's self-definition.

Overview

The film begins with Morvern lying next to her boyfriend's dead body. On the computer is his finished novel, along with instructions for finding a publisher. He has left her a mix-tape with different songs and money for his funeral. As days go by, Morvern lives next

to the dead body, without telling anyone. To her close friend Lanna, she says he abandoned her. She eventually dismembers, then disposes of his body in the forest nearby. Without thinking it through too carefully, Morvern takes authorship of the novel by inserting her own name in the title page. She contacts the suggested publisher, sends him the book and in the meantime, uses the funeral money to arrange a holiday trip to Spain, for herself and Lanna. The location shifts to Spain. After several shots of the girls drinking, partying and having sex, Morvern drags Lanna into a taxi which takes them far into the mountains, away from the coast. Morvern tells the taxi driver to bring them further into the deserted mountains, as she is enchanted by the wild and sparsely populated landscape. Soon the two friends are left alone, in a vast landscape, far from everything. Alone, the two friends find a lot more that separates them, which comes to a climax in a quarrel which Lanna starts, complaining to Morvern for having brought her to such an isolated place, far from people and fun. Morvern leaves Lanna asleep by the roadside and continues her journey alone. She hitches a lift and finds a place to stay. She then renews the contact with the London publisher, who flies out to Spain with his assistant and offers Morvern a contract and an amount of money she can scarcely believe. Morvern returns to Scotland only to collect a few belongings and when Lanna refuses to join her, Morvern prepares to leave on another journey, now alone.

Narrative

Ramsay's second feature is structured like a three-act narrative, but not in a classical approach. There is a middle, containing two very different parts: life in the small town and

the road-trip to Spain; it has a long exposition, though a lot of information is still withheld, a short resolution and a friendship which provides unity to the story. Again, as in Ramsay's other films, time is perceived as an accumulation of moments which gradually leads to a character's decision, though not necessarily towards a final solution. In *Morvern Callar*, time is what essentially decomposes the classical story structure; it is an elliptic storytelling, which seems to deliberately cut Morvern out of the narrative progression, in that it does not require us to follow the character's actions, but to come to an intuition of the workings of the character's mind. The slow pace of the narrative then allows the viewer time to record what is happening, primarily in a sensorial way, following what the character is feeling. There is a sense that the places and scenes, happening outside of a usual time and space for the character, feel like temporary happenings. The character has left her everyday work and lifestyle to journey to Spain. She seems out of context, lost in time and space, and this serves to emphasize the character's traumatic experience. Besides Lanna, any other character appears only in one, perhaps two scenes, and only for a specific, limited purpose. Each character helps to show or awaken a side of Morvern. Lanna's grandma, for example, is visited by Morvern and Lanna on Christmas day. Morvern returns to make a soup for her; it's not clear if they have ever met outside these two occasions. In the second scene, Morvern remains seated, watching the Grandma eat. The gesture is not defined intellectually but the viewer can associate a sensation of hunger with her visit. Maybe Morvern feels guilty about something, maybe she is yearning for a true home, maybe she just wanting to make a good soup for someone. In the middle of this scene, Grandma lifts her hand and points towards the window, she looks at Morvern but does not say nothing. Is it a sign to leave or look at

something in particular? Is she telling Morvern to fulfill her hunger elsewhere? The intent is not made explicit, but the movement of the hand, the thoughtful eyes of the Grandma and the silence in the room, create the feeling that Grandma was provoked by a memory of Morvern's. Other characters show a detached side of Morvern: she shows little interest in the partygoers with whom she interacts, her co-workers in the supermarket feel distant; the tourist to whom Morvern makes love provokes little emotional response in her. There is no clear causal reason coming from the narrative as to why Morvern interacts with these people;

Often, it seems, the viewer just barges into a situation with no previous hint about it given. The situations then feel like outcomes of some long internal accumulation, such as when Morvern deletes her boyfriend's name and types in hers on the novel's title page, or when she cleans, then dismembers the dead body to finally bury it. The lies she tells to Lanna do not seem calculated, but the viewer senses they must come from somewhere, likewise with her choice of Spain as a place to visit. And because the viewer is left to only see the already made decisions, they are invited to assume themselves the motivations behind those decisions. Alan Palmer states that the viewer gets engaged to "a story world primarily by using their knowledge of how to interpret other people's thought processes in the real world in order to try to follow the workings of characters' minds".⁴⁴ In *Morvern Callas*, this interpretation is helped by the viewer becoming close to Morvern over time through an immersion in her sensory world. Regarding the traumatic event which initiates the film, *Morvan Callar* does not attempt to offer a logic for the tragedy but instead, takes the viewer through the psychological narrative by connecting the viewer with the victim: Morvern

⁴⁴ Palmer, 2007, p. 205

seems traumatized by the sudden death. She oscillates between being silent, isolated, having sudden sparks and getting back again into a mute mode of reflecting and observing. The narrative progresses with unexpected moods that describe a destabilized character; The dramatic events such as the suicide, the dismembering of a body, the dead body carried in parts in a backpack across a hilly - is conveyed so simply that they don't feel like dramatic events. Most of the time Morvern is silent. Sarah Artt takes E. Ann Kaplan's article published in the journal *Framework* to describe the silence of Morvern as a consequence of trauma. In his article, Kaplan discusses the use of silence in the film-work of Marguerite Duras and Susan Sontag; Kaplan describes that particular silence, which is performed and accompanied by the look, even the stare, writing that it..."functions in several possible ways: as related to trauma [. . .] a way to communicate pain...as an —intimidating presence [. . .] a method to avoid the deception of words..."⁴⁵. Morvern tries to make sense of the world around her through looking and touching. Her actions usually suspend time or even go beyond the narrative meaning. The film reveals a tactile engagement; sensuous imagery that evokes memories of the senses (water, nature); the depiction of characters in acute states of sensory activity (smelling, sniffing, tasting) is what the film emphasizes. Morvern buries her boyfriend in a hill, then she sniffs the flowers on the way, she touches the cold water and let the worms crawl in her arms. Maybe this is a process of remembering him by caressing the land where he will rest forever. Peter Wollen explains, Andre Bazin 'was deeply influenced by [Emmanuel] Mounier's insistence that the interior and the exterior, the spiritual and the

⁴⁵ E. A Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, Rutgers University Press 2009, p. 158-174.

physical, the ideal and the material were indissolubly linked'.⁴⁶ But for example, In *Callar* the two main story-lines advance without too much explanation on their "exteriority" or "physicality": Morvern taking authorship of the novel and also the boyfriend's death. Both of these events exclude explanations. The narrative describes only the consequences of those to character's "interiority", "spirituality". Morvern is a character expressed more by the visual resources of cinema, than plot progression. The other story-line, the friendship between Morvern and Lanna, feels more familiar for the viewer because they witness it more closely as it unfolds: Morvern lies to Lanna about James, "*he is gone, he left me*" Lanna laughs "*left where, where could he go?*", Morvern replays "*to another country*". This is a quick narrative solution to wrapping up the storyline of the dead boyfriend, but it becomes more useful as a narrative device - a "plant" to which the "pay off" - will move the friendship's storyline further when Lanna reveals she slept with James. This information when first introduced does not really have a direct consequence, but it accumulates as a state of mind, perhaps in Morvern's mind but perhaps more for the viewer, who will now feel different when seeing the two friends together. The narrative feels like a progression of sensations towards things we know or learn. This often becomes a mutual process between the viewer and character: A good example for this could be the scene showing the two friends lost in the desert, when unexpectedly Lanna shouts: "*You still fucking hate me because he left you*" to remind us that the previous situation, never clarified, was still processing in the characters. This approach of casually introducing something without explanation but bringing it back later creates space for these release moments to function as if having a momentum of their own, encouraging

⁴⁶ P Wollen (1976) *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. London: BFI., p. 132

the viewer's personal experiences to make sense of the characters' reactions. Using Bordwell's words, this is "an approach to storytelling that fostered uncertainty about character psychology and causal connections, de-dramatization became one hallmark of ambitious filmmaking."⁴⁷ Eventually, the viewer resolves her uncertainty about the character through immersion in the character's world.

Images

Ramsay's visual strategy in *Morvern Callar* achieves an immersive body-experience and, unlike *Ratcatcher*, the camera-work seems looser; it adapts to more angles, even using the establishing shots and the subjective point-of-view shots which Ramsay did not use often in her previous films. The loose, handheld technique seems to be an approach which allows the (living) body to be dynamic, or to express itself more dynamically. The opening of the film with Christmas lights, flashing off and on, present and prevent us from seeing Morvern's face. Lights which also function as film-cuts, induce the feeling of time passing, rendering unnaturally the continuity of time and space, making it all the more intriguing and uncertain. The effect of red-flashing lights towards the pale bodies, the emptiness of the apartment (which is emphasized by the position of the two bodies lying on the floor), recalls a crime scene, which far from being shocking, feels quiet, clearly establishing the tone of the film and the way the film is going to deal with this tragedy. The Christmas lights become a detail which recurs throughout the whole visual structure. The lights at the beginning

⁴⁷ D Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 152

associated with James' death are mimicked by the disco strobe lights in the end. The same flashing-lights are used also in the bar and, by being the only "loud" visual component to the scene, they emphasize the mobility of the bodies, while visually connecting Morvern to the memory of the body she has left lying on the kitchen floor. Later Morvern escapes to Spain, but at the underground bar she fails to have fun while her face is lighted by the same flickering lights, reminding us that Morvern cannot escape the memory of her trauma. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes "the field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations ..."⁴⁸. The lived experience is then embodied through looking, listening, touching, tasting and smelling. The body is involved in the world on an everyday basis. Everyone and everything that we interact with can arouse feelings and cause reactions. As Marks notes, the spectator interacts with the haptic cinema with the intelligence of the whole perceiving body.⁴⁹ Marks also focuses on the ability that cinema has to evoke memories in the viewer. Using a Deleuzian term 'recollection-image' as a starting point, Marks calls certain types of scenic imagery 'recollection-objects'.⁵⁰ They are full of condensed history which can remind the spectators of their own past experiences.⁵¹ So, *Morvern* living with the dead body next to her does not make her feel a strange character with whom the audience cannot empathize. In witnessing Morvern's actions, the viewer can relate because she can recall the home feeling of sitting on a furry rug, letting the body get

⁴⁸ M Merleau-Ponty, 1995, preface XI

⁴⁹ Marks, 2002, p. 190

⁵⁰ G Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-image*, trans. H. Tomlinson & R. Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 47-50.

⁵¹ Marks, 2000, p. 81-84

warmed by a glowing electric fire; unwrapping Christmas presents, smoking a cigarette or the feeling of being among people and isolating oneself with music from headphones. And in order to sense, without being obstructed by prejudice, the viewer, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is invited to “sensing, in contrast with knowing.”⁵² These early scenes in the film, despite the dead body on the floor, “is a living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life”⁵³; To make the scene more familiar the camera first shows Morvern distanced, in a wide shot, then breaks into a completely fluid camera, inviting the viewer closer. The camera feels like a family camera, recording a home movie of Christmas, allowing the viewer to become immersed into a private moment. *Morvern Callar* breaks taboos in the way it presents death, particularly in the first scene where the dead body is linked with an inviting intimacy. The way Morvern caresses the dead body sabotages our visual perception when awakening the enjoyment coming from this multi-textured scene; making us think of that body as, once, a living body. Morvern’s touch makes the viewer think of James’ skin, the temperature of his skin, while the “dreamy” camera pulls in and out of focus and the flickering red light atmosphere creates an intimate embrace of two bodies. The scene allows room for a sensual feeling, which enables the dead body to be perceived as a memory of, once, a living body. *Morvern Callar* then includes us in a multi-sensorial experience, literally by using Morvern’s body to guide our body sensation: Morvern likes to touch. She puts her hands in cold water; let worms crawl into her hands; lets hot soil pass through her palm; she puts her hand out of the car’s window and lets the sun warm her skin.

⁵² T Toadvine, *On Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, online article -<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/#PhenPerc>, First published Wed Sep 14, 2016

⁵³ Ibid.

Morvern looks longer at her Christmas presents, at the hole in her sock, at the cockroaches; she looks at the face of the man she sleeps with as if she has not seen him before. In her essay “Perverse,” Angle Liza Johnson considers that the success of the film originates “precisely in using temporality to mobilize Morvern’s looks as actions”⁵⁴. Morvern’s looks, or the things seen from her eyes often delay the narrative effect and invite the viewer to apprehend the empty landscapes, traversing in silent and often unbroken shots, showing Morvern in her solitary wanderings. However, because of different framing techniques used throughout the film, sometimes the film gives the feeling of being inconsistent or rather fragmented. It does not hide this effect; it actually pushes it further to separate the film into two major parts. The second part, which takes place in Spain, switches to faster editing, a completely loose camera, wider establishing shots, use of symbolism and a clear contrast in colors, what makes it clear that this part aims to show Morvern being loose, sensing freely and openly. Spain is shown as a space of freedom, enabling fantasy to guide Morvern into an expanded sense of her own subjectivity. In contrast to Morvern’s tactile engagement with Spanish natural surroundings, the supermarket from the first part of the film, as an example, is used to describe a place where Morvern does not belong at all. The hand-held camera, used to prioritize her skin, arms, eyes and face, switches to an almost commercial technique. In a slow-motion tracking shot, we see Morvern walking in between the very symmetrical market set-dressing, which promotes the shiny plastic posters of fruits instead of real fruits. Morvern’s detachment is emphasized even further by isolating her from all other people, while then, in an extreme close up, her hand is shown playing with a worm crawling on top

⁵⁴ L Johnson, *Perverse Angle: Feminist Film, Queer Film, Shame*; Department of Art, Williams College, 2004

of a carrot. Morvern's enigmatic character disguises the purpose of such a gesture. This point in the frame is evocative and tactile, this kind of image can be very fleeting as the eyes quickly resume optical vision, perhaps trying to interpret what Morvern could be feeling at this moment.

Sound

Morvern Callar is a film that tries to understand silence, or tends to make the viewer to listen to the silence, something which the main character seems very comfortable with. Already this allows a haptic perception to the viewer who is used to hearing words accompany actions. Ramsay seems to deliberately stretch that silence for the whole first 20-minute sequence, letting it feel empty, lacking in dialogue and music so as to add weight to Morvern's state and establish this story to be Morvern's experience. According to Bela Balazs: "Things that we see as being different from each other, appear even more different when they emit sounds."⁵⁵ Silence here give the viewer room to form their interpretation; it is not knowing and being in the world through sound, but through their imagination. A portable tape-player and a mix tape called "*music for you*," which James has left for Morvern, functions mainly as the soundtrack to the film and at times seems to dictate her actions by imposing James' mental state on her. In the background, when Morvern dismembers James' dead body, we can hear *The Velvet Underground* "I'm sticking with you, 'Cause I'm made out of glue, Anything that you might do, I'm gonna do too." The scene becomes digestible for the

⁵⁵ B Balázs, Early Film Theory : *Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*. Berghahn Books, 2010, p.191

viewer who takes the position of a listener/ observer since the music, which comes as a “foreign” voice, creates the possibility for the viewer to alienate himself from it. As in *Ratcatcher*’s music, hit songs, with a very dynamic rhythm, attached to a dramatic moment tend to pull the listener in different directions. The contradiction can leave the listener unresolved or unsettled for a while. So it is in the scene where Morvern is dismembering her boyfriend’s body. The music creates a light-hearted bodily sensation which the images counteract in being disturbing.

In *Morvern Callar* diegetic sound is also used expressively. Ramsay isolates and intensifies sounds, which acquires a power of signification that these sounds do not have naturally. Such a technique could be illustrated with the scene after the burial, when Morvern walks around the forest and hears her own rustling. The sounds of birds and insects are enveloping while amplified. Morvern sees some water-bug, and the soundtrack animates it with mysterious sounds. She reaches into a small puddle and puts her hands in, letting worms go over her. The sound incorporates Morvern within an intense experience when combining the electronic scores and field recordings to get beyond sound’s concreteness and relate it more to the sensation of touch and sight. This then is related to James’ body being hidden forever under that field, so the viewer/listener, based on his/her sensation, can give their own interpretation to such a relationship between the sound and the image. The sound becomes for the viewer, same as for Morvern, something to remember and incorporate into their search for meaning.

In contrast to her friend Lanna, who likes to talk, make jokes, respond and interact, Morvern is someone who likes to listen. Dialogues become significant of friendship gaps and verbalize their alternated realities. In the second part, at the Spanish territory, dialogue takes the role of a sound effect, it gets louder and more disturbing as the story progresses. Dialogue is also used to emphasize the change that the friendship goes through. While Lanna becomes louder and more euphoric, Morvern's responses wane towards silence, but a silence which is not numb or arrogant; it is rather the rich and imaginative world of the introvert. Another moment to strengthen the difference between the two friends, is the scene which shows some game happening at the Spanish resort. The "happy" crowd is shooting and cheering, following the leader's instructions, while the participants feel part of a pattern, far from being individuals with a personal idea of fun; Lanna seems to enjoy it, while Morvern detaches herself, preferring quiet places instead.

The Character's Multi-Sensory Experience of the World

Ramsay's previous film described a traumatic event by exploring the character's external circumstances but with *Morvern Callar*, she is firmly attuned to a character's psychology to do so. The complexity that embodies the unpredictability and irrationality of human behavior, especially when inflicted with grief, allows Ramsay to collect thoughts in bodily behaviors.

Morvern is a simple girl, living in, what feels like a rented apartment, which lacks that personal imprint on it. She seems to have bonded with Lanna in class solidarity, as they

both work in the same supermarket, live in the same small town and share common interests. But the story tries to avoid elaborating further into social connotations as to associating those with the “subjectivity”. Instead Morvern’s character expands when engaged in seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching; she gets subsumed into the invisible, intangible world, as well as the metamorphosis of a body and the complex desires that guide it.

Haptic perception is usually defined as the independent movement of multiple sensory surfaces, a combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies.⁵⁶ Marks places particular emphasis on a kind of movement that occurs during this process of looking. A shifting between haptic and optical, between closeness and farness, the surface and depth. She identifies this oscillation as a limit to where something can become erotic. Marks writes: “What is erotic? The ability to oscillate between near and far is erotic. In sex, what is erotic is the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver. It’s the ability to have your sense of self, your self-control, taken away and restored - and to do the same for another person...”⁵⁷; Morvern is eroticised by the lens of the camera. The camera is often prioritizing her skin and caressing her body. Images are often soft-edged, while she is often shown in a diffused red light. When she has sex with the foreigner at the hotel, the image goes into a blurry view, the camera creates an aura around her. But then the red lights which representing sexuality, passion, sensitivity, connects Morvern's erotic body to the blood stains of her boyfriend. By provoking such a perception, the viewer then is

⁵⁶ Marks, 2002, p.2

⁵⁷ Marks, 2002. *Haptic and erotic*. XVI, introduction

invited to wonder who is Morvern and how was her love life. Morvern's aloof character, her discreet facial expression, her speechless reactions, makes for a performance that doesn't really allow one to judge the character quickly. Instead the viewer is left to imagine and sensing what the character is sensing. In the film, Morvern's background is left completely unknown. We don't know what James meant to her, neither how she became friends with Lanna. Morvern is no one in particular. She is some-*body*. To the unknown caller, at the train station she answers "*I am not from here*", while the man at the party tells her "*Where have you been, long time no see.*" These are just two small hints we get from about the character's background, while Lanna's secret of having slept with Morvern's boyfriend, makes the significant relationship of her trauma all more mysterious. Morvern could as well be, just another party girl with whom James has slept. This technique of giving minimal hints rather than clear information prevents a chance for interpretations or judgment.

Morvern does not say much. Laura Marks mentioned that "tourture » (traumatic experience as a form of torture) deprives a person of language and reduces him/her to nothing but a body. Language, she argues, is what makes us subjects; it allows us to take a distance from our bodies.⁵⁸

Morvern seems to be in a process of re-discovering her connection with the body, and her body with the world. I take into consideration the analysis from Mazierska and Rascaroli on how tourism and tourist identities allow Morvern to "play with identity." This then is something that explains Morvern's journey to Spain and her comfort in being a foreigner, roaming in unknown places, among unknown people to whom she often presents herself as

⁵⁸ Marks, 2002. *Haptic and erotic*. XVI, introduction

“Jacky”- a name carved in the gold neckless she has found in the ground and carries on her neck. While different from her, Lanna, seems to have locked herself into something which is familiar, so to say comfortable. She never questions, so she never changes. Spain, which becomes somehow representative of an open place, does not expand Lanna’s sensitivity. Her desires are for immediate pleasures. The lack of emotional connection to her sexual partners, her clumsiness and her insensitivity which fails to appraise the importance of nature, makes her a less complex character and summarizes her as a working class woman who cannot go further than, as she says, to “*stop dreaming it’s the same crapness everywhere*” (1.20.00).

Ramsay uses irony and absurdity in very mundane moments, to make Lanna’s character turn serious matters into games and attribute to trivial things the same importance as serious affairs. For instance, while Morvern goes to a party to try to forget about James’s death, Lanna cannot even forget about a fake blue nail she loses while dancing. Later, while at the Spanish resort, there is a blind girl who does not seem aware of being included in a striptease game. While the others laugh at seeing the topless blind woman confused and scared; Morvern is nailed with puzzlement. The editing cuts from the topless blind girl to Morvern and back again to the place where the topless girl was, but now we see Lanna, topless, laughing. For her, the serious matter turned into a chance to play the game. In another contrast to Morvern, Lanna is careless about showing her body to anyone. Unlike Morvern, Lanna is a “social body”; To use Merleau-Ponty’s view on the body, we can then describe the body as the center of our perspective on the world, the place where our sensing is ‘localized’- and then there is a huge difference between the two friends, since Morvern’s bodily sensations seem to take place both on the surface of her skin and deep within her.

Sensing is what comes to separate the two friends. They seem to be friends only to avoid being alone, especially in entertaining social events. Although Lanna senses something is wrong when she first sees Morvern, she does not really know how to behave towards it, so instead offers drugs' - an easy self-sabotage. In the scene where the two friends take a bath together, Lanna distances herself from Morvern's concern by making jokes. There does not seem to be true feelings between friends. This escalates when the two of them get lost in the Spanish desert. Lanna is uncomfortable. There is nothing to talk about. She bursts into anger and wants to get back to the resort, while Morvern refuses to go because she idealizes nature rather than the idea of having to share it with Lanna. This is how the friendship unfolds, but its weakened state is hinted at from the beginning, since Morvern does not tell Lanna the truth about James' death and as the story progresses, she restricts Lanna from her private life. Lanna never learns anything about the novel, nor the publishers. By this point, the viewer feel she won't be sensitive enough to understand, and because the story has "planted" the "cheating", from Lanna's side, the viewer can relate with the idea of Morvern keeping secrets from Lanna. At the end of the film, Morvern offers Lanna to join her, she says 'I'm going again.' She does not say 'I'm going back'; for me, the word 'again' reinforces her wish to continue her sensory experience. The last scene, at the club, where Morvern is listening to "Dedicated to the One I Love" on her walkman, is described in the Kate Ince's book on female subjectivities represented in film. Ince writes: "She has removed all the trappings of everyday life that conventionally constitute a social identity – name, job, home, friends,

conversation, routine and immersed herself into a physical environment which occupies her on a sensory level.”⁵⁹

The film can be interpreted as Morvern’s journey towards self-definition. Mazierska and Rascaroli, refers to Morvern as a postmodern traveller who ‘does not change identity but plays with it – more precisely, she plays with tourism and tourist identities’⁶⁰. But there is a change, a clarity in Morvern. In the party at the beginning of the film, she is a body merged with other bodies. In Spain the camera starts to distance her and objectify the fun. A shot made at the Spanish resort shows drunken people having fun, shouting and drinking on their balconies, which resemble small cells, isolating and dehumanizing them. Morvern looks at them, separated, an individual apart from the others.

She also needs to face something within herself: to connect with her body and the feelings it contains, including trauma, in this journey of self-definition. The film’s sensorial depictions help the viewer to become immersed in her journey. At one point in the film, Ramsay uses a technique that we’ve seen already with James in *Ratcatcher*. Morvern is split into two. Morvern and the publishers end up to a graveyard going after signing the book-contract. The sequence breaks the 180-degree rule by having Morvern appear on the left side of the camera and then reappear on the right as the camera pans. The same as with James, Morvern enters her own point-of-view shot. In these stories of trauma, Ramsay describes the necessity of a body to connect with itself.

⁵⁹ K Ince, *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivities in Contemporary Women’s Cinema*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017

⁶⁰ Mazierska and Rascaroli, *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and the European Road Movie*, Wallflower Press, 2006. p.194

IV. WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

Overview

We need to talk about Kevin (2011) is directed by Lynne Ramsay. The story was adapted from Lionel Shriver's novel with the same title.

The film tells the story of a mother, Eva's (Tilda Swinton) relationship with her son, Kevin, (Rock Duer, Jasper Newell and Ezra Miller, at different ages) over the course of nearly 18 years, from his conception to his present state in a correctional facility. At 15, Kevin massacred nine of his classmates in his high school's gym with his longbow. The morning of the massacre, he also used the same weapon to kill his father and younger sister. The film leaps between different time frames as the audience comes to understand what happened and to wonder about why. Its fictional present is two years after the murder. In this time frame, Eva works in a travel agency and is preparing for her son's release from the correctional facility when he turns 18. At other times in the film points, memories from her past - her pregnancy, the childbirth, Kevin's infancy, Kevin's early and adolescent years – interrupt the present and help the viewer to understand the traumatic event with which the images are connected.

Narrative

We need to Talk about Kevin has a narrative flow which allows the viewer to become engaged into an associative experience of understanding Eva's world. The connection

between the past and present is based on states of minds which also helps specify and underly a theme of trauma. We are first presented to Eva as she sleeps on a sofa, next to a table with lots of pills on top of it; the window blinds are down, the room is dark. Then the story sends us back in time: Eva goes to wash her face, when she lifts her head out of the basin, her face becomes Kevin's. Eva has a family, two children and a husband. Beside an editing-trick, we are introduced to the first of many parallels between Eva and Kevin; in this moment, both of them are watching her husband, Franklin and daughter, Celia, dance. Both of them are detached. From this point on, the narrative progresses deeper into Eva's memories while the plot develops by advancing different aspects of this mother-son relationship and fleshing out the nature of the traumatic event that will take place the day of the dance.

Because of the associative storytelling which progressively reveals characters' emotions and mind-states, the viewers comes to know the world of the protagonists before the events in the story explain them: In the story's fictional present, we see Eva on her job, then leaving the office running terrified. We see Eva in between the terrified crowd, witnessing, what seems to be, a massive accident. But then the narrative leaps to Eva back in the office when she first gets the job with hints from the employee about a past that the viewer will need to fill in. The story progresses in fragments. We see Eva before Kevin was born. We're shown Eva's anxiety and her fears. The narrative manipulates the depth of the viewer's knowledge, decoupling cause and effect, or, shall I say, cause and affect. Kevin is born. He is a demanding baby and then a cruel child. Eva fails to get close to him. Back in the present storyline, Eva is attacked by people in the street. What was Eva's fault? Was she

unable to raise a child? If the audience finds answers to these questions, the story reaches a more-unifying logic. In another scene we see Eva driving home. The time is the film's fictional present again, two years after the massacre. It's Halloween and trick or treaters are crossing the street. Eva is uneasy. She manages to make it into her house. She sits down with the glass of red wine and collapses on a couch. The children pound on her door yelling "trick or treat". The sequence draws out metaphorical allusions about Eva's "inability to give", to children.

Because the story does not tend to make conclusions or judgments, the film becomes a question for the viewer and his/her own perception. It is up to the viewer to feel whose "fault" it is, or who's the "bad one". To challenge the viewer's position at the so-called midpoint, Eva reads Kevin a book about Robin Hood. Kevin likes the story and smiles at Eva for the first time. But their connection doesn't last longer, perhaps because Eva is pregnant in the second child. Eva tries to describe to Kevin how "Mama Bear and Daddy Bear... went about creating" a new person and that they would soon get used to having another person in their family. Seven year old Kevin responds coldly: "*You mean fucking?*". Kevin looks at Eva while breaking crayons and says : "*Just because you are used to something, doesn't mean you like it. You're used to me.*". The narrative uses the dialogue as a device to hook attention so that the viewer will be waiting to see how will the story will evolve with the coming of the new-family member. Celia is born. Kevin becomes jealous. His jealousy allows Eva to reveal her hidden doubt around having another child. The story uses these moments to create cause and consequence between Eva's and Kevin's behaviors, always leaving open the question between the story's protagonist and antagonist.

Another part of the film follows Kevin's improvement in archery, which we find out later will transform into a serious crime; the moral weight of which falling on Eva's shoulders. Many dramatic events which might help the viewer understand more are kept offscreen. For example, we never see exactly how Celia lost the eye, though we learn it was from drain fluid used on it, and the viewer is left with Eva's conviction that Kevin was at cause. But this was not the worst of his crimes. The final culmination of crimes, the massacre, leaves the mother with no answers and serves as a confirmation of the idea that she had made a monster. Quoting Virginia Woolf, for Ramsay, the "likeness of the thought is for some reason more...comprehensible, more available, than the thought itself".⁶¹ So, Ramsay creates a narrative that deliberately fragments the chronology of Kevin's crime, engaging viewers' imagination to motivate or interpret it. Žižek uses the term "The imaginary real"⁶², which he explains to be "the thing where we (the viewer) feel that we do have a reason for whatever response, but we tend not to notice it as clearly because of the 'reason', even though the imaginary is always there, adding its input to our feeling.

The plot moves on plugging into Eva's psychological state. Her state is always related to Kevin: We see Eva's first ultrasound. She sees her fetus on a screen which then is juxtaposed with the same light-flickering coming from the copy machine she is using at work. I as a viewer interpret this to be a possibility for Eva to move on, now that she has a new job. But her memories of Kevin do not let her be happy. Then we see Eva walking down

⁶¹ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/02/25/virginia-woolf-on-the-cinema-1926/>

⁶² see, Žižek, *Lacan's four discourses and the real*, 2014, <http://www.egs.edu/>

the prison corridor. The editing creates a parallel with Eva walking, in almost the same type of corridor, but this time she is pregnant and a group of little girls dressed as ballerinas passes through her. Eva's expressionless posture remains the same in both scenes. This creates a ambiguity – and we can ask if Eva doomed from the start or if there was something she could have done differently. The narrative structure continues to work with parallels, mainly between Eva and Kevin, even to the point of their own sexuality. Eva finds the adolescent Kevin masturbating and then, while cleaning his room, she finds a CD with porn footages. This is juxtaposed to a scene, on the present story-line, where we see Eva's colleague try to flirt with her, during the office Christmas party. Eva runs away, as if traumatized by such approach. In this rather long “dealing with sexuality” sequence, Eva also has a low moment in her marriage. She and Franklin discuss a divorce because Franklin cannot accept Eva's uneasiness with their son.

It is a narrative that builds up in details which come to resonate with each other as similar motifs recur. This allows room for the audience to consider and to create associations. The closer to the end, the complex relationship of narrative timelines (pasts, present) becomes more integrated and culminate into the traumatic event and its devastating consequences.

Images

Haptic sensitivity suggests that seeing is not only a visual experience, but also an experience that involves all of our senses. Through a cinematography that challenges the spectator's sense of space and embodied imagery, Ramsay creates a multi-sensorial experience both for the character (Eva) and the viewer.

Her shaky, “experimental” camera becomes an aesthetic choice that gives the film the potential to evoke an emotional experience associated with the trauma and to provoke the viewer’s vestibular sense (perception of orientation and balance).⁶³ The loose, experimental camera plays in and out with the focus to make the viewer feel unbalanced. This, when combined with the elliptical editing, tricks the viewer’s sense of the space. The connection between the spectator, the character and the space is gradually results from cues of misbalance, showing Eva’s puzzled state of mind.

As an example, indicative of Eva’s dis-oriented state of mind, we can look at the scene taking place on Halloween day. Eva is driving home from work in the fictional presente of the film. It starts like a dream (kids are dancing across the street and having fun, masks peering into the window of the car, harsh colors of costumes, glaring city lights). The dream becomes increasingly nightmarish. Shadows from the children, the harsh-light on her face, Eva’s crooked position, all create a distorted sense of space and her upset position within it. The atmosphere resembles that of a horror film. In the Halloween scene, the lighting shining into her car upon her face from trick or treaters with flashlights (as if Eva is under a police interrogation, as if she is guilty of something) terrifies Eva. As with many of the images in the film, light shining on Eva’s face is part of a recurring motif, found again in the scene where we see Kevin’s embryo in an ultra-sound from her memories alternating with the flashing light coming from the copy machine. The light from the copy machine creates harsh shadows on Eva’s face; she appears and disappears. Though nearly

⁶³ A term presented by Luis Rocha Antunes in his book: *The Multisensory Film Experience: A Cognitive Model of Experimental Film Aesthetics*. Intellect Books, 2016

expressionless, the viewer comes to empathize with her suffering; yet our empathy does not come so much from a moral perspective or intellectual understanding of her situation, but derives from the viewer's physical experience of Eva's state of mind.

Eva cannot actually be happy. Because of the traumatic event she has suffered as the mother of a murderer, in her mind the joyful or pleasant memories related to Kevin become connected with something terrifying. For example, in terms of framing, setting, editing type, and the *mise-en-scène*, the sequence where Eva and Franklin appear to be having fun in the city (they are drunk, they sing, they dance, she screams... they end up having sex in what is likely the conception of Kevin), matches perfectly with the shots where the terrified crowd stands gathered around the mass-murder scene. The juxtaposing of the two moments might express Eva's guilty feelings. The two scenes have the same aesthetic approach; aesthetics which relate to haptic perception: the inappropriate grains and the low-key light, the deep black that makes the other colors (especially red) pop up strongly. So, the same dreamlike aesthetics are used to describe a nightmare feeling. By such a choice, the film then is creating a very thin line between the feeling of joy and death (between the night when Eva gets pregnant and the night when Kevin commits the crime).

Eva's memories become a multi-sensorial experience: there are visual metaphors, which turn eyes into hands, skin, lips, feet and arms into feelings. The film then draws a strong attention to the sense of touch. For example, because of the low light used to light the sex scene, Eva and Franklin are shown as two shadows moving in the dark. Recalling Marks:

“the eyes themselves function like an organ of touch”⁶⁴, this scene is an example when sight has come to contain touch. The viewer would want to have access to see (vision as related to touch) characters’ bodies. Instead the viewer is called upon to fill in the gaps of the image. The scene then gains an immersive quality by focusing on paradoxical sensations left on the viewer.

The connection between the past and present events is also based on metaphorical meanings. Metaphors are suitable for haptic interaction because they allow the viewer to react first with their senses and create perceptions before the conscious mind has the opportunity to connect metaphors logically or to make sense of the experience. As Laura Marks argues, “haptic perception offers a means of engaging with the world which differs from that of conventional optical visibility”⁶⁵. “Haptic perception invites the viewer to dissolve his/her subjectivity in close and bodily contact with the images.”⁶⁶ In *We need to talk about Kevin*, there is a good example in a scene where Eva, Franklin and Kevin are eating lunch. Eva wonders if Kevin caused the accident that took Celia’s eye. The camera points at Kevin’s mouth chewing and sucking upon a squishy white lychee. The close up focuses on movements of Kevin’s lips while the juice squirts from his mouth. A haptic perception can provoke imagination beyond the optical vision which tends to show, simply, just a lychee. My mind kept on relating the squishy white fruit with a detached retina.

⁶⁴ Marks, 2002, p.3

⁶⁵ Marks, 2002, introduction

⁶⁶ Marks, 2002, Video Haptic and Erotic, p.13

Ramsay's fragmentary frames which derive from her photographic eye, capture those details and visual motifs that tell a lot more about character than a dialogue could do. It's her ability to make the viewer feel so deeply through the images, to mobilize the senses beyond the boundaries of story and performance: for example, there is a similarity of Kevin biting off his fingernails and arranging the nails into an arc, with Eva removing the pieces of egg-shell from her hurriedly-prepared omelette; she then arranges those in the same way as Kevin did before. There is also similarity in their posture: pay attention of how Eva and Kevin sit on the floor of their new unfurnished room, to the similar positions of their bodies when they sit in the prison room, years later. Ramsay uses photographic composition to also show the role of the father in this relationship. The father is usually cut in half. Ramsay often leaves him offscreen, disconnecting him while strengthening the bond between Eva and Kevin. And, differently from the previous films, in *We need to talk about Kevin*, Ramsay's aesthetic variations include also the usage of long-exposure, pixel density and video distortion. Eva's image is distorted while she is giving birth. Camera alienates Eva's face, reflecting her through an overhead lamp, turning the event into a more mental representation of Eva's memory. She screams and seems to have a non-human shape. But, besides technological devices which are used to manipulating the images, a haptic perception comes also by how Ramsay achieves to transform everyday images into something seemingly surreal when seen closer and longer than ever before. Ramsay then uses such images to show time, mood, the relationship between characters: we see Kevin smashing his jam-sandwich in top of the glass table, doing it on purpose to annoy Eva who is watching him. Then his father comes, we hear him in off-screen but we see Kevin running towards him cheerfully, while Eva is left alone in

her puzzlement, still staring at the smashed-sandwich. Later, we see Eva lying on Franklin's lap. Franklin's head is offscreen. We hear him say "He's just a boy, that's what boys do", and we see Eva's intense look, held longer by the camera, as to give space for the viewer to imagine what she might be looking at, before her point-of-view shot presents us with the same sandwich, which remains in the same place; at this point already covered by a lot of bugs. The image then has a haptic quality because it is hard to recognize it immediately (due to Eva's portrait reflected on top of the glass-table and the "shiny" crumbs which create the effect of a dream). The dreamy effect then turns the image into a so-called mental image. It is as if Eva is imagining it; yet this detail tells us a lot about Kevin and about her. (She never cleaned the table?!) They are both connected to the "mess" created in there.

Still with imagery, it is interesting to talk about Ramsay's use of color. In the film, red becomes associated with femininity, horror and also sensuality. Red becomes related to Eva's identity. In the very first image, at a tomato-festival in Spain, Eva is covered with the fleshy red of crushed tomatoes. The image first looks like a blood bath and calls to mind a massacre even though it hasn't occurred yet in the film. The red color might also be associated to her femininity, which is raised above the other bodies, as Eva is held high by men above the crowd. This moment is interesting also because her body is stretched into a position "that diagrams both a crucifixion and the long bow and arrow"⁶⁷ which was Kevin's chosen weapon for the massacre. The image of Eva's red body then is a traumatized body depicted in a metaphorical way.

⁶⁷ M Angiolillo, *Teaching Directing Students to Use Objects*, p. 9

Within the film's aesthetic approach, the red color then becomes associated with blood, sex, martyrdom and also dream. Such a combination reflects extreme points of Eva's life: red as connotation of youthful playfulness, because the tomatoe festival is also playful, red as a sensual red that spreads around her bedroom when she has sex, and red as also related to the horror of the massacre scene. These moments blur together as memories flow in and out of Eva's mind. The color then is also used to dissolve boundaries between the real and the imagined. The viewer is left to sensing her world, with its distortion, reflective of Eva's psychological state.

Sound

Sound can evoke texture, taste, atmosphere. Same as the images, the sound can also invite the viewer to an embodied response. In the very first scene of the film, the tracing camera moves towards a window, a curtain moves in slow motion, the place is illuminated while the haptic sound (of a lawn sprinkler, but it is hard to recognize as such) evokes a confusing immersion within a familiar environment. Sound gives a supernatural dimension to the space. It might seem that the sound is coming from a helicopter, but soon becomes defamiliarized. I feel that the tension coming from the approaching camera and the sound of (what feels to be) some kind of a space-machine is like a preparatory scene for the viewer meeting some alien arriving from the outer space. The haptic perception (which comes mostly from the sound) leaves space for imagining something else rather than a simple familiar ambience. The viewer can not react to the house as a simple, domestic environment. He/she senses that there is something "inhuman" here. The film's atmosphere becomes

haptic due to the usage of asynchronous sounds- sound with no recognizable visual source.”⁶⁸

This disorientation does not only relate to the viewer but also to Eva. Throughout the film, when she recalls her memories, the sound mixes different sources. It feels like she does not only experience the sound through her ears but through her whole body. The sensory qualities of sound are even more highlighted in the scene of giving birth because the sound comes from different sources. The diegetic sounds are often used expressively and create meaning beyond their first representation. This is because, in the film, the natural ambient and environmental sounds are used in an amplified way, to the extent of becoming almost denaturalized. This occurs especially when sound is related to Kevin and his movements: Kevin crying, Kevin chewing and swallowing food, Kevin’s performance in his toy piano, Kevin writing in the paper, Kevin drawing with his crayons, Kevin crumpling the paper where Eva has written the math instructions. These are all intensified sounds, however, the film plays on the ambiguity of not knowing if Kevin is actually making such a noise on purpose or if those sounds are reflections of Eva’s anxiety. There is a shot of Kevin eating at the backseat of the car. The sound of his chewing is intensified, but this time he is clearly not doing it on purpose to annoy his mother. The framing isolates the whole scene into Kevin’s shot, but then the scene makes us imagine Eva hearing him in offscreen. This moment is further explored when Eva gets annoyed by her colleague who loudly chews his sandwich. In my interpretation, such a moment shows Eva’s manifestation of guilty feelings. She feels

⁶⁸ Balázs, 1952, p.83

guilty for the bad look she gives to her colleague, then, because of this, ask politely if anyone wants lunch. The “denaturalized” sound become a question of Eva’s state of mind. Maybe it is Eva’s unstable state of mind that depicts such sounds and Kevin might not be the only one to blame. Like the imagery, the sound again plays with the ambiguity and distortion that is in this relationship of mother and son, blurring what is cause and what is consequence.

The use of music is interesting in that the non-diegetic soundtrack often contradicts the mood that the images present. The combination between sound and the visuals makes the scenes even more unsettling. The pop music that Eva listens to in her car adds to a sense of unease in the viewer because of its combination with the terrifying Halloween moments. The dualism allows the viewer to postpone a judgment on what Eva might be feeling, though uneasiness is probably the best word to describe Eva’s feeling in the car. As Walter Benjamin suggests “We look for hope in the midst of the crisis which characterizes the unhappy consciousness (...) “that is, out of the anger, rage, and violence...”⁶⁹ All of them are intrinsically ironic. Ramsay’s sound design uses different music and soundtracks and, same as in the other films, in *We need to talk about Kevin*, Ramsay uses the music in an ironic tone. “Irony has its targets. As the most extreme form of irony, sarcasm looks to destroy its target. In the midst of such destruction, one traverses the limit of nihilism and madness”⁷⁰. This phrase fits perfectly to the description on the use of the song ‘Mother’s Last Words to Her Son’, which we hear when Kevin is practicing and getting better at the archery game, a

⁶⁹ <https://schlemielintheory.com/2013/03/20/comedy-nihilism-and-hope-paul-deman-and-walter-benjamins-differing-approaches-to-irony-take-1/>

⁷⁰ See Paul de Man, essay *The Rhetoric of Temporality*. 1968

passion which his mother Eva planted in him by reading Robin Hood. Then “Irony, [...] call into question traditional and consoling versions of the plot of human history”⁷¹; ‘The Ambush’ a song by Lui Fang “is a famous Chinese classical pipa music whose composition describes the decisive battle”.⁷² For me as a listener the sound feels unfamiliar. This might be how the melody succeeds to build up tension that comes from the “unknown”. “Usually it is not possible to see the unknown, one just decodes things already predefined....There is this specific experience one makes when confronted with something yet unknown, insecurity and ambivalence forcing the whole sensory system to react.”⁷³ Ramsay uses this song to foreshadow Kevin’s “monstrous” actions.

Unlike in other films, Ramsay’s dialogue in her third feature, does not feel like “the most random dialogue”. It is not expositional but neither is it “quiet”, it moves with the flow. The dialogue is often jarring and shocking; one cannot forget Kevin saying: *“It’s like this: you wake and watch TV, get in your car and listen to the radio. You go to your little jobs or little school, but you don’t hear about that on the 6 o’clock news, why? ‘Cause nothing is really happening, and you go home and watch some more TV and maybe it’s a fun night and you go out and watch a movie. I mean it’s got so bad that half the people on TV, inside the TV, they’re watching TV. What are these people watching? People like me?”* As Walter Benjamin describes “In the experience of (talk) dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are inter-woven...Our

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambush_from_Ten_Sides

⁷³ Interview with Marks / Nov. 2004 / HKW Berlin. online: <http://www.mindgap.org/laura-u-marks/latency/>

perspectives merge into each-other, and we co-exist through a common world"⁷⁴. So here the dialogue creates a very strong parallel between the viewer and the screen. This world comes directly to the audience who might have a more sensorial experience when hearing a dialogue that tends to get beyond the screen and reach them closer.

The Character's Multi-sensory experience of the world

Eva wakes up, struggling to keep herself balanced. She walks leaning on the things around. She uses her hands for the sensory recognition. She looks and touches around, engaging into a multi-sensorial experience in order to orient herself at what turns out to be her own home. Her sensing leads our sense of space as well. We discover her space by following her gestures. Previously, Eva was seen in a huge crowd at the Tomasina festival. The camera moves against the crowd, into a slow and methodical rhythm, almost hypnotizing the viewer's body while his/her eyes pay attention to the opaque images. It is rather unsettling, because the viewer's body and their eyes are responding to two different moods. When Eva appears on top of the crowd, stretching herself, she balances the composition. She becomes a compass for the viewer's perception of the space. While in this past moment, Eva's diagonal posture might suggest strength, she is often shown as a fragmented human being (depicted into close up and fast cuts) in other moments of the present storyline. The camera movements draw a difference between who she was and who she is now. Barker suggests:

⁷⁴ M Merleau-Ponty, 1962, P.431

Our bodies' muscular empathy with the film's body emerges partly from experience. When the film swivels suddenly with a whip pan, or moves slowly along with a long take or a tracking shot, or stretches itself out in widescreen to take in a vast landscape, we feel those movements in our muscles because our bodies have made similar movements ... Our responses to film are a case of kinesthetic memory.⁷⁵

Eva becomes the body who lets the viewer sense the space; The camera adjusts to Eva's body in order to get through the crowd of the massacre scene. Often the camera is diagonal or even shaky. When Eva sees her pregnant image at the mirror, the camera shows her reflection out of balance. The tracking shots that follow Eva running through the corridor also become shaky and make the viewer lose the stable perception of the space. Eva's point-of-view-shot which leads the viewer towards Celia, sitting at the kitchen table, shows Eva badly-balanced and the space takes a hallucinatory sense. Sobchack points out that "When spatial disorientation takes place, it is the lived body that is taken into account; thus the body becomes the center of the world."⁷⁶

We need to talk about Kevin is evidence of the ways in which trauma can be transmitted through the body. Eva might experience her body, her life, her mind and her self as disjointed by the birth of her first child. Her identity is no longer her own but inevitably

⁷⁵ Barker, 2009, P.75

⁷⁶ Sobchack, 1992, p.20

and irreversibly connected to another human being: Kevin. So the memories tend to distort the reality, the multi-sensorial experience comes from the tendency to question a reality she can no longer affirm. Eva is consistently at odds with her world: dislocated, disoriented and fragmented. The distortions of her senses are trying to eventually re-make reality. So, this perspective of trauma is strongly affecting Eva's sense of self. Eva's awareness of how a mother should feel and a sense of division, self-blame for failing to feel the way an ideal mother shall feel, causes ambivalence. From the beginning of her mothering, she was not able to deal with the child, or failed to be "the ideal" mother. Perhaps, Eva had difficulty regulating Kevin's emotions because she was dealing with her own emotions. Arnheim explains:

The experience of the present moment is never isolated. It is the most recent among an infinite number of sensory experiences that have occurred throughout the person's past life. Thus the new image gets into contact with the memory traces of shapes that have been perceived in the past. These traces of shapes interfere with each other on the basis of their similarity, and the new image cannot escape this influence.⁷⁷

The film also pays attention to the act of looking. This deconstruction of the act of looking, however, shows Eva guilty of her voyeuristic role, particularly when it comes to

⁷⁷ R Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, University of California Press, 1974, P.32.

understanding Kevin. She enters Kevin's room, touching and looking more closely. The camera prioritizes her sensorial connection to Kevin's space by showing us close ups of what seems to be Eva's point of view. By focusing on textures and surfaces, the film manages to evoke tactile sensations, especially in such a situation when the viewer is seeing through Eva's eyes. Eva also checks Kevin's drawers. She finds a CD which is clearly a secret of Kevin. She takes the CD and checks it. The lack of certainty is what makes her lose balance. Eva's space is soon shown as a distorted space. She is also alert to any noise or movements that can bring her back to multi-sensory mental images; Those always lead her back to Kevin. Through Kevin, Eva is doubled, so is he. In part, the film suggests that Kevin believes that he is not a decent human being because he cannot satisfy his mother. And in part, Eva takes the same attitude in terms of satisfying Kevin.

One of the most crucial scenes for me shows Eva looking satisfied with the design she has made in decorating her room. She has just finished gluing the last piece of a map on her wall, now covered with mementos from her work as a travel writer. Kevin as a young child enters, looks around and says: *"These ugly squares of paper. They are dump."* Eva replies: *"Everyone needs a room on their own. You have your room. This is mama's room."* The shot stays on Kevin's face. This allows the viewer to pay attention to his look, which might suggest some kind of dissatisfaction, perhaps in that she separated herself from him in some way. There are two of them; him and her. *"What do you mean special?"* - he asked. Eva replies: *"So it looks like your personality,"* Kevin goes further: *"What personality?"* Being a kid, Kevin might be thinking he has no personality at all, but Eva replies with *"You know what do I mean."* *"They're dumb"* - says Kevin, dismissive to the whole idea (of

personality?). Then a phone call makes Eva leave the room. There is a shot on Kevin's face, and, for the very first time, camera is alone with him. Kevin has a moment of thought that pays off with him destroying Eva's maps with his ink gun and putting his "own personality" on top of her design. Such a gesture might be interpreted, as Kevin's punishment to Eva for having made him feel the pain of not being "someone," a person with "strong" personality. Maybe it signals Kevin's need to become someone "special". This scene is a good example that in order to resonate meaning, the film depends on the viewer's sensibility, on his/her intuition and experience for completing the nuances given. For me, as a viewer, the look that Eva and Kevin share tells much more than any dialog could. It's a look that expands the narrative or even the establishing shot-technique and becomes something significant. Kevin has clearly learned to identify himself and understand his own potential, always through Eva, so he doubled, same as she.

Toward the end of the film, Eva comes to visit Kevin in the prison and asks: "*Why?*"; "*I used to think I knew*", Kevin replies, and for the first time there is a different look on his eye. "*Now, I'm not so sure.*" he says and then turn his eyes slightly away, hitting the lens of the camera. Like other Ramsay films, *We need to talk about Kevin* hasn't a clear closure. It is a film that depends on the viewer's sensation in order to close the cinematic experience. Having Kevin turn his eye and look at the lens of the camera, reminds me of Denzin saying: "cinema not only turns its audience into voyeurs, eagerly following the lives of its screen characters, but casts its key players as onlookers, spying on other's lives".⁷⁸ This then might remind us of Kevin's words "*What are people in the television looking at? People*

⁷⁸ N.K Denzin, *The cinematic society*. SAGE Publications, 1995. p.3

like me” and it seems like Ramsay has pushed the relationship between viewer and screen even more, allowing the viewer to participate closely to the production of the cinematic experience. Here, rather than have Kevin as the object of the gaze, his ‘looking’ engages the viewer in an intersubjective process; This might provoke the viewer to get closer in order to understand Eva’s traumatic experience.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Ramsay's Embodied Narrative

As described in the preceding analyses, Ramsay uses haptic techniques to invite the viewer into the characters' worlds. Through the narrative's flow, the main character takes the role of simulating the viewer to think, feel, and desire, according to an embodied narratology, which as Wojciehowski and Gallese suggest, takes place when "actions, emotions and sensations of others are mapped onto the observer's own sensory-motor."⁷⁹ Ramsay's main characters, James, Morvern, Eva, are somewhat expressionless in often holding blank faces or still responses to events around them. This could create difficulties for the viewer to recognize and understand their motives. However, the viewers' identification with the characters is not based on acting with facial expressions, but instead the narratives are built around observations that stimulate bodily identification.

In this sense, it is important to realize that narratives are always a product of the perceiver's narration-activity. "Narrative is (...) a global interpretation of changing data" (Branigan).⁸⁰ Likewise, Bordwell makes a very important distinction between internal and external conceptions of plot structure.⁸¹ And S.Kracauer wrote relatively early on about

⁷⁹ See the seminal article; Gallese and Guerra, *Embodying*, p.184

⁸⁰ Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. London: Routledge, 1992, p.4

⁸¹ See: Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*

cinema's 'resonance effect', including viewers' kinesthetic responses such as muscular reflexes and motor impulses.⁸² This bodily engagement is made even more possible because of Ramsay's lack of judgment towards her characters. The ambiguity and subtlety of her character's behavior opens the way to different interpretations and less judgments. Ramsay's narrative challenges a viewer who is used to the classical progression of stories, since her narrative is not a cause before consequence experience. Ramsay's narrative does not make the viewer geared toward an expectation that usually comes from pre-determined classical underlying schemas of narratives. Rather, the formal narrative construction is based on the viewer's own emerging ability to structure and format both real-life and mediated experiences. To be explicit, this aesthetic approach of cinema is not a closed and determined experience; Ramsay tends to leave the ending open, as if agreeing with the viewer to wrap his/her cinematic experience with what they have perceived.

Ramsay's narratives in the films discussed begin with the main character's response to a traumatic event and can be interpreted as ending with the characters making a decision related to the trauma. *Ratcatcher* begins with James witnessing his friend drown and ends up with the sequence of James drowning, intercut with his family moving to the new house. Is it a hallucination, a dream, or James has decided to kill himself? A viewer might interpret James as finally free from his trauma. *Morvern Caller* begins with Morvern waking up to the dead body of her boyfriend. In the end of the film, she decides to go on a journey. Is this a closure to her first journey or an extension of it? Is it back to Spain? Will she go as herself or in a new identity? She doesn't say "I am going back", she says "I am going away". A viewer

⁸² Kracauer 158, p.196

might interpret Morvern's departure as continued search for herself. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* begins with Eva's memory of finding her husband and daughter killed as she wakes to her vandalized home, smeared with red paint. By the film's end, Eva has repainted her home and a room in it to look like Kevin's old room, arranging his clothing and objects within it. Is she moving forward or moving back? A viewer might interpret Eva as being ready to live with who she is, to accept herself as mother to Kevin. There is something in Kevin's look from her final visit with him that the viewer is invited to pay close attention to. Ramsay has reversed the gaze: Kevin becomes the focus of 'looking'; rather than having the characters as the object of gaze, the 'looking' invites the viewer into an intersubjective process.

Ramsay's narratives become an invitation to the world of the character. Their worlds are traumatized worlds. Trauma is the organizing principle of the character's world and of the narrative itself. Trauma creates the difficulties and the obstacles for the characters, whose worlds have collapsed. The character then becomes immersed into a process of establishing a new relationship with their world through an ultimate character decision: In *Ratcatcher*, James might be leaving his world; In *Morvern Callar*, Morvern re-invents it and in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Eva accepts the traumatic event as part of who she is.

Haptic Sensuality in images and sound

The viewer's entry into the characters' traumatized world is made possible by their immersion into the multi-sensory activities of Ramsay's characters. Her characters are

engaged in seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. The emphasis on such activities is achieved through close-ups, of ears, hands, eyes and the way that the body is treated in her films. In Ramsay's films, the body is a fragmented one. The fragments of the body become multi-sensory metaphors, which turn eyes into hands, skin, lips, feet and arms into feelings. Sobchack notes how haptic perception challenges 'both the unity and security of the subject' through 'particular bodily signs that indexically point to and foreground the essential mystery of bodily being and nonbeing'⁸³. In Ramsay's work, this is then connected with the thematic concern, so the final result is a fragmented, disjointed body affected by the trauma.

Haptic sensuality is also achieved through choices related to cinematography. According to Marks, haptic perception results from closeness and the elimination of distance, while optic perception occurs with a distance which "allows the viewer to organize him/herself as an all-perceiving subject".⁸⁴ As a general rule, Ramsay resists making establishing shots and wide shots, rarely using the classical 'shot reverse shot' and she prioritizes instead shallow focus and the narrowing of the field of perception. Close-ups on surfaces and bodies make Ramsay an example of a haptic rather than optic viewing. In addition, her camera focuses on the open indeterminacy of the world's materiality through long takes on those moments of touch in which camera focuses on textures, temperatures and surfaces, aiming to describe how it feels to be exposed to those and to touch those. This is how her films manage to evoke tactile sensations. The viewer becomes even more engaged because of Ramsay's photographic eye, which chooses the most representative detail, inviting the viewer to

⁸³ Sobchack, 2004, p. 232

⁸⁴ Marks, 2000, p. 162

imagine the rest. In contrast to some films that tend to create such an immersion by focusing on paradoxical sensations (in which films visuality and tactility are either at odds with one another).

As previously noted in the thesis, Ramsay is often using this visual and tactile focus on objects of our everyday experience, and in such a way to undermine our knowledge about the world we live in. The viewer has a feeling of seeing something for the first time or at least closer than ever before, with a photographic eye that tends to challenge the angle of looking at the “common” things. This also gives Ramsay’s use of imagery a haptic sensuality.

In addition, Ramsay’s sound design is important for immersing the viewer into the cinematic experience in a sensorial way. By sometimes denaturalizing natural or environmental sounds, often mixing sounds from different sources, or using a sound that originates outside of the visual frame, Ramsay’s use of sound challenges the viewer to pay attention to it. As Laura Marks says, in haptic cinema, “sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to”.⁸⁵ We usually perceive sound as merely the accompaniment of an image, but Ramsay elevates sound to a position of equality with the images because, in her work, sound is not used to accompany an image but often to bring another dimension to the scenes. It is often more difficult to recognize or even organize an event through noise than through images. Ramsay’s sound design becomes more immersive for the viewer precisely because the

⁸⁵ Marks. 2000, p.183

listener is trying to figure out the source of the sound while his/her own bodily perception is being awakened by the very vibrations of the sound. Consider the distorted sound of the lawn sprinkler heard in the opening image of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, The viewer will only be able to identify the source of the sound later, if at all. But its intensity, resembling a hissing and a ticking that grows in intensity leaves an impression. In this way, and in keeping with the theories of Marks, Ramsay's cinema results in a haptic perception "that is not merely cognitive but acknowledges its location in the body".⁸⁶

Character as an *Erlebnis*-experience

We began with Benjamin's explanation of experience. We come to the conclusion that Ramsay's cinema comes closer to *Erlebnis*. This because Ramsay's stories are not based on that "cause and consequence"- effect; it is not an experience as knowledge-passed-on, instead Ramsay searches for ways to touch the emotion of her viewer and immerse them into their moments of experience. In her case then, the viewer's experience *is more Erlebnis* (which cannot be communicated; experiencing itself through the senses) rather than *Erfahrung* (storing experiences, making the architecture of the experience). In *The Storyteller* (1936): Benjamin describes storytelling to be , "... the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. Stories are retained when they are integrated in the listener's own experience; Experience as the sum of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*". But while Benjamin describes *Erfahrung* as constructive and integrative,

⁸⁶ Marks 2000, p.131–132.

Erlebnis is self-presence without self-possession. This experience appears to be intermittent, discontinuous, transitory. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, Benjamin describes the relationship between *Erlebnis* and its effects, especially shock. It seems then, that *Erlebnis* without *Erfahrung* is a state formerly associated with trauma. So, it seems fitting, in her films which deal with trauma, Ramsay prioritizes *Erlebnis*. Ramsay’s characters, James, Morvern and Eva, because of their traumatic events, cannot put their experience into discourse. It is then *Erlebnis* followed in the films (an experience prioritized in childhood); as the three characters start a journey of re-connecting with the world, understanding it without the construct of *Erfahrung*, because reason has collapsed. This “childhood” experience could be associated with the multi-sensorial quality that comes with the idea of seeing/hearing for the first time or seeing/hearing without the barrier or pre-constructed models. As my previous chapters have shown, Ramsay is very attentive to building each of these characters in a multi-sensorial way.

Ramsay’s cinema as intercultural / universal

Haptic cinema is universal because the viewer is engaged in creating the meanings. Works that are based on the idea of awakening sensations or memories only become complete when the viewer’s sensations are added. When addressing the issue that the embodied response to cinema is itself informed and organized by culture, Marks defends intercultural spectatorship as “[...] the meeting of two different sensoria, which may or may not intersect [...] an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge [...]”. The federating

agency of this "sensory translation" is visible on a socio-political level; transforming nameless identities, building social alliances, and organizing cultural coalitions...."⁸⁷. In other words, the spectator is able to adopt the identities and places as his/her own by sharing in the sensations which create the identities and places.

The analysis of the three feature films, *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Morvern Callar* (2002) and *We need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) prove that Ramsay is representative of such universality. Or better to say, the analysis of her cinema also provides an example of Ramsay's evolution towards the idea of an intercultural / universal cinema. Yes, *Ratcatcher* is a film which has connection to a particular place at a particular time- Glasgow during the garbage strike. But as described in the analysis above, the place is never mapped out and actually the orientation or geographic clarification of this place tends to be confusing for the spectator who becomes more immersed in the texture of the place than in its actuality. Even by the time she made *Ratcatcher*, Ramsay was departing from the Scottish Cinema, which aimed to represent life in Scotland. Then, with *Morvern Callar*, she avoids being connected or rooting her cinema to a specific space. She completely excludes her nationality. We never know exactly where the story is taking place. The place, as described in the film's analysis, becomes more a mental representation of the character and focuses on its haptic sensation. In the case of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Eva drives in streets which portray a domestic environment that could exist in any number of cities.

The trauma underlying the characters is not treated within any particular social laws or dependent on any particular society's reactions. James kills his friend but the society's

⁸⁷ Marks, 2000, p.153

laws do not even intervene into the death. Morvern doesn't kill her boyfriend, but assumes responsibility for the death when she dismembers the body and buries it. She also takes authorship of his book and in every case, no social laws intervene. With Eva, there is a society present at odds with her character, since she is depicted as an outcast, but her experience of guilt and trying to come to terms with her role as mother can be felt and understood beyond the boundaries of one particular culture. Ramsay's narratives, aesthetic choices and themes are treated from a personal and intimate lens. "For intercultural artists it is most valuable to think of the skin of the film not as a screen, but as a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory".⁸⁸ Memory achieves to awaken the sensations stored in the entire body. It is the body Ramsay cares about – the character's body and the viewer's body. The fact that language is diminished because her characters, James, Morvern and Eva are rather silent, perhaps as a mark of their trauma, adds to this universal dimension to Ramsay's cinema.

⁸⁸ Marks, 2000, P.243

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VII. FILMOGRAPHY

Ratcatcher (1999).

Written and Directed by Lynne Ramsay
Produced by Gavin Emerson
Cinematography by Alwain H.Küchler
Edited by Lucia Zuccheti

Morvern Callar (2002).

Written by Lynne Ramsay and Liana Dognini (based on a book by Alan Warner)
Directed by Lynne Ramsay.
Produced by George Faber and Charles Pattinson
Cinematography by Alwin H. Küchler
Edited by Lucia Zucchetti

We need to Talk about Kevin (2011).

Written by Lynne Ramsay and Rory Stewart Kinnear (based on a book by Lionel Shriver)
Directed by Lynne Ramsay.
Produced by Jennifer Fox, Luc Roeg and Robert Salerno
Cinematography by Seamus McGarvey
Edited by Joe Bini

VIII. APPENDIX: FILM AWARDS

Ratcatcher, 1999

Nominee, Un Certain Regard Award (Lynne Ramsay)
Winner, BAFTA Awards (Carl Foreman Award for the Most Promising Newcomer)
Winner, New Director's award, Edinburgh International Film Festival
Winner, VVFP Award, Village Voice Film Poll (Best Feature Film)
Winner, ALFS Award, London Critics Circle Film Awards (Best Director of the Year)
Nominee, Grand Prix, Ghent International Film Festival (Lynne Ramsay)
Winner, Douglas Hickox Award, British Independent Film Awards
Nominee, British Independent Film Awards (Best Screenplay)

Morvern Callar, 2002

Winner, BAFTA Scotland Award (Best actress)
Nominee, Grand Prix, Bratislava International Film Festival
Winner, British Independent Film Award, (Best Actress, Best Camera)
Winner, FIPRESCI Director of the Year, San Sebastián
Nominee, British Independent Film Award (Best Director, Best Screenplay)
Winner, Award of the Youth, Cannes Film Festival (Foreign Film)
Winner, C.I.C.A.E Award, Cannes Film Festival (Best Director)
Nominee, Gold Hugo, Chicago International Film Festival (Best Feature)

We need to talk about Kevin, 2011

Nominee, Palme d'Or
Nominee, BAFTA Awards (Best British Film, Award for Direction)
Winner, British Independent Film Award (Best Director)
Winner, Canvas Audience Award, Ghent Film Festival (Best Director)
Winner, London Film Festival (Best Film)
Winner, Jury Prize, Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (Best Director)
Winner, EDA Female Focus Award (Best Woman Director)
Winner, BOFCA Award (Best Director)
Nominee, Grand Prix (Best Film)
Nominee, AACTA International Award (Best Screenplay, Best Direction)
Nominee, EDA Female Focus Award (Best Screenplay, Best writing-adapting)

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