

Questioning Motherhood's Ideal Expectations: We Need to Talk About Kevin

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Cinematography is a form of art expression which can bring valuable understanding regarding not only the human nature and natural, common states along with their diversity but it is also an efficient mean of stretching portraits which lead us to a rather indirect but quite complete understanding of psychopathology. Wedding, Boyd & Niemiec (2005) are some of the adepts of teaching psychopathology by recommending pertinent works of cinema for such field. The authors do not analyze movies demonstrations of symptomatology but see them from the point of view of the groups of people directly involved in the discussed issues, groups which usually are considered minorities and are being treated by society through the lenses of prejudice and misconceptions.

A similar idea is also supported by Fleming, Piedmont & Hiam (1990) who view films related to psychopathology as adequate means of re-evaluating one's perceptions related to people suffering from mental illness.

“We Need to Talk about Kevin” (2011, directed by Lynne Ramsay) does not necessarily raise the question of what the character's possible diagnosis might be; the emerging questions and issues go even far deeper than labeling and prediction. The storyline and evolution of the characters might make the viewer feel like he's missing something from the big picture even if signs of the final outcome are more or less subtly strained along the way. The movie is based on 2003's bestselling novel with the same title, written by Lionel Shiver.

Briefly, the movie approaches a complicated and sometimes uncomfortable to watch mother and son relationship, the father's loss of sight while his son's issues are signalized, the unfortunate outcome of being incapable of reaching out one's own child and the continuous bargain a mother carries following the moment of mirroring the reflection of her own struggles.

The nature versus nurture issue, developmental psychology, attachment theory up to theories related to conditioning patterns and questions of family dynamics, post-traumatic experiences and social stigma are all only some of the subjects which can easily be identified by any mental health specialist through the movie. On the other hand, stories similar to Kevin's

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sometimes only remind us that at the moment, we only know where to look for signs and clues but the final answers might be purely individual and hard to predict.

The choice of motherhood seems to be shaded by doubt ever since its settling into shape in Eva's case; as Valdrè (2014) suggests, Kevin seems to be a desired child only at a conscious level), becoming a mother and the way her relationship is established with her child is one of the most discussed issues related to “We Need to Talk about Kevin” and which we will elaborate as follows.

Bradley and Olufs (2012) notice that the center theme of the movie consists in the mother-son relationship, mentioning that among the family issues approached we will recognize to be developed within the storyline, postpartum depression, problematic communication, ambivalent attachment, behavioral and temperamental problems at young ages.

The authors go further by emphasizing that the mother, Eva, who most likely suffers from depression, has played a major (but not single) role in her son's personality development (Bradley & Olufs, 2012); as they remind us, a mother's severe depression correlates to noncompliance and antisocial behavior of the child and also with empowering any temperamental traits of the child which are socially considered to be negative/difficult traits. Also Eva's depression, according to Valdrè (2014) is a way to manifest her ambivalence and pain, feelings which fail to be admitted and carried through by the family and Eva herself who seems to become a passive container of a sheer kind of emotional life.

Also regarding motherhood and depression, this affective disorder is cited as a factor of antisocial prediction, both before giving birth or as an element the child is exposed to, as it seems to highly correlate to violent behavior manifested by the child during adolescence (Hay, Pawlby, Waters, Perra & Sharp, 2010).

Related to social expectations and labeling towards motherhood, the movie, according to Valdrè (2014) marks the modern pressure of playing the part of the “all good mother”, making almost each mother question herself at times when she is even humanly and understandably incapable of showing the unconditional (ideal) love and nurturing toward her child. Such social pressures, the author further explains, leaves the woman interpreting motherhood from a perfectionist point of view, making it hard – if not impossible – to accept imperfect moments and acts involving the mother – child relationship.

Kevin's act of massacre seems to be attired in even more uncertainty is his choice of leaving only his mother alive; the viewer cannot be sure whether he has planned his act this way in order to finally reach to a type of relationship with her that only he can understand, or whether he intended to obtain a sort of revenge for not receiving acceptance as an infant. Besides these two types of interpretation, we may add the option where he chooses to leave her forever facing the mirror of her own emotional emptiness.

What the movie brings as novelty is that, despite the approach of other similar subjects, is that the massacre story is not built up on the author's personal experience but on his mother. As the director herself pointed out for *The Guardian* (in press), this may not be a realistic story telling but it does set out uncomfortable questions, mostly regarding family dynamics (lack of involvement, contempt and guilt, passiveness, manipulation, negative feelings between family members who are had to admit both on an individual and cultural level but which, once accepted, might lead the people involved to come to healthy solutions). All these mentioned issues are highly exaggerated (while keeping the viewer in contact with the character's emotional reality, under any given form and exposing a family's taboo subjects to the core) but this is the exact manner in which the viewer keeps wondering about them long after the movies stopped playing.

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