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We Need to Talk About Kevin

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Title: *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

Country of Origin: UK/USA

Year: 2011

Language: English

Production Companies: BBC Films, UK Film Council, Footprint Investments LLP, Piccadilly Pictures, Lipsync Productions, Independent, Artina Films, Rockinghorse Films, Caemhan, Panaramic, Beryl Betty, Atlantic Swiss Productions

Filming Locations: Buñol, Valencia (Spain); New York City, Norwalk, Stamford (USA)

Director: Lynne Ramsay

Producers: Jennifer Fox, Luc Roeg, Robert Salerno

Screenwriters: Lynne Ramsay, Rory Stewart Kinnear, Lionel Shriver

Cinematographer: Seamus McGarvey

Art Director: Charles Kulsziski

Editor: Joe Bini

Runtime: 112 minutes

Cast (Starring): Tilda Swinton, John C. Reilly, Ezra Miller

Synopsis: Eva Khatchadourian is a woman who gives life to a child and sees her own life taken from her as a result. Once a highly successful, New York-based travel writer, viewers first see Eva as a socially ostracised, alcohol-and-anti-depressant-dependant wreck. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* then oscillates between narrative present and past tenses in order to gradually reveal the reasons for her present-day unhappiness and isolation. On one hand, some part of Eva's present-day unhappiness seems traceable to the endless frustrations and restrictions imposed by heterosexual maternal responsibility as conventionally defined and practiced. Her husband, Franklin, blithely assumes that his wife will assume all domestic responsibilities and accept physical relocation from the city to sterile suburbia once their first child, Kevin, is born. One way of reading Lynne Ramsay's film therefore involves viewing it as the story of a woman whose confinement is inaugurated, rather than ended, by the successful delivery of her progeny. More obviously and immediately troubling than Eva's identity as a mother, however, is Kevin's as a son. From infancy through to adolescence, he wastes no opportunity to aggravate and alienate his increasingly bewildered and bruised female parent, all the while artfully concealing this campaign of emotional and psychological warfare from his unsuspecting father. Thus, while Eva fears for – and, eventually, just plain fears – the state of Kevin's mental health, Franklin increasingly doubts that of his wife. In the end, it is she who is proved right in the most awful way possible. Just before he turns sixteen (the age at which he would become legally accountable as an adult), Kevin cold-bloodedly kills his younger sister, Celia, and

Franklin before proceeding to calmly massacre many of his fellow pupils at the local high school. The film ends by locating its narrative present some two years after the crimes that Kevin committed. Despite the unimaginable pain he has inflicted upon her, Eva continues to visit her son in prison; he, however, is unable (or unwilling) to reveal the reasons for his terrible actions.

Critique: The first stage in any assessment of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, involves deciding exactly who/ what it is that the film's title entreats us to discuss. The most literal (and lurid) reading of all, for instance, is to see this movie as a contemporary secular rebooting of the 'demon child' horror template so expertly established and exploited in earlier works such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976). Viewed in this way, director Lynne Ramsay's long-awaited third feature turns out to be little more than a superior potboiler purveying the unlikely story of a blameless parent driven mad by the birth of a child who is irredeemably bad. Indeed, should one choose to understand *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in this manner then it might even be said that the movie narrates more than one over-familiar cinematic horror story at once: Ramsay becomes the latest in a very long line of talented European art-house directors who finds that a career move stateside significantly compromises the integrity and agency of their creative voice and vision.

But there other ways in which to interpret the subject of *We Need to Talk About Kevin's* title – and, by extension, the thematic agenda and success of the whole movie itself. We could, for example, set Ramsay's film alongside works such as Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) or Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), two other high-profile twenty-first-century filmic attempts to understand the mentality and motives of the small number of American schoolchildren who have in recent years achieved notoriety by murdering large numbers of their unsuspecting fellow pupils. Alternatively, we might see Kevin as a less sympathetic/salvageable version of the angst-ridden male adolescent protagonists familiar from much recent American Independent cinema. Like *Donnie Darko* (2001) or *Thumbsucker* (2005), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* could be understood as an uneasy study of a dysfunction understood to be societal – the emotional pain and perversion inflicted by the values of middle-class suburban conformity – rather than individual in both scope and impact. The numerous similarities that the film suggests between Kevin and Eva (it hardly seems accidental, for instance, that shots of her operating an office photocopier are intercut with brief flashback images of his conception and gestation) would certainly support such a reading. Or we could adopt a different critical approach yet again, and consider 'Kevin' as a synecdoche for the feminine frustration, self-flagellation, and lack of fulfilment that are systematically fostered by the iniquities of a patriarchal social order. While the vituperative communal view that Eva is somehow responsible for her son's crimes is obviously and flagrantly unreasonable, Franklin's earlier assumption that his wife would/should give up her professional and psychological independence in order to raise their family while he continues his working life exactly as before is, arguably, no less myopic or unkind.

Finally, it is also possible to interpret *We Need to Talk About Kevin* through primary recourse to the name of the film's creator, rather than that of its titular character. After all, Lynne Ramsay's third feature is marked by a number of suggestive similarities to the director's first two. The opening

image of a gauze curtain that functions as a presentiment of death links ...Kevin to *Ratcatcher* (1999), Ramsay's critically acclaimed debut feature. Both movies explore intimate experiences of crippling guilt and self-censure: James, the central protagonist of *Ratcatcher*, blames himself for the accidental death of a child, much as Eva cannot free herself of the conviction that Kevin's crimes are somehow really her own. Alternatively (or as well), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* could also be seen as a companion piece to Ramsay's second film, *Morvern Callar* (2002). The main connection here has to do with the director's interest in the precious – but precarious – nature of personal freedom and self-realisation for many modern-day women: both Eva and Morvern are, for example, shown to be most fully alive and fulfilled when travelling alone in Spain, free from the expectations and obligations routinely foisted upon them within their respective domestic habitats. As the discussion above hopefully indicates, in addition to suggesting to its audience that we need to talk, Lynne Ramsay's third feature provides no shortage of potential subjects for us to talk about.

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