

‘A HATRED SO INTENSE...’¹. WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN. POSTFEMINISM AND WOMEN’S CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Lynne Ramsay’s 2011 film, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, in the context of what has been called the ‘new momism’, and in the light of key feminist debates about maternal representation, matriarchal genealogy, feminist cultural production, and classical and contemporary melodrama. The ‘new momism’, critics have argued, constitutes a postfeminist return to the idealized image of domestic femininity that dominated 1950s America. The difference is that intensive mothering is now seen to be the liberated woman’s enlightened choice, a claim that serves to mask the continued centrality of a gender dualism that determines both our institutional structures and our public fantasies. Arguing that Ramsay’s film should be seen as part of a feminist tradition of filmmaking which subjects to critical reappraisal both these public fantasies and the form of the maternal melodrama in which they are commonly embodied, the article analyses in detail the film’s exploration of issues of female identity, agency and control. Unlike her predecessors, it argues, Ramsay invites us to inhabit the fractured subjectivity, hate, and sense of guilt of the mother in this exploration. Although there is, as Ramsay has commented, no easy ‘redemption’ at the end of the film, its ending points us beyond the twin fantasies of postfeminist maternal masochism and unproblematic feminist agency and towards the possibility of a subjectivity which might accept rather than deny the uncontrollable messiness of maternal embodiment.

KEYWORDS

Postfeminism; ‘new momism’; counter cinema; maternal melodrama; maternal subjectivity

Children are an obsession in American movies ... The sacrifice of and for children — two sides of the same coin — is a disease passing for a national virtue.... Both of these transactions represent beautifully masked wish fulfillments, suggesting that the myth of obsession — the love lavished, the attention paid to children ... — is compensation for women’s guilt, for the deep inadmissible feelings of not wanting children, or not wanting them unreservedly, in the first place. (Haskell, 1987, pp. 168-170)

This description, first published in 1974, is of the ‘sacrifice’ film, which Molly Haskell sees as the paradigmatic form of the woman’s film of the 1930s and 40s. Haskell’s account of this ‘hatred so intense it must be disguised as love’ (Haskell, 1987, p. 169) is remarkable, not only because it runs counter to other feminist accounts of the subject

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positions into which the 'woman's film' draws its female viewers², but also because the active subject position that it insists on is that of the *mother*. Thirty-seven years later, at a time when an American 'new momism' or 'mommy mystique' has been seen not only as culturally dominant³ but as 'the central, justifying ideology of what has come to be termed "postfeminism"' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 24), such hatred is also the subject of Lynne Ramsay's 2011 film, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The 'new momism', writes Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, which purports to celebrate intensive mothering as the liberated woman's enlightened *choice*, in fact replaces subservience to a husband with subservience to the child (Karlyn, 2011, p. 3). Just as Ramsay's *Morvern Callar* (2002) deploys its intensely realized surreal sequences — sequences which 'stick inside you like shrapnel, like repressed thoughts' (Williams, 2002, p. 25) — to re-work, disturbingly, a postfeminist narrative of youthful female empowerment, so her most recent film, I argue, subjects to similar critical re-appraisal this latest postfeminist celebration of feminine fulfillment.

1. COUNTER-CINEMAS AND MAINSTREAM TRADITIONS

The figure of the mother preoccupied feminist filmmakers as well as feminist critics of the 1970s. Documentaries like *Joyce at 34* (Chopra & Weill, 1972) explored intergenerational relationships between women, and the maternal relationship is central to experimental films such as Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978) and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Akerman's film, argues Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, is crucial to feminist conceptions of a counter-cinema, constituting a key element in a counter-tradition of 'cinematic resistance' to identifications of femininity with domesticity and to the dominant narrative conventions through which these have been expressed. Like its cinematic 'ancestor', Germaine Dulac's *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (The Smiling Madame Beudet 1923), Akerman's film, she writes, is an exploration of 'the frozen perimeters of domestic space'. The protagonists of both films, middle-aged women who have become 'robots, monsters or both', experience an eruption of murderous rage which is the product of the 'stifling domesticity' within which their ordered bourgeois lives are contained (Flitterman-Lewis, 2003, pp. 27-28) [Figure 1 below].

We Need to Talk about Kevin, Ramsay's film adapted from Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel, needs, I argue, to be added to this matriarchal genealogy. *Jeanne Dielman...*, as Flitterman-Lewis writes, re-replaces the oppressive husband as representative patriarchal figure — the core of Dulac's earlier film — with the teenage son, whose taken-for-granted precedence, despite his marginal presence in the film, now defines the terms and limits of his mother's world. Ramsay's film goes further in placing the mother-son relationship — with all its contemporary as well as mythical resonances — at its centre. It does this, however, in a way that also represents a significant shift of focus. Akerman's film, like

² See in particular Mary Ann Doane (1989), who argues that female masochism functions as a substitute for female desire. See also Tania Modleski (1982), E. Ann Kaplan (1983) and Linda Williams (1984).

³ See Douglas and Michaels (2004), Warner (2006), Podnieks and O'Reilly (Eds.) (2010), Karlyn (2011). The term 'momism' was coined by Philip Wylie in *Generation of Vipers* (1942). "Mommy mystique" references Friedan's 'Feminine Mystique' (Friedan, 1963).

that of *Citron*, is a *daughter's* film, concerned to register both an ambivalent identification with the mother and directorial separation from her complicity with patriarchal norms and structures. Teresa de Lauretis has argued that there are 'two logics' at work in the film: 'character and director, image and camera'. The two can be equated, she writes, with femininity and feminism, with the former 'made representable by the critical work' of the latter (de Lauretis, 1989, p. 132). A similar argument is made by Janet Bergstrom, for whom the feminism of the film lies in its framing of the mother through a gaze which is unequivocally that of the daughter: on the one hand distanced and controlling but on the other obsessed and fascinated — an 'image of the old viewed actively, with fascination' (Bergstrom, 1977, p. 118). Akerman herself has said that its point of view is 'always me' (1977, p. 119). For de Lauretis and Bergstrom, as for other contemporary critics of the film⁴, subjectivity, agency and authorship are aligned with the position of daughter and constituted through the separation of her authorising gaze from the mother who remains its object.



Figure 1

This subject/object, daughter/mother split, as Kaja Silverman has pointed out (1988, p. 210), is not nearly as fully achieved in Akerman's film as is suggested by Bergstrom and de Lauretis — critics who are themselves clearly aligned with the ambivalences of her position. The obsessive self-control which is ruptured by Jeanne's unwitting experience of orgasm and the ensuing murder of her client — the central, disruptive event of the film — is paralleled by a rupturing of the film's formal 'purity', as Akerman herself has suggested⁵. Not only do we see the murder, but we see it through a complex series of mirrored shots which, as Flitterman-Lewis argues (2003, pp. 38-39), give us access to Jeanne's point of view, an access denied elsewhere. The feminist author, it seems, can not be so clearly distanced from her maternal other, from the 'monstrous' eruption of desire and rage, and from the excesses of narrative cinema, as Akerman's early critics wished to claim. But the desire for such a separation — and with it for what Silverman sees as a fantasy of 'unproblematic agency' for women (1988, p. 209) — is bound up

⁴ See for example Ruth Perlmutter (1979).

⁵ Akerman talks of 'certain people' who 'hate this murder and say, "You have to be more pure."' (1977, p. 120).

with a good many feminist attempts to assert female subjectivity, agency and authorship, whether in critical writing or in filmmaking⁶. It is a desire that is refused in Ramsay's film.

Feminist counter-cinema, of course, is not the only antecedent of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. I have already referred to the 'woman's film' or maternal melodrama, whose subject matter it echoes. In a suggestive essay Vivian Sobchack brings together discussion of this genre's successor, the American 'family melodrama' of the 1970s and 80s, with that of its obverse and complement, the child-centred horror film of the same period. In the 1970s, writes Sobchack, a period characterized by counter-cultural youth movements and apocalyptic cultural anxiety, the children of both genres were depicted as 'uncivilized, hostile, and powerful Others' who mocked and threatened 'the established values of dominant institutions' through 'unwarranted and irrational' eruptions of anger and violence (Sobchack, 1996, p. 150). By the end of a decade of second-wave feminist activity, however, the dynamic of the cinematic family had shifted: the child had become hero and victim in a family structure now threatened by a 'hard, strong and selfish' mother. In *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), a paradigmatic text in this shift, the mother's proclamation of her 'right to a life of [her] own' is expressed in the language of second wave feminism, the father has become vulnerable and maternal, and it is the (male) child who 'has the power to authorize the family, ... who denies or legitimates the particular family's existence as a viable structure' (Sobchack, 1996, pp. 154-155). Patriarchal rage at threats to its power has here given way, writes Sobchack, to an image of paternal vulnerability and helplessness, with the male child now the generic representative of (a benevolent and re-born) patriarchal law. This shift occurs, she argues, in response to a feminist challenge which forces a conceptual gap between patriarchy as political and economic power structure and paternity as personal and subjective relation. Mainstream cinema's response to this troubling disarticulation is to produce (feminist) mothers as cold and powerful figures who must re-learn maternal softness if they are to be redeemed, children/sons as wise innocents who must effect the re-normalisation of the bourgeois family, and the home as problematic and contested site.

In the films that Sobchack discusses the mother is a marginalized figure: their focus is on relations between patriarchy and paternity, and between father and son. If their narratives suggest 'a crisis of belief in the Oedipal model' (Sobchack, 1996, p. 156), then they are primarily concerned to reinstate that model. Thirty years later, the elements that Sobchack sees as expressions of bourgeois America's 'political unconscious'⁷ have become the subject matter of Ramsay's film, but it is the mother's subjectivity through which they are explored. Eva's obsessive sense of order and desire for control, the stifling and 'frozen' quality of the domestic space which characterises the house that 'seem[s] like a set'⁸, the distancing effect of much of the film's framing all recall the feminist inheritance of Akerman's film, as do the recurring mirror shots of the female protagonist

⁶ For more detailed discussion of issues around female authorship and filmmaking, see my *What if I Had Been the Hero?* (2012).

⁷ Sobchack 1996, p. 160. The reference is to Fredric Jameson's *The political unconscious: narrative as socially symbolic act* (1983).

⁸ Ramsay's comment, quoted in *Sight & Sound*, 21(11), 18.

— central also to Dulac's *Madame Beudet*. But the mirror shot is also central to the mainstream maternal melodrama: *Madame Beudet's* gaze at her reflection in the triple mirror of her dressing table is echoed in *Stella Dallas* fourteen years later, and in its many successors [Figure 2 below]. Similarly, if Ramsay's *Kevin* is the successor to Akerman's *Sylvain*, then with his violence, mockery of parental authority and unreadable self-possession he is also and far more obviously successor to both the monstrous children of 1970s horror⁹ and, in an ironic gesture, to the wise innocents that succeeded them.

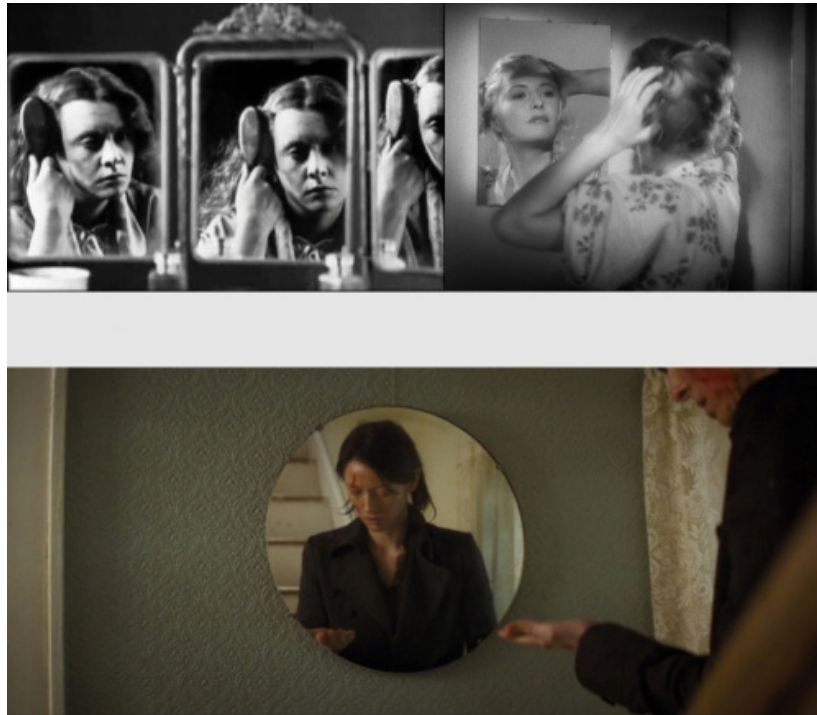


Figure 2

2. 'WE AIN'T THE 1950s ANYMORE'

Interviewed for the DVD of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, actor John C. Reilly (Franklin), seeking to signal changes within the American nuclear family, settles for a stumbling, 'There's a lot changing in our world, and we ain't the fifties anymore, you know what I mean'. Whilst Reilly's comment refers us back to a time of imagined familial stability and gender certainty, a very different referencing of the 1950s has been made by critics of the 'new momism' which emerged in the America of the 1990s. For Douglas and Michaels, this 'retro version of motherhood' is the contemporary version of Friedan's 'feminine mystique', the idealized image of domestic femininity that for Friedan dominated 1950s America. What is different, however, is the postfeminist notion of *choice*. The logic, they write, goes as follows: 'Feminism won; you can have it all; of course you want children; mothers are better at raising children than fathers; of course your children come first; ...

⁹ Interviewed for the 2012 DVD release of the film (*Artificial Eye*), Ezra Miller (*Kevin*) commented uneasily, 'This isn't *The Omen*'. References to *The Omen* (1976) and to *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) can be found in many of the reviews of the film.

today's children need constant attention and cultivation, or they'll become failures and hate you forever....; and whoops — here we are in 1954' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, pp. 5, 25). In such a scenario, whilst feminism *cannot* be returned to, since 'we are, and will be forever more, in a post feminist age' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 24), this 'retromomism' encounters no such barriers since it acknowledges the gains of feminism and is freely chosen.

One outcome of this emphasis on 'intensive mothering' as choice is, as Andrea O'Reilly (2010) has written, an extraordinary explosion of 'mommy memoirs'. An Amazon search reveals titles ranging from the *Joys of... variety* to *Surviving the Shattered Dreams*, *The Madness of Motherhood*, *Strategies for Coping...*, *The Guilt that Keeps on Giving*, and from self-help books to 'stories of reluctant motherhood' and reflections on the difficulties of reconciling career and maternity. Most are first person narratives cataloguing the difficulties and disappointments but ultimately the redemptive power of motherhood. Three themes, argues O'Reilly, are central to the genre's ideological stance: first, that 'mothering is *natural* to women and essential to their being'; second, that 'the mother is to be the central caregiver of her biological children'; and finally that 'children require full-time mothering' (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 206). Thus whilst motherhood is given a public voice in these memoirs that so often catalogue the impossibilities of its demands, their framing by the 'new momism' limits what that voice can say. The genre 'remains one of complaint and not change'. Despite its claims to speak for a new maternal *subject*, it remains trapped within a discourse that 'naturalizes and normalizes' the very conditions against which it protests (O'Reilly, 2010, pp. 212, 205).

Underlying the power of these discursive constraints is a more deep-rooted conceptual opposition between motherhood and agency or subjecthood. Marianne Hirsch, among others, points to the way in which in psychoanalytic theories of the subject, the mother 'exists only in relation to her child... She cannot be the subject of her own discourse' (Hirsch, 1992, p. 252). Luce Irigaray (1985) and Michèle le Doeuff (2002) have extended this argument, arguing that Western philosophical discourse as a whole is constituted upon exclusion of, and opposition to, the female (maternal) body. The problem, in each case, is the *embodied quality* of maternity. In Julia Kristeva's description:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up and slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." (Kristeva, 1980, p. 237)

For Kristeva, who writes within the psychoanalytic tradition that Hirsch critiques, this is 'Mother-hood's impossible syllogism' (1980, p. 237), placing mothers always on the side of the non-symbolic, 'more of a *filter* than anyone else — a thoroughfare, a threshold where "nature" confronts "culture"' (Kristeva, 1980, p. 238). Like Simone de Beauvoir, whose feminism is always that of the daughter, Kristeva sees the maternal body as inimical to subjectivity. As subject, writes de Beauvoir, woman feels herself to be a

stranger in a body which is 'absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous' (Beauvoir, 1988, p. 286, 407). This maternal body, as it is for Kristeva, is the stuff of horror.

Other feminist theorists, however, have argued differently. Jane Gallop, advocating a feminist 'thinking through the body', argues that it is the 'mind-body split' of Western philosophical tradition that 'makes the mother into an inhuman monster' by separating the realm of culture and history from that of embodied motherhood (Gallop, 1988, p. 2). Christine Battersby, drawing on Irigaray¹⁰, similarly calls for a 'fleshy metaphysics' and a model of subjectivity which would take the *female* rather than the male subject as norm. Such a move would involve accepting that in Western philosophy and culture the identification of female identity with embodiment inevitably allies it also with 'the anomalous, the monstrous, the inconsistent and the paradoxical'. But, she argues, this identification should be embraced not rejected. In insisting that identity is *always* embodied, it 'allows us to think identity otherwise'. The subject that is thus constructed is neither free and autonomous nor simply passive. Instead it is fluid, transformed over time and through relationships, both shaped by others and 'self-shaping' (Battersby, 1998, pp. 11, 12).

A subjectivity which is maternally embodied — or which permits always the *possibility* of maternity — is not only irreconcilable with traditional philosophical conceptions of the free and autonomous subject, however. It is also very difficult to reconcile with the self-fashioning mobility which has been seen to characterize both the individualized subject of neo-liberal late modernity (Bauman, 2001), and its 'nomadic' feminist counterpart (Braidotti, 1994)¹¹. Recent meta-narratives of social transformation have suggested that historical shifts in modernity have produced new and expanded opportunities for women, so that young women now can, and indeed must, plan 'a life of one's own' in place of the 'living for others' that traditionally circumscribed women's lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 75). Yet, as a number of feminist critics have argued (McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2008), this self-fashioning individualised female subject who is thus identified with 'capacity, success, attainment, entitlement, social mobility and participation' (McRobbie, 2009, p. 57) is a *girl*, or at the least a pre- or non-maternal woman. As a result, one effect of such narratives is to reinscribe the distinction between selfhood and (maternal) female embodiment: as individualised subjects women are urged to mobility and self-definition; as *mothers* they are re-embodied and returned to place. Women, as Patrice DiQuinzio argues, 'can be subjects of agency and entitlement only to the extent that they are not mothers, and [...] mothers as such cannot be subjects of individualist agency and entitlement' (1999, p. 13). It seems, as Elizabeth Reid Boyd (2005) suggests, that this apparent division between women masks a far more powerful conceptual dualism: that between male and female. In a dualistic framework in which men are defined as subjects and/be-cause they are not-mothers and women are defined as

¹⁰ Battersby (1998, p. 7) acknowledges a number of precursors: in addition to Irigaray, Adorno, Deleuze, Butler and, more surprisingly, Kierkegaard.

¹¹ Although Braidotti herself insists that her feminist 'nomadic subject' is an 'embodied subject' (1994, p. 199), her concept of a constantly shifting, 'transitory' subject freed from 'the illusion of ontological foundations' (1994, p. 35) seems irreconcilable with a maternal subject.

mothers, she argues, the gendered dualisms that follow — between mind/body, culture/nature, public/private and so on — remain fundamentally undisturbed, despite their apparent displacement onto conflicts between or even within women. From this perspective, the newfound mobility and individualisation of the young female subject will always be precarious in its temporal boundedness — a sort of ‘restless ... transvestite’ fantasy, to borrow Laura Mulvey’s words (1989, p. 37). The (white Western) female subject who becomes a mother, meanwhile, finds herself in a culture which insists on her capacity for individualised choice even as it demonstrates its impossibility.

3. EVA AND SON

A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships. (Freud, 1973/1932, p. 168)

In the world of Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* the separation of which Sobchack writes, between paternity as personal and subjective relation and the political and economic power structures of patriarchy, seems complete. It is Franklin who asks plaintively when Eva is coming home, who holds the newborn Kevin, talks babytalk to him, and attends to his needs during the night. Eva, in contrast, has a public presence and image. It is Eva, too, who makes decisions about conception as she does about travel; both are adventures of the body, undertaken as a matter of choice. The film’s fragmented, flashback structure, however, frames these choices always in relation to their limitations and to their aftermath, which sometimes inverts and sometimes mimics them to parodic effect. The limitations are depicted through the film’s emphasis on institutional spaces. In the vast, white, symmetrically framed corridors of the recreation centre, the hospital, the supermarket and the prison Eva’s agency is removed: she is a pregnant body among others, surrounded by the identically dressed little girls who prefigure the motherhood to come; and she is a mother standing or sitting in line, awaiting the decisions of others. Once a mother, she can no longer insist on staying in New York, and the ‘castle’ (Franklin’s words) in the suburbs to which she is removed is filmed with the same wide lens and emphasis on symmetry: it, too, is vast, ordered, white, and, as Ramsay said, ‘like a set’. With a reference to Woolf (‘Everybody needs a room of their own’), Eva constructs within it a private space papered with maps and decorated with exotic masks, only to find it not simply invaded but vandalised by Kevin, its fantasy of other places permanently disfigured and smeared with paint. In more direct inversions and references, the red-saturated *jouissance* of Valencia’s La Tomatina festival, which is the film’s first flashback, is replaced first by the jam with which Kevin smears his sandwiches and then by the regimented tins of tomato soup behind which Eva takes refuge in the supermarket. The images which line the office of Eva’s travel writing firm, meanwhile, with their promise of ‘Escape’¹² into the exoticism of Thailand and Vietnam, are replaced by the cheaper,

¹² Escape is the name of Eva’s travel writing company.

mass-produced posters in the downmarket travel agency, Travel R Us, in which she now finds a low-grade job.

This structure of ironic echoes and inversions frames Eva's choices. Franklin's genial paternalism, despite its overt refusal of authority, is rendered powerful by the structures that support it, and its careful separation of ordered suburban 'castle' from the disorder of the outside world masks a refusal to recognize the violence which is inside the home. That this is a specifically *American* hypocrisy is made clear when Kevin enters the school sports hall that will be the scene of his mass slaughter. As he pushes open the double doors we are faced by twin signs exhorting 'Pride' and 'Focus', the latter defined as 'Concentration of the mind such that *nothing* distracts you from your task'. Between them, exemplifying these virtues, is the image of a face which could be Kevin's. Later, inside the hall, he turns to face the US flag and bows, then stretches wide his arms as the lighting, with its red and blue horizontal bars against the white of the hall, reminds us that the film's dominant colours of red and white, so often contrasted in the film, together make up the American flag.

The violence at the heart of Kevin's perfectly controlled performance of these all-American values in the slaughter of his classmates is also seen elsewhere in the film. It is there, grotesquely, in the clown faces 'straight out of a horror film' (McGill, 2011, p. 18) on the office walls of the paediatrician to whom Eva takes Kevin; it is there in the Halloween costumes and demands for 'trick or treat' of the children who menace Eva on her return from work, their hostility intercut with instances of Kevin's own childhood anger; and it is there in the Robin Hood story ('Again he shot and again he smote the arrow close beside the centre') and the videogames with which Eva and Franklin seek to establish 'normal' parental closeness with their son. It is also there, menacingly, in the response of Eva's co-worker Colin, when she rejects his advances amidst the forced jollity and drunken detritus of the office Christmas party. This is a society whose institutions, with their order, controlled cleanliness and enforced optimism, both control and deny the disorder and dirt of bodies, with a resulting violence that is barely repressed. In the fractured narrative of the film's present Eva will spend the whole of the film trying to remove all traces of red from the white surface of her new home. The red, of course, will return, inside the house as well as on its walls and windows.

Eva's own 'nomadism', as a number of commentators on Shriver's novel have pointed out¹³, is as much a product of American values as Franklin's buddy-ism and Kevin's ironic gesture to the US flag. Her first flashback is to the ecstasy of La Tomatina, where bodies fill the screen: plural, viscous and grub-like, smeared with the red pulp into which Eva is lowered in a gesture of total surrender [Figure 3 below]. This is a *jouissance* which is also abjection, recalling the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human, bodies and organic waste which is the stuff of horror¹⁴. In Kristeva's description

¹³ See Evans (2009), Jeremiah (2010), and Gambaudo (2011). Evans reads Shriver's Kevin as 'a metaphor for the contemporary US, a country literally unable to "behave"' (2009, p. 148).

¹⁴ It recalls, for example, the equally ambiguous gesture of a resurrected Ripley sinking into the moist, absorbing body of the alien in *Alien Resurrection* (1997).

(1982, pp. 8-9): 'The clean and proper ... becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame. ... one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion'. For Eva, however, the scene is safely *elsewhere*, part of the 'Legendary Adventures' of 'Escape' of which she is the acclaimed writer. The affluent, ordered offices of Eva's travel writing company, with their posters offering fantasies of exotic indulgence, remind us that this adventure in mobility and choice is in fact an imperial one, whose success depends on the turning of embodied excess into a commodity which can be bought and experienced — always elsewhere — by the rational Western subject¹⁵. It is a project which is already corrupt before its degradation into its tawdry successor in Eva's life, Travel R Us¹⁶.



Figure 3

In Ramsay's film, however, the La Tomatina scene is not, or not simply, an encounter by the self with the exotic and feminised other. It is the first instance of an intensity which repeatedly splinters the film's realist surface: dreamlike, incorporating both corporeal fragments and intense light, but insistently present. The flashback occurs immediately after the film's opening sequence and forms a counterpoint to it. In this sequence the camera, following what we later find to be Eva's point of view, approaches the billowing, semi-sheer white curtains which form a growing point of light against the surrounding darkness. As we get closer, however, we do not see *through* the curtains; instead we become conscious of their texture until they become simply whiteness and we see only the dazzlingly bright screen itself.

The camera, then, draws us to the window but bars our access to the scene of horror beyond, replacing it first with the screen and then with the memory of La Tomatina. The edit serves to parallel the two scenes, of ecstasy and familial murder, and to add to the undertone of horror in the former. Within Franklin's suburban 'castle' Eva will try to recreate her exotic memories of 'other-ness' in the maps and masks which cover the walls of her study, but when Kevin smears and splatters them with paint she does not redecorate.

¹⁵ For the history of this theme in Western writing see Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (1995).

¹⁶ Even here we see a hierarchy of privilege. The cleaner who silently compels Eva to leave the office when she is working late is clearly an immigrant worker, excluded from the promises of Travel R Us.

As in the brief scene where we see her, after the ecstasy of the La Tomatina festival, now simply dirty and alone in an alien street among fellow tourists, turning to camera as if bewildered and lost, Eva's separation of order from the exoticised ecstasy of disorder is never quite secure, the violence produced by such splitting never quite re-pressed.

Eva enters pregnancy, too, in a spirit of controlled adventure¹⁷. The moment of conception is chosen and noted precisely: 12:01. Yet what Ramsay's camera then shows us is the alien stickiness of cells dividing and reproducing, in another image that insists on the disorder, the uncontrollability and the strangeness of the embodied. The moment of childbirth is similarly doubled: if the final shot is a wide-angled shot of a perfectly ordered institutional cell, in which Eva sits isolated from baby and husband, the scene of childbirth that precedes it is shot through the distorting mirror of the huge hospital light, so that, in an echo of earlier horror films, Eva is reduced to a melting, misshapen eye and a mouth that screams [Figure 4 below]¹⁸. This scene in turn follows in continuous sound that of a prisoner screaming as he is restrained.

In the scenes of Kevin's infancy and childhood that follow, Eva's resistance to absorption into motherhood is depicted as discomfort with the body. From the repeated instructions of the mid- wife during childbirth — '*Stop resisting, Eva*' — to Eva's sidelong glances of dislike at the bodies that surround her in a pregnancy class, and thence to her insistence on maintaining distance from Kevin's body and actions, Eva's constant effort is to recover control through discipline and training. In a reversal of conventional gender assumptions, it is Kevin who represents the anarchic excesses of the body, from the alien viscosity of his conception to the food and faeces which he smears, throws and expels, and later to the discomfiting sexuality which he displays in front of Eva. Kevin denies her control, refusing her transformation of the unknown into an exercise of mapping, of motherhood into a teaching relationship. Instead, his behaviour insists on the messiness of the body, on the fleshy, the organic, the abject — and insists that Eva recognize this, together with her own rage and fear at her entrapment. It is an embodiment that always threatens violence, and that draws a complicit violence from Eva. In contrast, Kevin's sister Celia is the image of compliant girlhood, her father's 'princess'; only her red shoes and the disconcertingly aggressive games that she plays with her soft toys and pet guinea pig¹⁹ suggest that this feminine compliance is bought at the cost of a repression which might mirror Eva's own.

¹⁷ In Shriver's novel, Eva comments, 'Motherhood, ... Now that is a foreign country' (2003, p. 22).

¹⁸ In Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) the female victims are forced to gaze at their distorted images in the camera's mirror.

¹⁹ She dresses the guinea pig as Robin Hood in an echo of Kevin's violent fantasies.

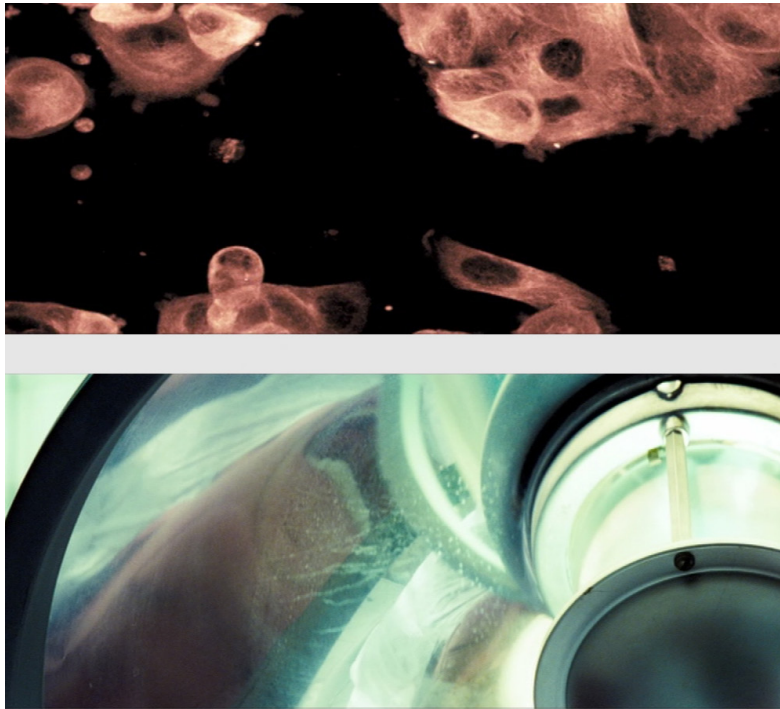


Figure 4

4. MONSTROUS DOUBLING

Eva's apparent recovery of control during Kevin's adolescence is marked both by Kevin's own acquisition of a sense of order that parallels Eva's own and by her return to work. Eva is a travel writer, and it is the split between motherhood and *writing* which, or many feminist critics, most starkly figures the conceptual difficulties in imagining a maternal subject. Whilst Eva's own professional writing simply maintains the split — her books are 'legendary adventures' of 'escape' — the dualities and difficulties that can be worked through textually in the novel are in Ramsay's film rendered in cinematic terms. The wide frame, the symmetry of the sets and square-on distancing of the framing, the emphasis on the frames of windows, mirrors and doors all make us conscious of the cinematic screen. But as we saw from the opening sequence, this is a screen which has a material presence and texture. In disorientating fragments, the visceral and the intensely detailed repeatedly fill it in close-up: the ants that crawl over Kevin's discarded sandwich, the fragments of eggshell that Eva picks out of her mouth, the fingernails that Kevin bites off and lays out. As Kevin fingers his scar or squelches the lychee in his mouth we are repeatedly reminded of the uncontrollable otherness of the body. Most of all, there is constant slippage between the two sets of images, between transparency and texture, and between image and sound. There is also, of course, slippage between Eva and Kevin. From the moment at the start of the film when Eva lowers her face into water and, as she shakes her head beneath the surface, it becomes Kevin's, the two are constantly doubled, their faces alternately paralleled and sliding together and then apart [Figure 5 below]. In this early sequence, as Eva lifts her head from the water she wipes her face and stares

into a mirror, as if willing separation from her monstrous double. Later, as she gazes in fascination at the television screen on which Kevin is 'explaining' his crimes, the reflection of her face is half superimposed on his, dissolving into his more dominant features.

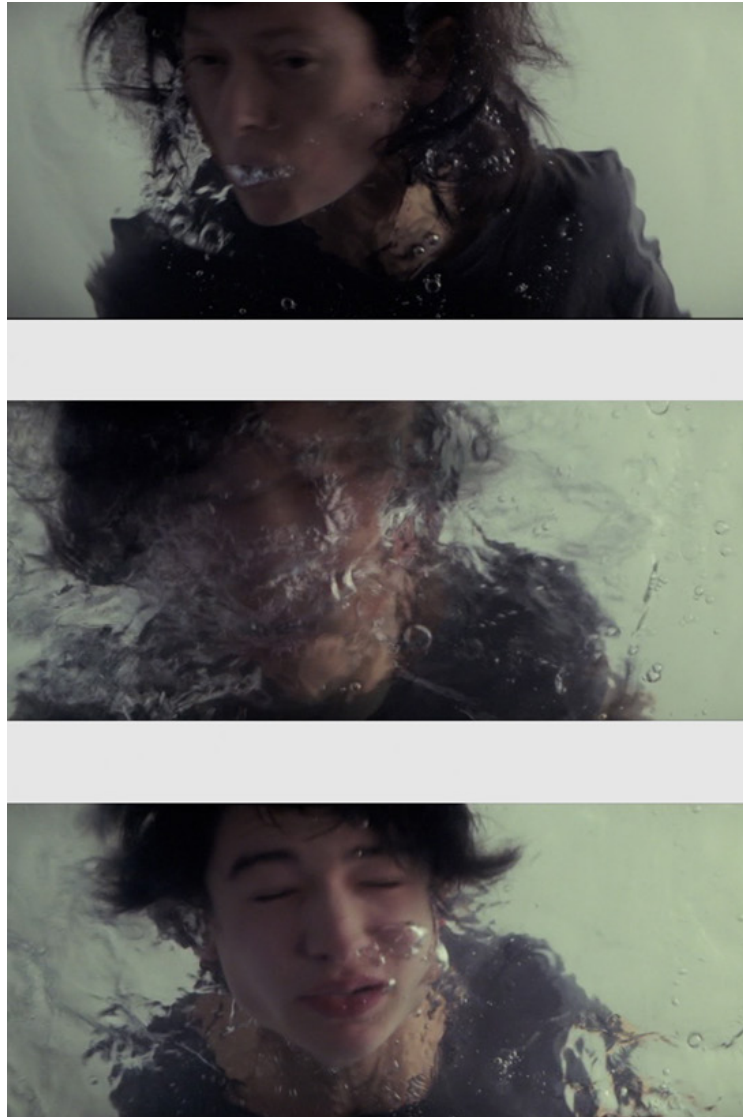


Figure 5

The idea of the child as monstrous double of the mother is one that has been explored in two very different places: in feminist writing and in the horror film. Adrienne Rich writes of 'the dread of giving birth to monsters' (1977, p. 164) and Phyllis Chesler calls her unborn child 'my monster, my-self', wondering 'What if you're born ... with my anger, my excesses?' (1998, pp. 36, 101). For Rich, such anxieties are the product of patriarchal associations of childbirth with evil and the resulting internalised feelings of guilt — she points to the prevalence across cultures of notions of the female body as 'unclean, and as the embodiment of guilt' (Rich, 1977, p. 164). She also points to women's repressed anger at the death of self which accompanies motherhood, quoting the following diary extract from Elizabeth Mann Borgese's *Ascent of Woman*:

My face in the mirror looked alien to me. My character blurred. Childish violent desires, unknown to me, came over me, and childish violent dislikes. I am a coldly logical thinker, but ... my reasoning blurred and dissolved... I was one and the other at once. It stirred inside of me. Could I control its movements with my will? Sometimes I thought I could, at other times I realized it was beyond my control. I couldn't control anything. I was not myself. And not for a brief passing moment of rapture, which men, too, may experience ... Then it was born. I heard it scream with a voice that was no longer mine. (Borgese, 1963, p. 45)

Lucy Fischer draws upon such accounts in her analysis of Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). She argues that the film acts as a 'skewed "documentary"' for its age, recording not only patriarchal horror at the maternal body and the birth process but also, and against the grain of much feminist writing of the time, 'women's private experience of pregnancy' (Fischer, 1968, p. 415). As applied to Polanski's film this seems to me to be a questionable argument, yet it is clear that the sense of maternal splitting and alienation that in the horror film generates the monstrous child has also been a key but repressed part of women's experience of maternity.

That Eva's experience so precisely mirrors the autobiographical account quoted above, written at least fifty years earlier, suggests again how far the post-feminist insistence on 'intensive mothering' as chosen masks a continuing split between individualized subject and embodied maternity. Yet Ramsay's vision also differs profoundly both from these autobiographical accounts and from horror films like *Rosemary's Baby*, for its engagement with intensely realized but disturbing sensory experience is not simply localized in Eva. As with Ramsay's earlier films, both it and the elusive texture of brightness to which Eva is also drawn are features of the world portrayed in all its everydayness, from the ants that crawl over the discarded sandwich and the cigarette stubbed out in a Christmas cake to the texture of human nails and scar tissue. Like Eva, we must learn to see both not as elsewhere but as *here*.

5. MEMORY TEXTS AND OEDIPUS

The memory text is typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, 'snapshots', flashes.... All this produces a sense of synchrony, as if remembered events are somehow pulled out of a linear time-frame, or refuse to be anchored in real historical time. Memory texts are metaphorical rather than analogical: as such, they have more in common with poetry than with classical narrative. (Kuhn, 2000, p. 190)

Annette Kuhn's description of the formal properties of the 'memory text' is one she also applies to certain films. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is not precisely such a text; as Tim Robey's review of the film states, Eva's flashbacks are not consciously invoked memories, but rather 'happen to her out of the blue' (Robey, 2011, p. 79). Time slips,

slides and collides, the sense of dislocation increased by the way in which sound may be clear or distorted, and may run on, precede or be superimposed onto quite different and temporally distant events. That this is Eva's perspective, however, is clear from the film's opening, when the camera adopts its point of view shot in the approach to what becomes a sheer white screen on which memories can be replayed. At the end of the film, when the sequence is repeated, Eva's identity as the author of that point of view is confirmed. If, however, the film, as in Kuhn's description, offers a 'montage of vignettes, ... fragments', "snapshots", it is also, as with the memory text, 'wrought into a "telling" that is by its nature linear, syntagmatic' (Kuhn, 2000, p. 190). It is driven, until its final sequences, by Eva's drive to restore order, to cleanse the white walls of her home of all traces of red, to separate the screen, with its play of logical cause and effect, innocence and guilt — a logic which is also the stuff of fairytale — from the sensory disorder of lived experience.

'All narrative', writes Teresa de Lauretis, 'in its movement forward toward resolution and backward to an initial moment, a paradise lost, is overlaid with what has been called an Oedipal logic – the... quest for (self) knowledge through the realization of loss, to the making good of Oedipus' sight and the restoration of vision' (de Lauretis, 1984, pp. 125-126). It is a formulation which Rita Felski has more recently disputed, seeing in it an essentialising of what is really simply a matter of historical male dominance. Plots are not, she writes, doomed to follow Oedipus, confining women to passivity and subordination. For women, a plot 'may be a playground as well as a prison-house' (Felski, 2003, p. 106). Felski, I think, misreads de Lauretis' argument in seeing it as essentialist: Ramsay's film shows us just what a playground might be made of the Oedipal story itself, even whilst noting its cultural dominance. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* replays the Oedipal story — the son's usurpation and murder of the father, the disturbingly sexual overtones in the relationship between son and mother — but from the mother's perspective. This is Eva's story: Franklin is a peripheral figure and Kevin unknowable, narratively important, despite his cultural centrality, only insofar as he mirrors and impacts on Eva herself. It is Eva who investigates, who 'unveils', as Kristeva (1982, p. 83) describes Oedipus as doing, the corporeal 'defilement' that lies on the 'other side' of familial normality. When towards the end of the film, however, we finally step with her beyond the curtain to see the bodies of Celia and Franklin lying pierced with arrows on the lawn, the scene suggests the dangerous absurdity of the dominant cultural narratives with which we make sense of our lives. Celia remains her father's 'princess', still prettily dressed; Franklin, however, is both the fallen hero of myth and, wearing only a white towel round his waist, stripped to an absurd, infant-like nakedness. As Eva steps beyond the doorway, the sinister whirring which has accompanied the repeated sequence of her approach to the curtains is revealed to be the sound of the garden sprinkler system, which now bursts into celebratory life, to form decorative fountains behind the bodies. Unlike the female investigators of the 'paranoid sub-group' of the woman's film described by Mary Ann Doane (1988, p. 137), what Eva confronts on the other side of the door is not 'an aspect of herself', the other side of 'Janus-faced' woman (Kristeva, 1982, p. 85). Instead, it is a realization not

only of loss but also of the horror and absurdity at the heart of the narratives within which such losses are usually framed.

Writing about the ending of Shriver's novel, Sylvie Gambaudo expresses disappointment. It is, she writes, 'unclear whether it is Kevin or [Eva] who is punished for his crimes'. As she prepares a room in preparation for Kevin's release from prison, Eva 'leaves us with no hope to ever reconcile woman's split status', becoming 'the quintessential self-effacing mother who patiently awaits the return of the prodigal son'. 'Woman', it seems, 'has to choose between motherhood and empowerment, as if the two could not co-exist' (Gambaudo, 2011, pp. 167-168). At the end of Ramsay's film, too, Kevin's room has been decorated by Eva as a replica of his childhood bedroom, and the white house has been cleaned. A kind of unseeing order, an imaginary 'paradise lost', has, it seems, been restored, and Eva pauses briefly to contemplate it. Yet the film's fractured 'snapshots' do not allow it to end here. Towards the film's close there is a repeat of the sequence in which Eva lowers her face into water, with the camera positioned below the surface. This time, however, her face does not merge with Kevin's; he remains separate, resentful, flicking at the surface of the water into which she has removed herself. In her final prison visit the two are no longer mirrored; his head shaved, Kevin now seems both older and more childishly vulnerable. As the two look at each other and Eva asks for the first time, 'Why?', it is clear that Kevin is lost, bewildered and afraid. He no longer 'knows' why he committed the murders, and this, it seems, might be the beginning of responsibility. The hug that follows is awkward, but it seems, too, a recognition of both connectedness and difference. It follows an earlier physical contact in this final prison visit, where Eva reaches out to touch a distressed young black woman who waits with her, in a gesture that suggests a new capacity for disinterested empathy. As Eva leaves the prison, walking towards another doorway that is an expanding patch of sheer white light, the nuclear family, with its ritualised relationships, repressions, blurrings of identity and underlying violence, is broken. Eva's embrace of Kevin seems at once to insist on the maternal relation and a shared responsibility and to recognize Kevin's otherness, the separation of his body *and* actions from her own. Her final movement, however, is solitary, a movement outwards towards the future which, whilst it continues to insist on the in-escapability of connection and responsibility for the maternal subject, nevertheless seems an affirmation of both subjectivity and agency [Figure 6 below].



Figure 6

6. CONCLUSION: THE GREAT DIVIDE?

The mother hates her infant from the word go.... If, for fear of what she may do, she cannot hate appropriately, when hurt by her child she must fall back on masochism, and I think that gives rise to the false theory of a natural masochism in women. (Winnicott, 1984, pp. 201-202)

Reflecting on her 1970s conscious-raising group, Ann Snitow comments, 'We used to agree in those meetings that motherhood was the divide: Before it, you could pretend you were just like everyone else; afterward, you were a species apart – invisible and despised' (1990, p. 32). The tell-tale phrase here is 'everyone else', with its assumed masculinity: the feminist conflict that Snitow describes is between a desire for an identity not overdetermined by gender — a desire, in effect, not to be a woman — and a desire to construct solidarity around an embodied female experience. Forty years on, that 'everyone else' has been feminized: the 'female individualisation' which characterizes the contemporary moment means that (white Western) women, too, can, in Angela McRobbie's words, 'choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a life-plan. They must

become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives' (2009, p. 19). The divide of which Snitow writes, however, not only remains but is now intensified. Maternity — the other side of the divide — retains its identification with place and the body. That the identities 'not-mother' or 'mother' have now been *freely chosen* serves simply to mask the continued centrality of a gender dualism which determines both our institutional structures and our public fantasies.

Addressing this context, Ramsay's film refuses a closure which would insist on Eva's 'empowerment', as Gambaudo seems to desire. Her early self-fashioning 'nomadism' is an imperial adventure, as much a splitting off of bodily ecstasy from the self that will plan, map and write these adventures as the nineteenth century tales of masculine exploration which preceded it. In the 'adventure' in intensive mothering which follows, such splitting is no longer possible. Kevin, her monstrous double, demands an acknowledgement of the unruly body *within* the ordered domain of the white American suburban home. Like Winnicott's mother — the product of another era (the late 1940s) that saw women being urged back into the home — Eva responds with alternating hate and masochism.

It is a response that recalls Eva's predecessors — the repressed middle-aged protagonists of Akerman's and Dulac's films. Unlike Akerman, however, Ramsay does not allow us the distance — and the optimism — of the daughter's perspective. Instead, it is Eva's fractured subjectivity, hate, and sense of guilt that we inhabit. As Ramsay has commented, there is no easy 'redemption' at the end of the film (O'Hagan, 2011). I would argue, however, that in Eva's final realisation of both the inescapability of her relationship — however ambivalent — with Kevin and his separateness from her, the film's ending points us beyond the twin fantasies of postfeminist maternal masochism and unproblematic feminist agency and towards the possibility of a subjectivity which might accept rather than deny the uncontrollable messiness of embodiment.

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