

Dermatology as Screenology: The Films of Lynne Ramsay

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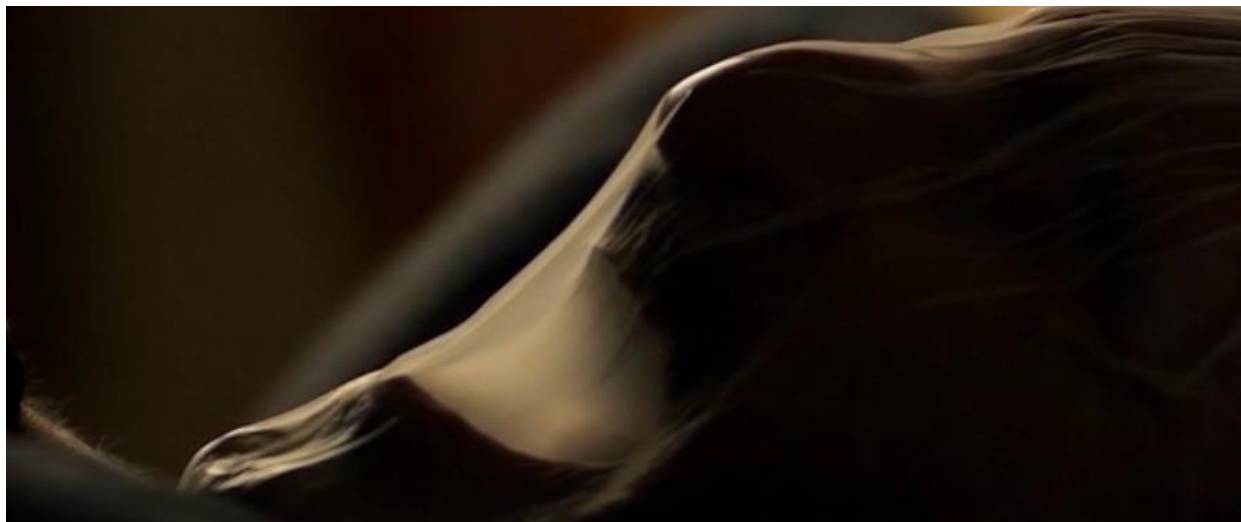
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Abstract

The filmmaker Lynne Ramsay exhibits an onscreen interest in human skin, which, coupled by her preoccupation with the materiality of screens, uncovers how the motion picture screen itself acts as a spectatorial epidermis, a membrane that invites interplay between visual matter and spectatorial bodies. Ramsay's cinema is a corporeal affair.

Introduction

A whispered countdown, several ragged breaths, a man's snarls – “stand up straight, pussy” – and the sounds of water usher the spectator into the world of Lynne Ramsay's latest film, *You Were Never Really Here* (2018). The blackness then gives way to a man asphyxiating himself in a plastic bag. His strained gulps of air crumple the tensile material around his lips before it puffs back up full of vapor



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Figure 1. FBI agent Joe asphyxiating himself in a suicide bag in *You Were Never Really Here*.

Yet before Ramsay's protagonist, a former FBI agent suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, loses consciousness, he tears the plastic from his face. This unnerving sequence casts a pall over the remaining narrative; it primes the viewer for an encounter with death. Unsurprisingly, Ramsay's

protagonist repeatedly attempts to kill himself throughout the film. This opening shot of a suicide bag in *You Were Never Really Here*, in turn, is reminiscent of the first shot of Ramsay's debut film, *Ratcatcher* (1999), which begins with a slow-motion sequence of a boy's head wrapped in lace. The delicate fabric similarly clasps his face in a suffocating embrace before it, too, is ripped off him.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000002.jpg\]](#)

Figure 2. Child-protagonist of *Ratcatcher* wrapped in lace.

This ghostly image is not to be read lightly. Ramsay's child-protagonist will soon die from a literal form of asphyxia – drowning. Might, then, those water noises in the opening seconds of *You Were Never Really Here* evoke the submarine death of *Ratcatcher*? Or, might they allude to Ramsay's award-winning short *Swimmer* (2012) in which a young boy similarly disappears into the depths of a glassy lake? Whatever the allusion, all of Ramsay's filmography (thus far) is linked by human expiry, suffering, and pain. Her second film, *Morvern Callar* (2002), begins with a bloody image of Christmastime suicide, and her third, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), retells the story of a homicidal teenager. Human misery and death, for Ramsay, are wellsprings of creativity. It is not coincidental that her graduation featurette was itself titled *Small Deaths* (1996). Her preferred images and themes, then, serve to rattle us; she deploys the bodies of her characters to evoke a visceral spectatorial response (shivers, tears, nausea, squirms, shrieks, etc.). Ramsay reveals that her spectators, much like her characters themselves, are as vulnerable as those thin, ductile fabrics smothering her protagonists in *Ratcatcher* and *You Were Never Really Here*.

These textile coverings, furthermore, also point to another major motif of Ramsay's filmography: mediation. Ramsay, writes media scholar Tina Kendall, "invests in the in-between of things – in the intermediated space between humans and things, subjects and objects, sensation and representation, in order to establish new cinematic forms of intimacy with the lowly things of the world." [1]. In the opening sequences of *Ratcatcher* and *You Were Never Really Here*, physical materials (lace, plastic) intermediate characters' corporeal experiences of life and death. Indeed, throughout Ramsay's cinema, the viewer encounters a multitude of mediative materials (windshields, televisions, windows, mirrors) with which her characters variously engage. These onscreen surfaces, I argue, replicate the relation between filmgoer and movie-screen. They demand spectatorial attention, are touched by curious eyes, and, ultimately, become sites of passage. The screen, Ramsay reveals, is a transitory

material – a two-way street – that invites interexchange between its visual matter and spectatorial bodies; her films meditate on the experience of cinema-watching as a visceral affair. These corporeal encounters between images and viewers render the screen into a kind of epidermis, a membrane that, much like human skin, mediates physical sensation. It is no surprise, then, that a major preoccupation of Ramsay's cinema is the textural qualities of human skin itself – often in its ugliest, most distorted forms. The suffering bodies of her characters leave a lasting impression; her spectators come to feel their pain by means of the screen. Ramsay's images are as affective as they are affecting.

This article, then, maintains that Ramsay's filmic interest in human skin and mediative materials – these surface matters – is not merely a “superficial” one. That is, Ramsay draws our spectatorial attention to the surface of things, especially her physically pained characters, to reveal the embodied nature of cinema-watching. Ramsay's motion pictures interrogate the very phenomenology of the moving image, which, in recent years, has attracted an increased interest among film theorists. In other words, Ramsay dermatologically “diagnoses” the present-day conception of the screen as a material surface, a luminous membrane, capable of exerting itself physiologically on its spectators. She self-consciously lays bare the flesh of film. For its part, this article begins by exploring Ramsay's dermal motifs, then it turns to an analysis of the significance of her onscreen screens. Finally, this essay unites Ramsay's interests in skins and screens by arguing that such a two-pronged preoccupation forces us to recognize how cinema engages us bodily – how, by way of the screen, Ramsay makes contact.

Ramsay's Skins

A fixation with skin can be detected in Ramsay's filmography well before her groundbreaking debut, *Ratcatcher*. For example, the second episode of Ramsay's graduation film, *Small Deaths*, which, being comprised of three plaintive vignettes, won her the Cannes Prix de Jury in 1996, follows a young girl playing with her friends in a grassy field as they tactilely engage their surroundings. Ramsay conveys these children's corporeal immersion in their environment by a montage sequence of small hands clasping stalks of wheat, an extreme close-up of a gunky snail in a child's palm, and a shot of a girl wiping clean her friend's kneecaps with a leaf. These images reveal the ways in which children come to know their world through their sense of touch, a neural capacity that matures quicker than other visual, auditory, and cognitive processing systems. [2][#N2]. It is not by chance that the language we use to articulate comprehension is overrun with metaphors of tactility. We “grasp” information, “grapple with” theories, and “embrace” ideas. The second vignette of *Small Deaths* reflects on the tactile, physical nature of human development. It climaxes when the young protagonist discovers a bloodied cow stoned to death by her playmates. This slaughtered animal is likely her earliest exposure to human cruelty, which, like any child, she “wrestles” with viscerally. Assuming the gaze of the shaken girl, Ramsay's camera takes an especial interest in the animal's lacerated hide as it zooms-in on its flesh wound, a gaping slit that makes the spectator recoil.



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Figure 3. Close-up of a flesh wound in Ramsay's graduation film, *Small Deaths*.

The cow's eye is then seen rolling into the back of its skull. The young girl copes with this encounter of animal death through an attention to skin. She makes sense of this image because it has sense – it jolts her tactile imagination; it's a *touching* scene. The jarring, fleshy imagery of *Small Deaths*, foregrounded in a sequence fittingly titled "Holy Cow," pervades Ramsay's subsequent work.

In *Ratcatcher*, a gritty rendition of a dustbin strike in '70s-era Glasgow, the viewer notices a continual focus on despoiled skin, which Ramsay most often relays through close-up shots: scabbed knees, grimy toes, smashed faces, slobbering mouths, and sticky hands. The most haunting iteration of her epidermal motif is when Ryan Quinn, a young neighborhood boy, who, after rough-housing with his pal, James Gillespie, mistakenly drowns and washes ashore on the banks of a nearby canal. A shot of his limp, muddied fingers followed by a close-up of his face covered in wet grass corroborate his demise.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000004.jpg\]](#)

Figure 4. Close-up of James Gillespie's corpse in *Ratcatcher*.

The sullied skin of Ramsay's characters in *Ratcatcher* communicate the plight of their social conditions; physical complexion acts as a fleshy mirror of urban squalor. Similarly, in *Morvern Callar*, Ramsay conveys the emotional trauma of her eponymously named protagonist through shots of her hands gliding over the corpse of her dead boyfriend, whose self-inflicted wounds – several gashes to the wrist – Ramsay unhesitatingly presents in close-up.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000005.jpg\]](#)

Figure 5. Close-up of Morvern's dead lover in *Morvern Callar*.

The dermal evidence of his suicide, as critics Tulloch and Middleweek note, “ruptures what might otherwise appear to be a scene of postcoital intimacy between lovers,” thus further shocking viewers as they struggle to apprehend this necrophilic encounter obscured by twinkling Christmas lights. [3].[#N3] Ramsay's sensitivity toward skin allows her to project onscreen what she might otherwise through exposition or dialogue, that is, her characters' pain. Their afflicted bodies externalize their psychologically battered interiorities. Form is content.

It is not a coincidence, then, that the variously bashed, bloodied, and bruised protagonist of *You Were Never Really Here* – former FBI agent Joe – suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. His internal trauma expresses itself corporeally. The few glimpses that Ramsay does offer into Joe's backstory are through close-ups such as his bare feet buried in sand. The filmmaker relays her character's anguish through shots of skin and limbs. Analogously, in *Kill the Day* (1996), one of Ramsay's earlier shorts, her recovering addict-protagonist is repeatedly seen lying on his back with a swelled ribcage.

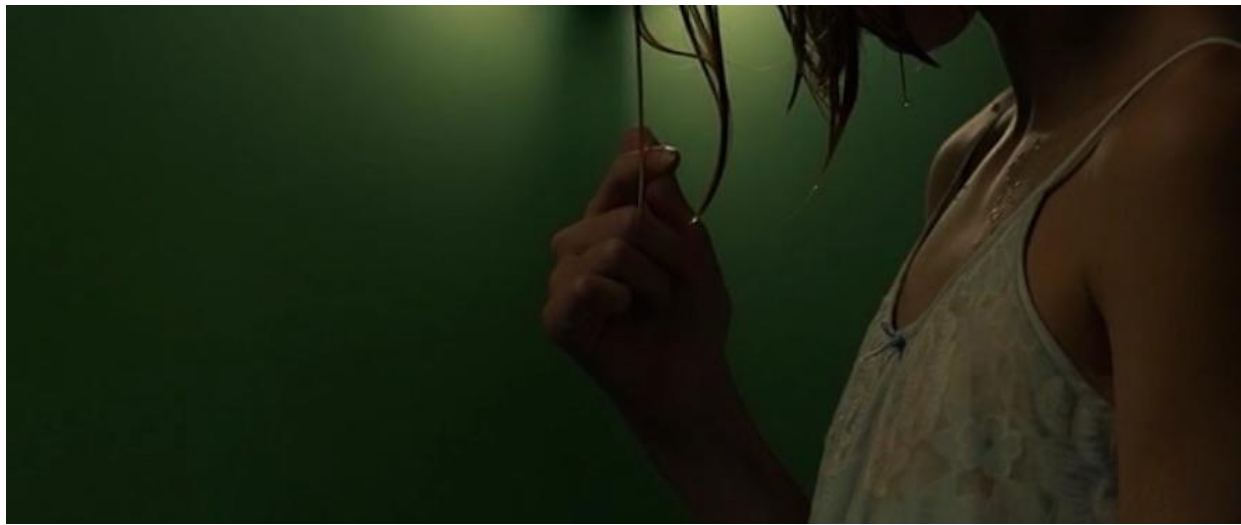


[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000006.jpg\]](#)

Figure 6. Swelled ribcage of Ramsay's addict-protagonist in *Kill the Day*.

Each of his slender ribs are as fragile as his shaky recovery; Ramsay transmits his inner demons by way of bone, skeletally. The tooth that Joe later yanks out of his mouth in *You Were Never Really Here*, which Ramsay's camera unflinchingly observes, can also be "read" as pain that begins on the inside – a toothache – before it bursts out onto Joe's exterior in pools of blood. For the rest of the film, Joe growls through a swollen, infected mouth, an epidermal reminder of his past trauma. The weapon that Joe chooses to use in breaking up clandestine rings of sex traffickers, moreover, underscores his tactile predisposition: a double-headed mallet. The hammer is a far more "hands-on" instrument than, say, a firearm. Ramsay's hired gun prefers to use his hands, to feel bones crack and heads split under his own weight; he's a hitman in the most literal sense. Joe opts for *contact*, a fleshy proclivity that accounts for the film's intense hand-to-hand combat scenes. The atonal clangs of Jonny Greenwood's haunting score acoustically capture Joe's hammer-wielding thwacks.

The fragility of the human body in Ramsay's filmography is rarely better captured than in her intimate shots of human hair. A wronged lover pulls her ringlets from the grasp of an unfaithful partner in *Gasman* (1997); Eva, the widowed mother in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, discovers bloodlike paint caked in her locks; Morvern repeatedly washes her scalp as if trying to purge the memories of her dead partner, whose body she cuts up in a bathtub; and the sexually abused girl of *You Were Never Really Here*, Nina, watches rainwater drip from her split ends, a delicate image that throws her otherwise broken body into sharp relief.



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Figure 7. Nina's rain soaked hair in *You Were Never Really Here*.

These shots of hair – of women's hair – bespeak emotional baggage. The tresses of Ramsay's female characters become storehouses for the damage inflicted by monstrous men: cheaters, killers, and predators. These women's coarsened interiors, like Joe's tooth, breach their follicles in physical appearance. It is fitting, then, that human hair is itself a kind of dead skin. The strings of our hair are sustained by a current of inert cells. Ramsay's women thus wear their deadened inner-lives in the guise of lifeless epidermal strands. Their full heads of hair – these strands of strain – hold memories of pain, hence Ramsay's filmic interest.

This filmmaker's fascination with skin, however, is not strictly aesthetic, not merely "superficial." The utility of hair and, for that matter, of all human skin, is to line body cavities, to protect vital organs from outside intrusion. The epidermis, the outermost layer of skin, is thus relied upon to regulate bodily intake and output. That word itself proceeds from the Greek *epi*, meaning "over" or "upon." Skin, therefore, acts as a kind of perforated screen, a membrane that invites traversal. It is a liminal organ, neither fully inside nor outside, that mediates matter, atmosphere, and temperature. Might, then, Ramsay's continual focus on human skin, especially when it's dirtied and slashed, reveal something deeper about her filmography, about cinema itself? A word often used to describe the thin membranous covering of a screen is, after all, film.

Ramsay's Screens

Before commenting on the relation between skin and screen in Ramsay's cinema, it is first necessary to reflect on the ways in which screens themselves, like flesh, suffuse her creative work. This line of inquiry will illustrate that a connection between the two is not incidental. Many critics have noted the motif of looking in Ramsay's films, especially in *Morvern Callar*, whose female lead is continually rendered speechless. [4]. [4] "By allowing the viewer to inhabit the space that is created for Morvern's silence," writes feminist critic Sarah Artt, "whether it is the total silence of the complete absence of sound, or the contemplative absence of speech accompanied by listening to carefully curated music, we come to understand Morvern's introverted world." [5]. [5] Morvern's gaze thus becomes a major arbitrator of meaning in the film; her eyes act as entry points into her interiority. Ramsay reiterates this kind of soundless, implicative gazing in her follow-up film, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, when Eva discovers that her son, using the very bike locks he promised to pawn off to become "the next

Donald Trump,” was not a victim, but the culprit of a high school massacre. These instances of traumatized looking spurred by sights that exceed verbalization culminate in agent Joe’s deadened eyes in *You Were Never Really Here*.



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Figure 8. Agent Joe’s deadened gaze in *You Were Never Really Here*.

The act of seeing, for Ramsay, is a visceral one far more communicative than speech. To quote Deleuze, with Ramsay, “a cinema of seeing replaces action.” [6].[#N6]. So many of Ramsay’s shots concern nothing less than the perception of perception. And for each example of unmediated looking in Ramsay’s cinema there is an equal number of incidents of mediated looking, that is, looking at something *through* something – through a screen, which, broadly defined, is a “surface for retrieving and transmitting visual information.” [7].[#N7]

In *Ratcatcher*, for example, James’s mother, Ann Gillespie, watches Ryan’s body resurface from the canal through a mud-spattered window.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000009.jpg\]](#)

Figure 9. Medium close-up of a dirtied window in *Ratcatcher*.

An obscured glass surface mediates her discovery of the child's death. Like a viewer following the twists and turns of *Ratcatcher*, she, too, becomes a spectator separated from narrative events by an intermediating material. Indeed, *Ratcatcher* is "a film full of frames within frames; windows, doorways, railings, stairwells and other framing devices create a series of *mise-en-abyme* compositions," a French term meaning images that contain smaller copies of themselves. [8]. [#N8]. The film's meta-commentary on matters of cinematic framing is especially evident in a close-up of Anne's eyes in which the window through which she is watching the drowned child is seen on her iris. This shot yields a complex web of intermediation; it is an image of an image of an image.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000010.jpg\]](#)

Figure 10. Extreme close-up of iris looking at a window in *Ratcatcher*.

A similar shot recurs in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* when an archery target is shown seared onto Kevin's pupil as he plots his bloodbath.



[\[f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000011.jpg\]](#)

Figure 11. Extreme close-up of iris looking at target in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

This kind of mediatic layering is a hallmark of Ramsay's cinema. She depicts a whole fight scene over grainy security footage in *You Were Never Really Here*, and another on the surface of a cracked mirror, and, in *Kill the Day* – a film about the mediative role of dreams in our perception of reality – Ramsay zooms-in on a puddle to reflect a scene of children playing, and, later, on a peephole to show a prison inmate trying to escape. As if acknowledging Ramsay's multi-layered aesthetic, the angsty protagonist of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* even states: "It's gotten so bad that half the time the people on TV – inside the TV – they're watching TV." That a character remarks on Ramsay's intricate style of cinematography exposes the extent of her own self-referentiality; her filmography is a meditation on mediation. It calls attention to the screened nature of spectatorship, thus acting as a metaphor for cinema itself. Hence, in *Morvern Callar*, Ramsay's protagonist discovers a computer monitor bearing the words, in all caps, "READ ME." This digital injunction, on which Ramsay's camera lingers, invites consideration of her own onscreen screens. They, too, demand "reading."

Generally speaking, the screen is an elusive material object that only recently has attracted critical attention. Calling for a branch of Media Studies dedicated to a cultural history of the screen, what he calls "screenology," Eriki Huhtamo writes: "...screens have a tendency to become invisible; they mediate perceptions and interactions, effacing their own identities in the process. We don't stare at the screen; we gaze at what it transmits. But there is more: screens also hide the history of their own becoming, turning into a kind of ever-present nonpresence, an anomalous object." [9]. [N9] An archeology of the screen vies to make screens visible again – to reframe them ontologically, historically, and culturally. A dilemma of screen studies, however, is contending with what constitutes a screen, which, if defined as any surface "for retrieving and transmitting visual information," can be anything from a mirror to a wall. [10]. [N10] For its part, Ramsay's cinema acknowledges the material diversity of screen technology and, more importantly, screens' ever-present and seemingly "invisible" presence. The viewer here recalls the rearview mirrors and windshields in *You Were Never Really Here*, the reflective pools in *Ratcatcher* and *Swimmer*, the tabletops, walls, and windows in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Gasman*, and the vistas and doorframes in *Morvern Callar*. These material intermediaries all operate on a dialectic of concealment and exposure, of immersion and disruption. They facilitate contact with their visual matter, but also stand in the way of such contact. The dirty window in *Ratcatcher*, for example, enables Ann to see the drowned child, but it prevents her from

determining which child has died – hence her fear that it was her son James, not Ryan, who washed ashore. The screen blurs fixed boundaries between interior and exterior spaces. Its function, Ramsay suggests, is to mediate encounters between matter – much like human skin. The epidermis, indeed, is the *body's* screen.

Consequently, any screening material is a membranous point of passage, a site of admixture. “The reciprocal contact between us and objects or environments indeed occurs on the surface,” writes media theorist Giuliana Bruno, “It is by way of such tangible, ‘superficial’ contact that we apprehend the art object and the space of art, turning contact into a communicative interface...” [11][#N11]. An act of looking never occurs dispassionately; it is an embodied, dynamic undertaking that involves interexchange. The extreme close-ups of objects burned onto the pupils and irises of Ramsay’s characters in *Ratcatcher* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* uncover how a palpable relation is forged between a looker and the looked at, a dynamic give-and-take of surface matter. “When we touch a surface, we experience immersion and inversion fully, and reciprocity is a quality of this touch. There is a haptic rule of thumb: when we touch something or someone, we are, inevitably, touched in return ...” [12][#N12]. The screen invites a bodily interplay between observers and its visual content; the spectatorial eye is but a hand once removed. Cinema, then, is also a sensual, seductive, fleshy affair. Throughout her work, Ramsay asks us to *grapple* with the motion picture screen.

Ramsay - Dermatologist as Screenologist

An early sequence in *You Were Never Really Here* nicely captures the fluid, corporeal dynamics animating a spectator’s relation to the screen, that is, it brings together Ramsay’s dual interests in skins and screens. After Joe rescues Nina from a child brothel, she is seen through a car window wistfully looking at city lights, which shimmer and dance on her pale skin. This urban glow creates a strange imagistic fusion between Nina’s face and the luminous street. Ramsay’s camera then reverses its perspective. The city is now shown through the glass as it assumes the elasticity of Nina’s mobile gaze. The screen’s visual matter thus incites an embodied interexchange with its child spectator. Indeed, Nina even glides her hands over its glassy surface. The screen, Ramsay suggests, has a tactile allure; it seduces touch. The girl “sees” by way of her palms and fingers. She makes sense of moving images through contact. Like the traumatized girl of *Small Deaths*, Nina discovers her world tactilely. The material of the screen is unmoored, malleable – as sinuous as skin. Greenwood’s ethereal music here also auralizes the lithe materiality of Ramsay’s screen, which, covered in rain drops, briefly acquires a crystalline texture that, too, tempts touch.

[Video 1. Nina tactilely exploring glassy surface in *You Were Never Really Here*.
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This shot intimately intimates the plasticity of screens. The screen here becomes a form of skin as much skin here becomes a kind of screen.

The tactile appeal of Nina’s glassy surface in *You Were Never Really Here* replicates that of a window on which Morvern similarly presses her hand in *Morvern Callar*. Using the money her boyfriend set aside for his funeral, Morvern flees Scotland for a resort town in Spain. There, after abandoning her friend, she marvels at a beautiful seascape through a double-paned window in a dusky hotel room. This intermediated image is unmistakably cinematic. Ramsay offers her spectators a solitary viewer in a dark room raptly observing an illuminated motion picture show, that is, Ramsay filmically recreates her own spectators onscreen. This self-reflexive shot is yet another example of Ramsay’s proclivity for

mise-en-abyme, an act of cinematic framing within the cinematic frame. And, like Nina, Morvern reaches out to caress the screen's surface, a palpable exercise to exorcise herself of her lover's suicide.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000012.jpg\]](#)

Figure 12. Morvern touching window pane in *Morvern Callar*.

The warmth, water, and breeze of this Mediterranean vista are corporeally explored. The screen, activated by touch, offers Morvern a means of escape. Similarly, in *Ratcatcher*, James flees his urban milieu through a screen of his own. He comes upon a window in a newly built house through which he sees a sundrenched field of wheat. This idyllic panorama, as in *Morvern Callar*, is a replica of a movie screen. It likewise invites tactile immersion; James literally traverses it.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000013.jpg\]](#)

Figure 13. James traversing window in *Ratcatcher*.

“Like James’s experience of the new home,” Kendall writes, “the experience of spectatorship is constructed through the interplay between the film’s material images and their appeal to an embodied and imaginative spectator. These scenes call attention, then, to the experience of spectatorship as always already divided, mobile, and unfixed.” [13]. [N13] *Ratcatcher* interrogates the very phenomenology of cinema-watching. Movies, Ramsay reveals, *move* us. The elasticity of screens as seen in *Ratcatcher*, *Morvern Callar*, and *You Were Never Really Here* uncovers the malleability with which Ramsay accords her own. In doing so, Ramsay diagnoses the state of screenology in contemporary discourse as a membranous site of corporeal interexchange and passage.

The present-day interest in the experience of cinema as it is lived, as one *feels* it through the corporally invested act of looking, largely inspired by Deleuze’s philosophical writings on cinema in the 1980s, signaled a retreat from psychoanalysis in cinema studies, which long dominated film theory. “One of the dictionary definitions of ‘experience’ stresses the aspect of discovery or knowing through feeling or undergoing ... This implies an encounter of some kind ... with the moving image screen and with the worlds it presents, frames, or contains as these engage the senses, the body, the emotions.” [14]. [N14] An interest in the phenomenological experience of film-going displaced previous scholars’ concern with its psychoanalytic implications. This sensuously-based approach to cinema, what Laura Marks notably calls “haptic visuality,” treats the eye as an organ of touch. [15]. [N15] The moving image is, in fact, “felt” by the skin of the eye; it enlists a full-bodied response, especially when incited by clever uses of sound, close-ups, and shots of various textures. This visceral mode of viewership is precisely what enthralls Ramsay. Her filmography is a model example of the “phenomenological turn” in Media Studies. [16] [N16] She so frequently punishes her onscreen personages so that her spectators squirm, squeal, and sicken in their seats. Their battered bodies, momentarily, become our own. We feel her characters’ pain by way of the screen, which Ramsay renders into a kind of epidermis, a shimmery filmic membrane that facilitates exchange between its visual matter and our viewing bodies. Ramsay’s screen is thus a site of dermatology; her moving images get under our skin.

Take, for instance, the concluding sequence in *You Were Never Really Here* in which Joe is seen in a café booth backdropped by a din of noisy diners. Succumbing to his demons, Joe reaches for a handgun, sticks it under his chin, and blows his brains out. A torrent of blood splatters across the wall and squirts out of his split skull. Yet the ambient conversation continues unabated. A bloodstained waitress then approaches Joe’s corpse and places his receipt in a thick, crimson puddle, saying: “Have a nice day.” This graphic portrayal of a suicide, complemented by the blackly comical inattentiveness of the restaurant’s patrons, is designed to disturb – even if it is only the product of a daydream. Such imagery is precisely what led film critic Joseph Walsh

to describe *You Were Never Really Here* as “a brutal, punishing watch ... a one-inch-punch to the gut, winding you from the start and giving you no respite” that “will leave you staggering from the cinema.” [17]. [N17] The visual matter of Ramsay’s screen weighs heavily on her audiences. Perhaps, then, the most jarring image of *You Were Never Really Here* is a vaguely cannibalistic one of Nina’s gory fingers playing with her food after she slit the throat of her rapist, Governor Williams, with a switchblade.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000014.jpg\]](#)

Figure 14. Nina's bloodied hands in *You Were Never Really Here*.

The image of Nina's despoiled skin, counterposed by her unsullied white dress, shocks and appalls Ramsay's viewers; it exposes the thinness of our own spectatorial skin. The slit throat in *You Were Never Really Here* recalls the severed limbs of *Morvern Callar* after Morvern uses a buzz saw to lovingly dismember her dead boyfriend. Like Nina, Morvern is repeatedly seen bespattered in blood. Ramsay's motif of disfigurement in these instances solicits a visceral viewer response. Hence, in the opening sequence of *Gasman*, Ramsay films her characters only from the neck down, thus cutting off their heads. She practices here a cinematic form of decapitation.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000015.jpg\]](#)

Figure 15. Cinematic "decapitation" in *Gasman*.

Ramsay's camera maims her protagonists, just as Morvern did her lover, as Nina did her attacker. These images haptically *come at* spectators, who flinch and writhe before Ramsay's screen. The reactions they elicit are aptly conveyed by an outdated Anglicism that harkens back to the wounded

bovine in *Small Deaths*: “Holy cow!” The violated skins shown onscreen tingle our own; Ramsay pricks the spectatorial epidermis.

The mutilated and bespattered personages of Ramsay’s filmography are, of course, inter-filmic allusions to the bloodshed of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), a film that deeply influenced Ramsay’s cinematic language, especially in *You Were Never Really Here*. When Joe first returns home, he finds his mother watching *Psycho*. “It scared me,” she says, “Oh boy, it scared me.” He then imitates the infamous slashing motion of the “shower scene” in which Norman Bates murders Marion Crane – only to do so again after he grows frustrated with his mother for having flooded the bathroom. These meta-filmic references to *Psycho* cannot be read lightly; the prescence of a film in a film always demands scrutiny. Hitchcock’s psychoanalytic thriller is, of course, one of the most viscerally jarring films of all time. The combination of Hitchcock’s deft camerawork, Bernard Herrmann’s screeching strings, and Anthony Perkins’s manic performance could successfully, in Hitchcock’s own words, transfer “the menace from the screen into the mind of the audience.” [18].[#N18] His watershed movie thus exposes the extent to which film makes contact with the spectator, the ways in which moving images burrow under the skin. Similarly, Ramsay seeks to imbue her moving images with *Psycho*’s stirring power. Hitchcock’s gripping shower scene, in *You Were Never Really Here*, is even recreated by Greenwood’s erratic string music; he acoustically reenacts the stabs of Bates’s dagger. That infamous murder scene, moreover, includes over fifty-shots – most of them extreme close-ups of Marion’s naked flesh. Hitchcock here exploits the elasticity of screen; he reveals how it can be manipulated, slashed, and distorted in pursuit of a specific spectatorial response. This cinematographic dexterity is what made Hitchcock, per Ramsay, “the best visual storyteller in the world.” [19].[#N19] *Psycho*’s capacity to terrorize its viewers, to *move* its audiences, is what Ramsay expropriates in her cinema; she, too, infiltrates the body of the spectator by way of the screen.

Yet Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, despite its raw palpability, is often read as an onscreen enactment of psychoanalytic theory, as a Freudian exploration of the psychological implications of death, drive, and individuality. [20].[#N20] The film frequently elicits debates about the precise issues of our opaque interiority that later film theorists, spearheaded by Deleuze, would reject in favor of paying greater attention to the exterior dynamics of cinema-watching as a more visceral, tactile affair. Acknowledging as much, Ramsay dupes us into thinking that *You Were Never Really Here* – a severely physical film – is not without its Freudian undercurrents. Joe, just as Norman Bates did before him, loses the mainstay of his psychological stability: his mother. The murders of these men’s mothers push them both to the psychologic brink. Ramsay here teases the possibility of a psychoanalytic thriller. Indeed, what shocks us most after Hitchcock unveils Mrs. Bates at the end of *Psycho* is her hollowed-out eye sockets and, in *You Were Never Really Here*, Joe’s mother is killed by a shot to the face, which gouges out one of her eyes. The image of Joe’s dead mother with her mouth agape directly recalls Mrs. Bates’s toothy leer.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000016.jpg\]](#)

Figure 16. Image of Mrs. Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-000000017.jpg\]](#)

Figure 17. Image of Agent Joe's mother in *You Were Never Really Here*.

Unlike Norman, however, Joe does not surrender to his id by reanimating his mother's corpse.

Instead, Joe heads to a nearby lake and disposes of her body. This scene can be read as Ramsay's rejection of an approach to cinema overburdened by psychoanalytic theory, against which Hitchcock also harbored deeply ambivalent feelings. In *You Were Never Really Here*, as in all her films, Ramsay advocates for a far less cerebral engagement of her moving images; her films demand less "thinking" than they do "feeling." She hopes to sustain and intensify the more visceral aspects of *Psycho* without its "psychic" baggage. The very shot of Joe discovering his bloodied mother, indeed, incites our revulsion. The bullet that pierces her glasses into her skull analogously lances Ramsay's screen into her spectators' emotional and tactile imagination. The death of the mother evokes a deliberately embodied response. Ramsay thus borrows Hitchcock's psychoanalytic tropes only to deconstruct

them. Indeed, Joe – the figure of the son – literally *lets go* of the mother in a lake, an anti-Freudian gesture, in a scene in which Ramsay's visual language reaches its poetic height. The image of Joe letting his mummied mother sink into the water's depths as strands of her hair undulate in its current is a truly arresting one.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-00000018.jpg\]](#)

Figure 18. A floating strand of hair of Agent Joe's mother in *You Were Never Really Here*.

It is, sticking with Freud, *uncanny*, that is, it is an image that estranges us from normative perception. Ramsay renders Joe's frail mother into a kind of trash-bag mermaid as she slowly cascades down to the bottom of the lake. This image of a mother-son funeral strikes us less for its psychoanalytic insinuations than it does for its sheer aesthetic splendor.

Indeed, this haunting shot, underscored by Greenwood's otherworldly music, makes itself felt on our skin in the form of shivers, goosebumps, and chills. Ramsay here recognizes that any strong affect, especially if triggered by music, will be accompanied by an outbreak of pimples on the skin. A burst of emotion releases a rush of adrenaline from our kidneys that forces a contraction of our muscles all over the body, thus transforming our skin into a bumpy texture akin to featherless poultry – hence its resemblance with gooseflesh. Throughout her filmography, Ramsay solicits such a corporeal reaction; she aspires to make our hair literally stand on end. The shivers, she reveals, are as much about repulsion as they are splendor. The graceful underwater shot of Joe's mother in *You Were Never Really Here* is a *moving* image – an (e)motion picture; it emotionally mobilizes our bodies into physiological overdrive; we get goosebumps. To be awestruck, then, is to be both frightened *and* enchanted, a feeling akin with the sublime. The beauties and horrors of Ramsay's cinema palpably strike us. Her screen acts as a thin, perforated covering – a film – between its visual content and the bodies of her spectators. Ramsay is a dermatologically trained screenologist; her screens establish contact with our own sensitive epidermis. Ramsay finds her home amongst the bumps on our skin.

[Video 2. The underwater funeral of Agent Joe's mother in *You Were Never Really Here*.](#)

[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0043.102-10000002.mp4\]](#)

In doing so, in inciting bursts of adrenaline from our spectatorial kidneys, Ramsay impels us to meditate on the phenomenology of cinema-watching itself. Her films make clear what Jennifer Barker details in her groundbreaking book, *The Tactile Eye*, that a film is a “lived-body in and for the world.” ^[21]^[#N21] Our body and the “body” of a film engage one another as counterparts – “one blood and tissue, the other light and celluloid” – that exist in a sustained state of corporeal interplay. ^[22]^[#N22] To watch a film is not a dispassionate act. There is an “I,” a fleshy, red-blooded body, behind each “eye.” The moving image buries itself within us despite it being received at a distance; it exerts itself on us from afar by way of screen. The act of watching is, in fact, a deeply corporeally invested one. Across her work, Ramsay calls attention to the embodied nature of perception. She relies on the sensitive skins of her characters – their own dermal screens – to lay bare the corporeal aftereffects of the moving image; her pictures stay with us, nestled in our follicles, far longer than after they have cut to black. We are vulnerable to her images. Ramsay’s films can thus be “read” dermatologically as a commentary on the insights proffered by screen studies in recent years on the more experiential nature of filmgoing. Her interest in skin does not stop at the surface. Rather, Ramsay foregrounds flesh, bones, and bodies to explore the ways in which we come into full-bodied contact with the “superficial” materiality of the screen.

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Raymond De Luca is a Ph.D. student at Harvard University, where he studies Russian/Soviet film, literature, and culture. His primary research entails haptic visuality, late Soviet film, and material culture. He holds a BA in history from Haverford College and an MA in Russian Studies from Middlebury College.

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