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Undoing Violent Masculinity : Lynne Ramsay's *You Were Never Really Here*

(2018)

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ABSTRACT

Reviewers described Lynne Ramsay's *You Were Never Really Here* (2018) as a “*Taxi Driver* for a new century.” Certainly, its narrative of an inarticulate killer who is also the would-be saviour of a lost and damaged “little white girl” recalls that of Scorsese's 1976 film., and the two films share a fragmented, hallucinatory quality. Yet what such comparisons miss is both the devastating critique of this culturally powerful narrative to be found in Ramsay's film, and the connections it makes between this paradigmatic story of a failed and violent but ultimately sympathetic white masculinity and another: that of the traumatising mother who is responsible for the violence of her psychotic son. In this article, I explore the nature of Ramsay's critique, arguing that her film both refuses and interrogates both of these readings of gender. Ramsay's protagonist, like Scorsese's, is a traumatised war veteran, but his identification is not with a fantasised and recuperative ideal masculinity but with its feminised victims: girl and mother. His tragedy is not that he fails in his rescue attempt, or that he is in thrall to the ‘death mother’, but that he believes that the means of this rescue might be masculinity.

Keywords: Violent masculinity, Lynne Ramsay, traumatising mother, little white girl, vigilante rescuer.

Introduction

“It's like you're not even there, not even a person. Nobody knows you.” Travis

Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976)

“*Taxi Driver* for a new century” was the critical tagline featured on both the poster for Lynne Ramsay’s *You Were Never Really Here* (2018), and on the later DVD. The comparison with Scorsese’s 1976 film was one made by many reviewers¹, in part because of narrative echoes – Ramsay’s film, like that of Scorsese, features an inarticulate and anonymous killer who is also the would-be saviour of a lost and damaged “little white girl” (Lury 2010) - and in part because of the hallucinatory quality that the two films share, in which a fractured and corrupt city is rendered through the protagonist’s disturbed and fragmented point of view. This article will draw on Karen Lury’s analysis of the earlier film, in which she points to the powerful cultural narrative of which Scorsese’s film is but one iteration, a narrative of flawed but heroic white masculinity whose restoration is sought through the rescue of a little white girl. It will also suggest another, closely linked narrative at play in *You Were Never Really Here*: a second story of violent white masculinity which finds the cause for this psychotic violence to lie in the destructive power of the mother. Ramsay’s film, I suggest, explicitly connects these two narratives: not, however, to update them, as reviewers suggested, but to offer a fundamental critique of both the vision of masculinity they construct and the solipsistic cinematic worlds through which it is displayed.

Fig 1. *You Were Never Really Here* poster

Rescuing the little white girl

You Were Never Really Here centres on Joe (Joaquin Phoenix), a former soldier and law enforcement officer who now works, brutally and efficiently, in the area of “private security,” specialising in the recovery of missing girls on behalf of wealthy parents. He lives with his elderly mother (Judith Roberts) in the house where he spent his

traumatised childhood. Joe's latest commission is to recover Nina (Ekaterina Samsonov), a senator's missing daughter who has been lured into a sex-trafficking ring. We follow him as, armed with his weapon of choice, a ball-peen hammer, he sets out to return the child to her father.

To enact such a rescue is, on the surface at least, to perform a hero's journey: to enter, as Joseph Campbell so influentially wrote in his account of the archetypal hero of Western culture (the "monomyth"), "the kingdom of the dark" and, after undergoing a "supreme ordeal", emerge triumphant (1993: 245). In so doing, writes Campbell, the hero will perform the Oedipal journey. Encountering the goddess/temptress, he treats her with "the kindness and assurance she requires" (ibid.: 116) and so masters her. Through this, he achieves the "total mastery of life," knowing that "he and the father are one: he is in the father's place." (ibid.: 120-21)

Whilst reviewers focused on the similarities of *You Were Never Really Here* to *Taxi Driver*, then, behind this and other similar vigilante rescuer stories² on which Ramsay's film both draws and comments lies an ur-narrative whose concern is the construction of the human subject as male³ (the hero, writes Campbell, masters life; the woman "is life" [ibid.: 120]). In the specific inflection that we find in Scorsese's film, this subjectivity is achieved, argues Lury, through the "narrative motif of the little white girl being lost and found, repossessed and revenged." (2010: 53) It is a motif we can find in myth and folklore, and it is manifest throughout European literature, as Lury points out⁴, but it also has a specifically American version, in the story of the white girl captured by "savages" and rescued by a noble but solitary and taciturn frontiersman. This story was a staple of American popular culture from the eighteenth century onwards⁵, finding its most popular literary incarnation in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* of 1826. Its cinematic apotheosis came over a hundred years later,

in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). *The Searchers*, indeed, has been seen by Lesley Stern as *Taxi Driver*'s origin text, with Scorsese's film as a "remaking," or a "recasting" (Stern 1995: 33) of Ford's Western. In both films, it is the rescue of a white girl that is the ostensible object of the narrative quest, and in both the would-be rescuer is a traumatised and, in Lury's words (2010: 87), "angry and potentially psychotic" war veteran. In both, it is the recovery of a heroic white masculinity that is in reality the doomed object of the protagonist's quest.

In contrast to Ford's film, the setting for this quest in *Taxi Driver* is not the blank and empty space of the wilderness against which the hero can assert his mastery⁶. Instead, the dark and dangerous world of both Scorsese's and Ramsay's film, as Lury again suggests, also has a more urban and more Gothic heritage⁷ (ibid.: 88), a quality pointed to in references to *You Were Never Really Here* as a "noir thriller" (Muir 2017). A predecessor here, as one reviewer suggested (O'Malley 2018), is Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), with its vision of city-wide corruption and sexual exploitation, and another white girl who cannot really be saved. What links all of these paradigmatic quest narratives, however, is a central focus on a solitary and violent white man whose threatened masculinity – the site of anxiety for the film - is bound up with a nostalgic sense of national as well as individual identity. In all of them, the heroic quest which should restore this identity is, as Lury argues, bound up with the protagonist's "desire to possess and control the sexuality of a little white girl."⁸ (Lury 2010: 88) Before turning to Ramsay's film, therefore, I want to say a little more about both this female figure and her absent opposite: the figure of the mother.

Daddy's girl

Writing of the ambivalence surrounding the figure of the eroticised “little white girl” in Western culture, Valerie Walkerdine points to the figure’s ubiquity. Popular images of “little girls as alluring and seductive, at once innocent and highly erotic” are everywhere, she writes, “contained in the most respectable and mundane of locations,” (1997: 170) thus rendering the male fantasies and patriarchal power that underpin them both socially sanctioned and invisible. “[P]resented publicly for the little girl to enter,” the position of “eroticized child-woman” is at the same time, however, regarded as “remov[ing] childhood innocence,” rendering the girl “vulnerable to abuse.” (ibid.: 172) She requires the protection of a “big Daddy” if that innocence is to be guarded (ibid.: 168). This Freudian scenario is, suggests Walkerdine, “the preferred sexual relation in our culture” (ibid.): what Kaja Silverman elsewhere calls its “dominant fiction.”⁹ (1992) It is a scenario that is at the heart of the vigilante-rescuer narratives on which Ramsay’s film draws. What renders the protagonist of these narratives sympathetic, despite his violence and the implied eroticisation of their relationship, is his impossible desire to restore the innocence of the little white girl.

The traumatizing mother

The figure of the mother is a notable absence in these narratives. Dead or simply narratively missing, it is the mother’s absence that permits the ambivalent positioning of the protagonist as hero/father¹⁰, his task to restore the family through the repositioning of the daughter within it¹¹. It is an absence that secures the centrality of a troubled, angry, but potentially heroic masculinity, but which leaves its violent anger finally unexplained. For an explanation we must turn instead to a different, but intimately related Gothic narrative: one in which the male protagonist’s violence finds its ultimate source in a figure that Joanna Wilson-Scott (2017: 192) calls the “traumatizing mother,” and David Greven (2014) the “death-mother.” Wilson-Scott is writing of the “violent

protagonist novel” in which our narrative focus is through the male killer. In these narratives, she argues, mothers function as “the principal traumatizing factor” in the creation of their violent sons. In them, *his* humanity and status as victim is asserted through *her* demonization and depersonalization (2017: 191-2). Greven’s concern is broader, with what he calls “a recurring set of preoccupations ... across a range of literary and film texts,” from *The Conjuring* (2013) to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which the maternal figure is associated with death, offering “toxic threat, not conventional nurture, terror, not love.” Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, which, comments Greven, has a long history of both “blaming the mother” and “suppressing [her] presence,” his account of this figure of male fantasy sees it as a product of a male “dread of femininity.” (2014: 167, 172) As both writers suggest, the paradigmatic cinematic text for *this* narrative, one which we might regard as the other half of this endlessly re-worked story of a damaged but ultimately sympathetic violent white masculinity, is Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Like Travis Bickle, Norman Bates, too, was “not even there, not even a person.” Obliterated entirely at the end of the film, he “only half existed to begin with,” as the psychiatrist explains at its close. In this story, the mother is powerful and destructive, the family cannot be restored, and the “daughter” (the “little white girl”) cannot be saved.

The mother, then, as Greven suggests, must be absent/repressed in order for the male subject to emerge as hero. The two narratives cannot co-exist. *You Were Never Really Here*, however, begins by linking them. Whilst its opening scenes, in which we are introduced to Joe as killer/rescuer, recall *Taxi Driver* in their ominous violence and hallucinatory sense of urban speed, they are followed by Joe’s return home, to his mother. In this scene, equally packed with cinematic references, we first see her asleep, mouth fallen open, in a rocking chair¹²; on the wall behind her is a framed print of a

songbird. When Joe enters, she pretends to be unwakeable. The references to *Psycho* are later made explicit (she has, she tells Joe, been watching Hitchcock's film, and it "scared me"), but the differences are also clear. Joe's mother is frail, dependent, and suffering from dementia, and he cares for her with patience and tenderness¹³.

Ramsay's film, I shall argue, is not, as the comparisons to *Taxi Driver* suggested, complicit with the vision of threatened masculinity central to its forerunners. If, as Stern suggests of *Taxi Driver*'s relation to *The Searchers*, it "re-makes" the earlier film, it is not as "reiteration" and "intensification" (1995: 34) but as what Mary Ann Doane and her fellow editors, drawing on Adrienne Rich, call "re-vision": "the act ... of entering an old text from a new critical direction."¹⁴ (Rich 1979: 35; Doane et al. 1984: 1) Nor does it suggest that its protagonist's violence can be explained by the trauma inflicted by a monstrous and oppressive maternal figure. Instead, it both refuses and interrogates these dominant and entwined readings of gender, and, though less obviously, the assumptions about whiteness that accompany them. The sexual exploitation from which Joe seeks to rescue the film's girl-victims is not identified with a degraded racial otherness, as it was in Scorsese's film, but with a globalised white American patriarchal enterprise. Joe's mother is not the originator of his trauma but the predecessor, as victim of patriarchal violence, of the girls he seeks to rescue, and Joe's tragedy is not that he is in thrall to the "death mother," but that he believes that the means of this rescue might be masculinity. Perhaps most important, if, like *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle, Ramsay's protagonist is a traumatised war veteran, his identification is finally not with a fantasised and recuperative ideal masculinity but with its feminised victims: girl and mother. In what follows, I shall examine Joe's relationship to the film's images of both masculinity and femininity, and the ways in which, despite its internalized, hallucinatory point of view, it allows us glimpses of

another, female perspective. I shall begin, however, with the world with which the film presents us, and in which Joe seeks to effect his rescues.

The unsafe city

It was in part *You Were Never Really Here*'s rendering of a fractured cityscape that provoked comparisons with Scorsese's film. As in *Taxi Driver*, its city streets are piled with garbage, and glimpsed in fragments through the windows of a moving car. The film's pulsing rhythms and constant movement, lights blurring into a moving palette of reds and greens, rain on windscreens giving a disorienting sense of underwater entrapment - all produce a hallucinatory sense that recalls the relentless, disturbing motion of the earlier film. As there, and as in many of that film's successors, too, this is a world whose corruption reaches everywhere: through cheap motels and brothels, through suburbia, to expensive offices, hotels and country houses; from the frightened Hispanic owner of the corner shop to the handsome and glossy state governor whose mansion is filled with Victorian wall panelling and European art. All of these places Joe silently approaches and leaves through their shabby back entrances and stairwells. Like his cinematic predecessors¹⁵, he approaches unseen and offers himself as vehicle of rescue for the white girl he finds at the richly decorated centre of this chain of exploitation.

Looking more closely, however, it is clear that the streets that we glimpse through Joe's journeys contain very different tableaux to those of earlier films. Instead of the association of dirt and filth with an invasive black otherness which permeates Scorsese's film¹⁶, here the glimpses are of vulnerable and isolated young women, one of whom seems to be resisting a male embrace, whilst another lies dead in the street. The perpetrators of this violence are white. These fragmentary scenes, shot from Joe's

perspective as he drives through the city on his way to his rescue mission, recall not so much *Taxi Driver* but the New York of another female filmmaker whose re-visioning of a popular “masculine” genre mounted a radical critique of its assumptions. Jane Campion’s *In the Cut* (2003), too, focused on a fractured and dreamlike cityscape permeated by a constant sense of male voyeurism and female danger¹⁷, and offered us a palette of saturated greens and reds and a city glimpsed in disorienting fragments. An earlier shot in Ramsay’s film provides a more explicit echo of that of Campion. In the earlier film, fragmented and isolated images of young women on subway platforms, staring fixedly outwards, punctuated and dislocated the narrative. Here, in a brief disconnected shot of a subway platform we also glimpse a young woman, her bruised face half-hidden but her expression, as she gazes fixedly at Joe, wary and questioning.

There are other crucial differences from *You Were Never Really Here*’s generic predecessors. This film contains no utopian nostalgic vision of a lost patriarchal family and nation to set against its fractured city. Joe’s father embodies both public and private forms of patriarchal oppression. He was a corporal in the marines and his uniform hangs in the closet in which, in the film’s splintering flashbacks, we see Joe take refuge to escape his father’s brutality, a brutality of which both Joe and his mother are victims. The nation which both he and Joe have represented as soldiers is imperialist and equally brutal. Family, police, city, government, business: all are built on the exploitation of women. The buying and selling of girls which is America’s present day is merely a continuation, now in the form of global capitalist enterprise, of its earlier colonizing activities. Its uniforms are now those of police and politicians, white paternal figures all. The association of filth and decay with blackness and a complicit white decay is central to *Taxi Driver*; the film points explicitly to its protagonist’s racism, but that racism is more subtly endorsed in the film’s depiction of the rotting city. In *You Were Never*

Really Here, however, the origins of corruption lie at the centre of white power, with all the wealth, cultural privilege, and superficial attractiveness that this brings. Ramsay alters the film's source material to make the politician who hires Joe to retrieve his daughter not the "soft and heavy," weak middle-aged man, "flushed" and with a "porcine face," of Jonathan Ames' novella, (2018: 20, 95, 27), a man who is mired in debt to the mob, but a trim, fit, clean-cut figure not unlike the youthful image of Joe's father that we see, who moves confidently through the world of wealth and privilege. More, she doubles this figure: Senator Votto, father of the missing girl Nina, is working for the handsome, smooth, and even more powerful Governor Williams, a character not in the novella, and another trim, attractive, and relatively youthful white man. In one fantasised shot the two men face each other against a background of the New York city skyline: mirror images. Williams' mansion, like Votto's club, has the heavy opulence of a specifically European tradition: furnished with panelled walls, antique furniture, neo-classical statues, and large, gilt-framed oil paintings. When we see Williams emerge from his campaign headquarters, accompanied by security men, his ease with wealth and power is clear.

Here, then, we see the true implications of the ubiquitous eroticisation of "daddy's girl" of which Walkerdine writes. They are realised most fully in two sequences that we see when Joe is on his way to Governor Williams's mansion to rescue Nina. In the first, which seems to be Joe's interior vision, Nina sits naked on a bed, her back to us and her head lowered. The room is a girl's bedroom: curtains and wall are pink; a cute pottery rabbit sits on a pile of books, another forms a bedside light. We see a male arm reach up and caress her unresponsive back. When the man sits up and turns to face the camera, we see that it is her father.

Fig. 2 Nina and her father

In the second, brief scene it is Williams who is pictured in another soft pink bedroom. He is, we assume, preparing for Nina. A little later we see the fluffy white rabbit on the pink four poster bed, the room's pink wallpaper with its images of animals, and its porcelain dolls. We see, too, the room's large framed image of a bird, this time a crow. Williams gazes at a collection of photographs of young girls, white and Asian, blowing softly to remove any dust. Then we see his hand, huge against the tiny furniture, carefully set in motion the rocking chair inside a doll's house. The eroticisation and sexual exploitation which underpin the sentimentality of these furnishings of a girl's bedroom are here made uncomfortably clear. Votto has sold his daughter into sexual exploitation and may himself have abused her. Williams, as his hired gun tells Joe, "trades" young girls. The mother in each case is absent¹⁸ but her figure is ironically evoked by the images of rocking chair and bird portrait; not, however, as cause of this exploitative violence, but as its victim.

Only girls slouch

"A half-dead man" is how Lury describes Travis Bickle (2010: 92), a description that was echoed in reviews of Ramsay's film. Joe, commented reviewers, is "dissociated [from] those around him" (Howard 2018); he is "autistically disconnected" (Dawson 2018), "a walking corpse." (Knight 2018) Like Bickle, Joe is invisible in the city, "his identity as a man ... lost to his function." (Lury 2010: 92) Joe is not, however, the hypermasculine figure into which Bickle turns himself in response, nor is he the Joe described in Ames' novella:

his whole body was a weapon, cruel like a baseball bat. Six-two, 190, no fat. He was forty-eight, but his olive-skinned skin was still smooth... He kept his hair at the length of a Marine on leave (2018: 8).

Instead, the movements of Ramsay's Joe are slow, hunched, ponderous; his hair is long and unkempt and his body untidy, heavy, and vulnerable. In the opening minutes of the film, it is Joe's slowness of movement that is most apparent; he is apart from the ceaseless motion of the city, often tracked in flickering glimpses through the flashing spaces between trains or cars, as he walks or simply stands. Joaquin Phoenix as Joe is, writes one reviewer, a "fleshy slab" (Knight 2018) of masculinity. Frequently seen with bare torso, his body is clearly accustomed to violence and bears multiple scars, but its masculinity, unlike that described in Ames' novella, is in its self-conscious slowness oddly vulnerable. In interview, Ramsay depicted his movement as shambling, and commented that she had "thought about Harvey Keitel in *The Piano* – the brutish thing, and the girth. It's not the cut, steroid body that you see a lot that's supposed to represent power." It is a body, she adds, that is "more terrifying," but also "more human" and "more vulnerable." (Hasted 2018) In its fleshiness, it is, despite its scars and brute strength, oddly feminised.

We see this ambivalence most fully in the scene in which Joe prepares for his rescue of Nina. For Joe, the rescue means adopting the kind of masculinity embodied by the father whom he followed into the marines and whose weapon of choice, the ball-peen hammer, he now employs. Here, Joe's heavy, scarred body fills the screen as he covers his head with a white towel, the action mimicking his father's preparations for his own bursts of violence: both men breathe in ragged bursts, head back, fists clenched, and muscles straining. Emerging from the sauna, Joe seems satisfied with the image of brute masculinity that faces him in the mirror, an image doubled by that of the huge,

thick-set white man who appears behind him and briefly meets his mirrored gaze. His final smile is one of self-approval and anticipation.

Fig. 3 Joe in the sauna

The scene, however, is more complex than this summary suggests. The flashbacks which precede the final sequence of shots are not solipsistic fantasies of power but agonised memories of powerlessness. As he looks in the mirror, Joe sings to himself 'The Alphabet Song': "A you're adorable" It is a song that, especially in the popular versions recorded by Perry Como and Dean Martin, exemplifies the eroticised relationship of which Walkerdine writes¹⁹. Appropriately, then, the final line murmured by Joe, "F, you're a feather in my arms," seems to anticipate his rescue of Nina. Its early lines ("B you're so beautiful, C you're a cutie full of charms"), however, are addressed to Joe's own mirror-image. His primary identifications are not masculine but feminine.

Our first view of Joe is of his head filling the screen, as he struggles for breath, sucking in the clear plastic bag that covers his head. His face is skull-like, in profile, foreshadowing the gaunt face of his mother, her mouth fallen open, which will be our first view of her. Preceding this shot, the screen is black, but against an ominously increasing drone of city noise we hear a child counting backwards, to be joined, out of sync., by the voice of the adult Joe, also counting. Over both, and as the black screen becomes dark underwater movement, and we hear the bubbling sound of water, we hear the voice of Joe's father: "Stand up straight. Only fucking pussy little girls slouch." As the adult Joe continues to struggle for breath, the face of his younger self fills the screen, staring blankly out at us, and we hear his father demand, "You must do better. Say it, 'I must do better sir'." Young Joe's voice responds, "I must do better, sir." The

adult Joe pulls the plastic bag from his head and the face of his younger self becomes that of a girl, also staring out at us, this time from a photograph.

Joe's voice, then, is doubled with that of the terrified child he was, a child identified as feminine (a "pussy little girl"); his face mirrors both that of the girl he has presumably just rescued from sexual exploitation and that of his mother, the woman he could not save from his father's violence. Both his identifications and the objects of his desire to save are feminine. As an adult, he continues, as we have seen, to slouch, but he will also try, and fail, to "do better," seeking to deploy his father's violent masculinity in the service of a doomed attempt to rescue its female victims. In his fractured flashbacks we find that he fails to save the Afghan girl to whom as a soldier he offers a chocolate bar, or the largely Asian group of girls he discovers, as part of a group of security agents, huddled in a locked container unit, dead. In the film's present he fails to save both Nina and, once again, his mother.

Slipping over

In her discussion of a film that is contemporary with Hitchcock's *Psycho* and is similarly concerned with male voyeurism and sadism, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), Kaja Silverman writes of the way in which for its murderer-protagonist, "voyeurism gives way to identification," so that he consistently mimics the bodily movements of his female victims, "slipping over to the side of the victim." (1988: 35) Unlike that of Powell's protagonist, Joe's compulsion is to save, not murder, the film's victims. But he, too, slips constantly "to the side of the victim," an identification rendered in the film through the fragmentation of the male body that seems so solid.

The repeated shot which introduces Joe's recurring flashback memory of Afghanistan is of a naked foot in the sand. We see the toes twitch and glimpse red trousers, but we cannot tell whose foot this is. Later we find that it is that of the Afghan girl whom Joe failed to save. The helpless vulnerability represented by her naked foot is one we will see elsewhere: in the brief shot of naked feet in the montage of images of the dead girls in the container unit; in the close-up of Nina's lace-covered feet as the corrupt cop carries her away over his shoulder; and in the image of his mother's feet when Joe finds her murdered in her bed. In this last scene the tenderness implied in the earlier shots is explicit, as Joe slowly uncovers and then strokes his mother's naked feet. A further shot, however, moves us from empathy to identification. The flashback scene in which he witnesses his mother's beating ends as Joe walks carefully back along the upstairs corridor of his family home, and we see his own beaten and scarred legs and feet.

Elsewhere, it is the image of an open mouth that provides the site of identification. The first brief flashback of Joe's discovery of the container of dead girls is triggered by the request by one of a group of young Asian tourists, as he walks the streets of New York, to take their photograph. As he raises his iPhone, the camera pans in close-up across the open mouths of the young women, pausing on the last of them as her smile seems to change to a grimace. He lowers the phone and we see her expression become shocked and questioning; there are tears in her eyes. We hear Joe's voice gasp "What the fuck are we doing?", and then the command, "Go! Go!". The rapid, barely discernible flashback that follows shows the container door being opened and then in the darkness the faces of two Asian girls, mirror images, their mouths open as they died, gasping for air.

As both child and adult Joe too stretches open his mouth in the desperate attempt to breathe inside the plastic bag. His dying mother lies with her mouth fallen open. The most ambivalent parallel, however, is when Joe lies back on his bed, his mouth open, and the camera, above him, shows him lower into his mouth the blade of his knife. In Powell's film, it was the woman's mouth viewed in close-up which became, in Kaja Silverman's words, the site of "woman-as-lack." (1988: 35) As we see the killer, Mark, replay the scene of his first murder, we, with him, watch on his home cinema screen the camera zoom in on his victim's screaming mouth, before he penetrates her with the blade attached to the leg of his camera tripod. In this most reflexive of films, however, as Silverman points out, Mark's identification is not only, and not primarily, with the penetrating camera/blade. In his father's documentary film of Mark as a child, it is *Mark's* mouth which, in close-up, is open and screaming. Unlike *Psycho*, Powell's film lays the responsibility for its protagonist's voyeuristic sadism at the door not of the mother but of the father, indeed of the patriarchal structure of values that he represents²⁰. Mark tries, but fails, to emulate him, to expunge his own memories of trauma by reconstructing them from the position of male power. Like Joe, however, he cannot, as Silverman points out, remain on the side of masculinity: he keeps "slipping over."

Glimpsing the female subject

Silverman's analysis is concerned to find a place for the female subject in depictions of male masochism, particularly when the author/director of such cinematic depictions is herself female. In such circumstances, she writes, the "figure of the marginal male subject" may provide "a kind of nodal point for the [female] authorial dream" (1988:

233), a point at which “the present symbolic order” is undermined and transformed, as subjectivity itself is feminised. The fracturing and slipping of male subjectivity that we find in Ramsay’s film, I suggest, provides such a point. Unlike the films of which Silverman is writing²¹, however, *You Were Never Really Here* also offers us glimpses of a female subjectivity beyond the victimhood with which Joe identifies femininity.

In *The Scorsese Connection* Lesley Stern draws a connection between Powell’s *Peeping Tom* and *Taxi Driver*. As Mark’s body became a “camera-body,” she writes (1995: 65), so that of Travis becomes a “machine-body.” Both bodies seek to enact the “phantasmatic scenarios” imagined by the films’ protagonists, scenarios into which we as interpellated spectators are drawn. Both films draw attention to the solipsism of their central characters and to the fantasised nature of the vision of both masculinity and femininity at its core. But both, in the end, find it impossible to see beyond their protagonists’ view of women²². If, as Lury suggests, “the little girl is ... not always or not necessarily the passive, uninterested object that these films apparently depict (and that their white male protagonists require),” her perspective, and her desires, remain unimaginable (2010: 4).

As reviewers observed, Ramsay’s film, like Scorsese’s, has an interiorised, hallucinatory quality which comes from the fracturing of its narrative with Joe’s flashbacks and the fragmented representation of his inner torment. Unlike *Taxi Driver* and its antecedents, however, it also provides moments which jolt us into awareness of another, female perspective. The bruised girl on the subway platform and the young Asian tourist who requests a photograph both look back at Joe, and the camera remains for a long time on their faces as their gazes seem to interrogate him. Both young women imply the possibility of victimhood and are reminders of the girls Joe has not saved, but in their extended gazes we also see questions posed of Joe from a consciousness outside

his own, questions which Joe's extra-diegetic voice, which we hear over the extended shot of the Asian girl's face, seems then to echo: "What the fuck are we doing?"²³

It is Nina, however, the senator's daughter he is contracted to rescue, who most provides this external vision. In Ames's novella, this character, named Lisa, is wholly passive, her brief appearance in the story framed entirely through Joe's perspective:

The girl was lying inert on the bed, her head to the side, her lips moving. Her legs were still open. She looked like a torn-apart doll. ... It was barely audible, but she was counting. ... *It's her way to get through it*, Joe thought. *She counts until it's over.* (Ames 2018: 40-41, original emphasis).

When Joe first enters the brothel's "playground" to effect his rescue, the girls he sees seem as featureless as Ames' character. The first girl he meets is small, blonde, and childlike, like Nina, with a drug-induced blankness. Utterly passive, she registers no concern at the naked body of a man that Joe has left lying in the corridor. As Joe wakes Nina, and her face comes slowly into focus, her look, too, is blank and impassive, her silence that of the traumatised child-victim (Lury 2010). The framing of her face, however, mirrors that of the boy Joe at the start of the film, and of the other young girl into which his face seemed to melt. Her counting echoes and merges with Joe's own; her internal voice, heard extra-diegetically, could be his. Joe has not mastered his traumatic experiences by replaying them, as psychoanalysis would advocate²⁴. Instead, his subjectivity dissolves into that of Nina. In the sequence that follows, it is Nina's consciousness that we share – Joe's voice is distant and blurred as he rouses her; we hear him through her perceptions. As he drives her away, it is her gaze through the car window that we follow, her dream-like view of the city streets that we share. Although Joe assures her that she is safe, she continues to count.

Into the kingdom of the dark

In a reference to the work of Giorgio Agamben, Lury comments that the witness of trauma “is characterised, perversely, by their inability to speak.” (2010: 6) This witness exists, she writes, “solely as what remains after the destruction of their humanity”; an “animate corpse,” s/he “barely exists.” (ibid.: 123) The child, who lacks adequate language, becomes a paradigmatic figure for such witnessing. Entering their consciousness is to enter a world in which temporality is disturbed, sound and image are dislocated, and narrative enters the irrational space of “a nightmarish fairytale.” (ibid.: 7) This is the world that we enter in the final part of *You Were Never Really Here*, beginning with the sequence in which Joe gives his mother an underwater burial.

It begins with Joe once more in motion: driving, with his and our view that of city bridge and skyline through the window of the moving car. Nina has been taken by Williams’ thugs and his mother murdered. He is dressed in suit and tie, the body of his mother on the back seat, wrapped in black plastic. As he lowers his window, the wind catches the plastic and gives the illusion of life, in an ironic echo of Joe’s earlier frustrated attempts at self-suffocation. The scene shifts and slows, becoming a canopy of trees through which sunlight streams; the soundtrack’s relentless metallic beat gives way to the sound of birds and a swelling pastoral music. The slowness of Joe’s movement is no longer heavy and ponderous and, as he walks into the water with his mother, both of them weighted down, and tendrils of her hair escape and float in the water, the slow-motion camera renders the scene both peaceful and beautiful. Time and movement are suspended; the world we have entered seems magical. When Joe opens his eyes, it is Nina, not his mother, that he sees floating; he removes the stones from his pockets and he and Nina swim to the surface.

Fig. 4 Nina floating

How are we to read this sequence? Its dreamlike quality suggests Campbell's monomyth, where the hero crosses the threshold into the "kingdom of the dark" with its "dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms" (1993: 97), from which he will emerge, perhaps aided by a woman, in a form of rebirth that will renew the world. The reference, however, is ironic. In this underwater sequence, which echoes the film's opening, Joe, the child he was, and Nina once again merge, and are again linked with the figure of the mother. We hear the voices counting once again, and whilst we can identify that of the adult Joe, the children's voices are indistinguishable. It is this child's voice that seems to prompt Joe to open his eyes. When he emerges from the water he resumes his role of dogged rescuer, once again seeking to separate himself from Nina. The film has made clear, however, that Joe is not the hero – there are no heroes – but the witness and victim of trauma, and Nina is his double.

When, therefore, this would-be Theseus reaches the centre of the labyrinth, having passed through hallways filled with the cultural artefacts that link this centre of exploitation with those of an earlier European culture, he finds that the monster – another white man whose clothes now mirror his own – has already been slain. In the hotel room where Nina learnt of the death of her father from a news broadcast, Joe reassured her: "It's okay. It's okay." A little earlier, in the car, she had lifted her fingers to find blood from Joe's hammer on her fingertips. Now, her hands are again covered in blood and she echoes Joe's words: "It's okay, Joe. It's okay." For Joe the discovery of Williams' body means the failure of his masculinity. He rips off his tie and shirt and curls into himself, sobbing and shaking. We hear him mutter, "I'm weak. I'm weak," and his voice merges with the extra-diegetic voice of his father, echoing his judgement. As he returns through the house, he sees a vision of his father, dressed in soldier's

trousers and with bare, muscled torso, hammer in his hand and towel over his thrown back head. It is a vision once more of the brutality, and its consequences, that Joe both failed to stop and has sought to emulate. We see, however, that he cannot expiate his own childhood helplessness and his father's brutality through the use of the father's own weapon. Nina has not needed his rescue and she is the one now tentatively in control.

You Were Never Really Here provides us with a doubled ending, neither of which is the ending of Ames' novella²⁵. In the first, Joe is invisible once again, seated in a diner where he and Nina face one another over milkshakes, and where overlapping voices speaking of everyday trivia merge with the artificially cheery 1950 song, 'If I knew you were coming I'd've baked a cake'. He cannot answer Nina's question, "Where are we going?", and when she exits the booth we see a tear slide down his face, blank with its weight of pain, before he shoots himself. In this dreamlike scenario it seems entirely plausible that an elderly customer should calmly continue paying for her meal and the waitress simply not notice Joe's suicide, placing the check on the table with its spreading pool of blood, with a "Have a nice day."

When Nina returns, however, she finds Joe not dead but sleeping, and it is her turn to rouse him. "Let's go," she says. "It's a beautiful day." He lifts his head and echoes her words; she smiles and he looks around him. After a cut to black, the film's extended final shot is of the empty booth of the diner. Behind it we see the same elderly customer pause in the same way at the cash desk before leaving. The clock on the wall registers the same time as before. The sound of the customers' voices,

briefly inaudible under the film's swelling soundtrack, rises in volume once more. Joe, the "animate corpse," and the child Nina, the witnesses and survivors of trauma, were perhaps neither of them ever "really here," if reality is the smooth, unseeing surface of the everyday that the diner represents.

Fig. 5 The smooth, unseeing surface of the everyday

Conclusion: *Taxi Driver* for a new century?

Like Travis Bickle, then, Joe embarks on a mission to save the "little white girl" and restore her innocence, in the face of a city whose corruption permeates all its aspects. As in Scorsese's film, his method is the violence of a fantasised ideal white masculinity. As there, we occupy the splintered consciousness of this vigilante rescuer. But what makes Ramsay's such a very different film is the way in which it both critiques this "dominant fiction" and renders its workings – psychological, cultural and political – visible. Joe's violence is the product of the abusive father with whom he attempts, but fails, to identify, not of a destructively powerful maternal figure. The ideal of white masculinity that he has internalised is the source of the corrosive power that corrupts the American city and stretches beyond it, globally, and it is a power founded on the abuse and sexual exploitation of women. To seek to employ it in the service of their rescue is to prompt not only failure but self-destruction. Moreover, Joe's consciousness is leaky. It dissolves into the femininity against which the masculinity he attempts to adopt constructs itself, and which it brutally exploits. He finds, too, that the "dirty little white girl" who is the object of his quest is not simply a passive, damaged figure. She is Joe's double: both victim and witness of the trauma of this brutal exploitation. Unlike him, however, she does not carry the burden of the need to assert masculinity – to fulfil

Campbell's "timeless" journey of the hero - and can therefore kill the father and free herself without risking self-destruction. In ceding control and acceding to *her* consciousness ("It is a beautiful day") lies the only tentative suggestion of hope for Joe – though not, the film suggests, for the world which he leaves untouched by his presence.

Notes

¹ The quotation is from Kate Muir's 2017 review of the Cannes screening of the film, for *The Times*. Other examples include: 'There are many parallels between Lynne Ramsay's *You Were Never Really Here* and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976)' (Pickett 2018); the film is 'a stripped down and updated riff ... on *Taxi Driver*,' (Hunneysett 2018), a 'contemporary *Taxi Driver* without all the talking' (Smith 2018), 'the *Taxi Driver* of the post 9/11 generation of veterans' (Howard 2018); Ramsay's protagonist is 'a sadder and more tragically human version of Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle' (Dawson 2018).

² I am thinking here in particular of Luc Besson's *Léon* (1994), whose protagonist, like Ramsay's, is a hired killer who acts in opposition to the political and institutional corruption in which he is nevertheless implicated; and Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1986), whose protagonist like Ramsay's, locates a drugged and abused blonde girl in a country house which is the site of corrupt wealth and privilege, and carries her away, barely conscious, on his back. For a critique of the 'dominant fiction' of the white male as sympathetic (but angry and violent) victim in post-war American culture, see Savran (1998).

³ For a fuller articulation of this argument, see De Lauretis (1984), Thornham (2012).

⁴ She discusses in particular Carroll's *Alice* and Nabokov's *Lolita*.

⁵ See Luft 1982, Myres 1982, Thornham 2019.

⁶ This is, as Jane Tompkins points out, a rhetorical strategy, one that functions to naturalize the code of values that the Western celebrates. In fact, 'the desert is no more blank or empty

than the northeastern forests were when Europeans came. It is full of living things, ... and inhabited by people' (1992.: 76).

⁷ Although Philip L. Simpson argues that in his quest for revenge, the frontier hero also becomes a Gothic figure, seeking, like the serial killers of later fiction, to escape 'a threatening grown-up woman' and the 'mature sexuality and feminine consciousness' that she represents (2000: 30).

⁸ In *The Last of the Mohicans* this girl is Alice, one of the two daughters of Colonel Munro; her non-blonde half-sister, Cora, is also captured but killed. In *The Searchers* it is Debbie, the captured niece of protagonist Ethan Edwards. In *Léon* the 'little white girl' is the orphaned 12 year old Mathilda; in *Mona Lisa* it is the prostituted fifteen year-old Cathy; in *Taxi Driver* it is another prostituted child, Iris; in *The Big Sleep* it is the corrupted younger daughter of General Sternwood, Carmen.

⁹ This fiction, or ideology, she writes, 'solicits our faith above all else in the unity of the family, and the adequacy of the male subject' (1992: 15-16).

¹⁰ Lesley Stern makes a similar point in relation to *The Searchers* where, she argues, Martha's absence means that her daughter, Debbie, 'is able to occupy the place of lover and daughter to Ethan' (1995: 44).

¹¹ Both *Taxi Driver*'s Travis and *The Searchers*' Ethan seek to return the little white girl to family and home: 'A girl should live at home', says Travis to Iris; 'Let's go home', says Ethan to the rescued Debbie.

¹² Though the rocking chair is also a central image in *The Searchers*, where it symbolises the domesticity of the homestead.

¹³ When she helplessly floods the bathroom floor ('I can't turn the tap off') as he stands outside, we see him mimic the actions of Hitchcock's shower scene - before helping her downstairs and methodically mopping and drying the bathroom floor.

¹⁴ Doane et al. are writing of feminist film criticism. Thornham (2007) applies the term also to women's filmmaking.

¹⁵ In particular, George in Jordan's *Mona Lisa*, who, like Travis is a driver whose constant journeys – this time across London - reveal the city's filth and degradation.

¹⁶ It is also central to the London of *Mona Lisa*.

¹⁷ See Gillett (2004), Thornham (2007), Tincknell (2013).

¹⁸ Nina's mother, we learn in both film and novella, is dead. Ramsay, however, changes the events and their order. In Ames's novella, Votto's wife is murdered by the mob after Nina's disappearance and her suspicion that Votto is complicit with it. Her murder is made to appear a suicide. In Ramsay's film, it is her mother's suicide that prompts Nina's own attempts at escape.

¹⁹ Published in 1948, the song was recorded by Como in 1949. Its introductory verse introduces the theme of adult – if sentimental – romance ('When Johnny Jones was serenading Mary/ He sure could quote a lot of poetry), but the lines themselves describe their object ambivalently as both child and woman: 'J, we're like Jack and Jill; K, you're so kissable'. Later, the song was to become the text for a child's reading primer, complete with sexualised but 'innocent' illustrations. 'The silly words work well as an address to kissable little sweethearts', commented the *Publishers Weekly* advertising copy. See:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/1954/a-youre-adorable-by-martha-alexander/9780763653323/>. In the film, the song is first sung by Joe's mother, as they share domestic tasks.

²⁰ Mark's father is a scientist. His voyeurism is identified with the desire to know; his sadism is in the service of scientific knowledge; he is a well-respected and prominent figure.

²¹ In this context she is writing of the films of Liliana Cavani.

²² In Silverman's account of the film she identifies a critical female voice in Helen, the young woman who survives Mark's murderous filmmaking. As Stern suggests, however, Helen is desexualised: a child whose 'prodding insistence' is 'lethally naïve' (1995: 68).

²³ Later, there is a surreal echo of this interrogative gaze in one of the oil paintings past which Joe walks in the mansion of Governor Williams. As he approaches the bedroom in which he

will find Williams, hammer over his shoulder, he passes a painting of a semi-naked woman in bed, perhaps an imitation of Rembrandt's 'A Woman in Bed' (1645). Like Rembrandt's figure, she is drawing back the bed curtain, in a pose that suggests seduction. Her pose prefigures the purpose for which Williams uses the bedroom Joe will enter – it, too has a four-poster bed with curtains. But as he passes, the camera holds on the painting and we see that the woman's gaze is questioning and wary, and seems to be fixed on Joe.

²⁴ See Freud 2001a, 2001b, Silverman 1992.

²⁵ There, Joe kills Votto and sets off to rescue the senator's daughter and exact his Oedipal revenge: 'At his core, Joe was a very angry boy who had never gotten proper vengeance on his father ... Though it's not always vengeance; sometimes it's justice' (Ames 2018: 72-3).

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