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Trouble on Screen

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David Roche

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 In terms of subject matter at least, circumscribing the cohesion of one of Great Britain's most important contemporary directors, Lynne Ramsay, was certainly an easier task after the release of the 2002 *Morvern Callar* than after that of her subsequent films, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2010) and *You Were Never Really Here* (2017). Like her early short films *Small Deaths* (1996) and *Gasman/1970s Christmas in Scotland* (1998), *Ratcatcher* (1999) and *Morvern Callar* are resolutely Scottish in their material: the first is set during the 1975 dustmen's strike in Glasgow; the second is an adaptation of Scottish writer Alan Warner's contemporary classic; both films depict aspects of Scottish society and history with a degree of realism (location shooting, archive footage, nonprofessional actors like William Eadie in *Ratcatcher* and Kathleen McDermott in *Morvern Callar*), even if the latter film "de-emphasizes the Scottishness" of the original novel[1], notably by transforming Morvern into an English-woman (Wallis 82; Caughie 107). By focusing on Scottish youths — a young adolescent male and a post-adolescent woman — in Western Scotland (Glasgow and Argyll county), Ramsay's first two films can even be said to form a diptych that endeavors to map the contemporary Scottish experience in terms of region and era, class and gender, and have for these very reasons been paired in a 2016 article by Kristine Robbyn Chick. It is for these reasons that both films were

received as testifying to the rejuvenation of the Scottish realist tradition, alongside other works that had received funding from local government, such as the films of Peter Mullan and Loach and Laverty's Scottish films (Sargeant 353). Released seven years later, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* seemed like a radical departure, which was to be confirmed by *You Were Never Really Here* (2017). Both films are adaptations of works by US-American authors (Lionel Shriver and Jonathan Ames), set mainly in New York and New England, and centered on adult protagonists. This departure was, according to Tom Wallis, a welcome one for Ramsay, who was intent on troubling the Scottish-woman-director-of-social-realist-films label that had been imposed on her from the start (82).

2 Yet Ramsay's fourth feature film pinpoints one of the common denominators between all four through an allusion to *Ratcatcher* that occurs as early as the second shot [1:52]. The lateral extreme close-up of Joe suffocating himself with a plastic bag recalls the opening credits of the 1999 film, in which a frontal close shot shows a boy named Ryan similarly wrapped in a curtain as if it were a shroud [0:42]. The parallel between the two films is furthered through a sibling motif, with suffocation making way for drowning: Ryan is also the child who accidentally drowns in a canal three minutes later [5:01], and whom James possibly follows in the end [87:48], while Joe tries to drown himself before changing his mind [63:55]. In linking her two apparently most different films—a naturalist coming-of-age story and a stylish neo-noir reimagining of *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976)—which, for the time being at least, bookend her career, Ramsay draws attention to what appears to be her main aesthetic concern: the expression of the subjectivities of troubled individuals, with trouble being understood in the very ordinary sense of being afflicted with "pain," "discomfort," "emotional strain," "anxiety," "worry" and/or "distress" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*).

3 All Ramsay's feature films are centered chiefly on one protagonist, a feature that the films' titles draw attention to: *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar* through the use of names, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *You Were Never Really Here* by explicitly stating the protagonists' anxieties (paranoia and PTSD). Two of the three source texts (*Morvern Callar* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*) are first person narratives, and Ames's novella employs internal focalization.

All Ramsay's protagonists are troubled subjects afflicted, like the protagonist of Ramsay's first film, with a form of "disorientation and struggle for an identity" (Blandford 78): *Ratcatcher*'s James, who is already trying to deal with the usual problems facing a teenager as well as his family and neighborhood's dire economic situation, is indirectly responsible for the death of Ryan who drowned after they playfought; Morvern Callar is an enigmatic young woman who fails to report the suicide of her boyfriend and momentarily usurps his identity as author of a novel, and whom even her best friend Lanna fails to understand; *We Need to Talk About Kevin*'s Eva Khatchadourian is the successful owner of a guide book company, for whom motherhood increasingly becomes synonymous with being persecuted by her son Kevin; and *You Were Never Really Here*'s Joe is an ex-veteran whose speciality as a hired man is saving kidnapped children and punishing their abductors. If the traumatic experiences the protagonists undergo are varied—much of the writing on her films evokes at least in passing the protagonists' trauma (Johnson 1362; Murray 223; Kuhn; McMahon 471; Art 5; Chick; Singer 32)—they all seem to foreground one emotion: guilt or, in the case of Morvern, the apparent lack thereof.

4 I will argue that John Caughie's contention that *Morvern Callar* "puts in play subjectivities which resist any attempt to contain them within the familiar contours of a national identity" (105) can be generalized to the primacy of subjectivity over identity in all her films. My interest, here, has little to do with the psychology of these troubled psyches, the unconscious reasons for their actions, and even less with determining whether they are authentic representations of various pathologies. It lies, rather, in the devices utilized to express their inner lives. In short, I would like to determine to what extent Ramsay's project can be seen as an attempt to develop a poetics of troubled subjectivities that operates on the levels of both cognition and sensation. Ramsay's focus on audiovisual plasticity is evident in her shying away from the verbal by portraying protagonists who speak very little: her Morvern, for instance, is even more enigmatic than the novel's narrator, who ends up sharing some of her thoughts with the narratee when she expresses her annoyance at Lanna's having slept with her boyfriend; and the openings of both *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and *You Were Never Really Here* delay the moment

we hear the protagonists talk (ten minutes go by before Eva speaks, while Joe utters one word in the film's first eight minutes). The soundtrack of *Morvern Callar*, Sarah Art has shown, invites "the viewer to experience something of what it is like to experience silence as an individual, personal state of being" (1). It is the complexities of subjective experiences that Ramsay's poetics aim to express.

5 What has become increasingly apparent with each new Lynne Ramsay film is how inaccurate early critical attempts to catalogue her as a successor of Loach and the like were. A *New York Times* reviewer said that *Ratcatcher* "could be 'The 400 Blows' as directed by Ken Loach"[2]; David Trotter also compares it to François Truffaut's 1959 film (154-56), while Laura McMahon sees echoes of *Germany Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948). Ramsay sought to draw attention away fom realism by admitting a debt to the avant-garde, citing Robert Bresson (Blandford 78; McMahon 473-75) and *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, 1943) as main influences on *Ratcatcher*. Speaking of Ramsay's 1999 film in 2005, Amy Sergeant opined that its "surreal" images make it far more "ambiguous" than Loach's work (354), and three years later, Annette Kuhn insisted that "the comparison [with the social problem films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh] does not stand up even to minimal scrutiny, because the [...] realism of the film's settings is constantly brought up against its poetic elements" (17). This was already the case in her early short films, *Small Deaths* and *Gasman*.

6 From the start, Ramsay inscribed her work in the tradition of art cinema that David Bordwell calls expressive realism. "Expressive realism," says Bordwell, endeavors to "dramatize private mental processes" and "presents psychological effects in search of their causes" (208); he distinguishes it from another art-cinema tradition, "objective realism," which emphasizes the contingency of everyday life in the name of verisimilitude (206). Ramsay's films do not claim to explain much; they seem content to express the enigmatic entanglement of emotions, memories and sensations. In a sense, her brand of expressive realism would tend to propose an objective expression of subjectivity. Thus, Ramsay's films, and *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar* in particular, ultimately demonstrate how objective and expressive realism may interact, as they did, though perhaps to a lesser degree, in Loach's early films, *Poor Cow* (1967) and *Kes* (1969), or in *The Loneli-*

ness of the Long Distance Runner (Tony Richardson, 1962) before that. In this respect, I expand on Caughie's analysis of the shifts between objectivity and subjectivity at play in the supermarket scene of *Morvern Callar* (108) and rejoin David Forrest's defense of the poetic potential of social realist cinema in his discussion of *Ratcatcher*, in which he calls into question Kuhn's and Ramsay's own restricted view of the genre (203-5). It seems to me that Ramsay's films prove that the difference between objective and expressive realism is by no means clear-cut, and has probably never been; it is just a matter of emphasis, of privileging the social and the physical over the psychological and the emotional, or vice versa. For in the end, both traditions aim to capture human experience: expressive realism by objectifying the subjective, objective realism by subjectifying the objective —which, in our post-modern, post-structural world, is already subjective in the first place.

7 What follows is an attempt to locate the cohesion of Ramsay's films in their aesthetics, and thus to identify elements of a poetics. My exploration of her brand of expressive realism will focus on four elements that aim to express a troubled subjectivity — color scheme and texture, narrative disruptions, sequence-shots, point of view — and that have in common a tendency to trouble the fiction film's formal, epistemological and ontological boundaries.

Color Scheme & Texture

8 The expression of subjectivity is, first and foremost, plastic and involves visual texture. *Ratcatcher*, for instance, is, like *Small Deaths*, dominated by a grayish color scheme appropriate for its setting, context and the Scottish realist/documentary tradition it invokes. The scheme, however, breaks up—again as in *Small Deaths*—when James explores the brand-new white houses and the golden fields under blue skies outside [39:00-42:27]—while the grayish tones of James's second visit seems to contradict the first [81:22-83:06]. The shift is also material, since the mineral, the liquid and the artificial (bricks, cars, garbage bags, rain, overcast skies, the canal) make way for air and lush vegetation (pristine skies and the wheat singled out in close-up in the final scenes [88:15]). In *Morvern Callar*, color and matter are used to distinguish two countries: the darkness of Scot-

land is expressed through a blue gray scheme, the light and heat of Spain through a yellow one, a contrast that is reinforced by the dry and humid earth and flora associated with both countries. Morvern and Lanna's night life, however, looks the same regardless of the country, with the darkness illuminated by harsh artificial white light or shades of blue and red. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* multiplies color schemes and textures to circumscribe singular space-times: the red juice of the opening dream sequence and of the final shoot-out; the gray, cement walls of prison; the sharp primary colors of Eva's former house in the woods; and the pale whiteness of Eva's present house under the beating sun, etc. The colors red and white, called on for their classical function as signifiers of violence, innocence and emptiness in Western visual arts[3], are used to identify the various worlds and express Eva's inability to escape these oppressive emotions, since they seem to inevitably seep into a variety of spaces.

9 In *You Were Never Really Here*, each space has its specific color scheme and texture: the wooden tones of Joe's mother's living quarters [8:44]; the yellow light of the hardware store [25:47]; the salmon walls of the room Fiona is imprisoned in [38:24]; the baroque interior of Senator Motto's country mansion [70:43]. In typical noir fashion, these spaces stand out against the urban backdrop. With its gray tones, asphalt and metal materials, narrow and underground spaces, and occasional streaks of neon lights, this environment appears as a visual continuum, encapsulated by the many lateral tracking shots of the streets, tunnels, bridges and roadsides [32:04, 40:03, 48:16, 62:15, 66:39, 67:36], as well as by the shots of the subway train [19:28, 22:44]. The narration rapidly dismantles the opposition set up in the opening scenes between the violence of the streets and the protection of the home by revealing that the warmth of the inner spaces is by no means synoymous with peace of mind, as the regal quarters Fiona is held in against her will demonstrate. The narrative takes us outside the city—the lakeside [62:36], the mansion—only to show that this rural space dominated by trees and water is equally permeated with death. As in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the memories are initially experienced as disruptions in the cinematic fabric (most notably when the blazing yellowish brown mineral images of the desert erupt in the steamy blue of the sauna [30:09-31:06]) only to be revealed as perfectly in tune within the urban continuum (the dark interior of the

container full of dead young women segues effortlessly back into the darkness of Joe's current location [34:18-34:36]).

10 Visually, subjectivity is evoked through a transgression of ontological boundaries of the material world. This is not to say that the different worlds are not real—they mostly are—but the color schemes and texture are meant to heighten our experience of the protagonists' subjectivities, whether it be primarily memory in *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and *You Were Never Really Here*, or sensory in *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar*. The films' visuals suggest that the boundary between memory and physical sensation is by no means radical; indeed, the insistence on the plasticity of the cinematic image—and the invitation to a haptic relation to the images' texture—posit a view memory and subjective experience as equally sensual. It is the effects of subjectivity that these visuals aim to express.

Intrusive Dreams & Fantasies

11 Narrative disruptions occur in all Ramsay's films, but the effect is certainly more jarring in her first feature because of its naturalist aesthetics, naturalist films tending to posit a stable ontology. Fifty-minutes into the film, *Ratcatcher* offers a scene straight out of the French children's films *Le Ballon Rouge* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956) or *Cerf-volant du bout du monde* (Roger Pigaut, 1958), when a group of children tie a rat to a balloon that sends the animal straight into outer space [51:15-53:06]. This fantastic moment is reabsorbed into the realist logic that governs the diegetic world when the space scene dissolves—through white noise—to a shot of James sleeping (and maybe dreaming) in front of the television. The potential dream sequence retrospectively calls into question the status of an earlier scene when James steps through a window into a golden field [41:23-42:27]. Although the frontier between reality and dream is not marked by a cut, frame-within-the-frame composition likens the shot to a painting on a wall. The ontological certainty concerning the status of the window frames James's transformation from a realist character à la Antoine Doinel or Billy Casper into a hero finding the doorway to Wonderland or Narnia, one that opens onto a space that recalls the American Midwest and its myth of a new Arcadia (Murray 222). In light of these two moments, the status of the penultimate scene of

James's family walking through the fields, which visually resembles the illustrations in the famous British children's book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Michael Rosen, 1989), is made highly ambiguous—is it a flashforward? a dream?—especially since it is framed by images of James drowning that are not particularly realistic in the first place (the canal cannot be as deep as the underwater shots suggest) [88:15-89:56]. These narrative disruptions are thus also moments of high generic instability where social realism morphs into children's fiction.

12 *You Were Never Really Here*, we have seen, offers a similar scene of Joe floating in an abyss of water (when he is presumably standing) and seeing Fiona in place of his mother [65:40-65:54]. The final scenes, which do not take their cue from the novella, further blur the frontier between dream and reality: Joe glimpses Fiona's reflection on the rainy windowpane of a bus in shot/reverse shot [67:24-67:35], and his shooting himself in the mouth is presented as continuous with the rest of the scene, the shift from one ontological level to another occurring within the same shot and going unmarked [79:24-80:43]. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the ontological status of the audiovisual material we are presented with is uncertain from the outset: the film practically opens on a dream sequence, with Eva covered in red fluids among other revellers in what appears to be a festival[4] [1:30-3:21]. The image's ambiguous status — is it a dream or a memory? — is heightened by the subsequent shot of Eva sitting glassy-eyed on a couch with an empty wine glass in front of her. More problematic even is a later scene in which Eva, after returning home on Halloween night, seems to fantasize that hordes of children are banging at the window shouting "candy"—which, of course, sounds like Kevin—an image that is introduced in a cut [31:50-32:48].

13 In all three films, such disruptions are rarely marked by a classical device (such as a lap-dissolve or a different color scheme) but erupt within the narration (through a cut, within a shot) on the same ontological level as the events depicted. However, once past the first instances (and on a first viewing), later instances remain identifiable thanks to our knowledge of the narration's "intrinsic norms" based on what we have already seen (echoes to previous scenes) and occasionally knowledge of "extrinsic norms",[5] such as references to familiar genres and intertexts (in *Ratcatcher*); the utilization of such devices

has been "normalized" and participates in the constitution of a recognizable poetics.

Slice of (Psychic) Life Aesthetics

14 What is especially fascinating in Ramsay's work is how devices more typical of naturalist aesthetics, and thus of objective realism, are also utilized to express subjectivity. This is notably the case of a staple device of neo-realism and slice-of-life cinema: the sequence-shot. Both *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar* tap into this approach quite naturally. Sequence-shots occur in particular in scenes where the protagonists carry out basic actions (Ryan pulling his pants out of his boots [3:34-3:46], James's little sister Anne Marie eating a sandwich while sitting on a garbage bag [30:41-31:05], Morvern and Lanna arriving at the airport in Spain [45:54-46:24], Morvern returning home after her trip to Spain [82:47-85:01]) or share intimate moments (James and Margaret Anne cuddling in bed [75:25-76:31], Ma and Pa slow-dancing [76:32-77:57], Morvern and Lanna hugging [20:08], Morvern rinsing her hair in a bathtub [55:18]).

15 Such scenes also appear in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Eva walking down the prison corridor [18:25] or the intimate post-birth scene [20:43]) and *You Were Never Really Here* (Joe and his mother talking when he gets home from a job [8:43], Joe pausing in a booth to wipe his forehead [27:46], Joe waiting in a staircase to purchase his meds [28:09]). In the later films, however, the sequence-shots' nature is problematized by the narrative structure they are integrated in. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the slice-of-life aesthetics actually serves to express memory. The post-birth scene, for instance, is framed by two present-day scenes (one in the prison and one in Eva's house) [20:10-21:19], while Eva's immediate reaction when she discovers her daughter's and husband's corpses is elided and followed by a sequence-shot depicting her lying down on her bed in silence, the narration mimicking her repressing the shock [98:05-101:06]. In the 2011 film, then, slice of life is, in effect, slice of memory. In *You Were Never Really Here*, it is the generic framework itself that renders the sequence-shots problematic. For though they occur profusely in the early domestic scenes between Joe and his mother, they are equally present in more staple noir scenes, such as the opening back alley

fight scene [4:47-5:49] and later on when Joe is out on a stakeout [33:33-33:52]. The boundary between genre film and psychological melodrama is thus effectively blurred. By adding a touch of realism to stories based on memory or fantasy, a staple figure of objective realism is thus put to the service of subjective realism—this is what I mean by "objectifying the subjective."

16 This is not the case in *Ratcatcher* where the sequence-shots are never problematic as such and are rarely juxtaposed with more subjective scenes. But it is very much the case in *Morvern Callar* where the sequence-shots are welded in a narrative that resists a psychological cause-effect reading in spite of its focalization on the eponymous character. In the film's early stages, for instance during the party scene, the jarring effect could be seen to mimic the effects of drugs and alcohol [18:27-20:49]. Yet sequence-shots depict both the most banal events and valuable information, including Morvern's phone call to the editors at the airport [45:22-45:37] (there is no way of knowing for sure who she's calling if you haven't read the novel). The film thus seems to foreground the inadequacy of slice-of-life aesthetics to capture a subjectivity such as Morvern's, and thus, perhaps, of any subjectivity at all. Or, at least, in the traditional realist sense. Because the iteration of the sequence-shot ultimately becomes the ideal mode of expression of an elusive subject, and thus an apt marker of subjectivity and of ontological and epistemological uncertainty—this is what I meant by "subjectifying the objective." This may explain why *Morvern Callar*, Ramsay's only feature without any dream sequences, may, in effect, be her trippiest. Or why Ramsay's portrait of French photographer Brigitte Lacomb, the 2018 *Miu Miu's Women's Tales #18 Brigitte*, ends up providing material for multiple portraits, including Ramsay's own.

Point of View

17 Indeed, disruptions in visual and aural point of view—what François Jost (1987) calls ocularization and auricularization—are frequent throughout *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar* in spite of the fact that focalization in both films is fairly stable. One device in particular occurs in both films: a lateral tracking shot that moves (right to left in *Ratcatcher*, left to right in *Morvern Callar*) away from

the protagonist (James in the new house [40:15-40:33], Morvern in the Spanish cemetery [81:01-81:30]) and "finds" him or her on the opposite side, standing in profile in positions symmetrical to their original positions. These impossible shots—both diegetically and technically (it is, after all, a trick shot and the character has not vanished and reappeared)—composes a reflection: it is as if the narration had taken us through a looking-glass without us knowing which side is which. This is furthered by the inversion of the trajectory between the two films, which makes it impossible to decide whether the right side or the left one has priority. As instances of what Deleuze calls a "crystal-image," one in which it is impossible to distinguish the actual image from the virtual image (93-94), these tracking shots not only transgress an ontological line that remains invisible; they invite us to invest this space of uncertainty with our own subjectivity: which one of them is James? Which one is Morvern? Are both of them James and Morvern? When does the shot shift from diegetic reality to fantasy? From an objective to a subjective image of the protagonists? Is it a purely mental image ?

18 Although they may not always be as salient, such disruptions in ocularization and auricularization occur frequently in both films. One can be found in the drowning scene in the first seven minutes of *Ratcatcher*. After James pushes Ryan into the water, James is shown running away in a very long shot, the camera now observing him from a distance [4:34-5:10]. This is followed by a close-up of the bubbles on the surface of the canal, metonymically suggesting that Ryan is drowning, and finally by an extreme close-up of James looking worried. Thus framed by shots of James that evoke both distance and proximity, the status of the close-up of the bubbles becomes problematic: it may very well be an image in James's mind and not proof that Ryan is actually drowning. The strategy is repeated in a subsequent scene when James's mother witnesses the discovery of the body from her window [5:38-6:14]. The scene is firmy aligned with the woman through eyeline match, a POV shot through the window showing us the three young men who have discovered the body. The angle of the final close-up of the dead boy's hand, however, is aligned neither with the mother's gaze, nor even with those of the three young men, but is instead connected, through a graphic match, to a lateral close-up of the mother's hand holding a grocery bag. This

strategy of misaligning point of view is repeated more obviously in the next scene when James comes home and his mother is relieved to see he is not the dead boy she saw through the window [6:15-6:53]; the shot/reverse shot of James on the hand and his mother on the other is broken by a close-up of the dead boy that is potentially an expression of one of the two characters' subjectivity.

19 The opening scenes of *Ratcatcher* thus interrogate, through iteration, the status of the images we are shown (the close-ups in particular). The film's naturalism does not preclude subjectivity; on the contrary, what appear to be disruptions—the jump-cuts when the boys play, the subjective inserts—ultimately produce a mode of realism in which the expressive and the objective coexist. When James and Margaret Ann take a bath, for instance, an extreme close-up of James watching as she dunks her head under water is accompanied by recognizable underwater sounds, the insert of James's father getting another boy's body out of the canal suggesting that he is imagining the experience of drowning while watching her [58:17-58:38]. What *Ratcatcher* proposes, then, is a layered experience of reality that includes the subjective (dreams, memories, fantasies) and many subjectivities at that—a jump-cut later evokes Dad's drunken state as he drops some coins [71:03], a POV shot offers Mom's perspective as she watches James running to the bus stop [80:51-81:02]. The fact that the film is framed by James's memories and mostly centered on his character indicates that the whole narration may be an emanation of his subjectivity, a feature we find not in the films of Loach, but in those of Fellini, Lynch or Cronenberg (8½ [1963], *Eraserhead* [1977] and *Videodrome* [1983] come to mind).

20 *Morvern Callar*, as the repetition of the magical lateral tracking shot indicates, orchestrates similar disruptions in ocularization. During the party, Morvern teases a sailor on a boat by pulling up her skirt and displaying her garter belt, a gesture depicted in a very long shot potentially aligned with the sailor's gaze [15:51-16:54]. Halfway through the film, a long shot shows Morvern at work, the reflection in the mirror of a man suggesting that she is the object of his gaze [43:35-43:50] (a point made clearer in the novel through first person narration). In the Spanish scenes in particular, ocularization, auricularization and even focalization are momentarily displaced onto the secondary character, Lanna, as soon as the two friends step out of

the airport (the camera stays on Lanna instead of Morvern [46:15]), then later when Lanna loses herself in the village revels (a scene that is introduced by an over-the-shoulder shot aligned with Lanna) [64:01-67:22]. When the narration is aligned with Morvern, we find her looking for her friend, as if the main focalizer were searching for the secondary focalizer to deprive her of that status. Retrospectively, of course, the images of Lanna can, like the close-ups of the dead Ryan in *Ratcatcher*, be reinterpreted as Morvern's mental images of her friend.

21 The possibility that both *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar* are entirely filtered through the protagonists' subjectivity suggests that *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is not the radical departure it may have appeared to be upon its release. In the 2011 film, ocularization is momentarily aligned with other characters, especially Kevin: a close-up of Eva's right hand playing with her hair is framed by a medium shot of a future male coworker observing her [8:59-9:14]; a POV shot tilts over the maps Kevin is studying [39:56-40:06]; the narration lingers in his bedroom when his mother leaves [58:41-59:13]; a close-up of his eye reveals the target reflected in it [60:48], visualizing his intention. These other points of view express the heroine's paranoia. Something similar is at stake in *You Were Never Really Here* when Joe's rescue mission is narrated primarily through surveillance footage [36:20-37:52]. Although they have the air of authentic proof, the ontological status of these images remains problematic since the film's internal focalization might lead us to speculate that the surveillance footage is also imagined by the protagonist, a hypothesis that is reinforced by the sequence-shots of Joe leaving and returning to the hotel in which he moves in the background [24:55-25:17, 42:58-43:09].

22 Yet it seems to me that, in Ramsay's more recent films, the ontological status of such images is, perhaps, less problematic than their epistemological status. The images are clearly mental ones spurred on by paranoia or trauma (Eva's imagining what Kevin had been doing in the past or what is on people's minds when they stare at her, Joe remembering his abusive father [52:54-53:16] and his witnessing, as a soldier, the horrible deaths of children and teenagers [11:19, 25:49, 29:21-31:06, 34:20]). One does wonder whether these images are memory or fantasy, but the more troubling question may actually be: how do such images allow us to relate with, and maybe comprehend,

not only the protagonists but also the other subjects within the diegesis, as the titles of both films clearly invite us to do. In *Ratcatcher*, for instance, once the mental images have been identified as such, their interpretation becomes fairly easy: James is worried Ryan might have drowned; James's mother is worried her son might be the dead boy and that she might very well never touch him again, but is relieved to find out he is alive and well. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, however, the mental images are explorations of a past that remains enigmatic even with knowledge of the outcome (we get a hint as to what Kevin did a dozen or so minutes into the movie). Our puzzlement is reflected on Tilda Swinton's face, as she expresses Eva's own puzzlement at her child and, more profoundly perhaps, Eva's and our own attempt to determine to what extent Kevin's mental condition was innate or determined by his environment (and notably by his mother's own anxieties). In *You Were Never Really Here*, it is not so much the causality linking Joe's mental images to his present actions that is of interest—clearly, witnessing the horrible deaths of children and teenagers and having an abusive father have traumatized him—as the violence with which they take over this bulk of a man and the defense mechanisms he employs to cope; by possibly picturing his actions through surveillance camera footage, Joe dissociates himself from the violent acts that align him with his father who likewise wielded a hammer—thus alienated visually, he was never really there.

23 If disruptions in point of view serve to problematize both the ontological and epistemological, the two dimensions are intertwined in all Ramsay's feature films: what are these images and what do they tell us? How can we learn from images when their nature remains uncertain? Ramsay's films emphasize not the truth value of the cinematic image (such as that which informed the writings of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes on photography [6]) but celebrate its ambiguity. The medium would be better suited to express the effects of trauma than to comprehend its causes [7], to express the elusiveness of subjectivity rather than to mimic its workings. In a sense, none of Ramsay's subjects are ever really here (in the cinematic image).

Conclusion

24 The various elements of Ramsay's poetics I have highlighted — the visuals, the dream/fantasy-sequences, slice-of-life sequences, and instability of visual and aural point of view—are made to express the protagonists' troubled subjectivities, and thus invite us to experience them cognitively, emotionally and sensually. They have in common that they aim to disrupt epistemological and ontological boundaries. The point is thus not to facilitate our comprehension of these characters and their worlds, but to allow us to get a sense of the complicated waters of meaning and being they navigate. The focus on ontological and epistemological questions in Ramsay's films would make them typically "postmodernist" in the literary scholar Brian McHale's understanding of the term; indeed, the questioning of the very nature of the image—and in particular Ramsay's resorting to crystal-images —aligns her work with the concerns of poststructuralist thinkers such as Deleuze. This would explain what distinguishes her first two feature films from the more classically naturalist work of Ken Loach or Peter Mullan: Ramsay seems to view realism and naturalism as problematic in a day and age when the notions of real, reality and nature are so unstable. But more profoundly, perhaps Ramsay's films are simply demonstrating that epistemological and ontological questions are bound to be linked by a fundamental paradox—that meaning interrogates being, while being is often seen as a precondition of the production of meaning, as in Descartes's famous "Cogito, ergo sum." As such, being and meaning can only be unstable, and aesthetically speaking, it is difficult to separate objective realism (with its apparent focus on epistemological questions) and expressive realism (with its apparent focus on ontological questions). What Ramsay's poetics of disruption ultimately points to are the multiple interactions between the ontological and the epistemological, the sensible and the intellectual, the psychic and the corporeal, and how an audiovisual medium like cinema can, by token of its plasticity, be the playing field of the wonderful paradox that disruptions are also part of the flow of existence.

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NOTES

1 Robert Morace also concludes that the 2002 film adopts a post-devolutionist and "transnational" (122) perspective while the novel is more typically devolutionist.

2 Anonymous. "For a Glasgow Boy, Rats Are Just the Beginning." *The New York Times*. October 13, 2000. Section E, Page 27. <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/13/movies/film-review-for-a-glasgow-boy-rats-are-just-the-beginning.html>.

3 See chapters 2 and 3 of Michel Pastoureau's *Le Petit livre des couleurs*.

4 Shriver's novel makes it clear that this event is actually the tomato-battle of La Tomatina, held every August in Buñol, Spain, and thus a memory of Eva's life as a globetrotter.

5 Borwell distinguishes intrinstic norms from extrinsic ones, the first being those developed by the film, the latter by exterior factors whether filmic (genre, compositional, narrational conventions) or based on our knowledge of the real world; intrinsic norms can be based on extrinsic ones (151-53).

6 I am, of course, referring to Barthes's "ça-a-été" (120) and Sontag's "trace" (154).

7 Harlan Kennedy's review of *Ratcatcher* in *Film Comment* noted that the film "decoupl[es] "cause and effect and – more important – cause and affect" (7).

RÉSUMÉS

English

If all Ramsay's four feature films all center on troubled characters, my interest lies not so much in their psychology, but in the devices utilized to express these subjectivities. In short, I'd like to determine to what extent Ramsay's project can be seen as an attempt to develop a poetics of troubled subjectivities that operates on the levels of both cognition and sensation. I argue that Ramsay's films demonstrate how objective and expressive realism, two art cinema traditions Bordwell initially opposed, may interact. The difference between objective and expressive realism is by no means radical; it is, rather, a matter of emphasis, of privileging the social over the psychological. For ultimately both traditions aim to capture human experience: expressive realism by objectifying the subjective, objective realism by subjectifying the objective, which, in our post-modern, post-structural world, is already subjective in the first place. My exploration of Ramsay's brand of expressive realism will focus on three elements of her poetics : narrative disruptions, point of view and texture.

Français

Si les quatre longs métrages de Ramsay sont tous centrés sur des personnages troublés, cet article ne porte pas tant sur leur psychologie que sur les dispositifs utilisés pour exprimer leurs subjectivités. Il s'agit de déterminer dans quelle mesure le projet de Ramsay peut être considéré comme une tentative de développer une poétique de subjectivités troublées qui opère à la fois aux niveaux cognitif et sensible. Les films de Ramsay montrent comment peuvent interagir le réalisme objectif et le réalisme expressif, deux traditions du cinéma d'art et d'essai que David Bordwell opposaient. Et pourtant, la différence entre le réalisme objectif et le réalisme expressif n'est en aucun cas radicale ; il s'agit plutôt d'une question de degré, plus précisément de la mesure dans laquelle l'accent est mis sur le social plutôt que sur le psychologique. Car, en fin de compte, les deux traditions visent toutes deux à capturer l'expérience humaine : le réalisme expressif en objectivant le subjectif, le réalisme objectif en subjectivant l'objectif qui, dans notre monde post-moderne et post-structurel, est déjà subjectif en premier lieu. L'exploration du réalisme expressif de Ramsay proposée dans cet article se concentre sur trois éléments de sa poétique : les perturbations narratives, le point de vue et la texture.

INDEX

Mots-clés

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Keywords
Ramsay (Lynne), film poetics, objective realism, expressive realism, subjectivity

AUTEUR

David Roche
David Roche is a Professor of Film Studies at Université Paul-Valéry, a 2022-2027 IUF member and President of SERCIA. He is the author of six monographs, including *Arrival* (2024) and *Meta in Film and Television Series* (2022), and has coedited several books, most recently *Edgar Poe et ses motifs à l'écran* (2019, with Vincent Souladié) and *Transnationalism and Imperialism: Endurance of the Global Western Film* (2022, with Hervé Mayer). His articles have appeared in *Adaptation*, *Horror Studies*, *Journal of Film and Video*, *Miranda*, *Mise au point*, *Positif*, *Post-Script* and *TV/Series*.