

We Need to Talk About Kevin

(2011, Ramsey, UK)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Filmmaking (AL)
Component 2: European Film (AS)

Core Study Areas
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area
Narrative
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

- *We Need to Talk About Kevin* was the third feature film from writer and director Lynne Ramsay, one of the most exciting and distinctive current British filmmakers. It was adapted from the bestselling novel by Lionel Schriver and was critically acclaimed for its cinematography, editing, direction and performances by Swinton and Miller. It is a beautifully shot and edited film which tells the dark story of a High School massacre in an unconventional and challenging manner. It will excite and engage students with its aesthetic style, subject matter and engaging debates about families, morality and the nature of evil.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and Timings/Links

- **0:0:00-0:07:50** - The opening sequence .
- **1:38:21-1:47:30** - The closing sequence.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Seamus McGarvey shot the film but worked closely with long-time friend Ramsay, whose initial interest in filmmaking came from photography and cinematography. Both are committed to the idea that film is a cinematic medium, that it is the visual image and how it is captured that communicates narrative, and both wanted to shoot the film on celluloid in 35 mm anamorphic format.
- A fast film stock was used (Fuji 500T) to create vivid contrasts in the film's many night time scenes. This gave McGarvey the, '*ability to create and manipulate contrast, which was especially important in scenes when atrocities take place, and in the clapboard house at the end of the film. I wanted deep blacks and the colours to pop, while shooting in low key light without inappropriate grain*'.
- In the opening sequence we see many close ups of blood-coloured images, such as in the tomato festival and Eva's food, which foreshadows the themes of death and murder but also is a visual motif familiar from Ramsay's other films in which she shows a fascination with the details of objects and bodies.

Mise-en-Scène

- Ramsay, McGarvey and Kinnear (co-writer) spent the month before discussing the visual grammar for the film, creating shot lists and decided on a colour palette of toned down natural hues and the dramatic use of striking red, blue and yellow primary colours. We see the dramatic use of red in the opening sequence.
- The performances of Swinton and Miller are very stylised and enigmatic in the opening and closing sequences of the film which encourage the spectator to create character meaning. We are uncertain at the end of the film how the

mother and son feel towards each other. Despite their final embrace there is little display of emotional connection (which has been a motif throughout the film, Kevin even comments on this when he asks, 'have I ever (looked happy)?').

- The contrast between the home in which we see Eva at the beginning of the film (rundown and vandalised) is in stark contrast to the home we see her living in in the flashback at the end of the opening sequence (spacious and luxurious). This visual contrast suggests the journey that Eva has been on and creates intrigue into how, and why, her life has taken such a turn.

Editing

- Graphic matches in colour and performance between the tomato festival and Eva waking up in the opening sequence suggest thematic connections. The striking use of the colour red makes the spectator focus on the connection between Eva and the idea of blood.
- The graphic match between Eva and Kevin's faces as they wash are discontinuous but, again, suggest a metaphorical meaning and invite the spectator to see a connection between these two characters. They not only look similar, and are washing in the same way, but they also move in the same manner, the transition between characters is seamless.
- The unedited tracking shot of Eva's apartment allows us to see the messy and disordered state of her life at the beginning of the film. We see the evidence of drinking, unhealthy diet and drug dependency revealed one by one and then connected to Eva.

Sound

- The film opens with a sound collage of a ticking sound, some faint echoed voices and a low hum that gradually increase in pace of repetition until they culminate in a loud bang and a cut to the ecstatic voices of the festival in the next shot. It is a threatening and mysterious beginning to the film that becomes more meaningful on repeat viewings as we realise it is a ticking clock/bomb and the sound of Kevin's victims echoing in the school gymnasium.
- There is no dialogue at all until 05:29 when Celia, ironically, sings 'I'm getting ready for the party'. The exposition of the narrative is achieved visually and through the creative manipulation of both diegetic and non-diegetic sound effects.

- The film ends with Eva and Kevin unable to communicate any further and virtual silence. The guard tells them, fatefully, 'Your time is up' and we see Eva walk away in a state of shock whilst the song 'A Mother's Last Words to her Son' plays. Sound is being used metaphorically again and deliberately subservient to the image, typical of Ramsay's auteurist style.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- At the end of the film we see Kevin embrace his mother and there is a suggestion in his vocal delivery that he is about to express remorse for what he has done or find some kind of emotional attachment to his mother but his facial expression is still blank. The final shot of Kevin sees him still disengaged from any emotional connections and there is ambiguity about his character and feelings. We are unclear whether we are meant to see Kevin as a damaged child who feels remorseful and frightened or as a cold-hearted, evil killer. He represents one of the central questions of the film – is evil caused by nature or nurture?
- At the end of the film we see Eva leave Kevin after asking her unanswered question to Kevin about his motivation for the killings. Her character is as ambiguous as Kevin's. In visiting him, seeking to understand why he did what he did and in embracing him she seems to be a loving mother despite what she has been through. Her body language, vocal delivery and facial expressions though suggest a more analytical and cerebral interest in Kevin's motivations rather than an emotional engagement. She walks out of the prison displaying a blank and unemotional face and never looks back, perhaps it is the last time she will visit.
- If we look at the representation of the family in the film we see a dysfunctional, damaged and fractured family unit. Suggestions of this can be seen represented in the initial introduction of them as a group, principally through the use of cinematography and editing. We see Celia isolated at the breakfast bar and as she turns, we see that her eye has been damaged. We then see each family member separated into different shots. There is some suggestion of connection between Eva and Kevin as a dissolved graphic

match is used between their shots. We see some connection in the father, Franklin, dancing with Celia and play-fighting with Kevin but generally the use of framing and cutting keeps them apart. Even when we see Kevin stood next to Celia their body language suggests disconnection.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual Style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

- Visual detail is very important in the work of Lynne Ramsay. She finds poetic meaning in the most mundane of objects and parts of the human body. A key aspect of her auteur style is to tell her stories visually, this has been a fascination of hers since her early interest in photography. We see an examination of visual detail in the opening sequence as we slowly zoom into the net curtain blowing in the wind, the series of shots showing Eva's body at the festival and then the visual details of her current home.
- The lack of expositional dialogue in the film is a key aspect of Ramsay's auteur signature and adds to the 'quiet', brooding aesthetic style. This can be seen very clearly in the opening sequence where there is no dialogue for the first five minutes of the film. When we do hear dialogue it is incidental rather than expositional, this is an important aspect of the film as it forces us to seek meaning in the visual storytelling.
- The use of graphic matches to connect ideas and characters rather than for continuity is an important aspect of the film's aesthetic style. In the opening sequence we see graphic matches made between objects and settings that are coloured red which help to signify blood, death and danger which become crucial themes as the film progresses. We also see the use of graphic matching and graphic discontinuity between characters to suggest their relationships. We see a dissolve and graphic match between Kevin and Eva when the family is introduced. There seems to be a meaningful connection between them in the way in which the shots match in terms of framing, setting, shot type as well as in the mise-en-scène, both mother and son look surprisingly alike.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – (Two from Social, Historical, Political, Technological, Institutional)

Social

- Broken families and genetics ... nature or nurture. The film reflects contemporary concerns about the breakdown of the traditional family, principally because of the competing interests in having children and pursuing a career... particularly for women. Another social concern that the film explores is the debate about the nature of evil which has long been framed within the discourse between the 'nature or nurture' positions but has recently, particularly in Western cultures, been influenced by advances in genetic and behavioural sciences.

Historical

- High school killings and contemporary concerns regarding terrorism can be useful explored as important contextual issues surrounding this film. The film is more explicitly connected to the former concern and explores central areas of contemporary debate regarding causes and solutions for such crimes. The fact that the book struggled to get published in the wake of 9/11 added to its reputation, and that of the film, later.

Political

- Political debates about the nature of crime and punishment, particularly in regard to issues of criminal responsibility and terrorism have been frequent and intense in the UK and internationally. The question about Kevin's criminal responsibility because of his age and family upbringing, as well as his mental state, can be usefully explored in this film. Similarly, there are interesting political debates raised by the film in the nature of Eva's character and her relationship with Kevin. The film raises issues of a woman's responsibilities to her children and broaches the taboo subject of a mother who doesn't seem to like her children.

Technological

- New developments in film stock, particularly the use of Fuji Eterna 500T, gave Seamus McGarvey the ability to shoot at night and by day with the same stock which reduced costs. This stock also gave the film a very vivid look and allowed for the manipulation of contrast which was important in the film. '*We needed a 500-speed film, because there are a lot of night scenes and interiors in low light environments,*'

McGarvey explains. *'I shot tests, including one in bright sunlight. There was a vividness that I liked. I knew I could fine tune contrast and saturation, if necessary. The ability to create and manipulate contrast was especially important in scenes when atrocities take place, and in the clapboard house at the end of the film. I wanted deep blacks and the colours to pop, while shooting in low key light.'*

Institutional

- The film was principally funded by the BBC which had trouble, at times, raising the necessary funds for the high budget. A long delay in the production because of lack of funds caused Ramsay to rewrite the script so that it could be made cheaper. Ramsay says that this forced her to be more inventive and spontaneous but she also said that the support from UK Film and the BBC gave her a support network that not many other independent filmmakers have, particularly when making films in the US.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Narrative & Ideology - STARTING POINTS - Narrative

- The use of flashbacks and parallelism in the structure of the film can be usefully explored. The film begins in the aftermath of the massacre, then flashes back to the events leading up to the massacre (including flashbacks to the beginnings of Franklin and Eva's relationship). The complex inter-relationship of narrative timelines culminates in the massacre itself and then flashes forward to the meeting between Eva and Kevin one year after the killings. The effects of this complex structuring of time in the plot can be usefully explored by considering the opportunities it affords the storyteller for showing parallels between characters and events, and in raising questions about cause and effect.
- How exposition of the narrative occurs in the film can be an interesting source of inquiry. We are presented with fractured elements of a story at the beginning that we have to piece together with little indication of how to organise these into a chronological framework of time and space. The difficulty of doing this is compounded by the fact that there is a lack of expositional dialogue and conventional establish of narrative setting. The first three scenes are the net curtains blowing in the wind, the tomato festival and Eva waking up which all occur in very different

places and times (which we discover later) but how we can organise these scenes into a story is restricted from us until much later in the film.

- Eva's and Kevin's characters provide many sources for inquiry, particularly in their position within the narrative. The questions about who is the film's protagonist and antagonist, who is the 'centre' or initiator of the drama and how we are supposed to respond to the characters is complex and ambiguous at times. This complexity of character identification and function within the narrative is further complicated by the use of mirroring. The characters are made to look like each other and often display very similar expressions and body language... frequent graphic matches force a further comparison which suggests characters that are connected in more ways than simply a mother-son relationship.

STARTING POINTS - Ideology

- What the film suggests about parenting and the influences of parents upon their children can be a fruitful approach to this film. Both Franklin and Eva can be described as parents who tried to be good parents but failed, in different ways, to understand and connect with their children. Both parents challenge the stereotypical roles of father and mother whilst seeming to provide well for their children, certainly in material terms. The film shows us the possible effects of parenting upon children but also raises the question of what causes dysfunction within the family.
- Eva's character and her function within the narrative breaks the taboo subject of considering how and why women may not take to the expected role of mother 'naturally'. Eva struggles to inhabit the role of mother and grows to hate her son which will challenge spectator expectations even in the face of Kevin's apparent evil. The film poses the question of who is the real monster, Kevin or Eva? Another fascinating facet of this approach to the film is the ways in which Eva hates her son yet feels guilty for the affect this may have had upon him and, by extension, the deaths of the other children. Despite hating him, he is still her child.
- The film can be seen as a psychological horror that examines the nature of evil – raising questions about how evil originates, how we should deal with it and our compulsion to try to understand it and contain it. Kevin represents

the discourse concerning whether evil is innate or learned and the more metaphorical, perhaps theological, question about whether evil is an objective reality or a subjective judgement. The narrative structure takes us on a journey in which we find ourselves compelled to find out the motivation of evil in an attempt to contain it, only to discover that its true nature is, perhaps, unfathomable. At the end of the film the prison guard tells us, '*Time's up*', and we have to leave with our questions still largely unresolved.