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(Post)traumatic Oscillations: A Preliminary Exploration of an Affective Dynamic

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Abstract
Recent decades have witnessed a renewed interest in trauma, both as a subject of scholarly inquiry and as a theme in film and popular culture. A significant portion of contemporary cinema, particularly mainstream productions, focus on how trauma shapes the character's backstory – a ubiquitous and reductive approach that treats trauma as a mere plot device, replacing nuanced character development with a simplified 'trauma plot.' In contrast, Lynne Ramsay's films offer a different approach, portraying characters in the aftermath of trauma and exploring their experiences not only through narrative but also through a unique cinematic style. The author of the article employs Jill Bennett's framework for analysing images of trauma to examine how the formal elements of the film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) reflect the (post)traumatic experience through the affective dynamic of oscillation. Furthermore, she explores how this oscillatory dynamic facilitates particular modes of empathic engagement, recreating in the audience an affective experience structurally akin to that of trauma.

In late December 2021, *The New Yorker* published Parul Sehgal's divisive essay on trauma in contemporary fiction. In "The Case Against the Trauma Plot," the influential literary critic argues that in the early 21st century, the employment of a reductive understanding of trauma in storytelling has become ubiquitous in diverse media texts. From nameless literary heroines plagued by disturbing flashbacks to brooding Marvel superheroes confronting their harrowing pasts, *on the page and on the screen*, Sehgal claims, *one plot – the trauma plot – has arrived to rule them all*.[1] In works following this trope, an excessive and misplaced emphasis on trauma leads to reducing the character to their devastating backstory, with their entire personality and all motivations becoming merely the scar tissue formed on and around their psychic wounds. The narrative itself relies heavily on foreshadowing and hinges on the Big Reveal. Uncovered in the final act – the flashback frequently serving as a vehicle for exposition – the hitherto inferred traumatic event comes into focus: a shocking revelation, an epiphany often meant for both the audience and the character. The 'trauma plot' invokes trauma not just as a trope or plot device, which, when handled badly, is cheap and exploitative enough in and of itself. This plot replaces actual story or character development. It signals rather than explores the complexity of traumatic experiences and their painful aftermath, reducing an already slippery and ambiguous term to a sensational buzzword. Sehgal concludes that *the trauma plot flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority*.[2]

Sehgal's combative and somewhat bitter essay seems to accurately capture something of the cultural zeitgeist. If only judging by the ripples it caused in the chronically online section of the commentariat, it was, indeed, the take that launched a thousand substacks. Almost simultaneously, *Harper's Magazine* published its December 2021 "Against Trauma" issue, in which writer and journalist Will Self contemplates the notion of trauma as a function of modernity: historically situated instead of timeless and universal, intertwined with the acceleration and specularity of media and technology, its most jarring symptoms only the extreme version of what is otherwise the quotidian experience of a distinctively modern consciousness.[3] By the end of January 2022, writing for the "Memory" issue of the digital magazine *The Highlight* – a branch of *Vox* focused on more in-depth think pieces – author and journalist Lexi Pandell declared trauma the *word of the decade*. Her essay conveys a weariness with both the increasingly pathologized public discourse and contemporary culture's infatuation with trauma.[4] Clearly, this growing trauma fatigue has reached the mainstream: from the well-versed audiences relentlessly ridiculing authors' overreliance on trauma plots via viral memes and TikToks to the increasingly self-aware creators poking fun at their own characters' tragic backstories while searching for ways to invert or transcend clichéd tropes.[5] The question remains: How can one engage with trauma narratives without a heavy reliance on a totalizing backstory, without falling prey to the reductionism and convenience of exploitative tropes and plot devices?

But then again, why do we consider trauma a "story" in the first place? It does not seem entirely coincidental that Parul Sehgal deals first and foremost with literature. So does Cathy Caruth, one of the leading theorists in trauma studies and professor of comparative literature at Cornell University. In her seminal work

Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, first published in 1996, Caruth constructs a framework for analyzing trauma narratives derived from psychoanalysis and literary theory. The method serves as her own version of an ethically informed hermeneutics of suspicion. Caruth does not focus on narrative content as such, but remains honed in on the literary dimension of the works she investigates. She reads for signs of trauma through recurring words and figures, which function as both floating signifiers and symptoms of an underlying "unclaimed" traumatic experience – the severed referents of a missed encounter with the Real.[6] By placing such an emphasis on *traumatic textualities*,[7] Caruth's extraordinarily influential book solidified the psychoanalytic tradition of conflating – or perhaps confounding? – the literary and the experiential[8] within the emerging discipline of trauma studies. She also championed an approach that examines trauma in literature, theory, and testimony – from the perspective of textual analysis. In Caruth's writing – much like in Sigmund Freud's before her and in the works of many who followed her lead – trauma remains a weighted paradox: an experience neither *assimilated or experienced fully at the time*[9] nor integrated into personal narrative or memory. It resists symbolization and thus proves uncommunicable. Yet, it is meant to be read for, hermeneutically analysed, and deconstructed like a literary text – its hidden meanings uncovered, the pain eventually relived and relieved through testimony, "the talking cure," through *listening to another's wound*.[10]

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But trauma is no text. Initially, the focus on literature stemmed – at least in part – from its capacity to not only represent but also *perform trauma by means of a range of complex narrative techniques* that Nicole A. Sütterlin calls *a poetics of trauma*.[11] However, with time, the continuing overreliance on the literary and the textual – from trauma theory, through art, to popular media – resulted in the oversimplified view of trauma and its impact through the lens of narrative content, backstory, or plot rather than form.[12] Thus, the emergence of a separate strand of trauma research, less invested in the sheer 'aboutness'[13] of the work, was all but inevitable. Such is the theoretical proposal of scholar and curator Jill Bennett laid out in her 2005 book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. While working on an art exhibition that explored themes of trauma and memory, Bennett noted that in the artworks she engaged with, *trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work*.[14] At the time, most of the academic work on trauma focused on modernist and postmodernist works,[15] centring around how real traumatic events – the Holocaust privileged among them as both exceptional and particularly influential[16] – impacted art, literature, and film.[17] Instead, forfeiting outright testimony and autobiography, abandoning the literary and the textual, and concentrating mainly on the non-narrative and the nonrepresentational led Bennett to develop a more affectively- and experientially-focused framework. This enabled thinking about how trauma may be expressed, conveyed, communicated, or evoked within the visual arts – in a way that may be considered affectively truthful[18] without reference to factual occurrences, an individual's internal psychology, or a set of

clinical symptoms. Her concern is not so much with the "meaning" or traumatic "source" of the art as with its form and modus operandi: the processes through which *affect is produced within and through a work, and how it might be experienced by an audience*.[19] This shift of perspective from searching for the traumatic e v e n t (the gruesome backstory, the wound beneath the scar tissue) buried within the text to focusing on the effects of the traumatic e x p e r i e n c e (the affective response, the lived and negotiated sensuous aftermath) registered in the work allows for a more complex and multifaceted way of engaging with trauma narratives. It may even provide some reprieve for those with 'trauma plot' fatigue.

Responding to an encountered affective experience requires different methods of engagement than the ones granted by literary theory's strategy of reading for trauma. Bennett agrees on this matter with the ethical foundations for trauma research laid out by such theorists as Dominick LaCapra and Kaja Silverman.[20] In Bennett's opinion, *critical and self-reflective empathy* constitutes the most appropriate form of audience engagement with works concerning trauma; however, she discerns her understanding of the term from its other interpretations within the field of trauma studies.[21] Specifically, in justifying her decision to focus on non-narrative works, she contrasts modes of empathy elicited by film with those evoked by other visual arts: *narrative film*, she insists, *lends itself to a realist interpretation by virtue of characterization … but most contemporary art does not*.[22] Bennett explains that *the affective responses engendered by artworks are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather, they emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work*.[23] From this, she develops an understanding of this sensation-based empathy as a catalyst for conceptual engagement, critical inquiry, and, eventually, a more profound affective and political understanding than the one offered by narrative-driven sympathy and emotional identification.

Bennett's reluctance toward narrative film comes as no surprise, considering the state of trauma studies at the time of her writing. Trauma-oriented scholars privileged victim statements and witness testimonies – thus prioritizing content and meaning – and remained fascinated with "Holocaust films" and documentaries, particularly Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). They tended to equate empathy with identification, going as far as to argue for the emergence of vicarious trauma in viewers.[24] Indeed, the early trauma studies' interest in trauma-as-narrative seems antithetical to Bennett's affective approach. However, I would argue that not only is narrative film not precluded from engaging the audience in a way that elicits an empathetic response akin to the one Bennett reserves for contemporary art, but the two modes of empathy are not at all exclusive. In her article "Fiction Film and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," cognitive film theorist Margrethe Bruun Vaage examines two models for prompting empathy in response to fiction film. These models prove quite similar to those discussed by Bennett: an *imaginative empathy*, driven by an understanding of the character and the narrative, and a primarily affective *embodied empathy*, elicited through stylistic effects.[25] Vaage defines the terms slightly differently and less scrupulously than Bennett, and eventually abandons her declared "integrative" intent to ascribe the two modes of engagement to different strands of cinema – "dedramatized" versus "mainstream." Still, I would insist that incentives for the audience to get empath-

ically involved with the aid of different processes can coexist in one work, their relation being complimentary rather than antagonistic. This includes the potential for the identification-based empathy derived from characters and plot to operate within the narrative fiction film alongside the sensuous engagement of the self--reflexive empathy, as described by Bennett.

This sensation-based and self-reflective empathic response to the affective dynamic of an artwork possesses a certain dynamic of its own – one marked by tension and variability. While further discussing empathic engagement with trauma registered in art, Bennett describes it as *characterized by a distinctive combination of affective and intellectual operations, but also by a dynamic oscillation* [emphasis added], *"a constant tension of going to and fro … of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from."*[26] The oscillation she invokes refers to empathy's pendulous movement between one's own emotional state and the trauma registered within the work; this movement, itself vacillating between the affective and the intellectual, proves essential for the recognition of the encountered affect as foreign and the development of a heteropathic, self-reflexive empathy: *feeling for another* rather than either pure emotional contagion or an exercise in imaginative identification.[27] However, oscillation does not exclusively describe the dynamic of self-reflective empathy but also characterizes the experience and aftermath of trauma. Yet, Bennett does not seem to make this connection. Following Hal Foster's account in *The Return of the Real*, of the ambivalent, "bipolar" affective posture of a section of postmodernist contemporary artists, Bennett describes the dynamic of the psychic shock of trauma as an *oscillation* [emphasis added] *between feeling and nonfeeling … "pure affect, no affect: it hurts, I can't feel anything."*[28] She goes on to elaborate on the ambivalence and fluidity of the trauma registered in the works discussed in her book: *not simply … an interior condition but … a transformative process that impacts on the world as much as on bodies, … trauma … is never unproblematically "subjective"; neither "inside" nor "outside," it is always lived and negotiated at an intersection*.[29] Thus, the very affective dynamic of trauma can be described as oscillation.[30]

While oscillation is not particular to trauma, it is, I would argue, applicable to trauma in particular. From the destabilizing whiplash of trauma's initial shock, through the processes by which trauma's impact manifests in lived experience – the alternating cycles of feeling and nonfeeling, the paradoxical synchronicity of avoidance and arousal, and the eternal recurrence of the flashback – to the *to and fro* of empathic engagement, the figure of oscillation seems especially suited to discuss the slippery, ambivalent, and negotiated nature of trauma itself, the post-traumatic experience, and the manner of engaging with trauma-related work.[31] Processual and dynamic, capable of simultaneously containing the notions of "here" and "there" or "both" and "neither," oscillation aptly describes the throbbing tension and the incessant movement between the ostensibly conflicting aspects of trauma's experiential aftershocks: the convulsive motion from taught repression to vivid recollection, the fragmentation of the self and its concurrent saturation with affect, the fraught intersection of hypervigilance and numbness, the contradictory state of knowing and not knowing. I would argue that oscillation is not only an important facet of the distinct affective dynamic of the (post)

traumatic experience. It is also one of the processes through which affect may be produced within a work and experienced by an audience. If, in accordance with Bennett's argument, trauma can manifest in an affective dynamic marked by oscillation, then recreating the oscillating motion of the post-traumatic experience within a work could arguably have the power to induce the pendulous, oscillating movement of self-reflexive empathy in the audience.[32]

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With this framework in place, I turn to the cinematic oeuvre of Scottish director and screenwriter Lynne Ramsay, whose work exhibits a similar vacillating quality. An uncompromising filmmaker both behind the camera and in her treatment of the audience, Ramsay has a singular vision and talent for teamwork. So far, she has directed four feature films,[33] in which she demonstrated her fascination with the possibilities of film language which rivals that of cinema's earliest creators, freshly discovering the possibilities of the new medium. From her 1999 social (sur)realist feature debut *Ratcatcher*, through the raw and sensuous 2002 indie *Morvern Callar* and her 2011 first (successful) foray into mainstream, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, to the acclaimed *You Were Never Really Here*, for which she received the Best Screenplay Award at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, Ramsay committed to exploring the experience of the aftermath of trauma through her unique cinematic style and audiovisual language, the affective dynamic of which can be interpreted through the notion of oscillation. Hers is a "bifocal" or "varifocal" cinema, one that continuously forces the audience to readjust their focus. The shift itself often takes place without conscious input, almost subliminally, like the eye accommodating to slight changes in perceived distance or light conditions. This mechanism is particularly evident in – but not limited to – the perpetual *to and fro* of the story and affect, of meaning and form, of the recurring back-and-forth between a film's aboutness and its sensuous, affective effects. Thus, it is equally easy for the audience to become completely immersed in the story, as it is to become violently cast out of it due to a spectacular feat of cinematic craftsmanship: a disorienting close-up, a chillingly sudden shift in the emotional tone, a strategically placed explosion of sound, or a brutal editing cut. The pendulum of attention then swings the other way when a surprising plot development or an abrupt change to narrative pace – an interference with the story's relentless goings-on – breaks the immersion in the sensuous, the affective, or the visual.

This oscillatory aspect of Ramsay's cinema seems to particularly puzzle critics and scholars, who, time and again, attempt to negotiate the exact situation of her work at the intersection of the narrative and the haptic, of the body and the screen, of language and sensation. For instance, David Trotter conducts a comprehensive analysis of *Ratcatcher* – as clever in tone as it is ambitious in scope. Using the concept of the "haptic narrative," he develops an especially interesting approach to the question of how sensuous imagery in general – and Laura Marks's 'haptic visuality' in particular – can work within and in service of the narrative.[34] Raymond De Luca presents a different Laura Marks-inspired haptic take. He compares Ramsay's interest in the surfaces of the screen and body to der-

matology, and while he makes some very interesting points, his analogy seems, dare I say, a little superficial.[35] Another scholar showing a dermatological interest is Paula Quigley, who employs the double meaning of the phrase 'sheer epidermis' to discuss how Ramsay's films treat the characters' faces as simultaneously opaque and transparent.[36] Even when authors focus primarily on the films' thematic content, as Sue Thornham does in her discussion of *We Need To Talk about Kevin*, they are not immune to the pull of the back-and-forth dynamic of Ramsay's cinematic language. Indeed, Thornham notes the *material presence and texture* of the screen and the *constant slippage between … transparency and texture, and between image and sound*.[37] These are just a few examples of how Ramsay's work seems to inspire readings centred on various aspects of the oscillatory *to and fro* movement inherent to her cinematic style.

In the following – tentative – analysis, I apply the oscillatory trauma dynamic derived from Bennett to *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Ramsay's third feature and an adaptation of Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel of the same name. The film follows former travel writer Eva Khatchadourian (Tilda Swinton) in the aftermath of violent and horrific events involving her son, Kevin (Ezra Miller). Received positively by film critics and moderately successful at the box office, the film soon became a favourite of academics and film scholars, mainly due to its observant and complex portrayal of a woman's ambivalent relationship with motherhood.[38] Instead of following this theme, I employ an affective-experiential approach to examine how certain formal and structural oscillations within the work relate to the embodied aspects of the (post)traumatic experience and whether they can facilitate a mode of reception based on self-reflexive empathy. While Bennett's work focuses specifically on the non-narrative and nonrepresentational, I intentionally chose to work with narrative film. The latter allows for a critical engagement with the oscillation between the textual and the audiovisual, enabling an exploration of how the cinematic form's affective and sensuous aspects are built upon and used in service of the trauma narrative while interrupting or obstructing the story's linear progression. With the trauma narrative in mind, I will revisit certain findings from Caruth's early writings while maintaining the previously stated stipulations. Additionally, I will draw on the work of more contemporary trauma theorists. At the same time, instead of attempting a thorough analysis of how trauma is registered in both the textual and the audiovisual layer of the work, I purposely apply the oscillatory framework only fragmentarily, to selected scenes, sequences, and structural mechanics found in Ramsay's film. In doing so, I wish to rely on the characters' inferred psychology and plot as little as possible to avoid privileging the aboutness over the affective dynamic of the work. I believe that this seemingly paradoxical line of thought will prove clearer in the course of the analysis. Therefore, the following is neither an exhaustive breakdown of the trauma registered in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* nor an attempt at a comprehensive interpretation of the work or Ramsay's broader cinematic oeuvre. Instead, it serves as a preliminary exploration of the possibilities that result from applying the framework of oscillation to engaging with themes of trauma in narrative fiction film.

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Following Sigmund Freud's writings on trauma and history, Caruth describes the temporal dynamic of trauma as *the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return*. She determines that the traumatic is distinguished by *its refusal to be simply located, … its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time*.[39] Indeed, among the many oscillations that characterize the post-traumatic experience, the vacillating spatiotemporal dynamic at the intersection of the past and the present, represented in the flashback, stands out as the most ostensible and arguably the most cinematic one. In fact, Ramsay constructs *We Need to Talk about Kevin* entirely from oscillating flashbacks – understood both as the plot device of analepsis and the affective experience related to trauma. To demonstrate how Ramsay achieves this traumatic spatiotemporal oscillation through the film's formal aspects, I will begin by outlining and discussing the first three minutes of its opening sequence, which contains a condensed version of the film's affective modus operandi. The film's initial sequence consists of two scenes whose status seems unclear at first; it is only on the second viewing that the components which comprise the opening sequence become legible and can – to an extent – be located within the diegetic world. At first, we can read the two scenes as belonging to a dream sequence. While Ramsay positions them as such within the film's narrative construction – directly after this sequence we see the heroine lying on a couch – they are simultaneously an audiovisual composite made up of elements taken from the main character's several lived experiences.[40]

The film opens with a dark screen accompanied by an initially unidentifiable rhythmic rustling sound. A sudden, slightly metallic whooshing noise coincides with the onscreen appearance of the film's title, with the name "Kevin" lingering on the screen a little longer than the other words. A glass doorway leading from a dark interior to a moonlit backyard takes up the centre of the first shot; the door is slightly ajar and, on the inside, a white translucent curtain is blowing in the wind. At this point, the rhythmic rustling may arguably be identified as the sound of garden sprinklers, which soon becomes intertwined with the slowly emerging voices of shouting cheerleaders. The juxtaposition of the presumably tranquil night scene and the mismatched, partially extradiegetic sound, in conjunction with the lack of other context cues, saturates the take with an unstable, oneiric quality which may lead the audience to question the meaning and status of the audiovisual image. While the sprinkler sound is becoming more insistent and the voices of the cheerleaders are fading out, the camera zooms in slowly at the curtain but halts just before the door, as if to avoid entering the yard. Instead, the image fades to white and then shifts to a different scene, one that stands in stark contrast to the first.

The sprinkler noise fades out and is replaced by the uproar of a crowd and the sound of air horns. The frame a filled with a bird's-eye view of a stirring mass of partially naked people, covered in chunks of red slush and drenched in red liquid. Initially, the scene, accompanied by constant noise, seems difficult to interpret: people move abruptly and aimlessly, some pushing through, shoving others, or falling into the muck. Bodies are squeezed against each other, and sludge flies

in handfuls. A young woman is carried in a man's arms, revealing more of the red pulpy mass under the crowd's feet. Eventually, a bucket is passed above people's heads, allowing the audience to conclusively identify the red substance as tomato pulp – the rowdy mob is taking part in Spain's La Tomatina festival, the biggest food fight in the world. In the following shot, a woman, Eva, is picked up and carried by the crowd, body covered in red mush, an ecstatic expression on her face. As she slowly loses that look of bliss and returns to the ground, the monotonous roar of the crowd gives way to something more distinct and more alarming, the muffled sounds of a dire emergency: a semi-rhythmic pounding, a distant alarm, desperate, panicked voices. Among them, a woman's scream rises: 'Not my baby!' Now lying in the red mush, tomato pulp thrown at her by the crowd, Eva attempts to cover her face and turn away, in a gesture that brings to mind anguish or shame. The sequence's final shot is just a close-up of the undulating red slush accompanied by the continuing sounds of the emergency. The distressed voices fade out slowly only after the image cuts away to an unfocused partial view of what later proves to be a curtained window in a different interior. A disturbing reddish tinge lingers over the room, as though it has bled over from the previous scene.

Oscillation marks the affective dynamic of this sequence through several mechanisms – all of them utilized by Ramsay throughout the entire film to convey the fractured temporality of the post-traumatic experience. The second sequence's affective and thematic oscillation is the most immediately accessible:[41] while the images from La Tomatina remain relatively consistent visually, the interpretation and affective tone of the sequence transform radically due to the scene's duration and gradual soundtrack shifts. The sequence initially prompts the audience to interpret the scene as one of violence, tragedy, or disaster, and instinctively read the chaotic pulp-covered crowd as drenched in blood and gore. At the very least, the audience is confronted with the unease of not entirely understanding the unfolding event. Later, the sequence's duration allows viewers to process some of the scene's additional details. The audience is, presumably, moved to relief by the recognition of the benign and, indeed, festive character of the onscreen happenings – only to become unsettled again by the gruesome implications carried by the sound of panicked voices: a return of the initial reading of the scene as that of violence and trauma. This layered construction, which triggers an oscillating dynamic of successive (mis)recognitions, not only destabilizes the interpretation and affective tone of the scene but also splits[42] the very audiovisual image. The emergency sounds introduced in what is only belatedly understood as an extradiegetic sound layer prompt the realization that post factum subverts the status of the scene – hitherto presumed realistic, or at least internally cohesive. This disjointed and variable oscillation of meaning and affect does not stem solely from the image's fluctuating interpretations based on the shifting sound or from the tension of the knowns and unknowns that alternate within the image, but it is also a function of the spatiotemporal slippage of the flashback.

Whereas, in both the conventional sense and its implementation in film, the flashback is understood as a recurring i m a g e , the post-traumatic reexperiencing of trauma is, in fact, a vivid embodied e x p e r i e n c e that may take on different sensuous aspects. Any part of the traumatic experience can be involun-

tarily recalled, just as any sensation or situation can become a trigger for the shudder of recollection. And while, as bemoaned by Sehgal, the 'trauma plot' narratives tend to reduce the flashback to a crude tool for exposition or employ it as a way to explicitly present a violent event for shock value, a more affective, multisensory way of representing traumatic retrospection is also gaining traction.[43] This more sensuous, experiential approach goes beyond framing the flashback around fear or pain as such; instead, the flashback is recognized as an experience structured by insistent intrusiveness and a disorienting, paralyzing incomprehensibility. The most unfathomable aspect of the experience lies in the paradoxical recognition that the flashback encompasses both disjointedness and simultaneity:[44] the sudden pang of a "then" and "elsewhere" within the "here" and "now." The shock of trauma re-emerges not only through the flashback's affective content but also through the stark contradiction of revisiting a sensuous memory in the present tense.[45] *We Need to Talk about Kevin* employs retrospections in such a way: the film's temporal construction dictated not by plot requirements but by the oscillating affective dynamic of Eva's disorganized experience of slipping consciousness and jumbled memory. After all, trauma is a *wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world*.[46] To convey this disjointed spatiotemporal experience, Ramsay often overlays or contrasts elements – images and/or sounds – from different points in Eva's timeline within one scene or sequence. Eva's past remains ever-present in her life; it is as real as the everyday. Crucially, Ramsay does not employ this strategy to merely create a blunt juxtaposition of the past and the present or the traumatic and the mundane – in fact, situations from different timepoints frequently merge through smooth, seamless editing, with their stark contrast revealed only in the pause that these temporal slippages give the audience. Instead, the director tangles and intertwines various points within Eva's present with various points in – and versions of – her past: her spatiotemporal experience marked by wild oscillation that follows an irrational, purely affective logic, trapping the character in a cruel interplay of similitude and dissonance.

Ramsay's film does not have a "then" and "now" but rather motions *to and fro* in a continuous slippage, its scenes and sequences resembling layered shards of fractured past and present.[47] At a certain point, it can be discerned that the opening scene with Eva waking up on the couch – interpreted, due to its placement, as the commencement of the narrative – while positioned within the "present,"[48] does not indicate the beginning of a linearly progressing story marked by flashbacks of the traumatic past (for one thing, a lot of these retrospectives have a prosaic nature[49]). Instead, the scene remains just an arbitrary entry point into the temporally shattered story, surrounded by scenes from other scattered moments – some of them more and others less distant in time. Because of this jumbled structure, within the film's spatiotemporal realm, the traumatic oscillation works not as a flashback but rather as a continuous t i m e s l i p ,[50] yanking Eva through different points in time and space by means of affective triggers – often unexpected and sometimes mundane ones.[51] Sitting in a travel agency office with posters advertising journeys to exotic locations can jerk Eva – and the narration – back to two years earlier, when she was sitting in a different office decorated by a different set of exotic posters in the moments leading up to the traumatic event that ruined


Tampa
awaits
Tenerife

her life and family. The corridor of a yoga studio is affectively interchangeable with the corridor of a prison, which in turn might as well become the corridor of a hospital. Getting in the car can take Eva home, to the store, or to work but also back to her son's childhood, in front of a prison gate, or to a crime scene; neither Eva nor the audience can ever be entirely sure where and when she ends up. The red foliage of trees passed during one of the car trips might change to the site of violent atrocities in an instant – just as the innocuous tomato pulp of La Tomatina transforms into the blood of the school shooting perpetrated by her son, though, notably, not onscreen.[52] Marked by trauma, both the character and the narrative become unmoored and destabilized, forced to oscillate confusedly between several spatiotemporal planes. These timeslips serve not just to express a facet of Eva's traumatized experience: while viewers must see her as a somewhat unreliable focalizer, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is by no means a mind-game film that plays out "inside someone's head." By spreading to the film's very construction, the timeslips include/involve the audience in the ordeal. Thus, the oscillating affective experience of the film remains partially shared[53] – or, at the very least, similarly disorientating. As for Eva, so for the audience, no point in time or narration can be considered a stable referent or a safe retreat. A situation may shift at any given point to become an entirely different situation, tinged with different affective undertones and carrying different emotional stakes – and one can never know beforehand which of them may reveal a hitherto undisclosed trauma.[54]

Some of the confusion and disorientation that occur in front of – and not just on – the screen stems from the audience's quick realization that they can never be sure what exactly they are looking at. One could even read this as an invitation to engage in a kind of spectatorial hypervigilance. The scenes from La Tomatina provide a sufficiently convenient example of this fundamental uncertainty in relation to the cinematic image: even disregarding the destabilizing effect of the soundtrack, without prior knowledge of the Spanish festival and its traditions, the audience may eventually recognize the images as festive rather than violent, yet struggle to assign them a fixed, conclusive meaning. Instead, viewers may end up treating the scene as a dream, a metaphor, a purely visual or haptic effect, etc. This experience is emblematic of the instability of knowledge – a hesitation characteristic of the post-traumatic condition. As Caruth claims, trauma always takes place *too soon, too suddenly, too unexpectedly to be fully grasped by consciousness*, its *overwhelming immediacy produces … belated uncertainty*.[55] This uncertainty informs the oscillating construction of Ramsay's film, which one can interpret as Eva not just slipping through time but also continuously questioning her memories and experiences in a gesture not entirely dissimilar to the literary theory method of reading for trauma. The timeslips/flashbacks she goes through could then be understood as her scanning through memories for early warning signs of what was going to happen, maybe even searching for any crucial moments, the timely recognition of which would allow her to prevent the traumatic events – a form of misplaced post-factum vigilance. Weathered by trauma – which bears at its core *the delay or incompletion in knowing, or even in seeing*[56] – Eva seems to recognize that she might not have initially comprehended what she was witnessing or experiencing, so now she attempts to re-view it with the hindsight of her ex-post traumatic know-

ledge.[57] But as the audience reviews Eva's timeslip memories with her, they, too, often lack relevant information and context – they are deprived of the significance of particular scenes or their elements. This leads to *a cognitive paralysis relieved only by the retrodetermined revelation of a given scene's meaning*,[58] which allows Ramsay to explore another aspect of the affective dynamic of trauma within the film: the oscillation between knowing and not knowing.

Caruth discusses this aspect of the experience of trauma in more detail. Once again following Freud, she defines trauma as, at its core, a missed encounter, an event whose true meaning and impact is, at first, unrecognized or overlooked. *Trauma*, Caruth claims, *is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on*.[59] Ramsay seemingly employs this notion of trauma as an experience not known or understood in the first instance, along with the accompanying motion from "experiencing without knowing," through the oscillation of "unknowingly reexperiencing," to, eventually, "knowing." In doing so, she purposely shapes the audience's experience of the film, so that it structurally resembles the affective experience of trauma.[60] Since the film plays out in a continual timeslip, a temporal oscillation, the audience revisits scenes and sites of trauma and violence without factual or affective knowledge of what they are confronted with. While such a traumatic omission takes place at many points within the film, it seems most poignant and condensed in the opening sequence, whose disjointed elements are only put into context at the film's end. Therefore, the audience can partially grasp these elements in retrospect, knowing them fully only on the second viewing.[61] By the end of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the audience learns that the rhythmic rustling of sprinklers at the very beginning of the film is the sound that accompanied Eva as she found the bodies of her murdered family. The nocturnal scene, where the camera approaches the glass door, is revealed to depict the lead up to the traumatizing discovery from Eva's viewpoint, its affective impact the more powerful for the fact that, since the scene is not integrated narratively within the film, it is easily forgettable – until its traumatic recurrence. Likewise, the metallic "whoosh" underscoring the appearance of the film's title now emerges as the sound of an arrow released from a bow – Kevin's murder weapon. The raised voices of cheerleaders allude to the school shooting he carried out – the anguished sounds of the massacre's aftermath play over the crowd scene at La Tomatina. Recognizing the sources of these sounds – in an ex-post recollection or during the second viewing – is accompanied by the affective shock brought on by the knowledge that the audience lacks when first encountering the seemingly benign scenes. The audience's reaction stems from the delayed realization of unknowingly "witnessing" a traumatic event – the striking, unbelievable incomprehensibility of simultaneously "having seen" and "having missed." This affective reaction occurs only through the oscillation between the first (unknowing) and second (knowing) viewing of the scene. This shock of delayed experience is again, in Caruth's terms, structurally akin to that of trauma.

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This necessarily fragmentary analysis of the oscillatory affective dynamic of trauma in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* serves as a preliminary exploration of the possibilities offered by applying an affective-experiential framework derived from Jill Bennett's work on nonrepresentational art to narrative fiction film. Due to the limitations of the article form, I focused on analysing the *to and fro* motion of only a few cinematic mechanisms employed by Ramsay in the film: flashbacks and timeslips, splitting the audiovisual image, and the induction of the paradoxical movement between not knowing and knowing. However, one can find the abovementioned oscillatory affective dynamic in other aspects of a (narrative) film's structure. Keeping to examples from Ramsay's filmography: in *Ratcatcher*, it might reside in the slippage between naturalism and oneirism – and perhaps between order and mess[62] – while in *Morvern Callar* it could manifest in the vacillating movement between affective detachment and saturation or between (inaccessible) interiority and haptic materiality.[63] In *You Were Never Really Here* – the one film explicitly tackling PTSD at the level of its 'aboutness' – an oscillatory dynamic becomes particularly pronounced, marking the continuous movement between the surface of the film image and its depth[64] and the resulting shifts from sensuous to plot-driven engagement (and back again). This interplay creates a throbbing tension between the pulpy genre narrative and the highly stylized cinematic form. In my opinion, the oscillation between the textual and the audiovisual underscores the value of expanding Bennett's theory to encompass narrative film.

Understanding trauma as an affective dynamic that structures the work's formal aspect – rather than a formative event constricted to or buried within the text – allows the (post)traumatic experience to transcend the identification-based empathy derived from character and plot, and, no longer contained within the story, inform and saturate the entire work. This does not dismiss imaginative empathy and identification altogether. Instead, it highlights how the two modes of empathy can alternate within a work. Therefore, while *We Need to Talk about Kevin* remains narratively legible regarding the plot, event structure, and – to an extent – character psychology, its narrative and representational nature does not preclude conducting *an analysis of the affective transaction in terms other than those of the identificatory relationship*, as postulated by Bennett.[65] The proposed framework enables the recognition and understanding of how the film's *engagement with intensely realized but disturbing sensory experience is not simply localized in Eva*,[66] even though the trauma that saturates the film form concerns a particular character. While the audience is exposed to Eva's subjective viewpoint – at times literally, as in the use of point-of-view shots in the nocturnal scene or in the reddish tinge that seemingly bleeds over from her dream/memory of La Tomatina and stains the following frame – their experience, though marked by a structurally similar oscillation, is simply not the same as Eva's.[67] Moreover, there is an almost strategic[68] opacity to Eva's motivations, even – perhaps especially – after we learn her whole story: she is neither necessarily relatable nor sympathetic. Rather than interpellating viewers into a particular sympathetic response[69] through a convincing portrayal

of a psychologically compelling character, Ramsay limits the audience's access to the protagonist's motivations. Instead, through the use of the oscillatory affective dynamic, Ramsay stages Eva's profoundly wounded way of existing in the world, thus evoking an empathy *grounded not in affinity (feeling for another insofar as we can imagine being that other) but on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible*.[70] Bennett argues that this encounter with traumatic affect requires audience engagement: *fundamentally relational rather than expressive in the traditional (communicative) sense of that term*,[71] it is only there when – and if – one encounters it. My analysis of Ramsay's work attempts to map out the mechanics of such an encounter: it demonstrates that the oscillatory aspect of the affective dynamic of the (post)traumatic experience can be replicated within the structure of a narrative film, providing a model for how certain elements of this traumatic dynamic can extend to the audience's experience of the film through the oscillatory modus operandi of self-reflexive empathy.

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[1] P. Sehgal, "The Case Against the Trauma Plot", *The New Yorker*, 27.12.2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot (accessed: 26.12.2024).

[2] Ibidem.

[3] W. Self, "A Posthumous Shock", *Harper's Magazine*, December 2021, https://harpers.org/archive/2021/12/a-posthumous-shock-trauma-studies-modernity-how-everything-became-trauma/ (accessed: 25.12.2024).

[4] L. Pandell, "How Trauma became the Word of the Decade", *Vox*, 25.01.2022, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22876522/trauma-covid-word-origin-mental-health (accessed: 25.12.2024).

[5] See, for example, the television writer and critic Emily St. James's proposition of an alternate term, "the abuse plot," meant to describe a comparably formulaic but more emotionally complex treatment of a character's traumatic experiences and their aftermath. E. St. James, "The Trauma Plot and the Abuse Plot", *Episodes*, 12.07.2023, https://episodes.ghost.io/the-trauma-plot-and-the-abuse-plot/ (accessed: 24.12.2024).

[6] See: C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore – London 1996, esp. the chapters "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference (de Man, Kant, Kleist)" and "Traumatic Awakenings (Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory)." Citing Anne Rothe, Will Self harshly criticizes Caruth's linking of the signification crisis to the experience of trauma and some of the ethical distortions this approach might lead to. See: W. Self, op. cit.; see also: A. Rothe, "Irresponsible Nonsense: An Epistemological and Ethical Critique of Postmodern Trauma Theory", in: *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture*, eds. Y. Ataria, D. Gurevitz, H. Pedaya, Y. Neria, Springer, Cham 2016.

[7] G. Forter, "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form", *Narrative* 2007, vol. 15, no. 3, p. 260.

[8] Caruth goes as far as to suggest that a text itself can be the site of trauma. See: C. Caruth, op. cit., p. 109.

[9] C. Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction", in: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. C. Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore – London 1995, p. 4.

[10] C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience…* op. cit., p. 8. See also: C. Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction", op. cit.

[11] N. A. Sütterlin, "History of Trauma Theory", in: *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. C. Davis, H. Meretoja, Routledge, London – New York 2002, p. 19.

[12] This should be regarded as a distortion of Caruth's method, which postulates seeking trauma in the text's formal aspects and in authors' use of language, in particular through interpreting significant absences, repetitions, and omissions.

[13] Jill Bennett borrowed this clever term from Dominick LaCapra. See: J. Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, p. 9.

[14] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 1.

[15] See, for example: J. Pederson, "Trauma and Narrative", in: *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. R. Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018. Pederson cites several poignant criticisms of this overly narrow

approach, including Stef Craps's disavowal of the Eurocentric assumption of the universality of trauma poetics' modernist literary techniques (see: S. Craps, "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age", in: *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, eds. G. Buelens, S. Durrant, R. Eaglestone, Routledge, New York 2014) and Greg Forter's discussion of trauma studies' focus on 'punctual' experiences of trauma – as opposed to continuous, perpetual, and systemic ones (G. Forter, op. cit.).

[16] See, e.g.: J. Hirsch, *Afterimage. Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2004.

[17] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 6.

[18] One can assume that many of the 'trauma plot' works criticized by Sehgal likewise aimed for this goal of achieving affective truthfulness at one point or another but, focusing overly on the textual, became overpowered by their own 'aboutness.'

[19] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 7.

[20] See: D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2001; D. LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1998; K. Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Routledge, New York 1996.

[21] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 8.

[22] Ibidem, p. 7.

[23] Ibidem.

[24] A model example of such an approach can be found in Joshua Hirsch's *Afterimage. Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust*. J. Hirsch, op. cit.

[25] M. B. Vaage, "Fiction Film and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2010, vol. 34, no. 1.

[26] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 10.

[27] Ibidem.

[28] Ibidem, p. 59 and p. 5. See also: H. Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1996.

[29] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 12.

[30] The method I adopt here, which involves analyzing affect through the formal structures it assumes within an audiovisual work, draws from Eugenie Brinkema's theoretical framework of radical formalism. See: E. Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, Duke University Press, Durham – London 2014. See also: K. Rachubińska, "*No Time, Make, or Reason*: The Affective Forms of Portishead's *Only You* Music Video", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2023, no. 123, pp. 75-96.

[31] I propose this affective dynamic in addition – but not necessarily in opposition – to the usual, more static and more "symptomatic" modes of communicating trauma: via absence, indirection/omission, and repetition, sometimes supplemented with splitting. See: J. Pederson, op. cit., p. 101; N. A. Sütterlin, op. cit., p. 20.

[32] In her recent article on the films of Alan Clarke, Karolina Kosińska presents an alternative application of Bennett's theory to develop a similarly "rhythmical" framework for discussing trauma and affect. See: K. Kosińska, "Affective Rhythms: Experience of Trauma in Alan Clarke's Films from the 1980s", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2023, no. 123, pp. 50-73.

[33] As of December 2024, at the time of writing this article, her latest feature, an adaptation of Argentinian writer Ariana Harwicz's 2017 novel *Die, My Love*, has finished filming in Canada and is in the post-production phase, with no official premiere or release date scheduled. Again, as *We Need to Talk about Kevin, Die, My Love* tells a story of fraught motherhood.

[34] D. Trotter, "Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*: Towards a Theory of Haptic Narrative", *Paragraph* 2008, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 138-158.

[35] R. De Luca, "Dermatology as Screenology: The Films of Lynne Ramsay", *Film Criticism* 2019, vol. 43, no. 1, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.0043.102?view=text;rgn=main (accessed: 28.01.2025).

[36] P. Quigley, "'Sheer Epidermis': 'Face Politics' and the Films of Lynne Ramsay", in: *Faces on Screen: New Approaches*, ed. A. Maurice, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2022.

[37] S. Thornham, "'A Hatred so Intense…' *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Postfeminism and Women's Cinema", *Sequence: Serial Studies in Media, Film and Music* 2013, no. 2.1, p. 18.

[38] See, for example: S. Thornham, op. cit.; S. L. Smyth, "Postfeminism, Ambivalence and the Mother in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011)", *Film Criticism* 2020, vol. 44, no. 1, https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0044.106 (accessed: 27.12.2024); E. D. Galioto, "Maternal Ambivalence in the Novel and Film *We Need to Talk about Kevin*", *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 2019, vol. 24, pp. 132-150.

[39] C. Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction", op. cit., pp. 7, 9.

[40] I am grateful to Ewa Fiuk for making a not-at-all-obvious association of Ramsay with David Lynch and for the inspiring discussion on the two directors' different approaches to affective realism in film.

[41] This reading refers to an unknowing audience encountering the film for the first time; I will further discuss how the interpretation and tone of the scene might change on the second viewing.

[42] Following Freud again, Caruth notes that a *split within immediate experience* characterizes traumatic occurrences. C. Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction", in: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, op. cit., p. 9. Later trauma theory and fiction often reformulate it as a splitting of the traumatized subject (or the narrative voice, see: N. A. Sütterlin, op. cit.). Still, Caruth's original application to experience seems much more analytically productive from an affective perspective.

[43] Mae Martin offers an experientially-informed depiction of the traumatic flashback in her dramedy series *Feel Good* (Netflix, 2020-2021). Sehgal praises the series as an example of a more nuanced approach to dealing with trauma on television. See: P. Sehgal, op. cit.

[44] See: C. Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction", op. cit., p. 153.

[45] See: J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 11, and the chapter "Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art".

[46] C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience…*, op. cit., p. 4.

[47] See: P. Quigley, op. cit., p. 143.

[48] This can be determined most easily by the length of Eva's hair.

[49] One could argue that the prosaic, mundane nature of some of the flashbacks hints at the fact that Eva's entire experience of motherhood is inherently traumatic: thus, anything that connects even remotely to her role as a mother proves triggering. While perfectly valid, this interpretation does not counter my general line of argument.

[50] A timeslip (or time slip) is a plot device in fiction, used most prominently in science fiction, fantasy, and children's media, whereby a character experiences a sudden dislocation in time, usually accidentally and/or by unknown means.

[51] Some of the timeslips have a comedic undertone, as when working a copy machine intertwines with scenes from Eva's pregnancy: the two points connected not necessarily by a sensuous or affective experience but by the action of making a copy. In interviews, Ramsay often expresses a confused exasperation at the fact that neither critics nor audiences recognize her films as darkly funny. See, for example: S. Monks Kaufman, "Lynne Ramsay: 'Being a Filmmaker Is Like Being a Psychoanalyst'", *Little White Lies*, 8.03.2018, https://lwlies.com/interviews/lynne-ramsay-you-were-never-really-here/ (accessed: 30.01.2025); E. Lazic, "Behind the Lens: DP Tom Townend on *YWNRH*", *Seventh Row. "You Were Never Really Here": A Special Issue*, 15.10.2018, p. 47 (e-book).

[52] Joshua Pederson notes that the understanding of trauma as a gap or lacuna might derive not so much from its inherent irrepresentability as from a *crisis of witnessing*, which he links to some trauma researchers' recognition that the Holocaust not only *produced no witnesses* due to the Nazis' deliberate political action but was so incomprehensible that it *precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims*. D. Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival", in: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. S. Felman, D. Laub, Routledge, New York – London 1992, p. 80, cited in: J. Pederson, op. cit., p. 102.

[53] Assuming a degree of intellectual and emotional engagement – though, importantly, not necessarily identification – which perhaps should not be taken as a given. I will revisit this point in the latter part of this article.

[54] *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is perhaps Ramsay's only film to actually include the "big reveal" component of the "trauma plot" structure.

[55] C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience…* op. cit., p. 101, and idem, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction", op. cit., p. 6.

[56] C. Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction", op. cit., p. 5.

[57] Crucially, however, unlike the many unwitting victims in contemporary "trauma plot" works, Eva is painfully aware of the traumatizing events she experienced. Neither forgotten nor buried, her trauma does not require unearthing. Thus, Kevin's violent atrocities are a shocking revelation only from the perspective of the audience.

[58] "Retrodetermination" is Greg Forter's alternate adaptation of Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (usually translated as "deferred action") rooted in the psychoanalyst's early work on trauma, as opposed to Caruth's use of the term "belatedness," derived from his later reformulations. Forter discusses this effect in relation to the systemic, historically produced traumas presented in William Faulkner's work; he provides an interesting analysis of the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, which offer *at once too much and too little information*. G. Forter, op. cit., pp. 279-280.

[59] C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience…* op. cit., p. 4.
[60] See: E. Brinkema, op. cit.
[61] Ramsay often employs this method of recontextualizing a previously "unknown" or misinterpreted image, sometimes in the vein of traumatic retrodetermination. She does so to great effect. For example, in the opening scene of *Morvern Callar* (dir. Lynne Ramsay, 2002), the titular character is filmed in several long close-ups while tenderly touching the body of another person. Later, framed from a different angle, Morvern is revealed to have been caressing the corpse of her dead lover. Liza Johnson offers an interesting affective reading of this film's "visual grammar." See: L. Johnson, "Perverse Angle: Feminist Film, Queer Film, Shame", *Signs* 2004, vol. 30, no. 1.
[62] See: D. Trotter, op. cit.
[63] See: L. Johnson, op. cit.
[64] See: R. DeLuca, op. cit.
[65] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 10.
[66] S. Thornham, op. cit., p. 20.
[67] Thus, even though viewers of Ramsay's film may, in a way, experience flashbacks, timeslips, missed encounters, affective shocks, and even misplaced hypervigilance of their own, they do not become vicariously traumatized. The distinction between empathic identification and self-reflective empathy remains sustained.
[68] "Strategic opacity" is Stephen Greenblatt's term for the intentional erasure of causal explanations and character motivations in order to create more complexity in a work. See: P. Sehgal, op. cit.
[69] J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 8.
[70] Ibidem, p. 10.
[71] Ibidem, p. 12.

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Słowa kluczowe:
trauma;
doświadczenie (post)traumatyczne;
dynamika afektywna;
oscylacja;
Lynne Ramsay

Abstrakt
Klaudia Rachubińska
(Post)traumatyczne oscylacje. Wstępna eksploracja pewnej dynamiki afektywnej
Ostatnie dekady przyniosły wzrost zainteresowania traumą, zarówno jako przedmiotem badań, jak i tematem w filmie i kulturze popularnej. Duża część współczesnego kina (zwłaszcza głównego nurtu), koncentruje się na tym, jak trauma kształtuje historię postaci. To podejście redukcjonistyczne, ustawiające traumę jako narzędzie fabularne, zastępujące zniuansowany rozwój postaci uproszczonym „wątkiem traumy". Reżyserka Lynne Ramsay proponuje inne podejście: przedstawia postaci, które doznały traumy i zgłębia ich doświadczenia nie tylko przez narrację, ale też unikatowy styl filmowy. W artykule autorka wykorzystuje strukturę zaproponowaną przez Jill Bennett do analizy obrazów traumy, aby zbadać, jak formalne elementy filmu *Musimy porozmawiać o Kevinie* (2011) odzwierciedlają (post)traumatyczne doświadczenie przez dynamikę afektywną określoną mianem oscylacji. Eksploruje także mechanizm uruchamiania przez tę dynamikę trybów empatycznego zaangażowania oraz wytwarzania przez nią w oglądających doświadczenia afektywnego strukturalnie podobnego do traumy.