

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

SUNDAY
FEBRUARY 16, 2020
2 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



We need to talk about Eva, the mother at the center of what Lynne Ramsay described as her “psychological horror film.” Portrayed by Tilda Swinton, she’s caught between past and present, reeling from the horrific violence of her son Kevin (played from toddler to teen by three young actors, including Ezra Miller), and revisiting their traumatic years together in light of tragedy. Some viewers, of course, see blame in the mom (Liz Beardsworth describes her as “by turns mother and monster, woman and witch”), others in Kevin himself (Dana Stevens claims that the film “isn’t a cautionary tale about the failure of nurture; it’s a bleak meditation on the inexorable power of nature”). In truth, the two characters are too deeply connected to separate, as the frequent doubling of their images on screen makes clear. “Mother and son, both lean, watchful and dark-haired, are like a pair of predatory reptiles,” wrote A.O. Scott. “Their antagonism is its own kind of bond, which makes its fulfillment almost incomprehensibly terrible.” In discussing her intentions for the film, Ramsay said, “I wasn’t trying to make an issue-based film; I’m trying to pose a set of questions. I was really interested in the mother-son relationship. I thought it was the last taboo in a way: you can love your kids, but do you like them?”

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Premiering to acclaim at Cannes in 2011, KEVIN is the third of only four feature films from Scottish director Lynne Ramsay, following RATCATCHER (1999) and MORVERN CALLAR (2002), and preceding 2017’s YOU WERE NEVER REALLY HERE. (It was also her second film to begin with the image of a white curtain.) All four of her films deal with grief and guilt in the aftermath of trauma, and are marked by minimal dialogue and multilayered sound design. Jonathan Romney has remarked that her films are “close to music, taking visuals to the point of abstraction,” while Ian Buckwalter cites her as “a filmmaker with an uncommon gift for getting at the inner psychology of her characters through striking visuals.” For KEVIN, Ramsay has spoken of being influenced by the horror genre, as well as the American scenes of photographer William Eggleston and the melodramas of Michael Curtiz and Douglas Sirk.

The screenplay for KEVIN, written by Ramsay with her then-husband Rory Stewart Kinnear (not the actor), was adapted from American author Lionel Shriver’s Orange Prize-winning epistolary novel of the same name, published in 2003. Shriver declined a consulting role on the film, saying she’d “had it up to my eyeballs with that book,” but she did raise concerns about film’s ability to communicate that Eva is an unreliable narrator, something Ramsay handled through the expressionistic quality of Eva’s flashbacks and through the wry use of songs (most effectively, Washington Phillips’s recurring “Mother’s Last Word to Her Son”). Most of the songs appear to be nondiegetic, existing outside of the story to reflect and remark upon Eva’s memories, but in one small but telling moment Kevin interrupts and insults one of these songs, bringing it into the narrative, signaling his unique ability to get inside his mother’s head and pick up on things about her psychological state that others seem to miss.

Scott Tobias has said the film “shocks more as a portrait of maternal ambivalence than for its evocation of school massacres,” but it appeared during a time when stories of violent “bad seed” children were increasingly seen in the news and on cinema screens (particularly if they were, as John Springhall writes, “highly-privileged children of affluent white parents, living in four-bedroom detached houses”). The novel was published four years after Columbine, and Ramsay’s adaptation was largely filmed in Stamford, CT, including at J.M. Wright Technical High School, less than 40 miles from where the Sandy Hook massacre took place a year after the film’s U.S. release. Revisiting KEVIN in the wake of Parkland, the film may be jarring for its even marginally sympathetic depiction of the boy (“gorgeous but repellent” as Liz Beardsworth called him), but it stands out as prescient for shifting the focus away from the predator and onto the lingering devastation of his actions on the lives of those around him.

DIRECTED BY **LYNNE RAMSAY**

WRITTEN BY **LYNNE RAMSAY** AND **RORY STEWART KINNER**, BASED ON THE NOVEL BY **LIONEL SHRIVER**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **SEAMUS MCGARVEY**

MUSIC BY **JONNY GREENWOOD**

PRODUCED BY **BBC FILMS**

(2011) 112 MINS.

STARRING **TILDA SWINTON, JOHN C. REILLY, EZRA MILLER, JASPER NEWELL, ROCKY DUER, ASHLEY GERASIMOVICH, SIOBHAN FALLON HOGAN, AND ALEX MANETTE**

DID YOU KNOW: BEFORE THE FILM WAS MADE, LIONEL SHRIVER’S NOVEL WAS ADAPTED BY PLAYWRIGHT ANITA SULLIVAN INTO TEN 15-MINUTE EPISODES OF A SERIALIZED RADIO PLAY, FIRST BROADCAST ON BBC RADIO 4 *WOMAN’S HOUR* IN EARLY 2008. THE RADIO VERSION STARRED MADELINE POTTER AS EVA, AND IT CAN BE FOUND ONLINE.

NEXT UP: TOMORROW EVENING, JOIN US FOR *EXPERIMENTS IN FRENCH SILENT CINEMA*, EXPLORING FILMS FROM VARIOUS 1920S AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENTS, PRESENTED WITH LIVE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY DONALD SOSIN AND JOANNA SEATON. THE LINEUP INCLUDES GERMAINE DULAC’S **THE SMILING MADAME BEUDET**, **ENTR’ACTE** AND **PARIS QUI DORT** BY RENÉ CLAIR, AND **UN CHIEN ANDALOU** BY SALVADOR DALÍ AND LUIS BUÑUEL. SCREENING ON FILM IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE COURSE “GLOBAL SILENT CINEMA” WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY OKSANA CHEFRANOVA, **MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, AT 7PM.**