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Contemporary Women Directors

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Reaction Papers 2: *Morvern Callar* (2003)

What makes Lynn Ramsey's *Morvern Callar* such a fascinating film is the performance by lead actress Samantha Morton. Morton plays Morvern a young woman who awakens one Christmas morning to find the body of her boyfriend, who has committed suicide sometime through the night. He has left a suicide note for her, with specific instructions on how to submit a manuscript of a novel to a list of publishers. She then unwraps a Christmas present located under the blinking Christmas tree and it is revealed to be a leather jacket. She puts it on and immediately gets a call from her girlfriend who invites her out to the pub. She agrees, gets all dressed up and heads out clubbing with her friend while her boyfriend's body remains on the floor of her apartment.

Scottish director Lynn Ramsey is exceptional on capturing the stark emotions on a character's face with a camera lens. She's done it incredibly well with her earlier 1999 film *Ratcatcher* which was her film debut immediately after two shorts. The young boy in *Ratcatcher* was constantly shot with a fascinating intensity which presented a sexually confused child who was still coming to terms with the guilt of the drowning of another young boy. The same intensity can be said for Ramsey's latest film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in 2011, as actress

Tilda Swinton gives a powerful and unforgettable lead performance. Throughout the entire picture we witness a horrific tragedy seen through the eyes of the mother as the film cuts back and forth between times presenting us with glimpses of the mistakes the mother made while raising a supposed sociopath. And so the same can be said with actress Samantha Morton in Ramsey's *Morvern*, as Morton creates enormous emotional intensity all without visibly changing her expressions throughout the entire picture.

Similar to the actor-model technique that the great Robert Bresson used with his actors and actresses, Ramsey has Morton reveal so very little to the audience that we are immediately drawn closer to her and the predicament she seems to find herself in. Interesting how I brought up Bresson and the style of his acting because he is also known to shoot the fragmentation of character's body parts, which was a aesthetic I immediately noticed with Ramsey's earlier short *Gasman* and how in the beginning Ramsey revealed the main characters in the story by presenting their legs, torso's and hands before showing us their faces.

I've always found the female face the most expressive and interesting when captured on a movie screen. I remember director Ingmar Bergman once stating, "The human face is the great subject of the cinema." Of course I'm not alone in thinking this since many of our greatest European filmmakers seemed to constantly re-use females as the main protagonist throughout most of their greatest films. Whether it's Ingmar Bergman shooting Liv Ullmann, Michelangelo Antonioni with Monica Vitti or Federico Fellini and his very own wife Giulietta Masina; there is something very expressive and powerful with the female face that I believe a male's rough masculine exterior couldn't effectively achieve. And yet, unlike the European director's I recently mentioned like Bergman, Antonioni and Fellini, the filmmaker behind the camera of

Morvern Callar is this time a female herself, which gives audiences a fresh, new perspective that no male filmmaker could equally achieve.

What makes *Morvern Callar* such an interesting film are the mysteries that are set-up in the early stages of the story. When Morvern wakes up to find her boyfriend's bloody corpse lying across the apartment floor, instead of calling for help she simply leaves him lying there and goes out with some friends. A day or so passes and she decides to dismember the body (before it begins to smell of decomposition) and throw the body away. Why does she do all this? Is she insane? Ramsey wisely doesn't give us any clear answers but from the expressions given from Morvern's face, she is indeed saddened by her boyfriend's death and is mourning in her own strange way. It's also refreshing to see a more feministic viewpoint in *Morvern Callar*, in which the violent victim this time isn't the female but rather the male in the relationship. At the end of the film when Morvern decides to sign her name to her boyfriend's published novel, she is telling him in so many words that she has finally moved on and will no longer sit and mourn for his selfish act.