

HERSTORIES

LYNNE RAMSAY TALKS ABOUT NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THE GENDER OF STORYTELLING

By Eileen Elsey

In May 2001 I interviewed Lynne Ramsay whilst researching a book on short film for the BFI.¹ She was in the process of editing *Morvern Callar* at the time. I had been interviewing film-makers about their creative process, and became fascinated by the different ways people talked about it. In general, women discussed the gestation of an idea in a much more personal way, citing their own experiences and emotions, even considering how to bring subconscious elements into the conscious mind. The whole process seemed more amorphous and internal than that described by most male film-makers. How was this reflected in the finished film? Did it lead into a different sense of narrative structure? That is the background to the following discussion, an excerpt from a longer interview.

Eileen Elsey: In *Ratcatcher*, the ending is ambiguous. It's like you're offered two and you can choose which one.

Lynne Ramsay: Yes. That was a strange process for me. It was always going to end with them coming through the field with the furniture. I was getting a lot of pressure to have a happy ending. At that point I thought I'd go with this really ambiguous approach where one way you'd be in his head. I didn't want it to be a straight, happy ending. It was something to do with the pressure I was getting that I cut that way.

EE: People seem uncertain what the 'real' ending is, and it's probably because the style of that final scene makes it look like a fantasy or a daydream.

LR: It was meant to be a *dream*, well, not a dream - it's surrealistic. For me it was always that he's going down in the water and what is



projected for him is like his fantasy. I put him back in the water because I didn't want it to be heavily depressing, but neither did I want to finish it with this smiling kid looking down at the camera. So I tried to put these two things together and the reaction was amazing. I was fascinated about the way people were reading it.

EE: When you finished it, did you think he drowned?

LR: No, for me he's in the *process* of drowning. It's always in the present tense. That's what as a film-maker I was trying to do. I enjoyed playing with the structure of a film like that. It was quite a tenuous narrative in many ways but it was more of an

emotional kind of journey. That's the way I felt about it, and there were many, many ways I could have played with that. I could have cut that film till the cows come home. I still might go back when I'm very old if I could face it again. I'll do a DVD version, if anybody will let me re-cut it. I'm interested in different types of structure. The project I'm doing



mean that there isn't another way of doing it. I enjoy experimenting and taking risks with the form.

EE: Another quality of your work is an immersion in the moment. I think the opening shot of *Ratcatcher* - the child and the curtain - really brought that home to me, because offhand I can't think of another feature that starts on such a still, quiet shot and holds it. Those small movements, and the sound.

LR: That was an accident, the way that shot happened in some ways. It was written in the script that the kid's turning the curtain. When I was doing the title sequence, the shot was slowed right down to put on the graphics and I said, "hang on, that really works." It had a kind of spooky quality to it. I always knew that I wanted to use that image slightly like a shroud - it points to the fact that the wee boy's going to die in some kind of subconscious way. I love using images in that way, and that also comes from being a stills photographer as well. It's attention to details that are not dramatic and trying to make them dramatic, rather than the drama being in the narrative; and the timing can give something power because of the length. And also sound. The sound I think I used there was of blood going through arteries. It's just a low rumble. It's about making drama from the details you normally don't pay any attention to.

EE: Do you think there is any connection between gender and narrative structures?

LR: I don't know if it's gender or individuals, but we've been taught to tell a story in a certain way, and it's very rigid. It's mostly men who have been making films and it's a much more rigid kind of cutting. It started out with, "this is the way we tell stories", which is very much like theatre in some ways I guess; three acts. I don't really make films like that, some other people don't really

make films like that, but it feels like it's the only form being presented a lot of the time.

EE: Are films with a clearer narrative direction easier to sell or get commissioned?

LR: Probably. If you present something different, it's like, "oh, we're not really used to that." It's not impossible to break through that but, as I said, it's the way we've been shown things traditionally and I think it's really, really hard to change. But some people are sick of seeing the same old thing all the time. It's quite interesting for me watching people looking at things I've done. They'd normally think they wouldn't like it because it's a wee bit too vague or it didn't present things on a plate. But then they found they did because they were given some room to come to their own conclusions. I'm a great believer in that.

I'm really excited with *Morvern Callar*, because I think it's quite risky and it's also hard to compare it to other things. I see that as a positive thing. It's also scary. *Ratcatcher* I wrote myself and it was quite a toughy. Now I'm interested in making my work go in a slightly different direction. I'm taking adaptations that are really hard to adapt, they're not something that you would say is the easiest thing to put on the screen. Maybe taking characters, it's almost like writing a script from scratch. I'd like to do another original project as well but that's harder. I think I'll probably do another adaptation and then start doing something original again.

Received wisdom is that the duration of a feature film requires a conventional three-act structure, active protagonist, escalating action and sense of closure in order to sustain audience interest. But does this construct fit more easily with traditional qualities of masculinity? There are other ways, and Lynne Ramsay's films,

whether short² or feature length, show us an alternative approach. They have a sensuality and immersion which slows, or even stops, the narrative pace. In *Ratcatcher*, the stasis at the opening of the film is brief. In *Morvern Callar*, it extends through the opening sequence, as we watch a woman poleaxed by the suicide of her boyfriend and wait for her to react. The shots of her caressing his body, going to the station and home again, opening and examining his presents, listening to music, smoking cigarettes, feel like an extended suspension of the narrative. It is the portrayal of the grieving of some-one who doesn't know what to do with grief, and has no truck with conventional forms of it. Likewise, the film forces us - partly through its rich, sensual visuals - to inhabit the moment rather than chase the narrative. v



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1 Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly, *In Short: A Guide to Short Film-making in the Digital Age*, London: BFI, 2002. 2 *Small Deaths* (1995, 10 mins) is made up of three separate parts and Ramsay wrote more episodes than were shot. *Kill the Day* (1996, 18 mins) has a disrupted, timeless feel to it, and she decided the final order of the sequences in the edit suite. *Gasman* (1997, 15 mins) is the straightest narrative, although the ending is inconclusive.