

It's perfectly true, We Need to Talk About Kevin is “not an issue-based movie”

David Walsh
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Directed by Lynne Ramsay, screenplay by Ramsay and Rory Kinnear, based on the novel by Lionel Shriver

Before the film opens, the character referred to in the title of Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, at the age of 15, has massacred a number of his fellow schoolmates. In flashbacks, we learn something about his short, unhappy life.

His mother, Eva Khatchadourian (Tilda Swinton), we soon discover, was somewhat ambivalent about having a child in the first place. Having led a quasi-bohemian life in the city as a travel writer, Eva finds herself talked into moving to a large, sterile house in the suburbs (“our very own castle”) by her well-meaning husband, Franklin (John C. Reilly). She seems anxious and out of place in the new home. Some of this discontent apparently rubs off on and damages her offspring.

Kevin is nothing but trouble from the moment of his birth. He cries constantly as a baby. In one scene, Eva stops on the street near a construction worker operating a pneumatic drill to drown out the infant's wailing. As a toddler, Kevin scowls constantly and does whatever he can to make his mother's life miserable. Later, he takes a squirt-gun and sprays ink all over the maps with which she has carefully decorated her office.

The one thing Kevin (Ezra Miller, as the older boy) does take to is archery. Ominously, he becomes an expert marksman as a teenager. When a family pet dies, and a younger daughter loses an eye to caustic cleaning fluid, Kevin's mother knows who to blame. The ever optimistic Franklin rejects his wife's claims about their son, and suggests she needs to seek psychiatric help. The parents are on the verge of divorce when the school tragedy takes place.

These episodes from Kevin's upbringing are intercut with scenes of Eva's wretched existence in the present. She lost everything in the catastrophe, and now ekes out a living working in a travel agency, where she is something of a pariah. Her family's infamy has followed her: her small house is pelted with red paint, strangers whisper about her behind her back. A woman, presumably the mother of one of Kevin's victims, slaps her on a public street. Eva pays her son visits in prison, understandably tortured sequences.

The filmmakers go to some lengths to render Kevin as a sociopath. Whether playing violent video games, collecting computer viruses, viciously taunting his mother over dinner at a restaurant, masturbating in her presence, or sneering provocatively as he exits the scene of the high school carnage, etc., the character is loathsome virtually every time he makes an appearance on screen.

To what end?

The incidence of school shootings in the US is a serious social problem. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a significant increase in gun violence in American schools. From the mid-1990s in particular, the phenomenon of students shooting classmates and teachers became an increasingly regular item in the headlines. Some of the most painful episodes occurred in Pearl, Mississippi in October 1997, West Paducah, Kentucky in December 1997, Jonesboro, Arkansas in March 1998, Edinboro, Pennsylvania in April 1998, Springfield, Oregon in May 1998 and, of course, Littleton, Colorado in April 1999.

In the latter tragedy, two students, 17 and 18, shot and killed 15 people (including themselves) and wounded 27 others at Columbine High School.

Lionel Shriver's novel, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, was published in 2003, and Lynne Ramsay has been trying to make a film version for a number of years. The writer-director (born in Glasgow in 1969) first came to prominence for the much praised *Ratcatcher* in 1999. Her far weaker *Morvern Callar*, with Samantha Morton, was released in 2002.

Tilda Swinton throws herself body and soul into her performance as Eva, both in her uncertainty as a mother and her despair after Kevin's homicidal rampage. As in a number of other recent films, John C. Reilly, a fine actor, is not given much to do in an unrewarding part. Ezra Miller smirks and acts monstrously, often cartoonishly, as he was presumably directed to do.

The past and present in Ramsay's adaptation of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* are offered in fragments, which an audience member is asked to make sense of and which are intended to form a coherent picture. To a certain extent they do, but again, to what end?

Ramsay terms her most recent effort “a psychological horror film,” which “uses genre elements.” This is misleading. Until recent years at least, the film industry had means of announcing to an audience (heightened music, exaggerated pictorial and acting style, etc.) that a film belonged to the “horror” genre, and that its goings-on, in terms of their factual possibility, should be taken with a grain of salt.

Ramsay borrows her approach, on the other hand, from the global school of quasi-poetic realism. This is not *The Omen* (1976), or even *The Bad Seed* (1956), much less *Village of the Damned* (1960), which treat their outlandish material and child-villains in broad strokes.

We are meant to be viscerally convinced, with whatever implications, of Kevin's rottenness and Eva's misery. No expense is spared, so to speak, along those dramatic-cinematographic lines. And yet the whole thing is so preposterous and unconvincing. The film is interminable because it is so ill-conceived. Watching the hateful Kevin and the glum Eva for two hours is a painful experience. Moreover, the film exudes a general disgust for humanity.

Ramsay, apparently following the novelist Shriver, has decided to

treat the decidedly *social* problem of school mass killings as no social problem at all. The director has made life easy for herself by simply making Kevin malevolent. When George W. Bush denounced the “axis of evil,” he was ridiculed by liberal and left commentators. Yet the approach has had a definite resonance within an ideologically impoverished and disoriented pseudo-intellectuals.

The director observes that she “wasn’t interested” in the phenomenon of school shootings. “I wasn’t trying to make an issue-based film.” Instead, she was intrigued by “the mother-son relationship,” this “perverse love story.” *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, asserts Ramsay, is “about the unexplainable. That sometimes evil comes from some, you know, somewhere unexplained.”

When Eva asks Kevin to explain his fondness for destroying other people’s computers through viruses, he responds significantly (and a close-up underscores the significance), “There is no point, that’s the point.” The closest Kevin comes to explaining his murderous attack is to fault the population for its fascination with scandal and mayhem. People lead such dull and banal lives that “half the people on TV, inside the TV, they’re watching TV. What are these people watching? People like me.”

In addition, Ramsay and Shriver end up blaming their fictional mother figure, at least in part. The implication is that Eva should have followed her initial “bohemian” instincts and stayed out of the suburbs and away from having children.

The novelist, for instance, told an interviewer “the mother certainly is implicated. ... Look, Kevin may have been a difficult child, but she didn’t improve matters. I don’t mean to let her off the hook. She did help to make him.” Ramsay, for her part, indicates that the question posed in her film is whether the monster is the mother or the child. “If you see the son, he even looks like her. To me, the look was important; they had to look like each other. They have to reflect each other. By proxy, she has murdered all these people. It’s really exploring the psyche of a woman who has this massive guilt.”

This is deeply disoriented, even if Ramsay is simply talking off the top of her head. Thousands and thousands of people have been directly affected by school massacres in the US, far greater numbers have felt an indirect influence. It is irresponsible, cruel and hypocritical to blame the parents—or any individuals—in such cases. These terrible events are symptoms of a dysfunctional social order. Parents and children may have all sorts of complicated and troubled relations, but for the problems to find such devastating and destructive expression requires definite *social and historical conditions*.

Ramsay notes that Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003) was “a brilliant film that dealt with” Columbine and such tragedies. In fact, it did no such thing. Van Sant consciously set out to avoid offering an explanation of the school shootings, for which he was widely praised by the critics.

In a review, the WSWS commented at the time:

“What does it mean to explain the Columbine tragedy? Naturally, no one will ever know precisely what went through the minds of its perpetrators in the days leading up to the event. Nor can anyone can point conclusively to this or that trauma or slight as the straw that broke the camel’s back. There are individually specific and inexplicable elements in such mad acts. And no doubt the attempts by the American mass media, insofar as they made such, to grapple with the event were predictably shallow and empty.

“But why must ‘explanation’ equal ‘simplistic explanation’? It is impossible to calculate with mathematical exactness why this adolescent as opposed to that one collapses, mentally and morally, in

the face of certain socio-psychological pressures. If it is an equally unmanageable task, however, to build up a picture of the social, political and cultural atmosphere in which such irrational acts committed by *some* disoriented youth become a near inevitability, then what is the use of our art or our social science?”

However, Van Sant at least paid some attention to the daily lives of his future killers, and their interaction or lack of interaction with fellow students, teachers and parents. Ramsay’s film focuses exclusively, unhelpfully and tediously on the family unit. We never see any of Kevin’s experiences at school or with people his own age. That is of no interest here.

Nor, of course, are any of the features of American society that helped create the moral and psychological climate for the mass killings in the schools: the endless wars and talk of war, the social polarization, the worship of money, greed and selfishness, the brutalization and cheap misanthropy of popular culture and everyday life, the repudiation of the idea of social progress, the severe demoralization of a section of the youth, and all the rest.

Two general trends, which no doubt nourish each other, account for a film like *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. A section of the upper middle class artists finds it uncomfortable to examine social life seriously, because such an examination would involve holding up a mirror too closely to a society in which they live quite pleasantly. Second, decades of intellectual and cultural retrogression, unhappily, have produced a generation of artists who simply find it too taxing to work through a complex social problem. They throw up their hands and produce work like this.

The author also recommends:

The Columbine High School massacre: American Pastoral ...
American Berserk

[27 April 1999]



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