

Using semiotic analysis, discuss how *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (dir. Lynne Ramsay, 2011) uses the colour red to communicate its themes

First coined by the English philosopher John Locke, semiotics is a mode of study which seeks to peek behind the curtain of signs and symbols in order to interpret what is meant by their communication (Champagne, 2014). Given that this is quite a broad church, it can be applied to a large range of scholarship, from biology to computer programming. This essay uses the basic idea behind semiotics to perform a close reading of Lynne Ramsay's filmic adaptation of the Lionel Shriver novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by applying an aesthetic spotlight on the utilisation of the colour red in the film. Attention will be drawn to how red is used to communicate themes of suffering, guilt, and lust while also being a device to metaphorically signify blood and gore. These poetic elements appear in the text's fragmented narrative structure as the protagonist, Eva Khatchadourian, recalls her experience of mothering a problematic son who grew up to become a mass murderer, while also chronicling her traumatised navigation (Desilets, 2017) through what rubble remains of her life after the cataclysmic event.

Through Eva's melancholic reverie, the audience is plunged into a mis-en-scene constantly oppressed by the permeance of red. Seldom is there a scene in the film where red cannot be found. Oftentimes its presence is overt and bordering on artificial which is executed through lighting [see: *figure 1*], but sometimes it is subliminally inserted through set dressing – a lamp in the background, or a toy, or a ping pong table. In all visual art forms, colour is of paramount importance (Gonigroszek & Szmigiero, 2021) and film is no exception. From this, it must be gleaned that Lynne Ramsay and her Director of Photography Seamus McGarvey intentionally weave the colour red into the text. It is also apparent from close reading that red holds significance on multiple levels for Eva. Some artists argue that no two people see the same red in their mind's eye (Albers, 2013), so Eva's associations with red are clearly

subjective to her, and as communicated through the narrative, these associations can be traced.



Fig 1: A shot which gets re-used with increasing intensity as Eva's recollection of motherhood get closer to Kevin's crime.

Before the birth of Kevin, red represents Eva's lust for life. This is expressed most vividly in the opening sequence of the film depicting a young, carefree Eva as she participates in La Tomatina, the Valencian festival which attracts people in their thousands to gather and throw tomatoes at each other. Shot from above, the writhing masses swarm in a sea of red; human flesh mingling with tomato flesh. Eventually, the audience finds Eva, stained with red, crowd surfing in dazed jubilation [see: *Figure 2*] as she basks in the 'raw, unsafe sensuality' of the moment (McGill, 2011). This scene represents life before the encumbrance of motherhood and reflects Eva's successful career as a travel writer which she had to put on hold to raise Kevin. Another instance reflecting Eva's lust for life is the scene where Kevin is conceived. A dark bedroom with a slow flickering red light which forebodingly fills the space spells 'danger' (Kauppinen-Raisanen & Jauffret, 2018) which the characters wilfully ignore in their passionate embrace. Eva's love of travel and Kevin's interruption to her sense of passion co-inside later on in the film when Eva, longing for the days when she was free, decorates her study with memorabilia from her travels. This awakening of her passion is signified in the mis-en-scene through the red dress which she wears while ceremoniously gluing old maps and posters to the wall. Kevin, made jealous by his mother's expression, ruins the decoration by splashing red and black paint all over the room. And so, passion gives way to suffering.



Fig. 2: Eva at La Tomatina. The rich vibrancy of the red coupled with Eva's splayed body could communicate jubilation or be emblematic of crucifixion.

Eva, particularly in the film's present, suffers greatly. Not only does she lose her family, but she also loses her wealth, and her career, and has to endure the purgatorial punishment of existing in a place which is filled with people who actively blame her for Kevin's actions. Red, being a vessel of powerfully intense introspection (Kandinsky, 2000), and a representation of the conscious mind in art (Siegal, 2014) is utilised as a tool to reflect the guilt (both that she feels, and that is externally placed on her) of failing as a mother. This notion of blame is often attributed to what many describe as an ambivalence towards motherhood on Eva's part (Quinn, 2011), however, the text represents her as attempting to socialise Kevin. For example, in a scene where she passes a red ball to a despondent Kevin, trying to get him to push it back [see: *Figure 3*]. This is a key scene for establishing Eva's impotence as a mother when he, while cognisant enough to do so, consciously refuses. But impotence does not necessarily equate to ambivalence. The redness of the ball is also likely significant



Fig. 3: Eva's impotence as a mother portrayed through Kevin's refusal to engage with her parenting.

as a totem of the shame she feels as a mother, due to its extensive presence in the mis-en-scene whenever she is recalling her experience of motherhood.

While frequently on display in her memories, red is also an unavoidable symbol of guilt in Eva's present life, especially as the narrative when the story set in the past catches up with the present, wherein red lighting shines on her more and more overtly [fig. 1]. The first glimpse we get into Eva's life after what Kevin did is a small living space, laden with mess. There are multiple red items on the table – a half-eaten apple, ketchup on the rim of a plate – as well as a thick red hue that shines on Eva's face. When she leaves the house, she finds that it has been vandalised with paint [see: *Figure 4*]. The red paint covering the house is emblematic of the guilt, both which Eva bestows on herself and that which is inferred on her by the local community. She spends the duration of the film making futile attempts to clean the paint off the house, but just like the guilt she feels, and the trauma which has fundamentally changed her (Desilets, 2017), it seems here to stay. This Sisyphean-eque task is a cosmic punishment in which she is eternally locked; she will never stop trying to scrub the walls clean. This sense of damnation is communicated in a sequence when a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses knock on Eva's door.

“Do you know where you're spending the afterlife?” one asks.

“Oh! I do, actually,” she says jubilantly, “I'm going straight to hell”

What Eva might not realise is that she is already there.



Fig. 4: Eva's paint-splattered house, a constant reminder of her guilt.

The red paint on the outside house is also a signifier of another incredibly prevalent metaphor in the film. Almost all words for red stem from the Sanskrit ‘rudhirā’. It’s meaning? Blood (Gage, 1999). Harking back to the film’s depiction of La Tomatina [fig. 2], Eva’s ecstasy, juxtaposed with the ‘slushy redness and physical abandon’ has gory connotations. This, coupled with the sound design which splices distant cheering with horrified screaming and police sirens foreshadows Kevin’s murder spree (McGill, 2011). There are numerous other instances in the text which use red to metaphorically portray blood and gore, especially as a device to depict Eva’s blame. From overt examples, such as failing to wash red paint off of her hands, to more subliminal instances like her holding a red sharpie, blood is often “on her hands”. This is also reflected in her Sisyphean task of fruitlessly cleaning the red paint off the house, wherein at one point, she starts to use a razor. This causes speckles of blood to ricochet off the window onto her face and could have strong connotations of self-harm. Red food is frequently utilised as a prop to requisitely plant the seed of Kevin’s premonition towards violence. For example, the jam sandwiches he eats which the camera holds on for long periods as he squeezes the bread, causing the jam to grotesquely ooze out [see: *Figure 5*].



Fig. 5: A harmless act becomes hard to watch given what the audience is presented about Kevin’s gory disposition.

Lynne Ramsay’s filmic adaptation of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a richly layered text which provides ample opportunities for semiotic analysis, particularly in (but not limited to) its use of the colour red. Eva’s guilt-smudged lens exposits, on

several occasions, her ongoing response to trauma; internal suffering projected onto the external world. Red does not just represent the guilt that Eva feels but also casts a blanket of blame over her to the extent that there are very seldom instances in the film which can be described as truly sympathetic towards her. There is blood, not only on Eva's hands but in the wider context of the film frequently presented as a metaphorical tool to subliminally foreshadow Kevin's crimes. However, the audience is given glimpses of red being emblematic of passion and lust in Eva's life, even if it is almost always marred by Kevin's destructive presence. Through the colour red, the audience is given a three-dimensional roadmap of how trauma has fundamentally altered Eva's world, which can be observed through its varied presentation in the text's unconventional narrative structure.

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