

Consider strategies used by any realist film director to instil a sense of authenticity in their films

Lynne Ramsay was born in Glasgow in 1969. She graduated in photography from Napier University in Edinburgh, and then attended the National Film and Theatre School, where she studied cinematography, followed by a directing course. A major icon of the 21st century, her films are beacons of reality in a world where “true voices of dissent are seldom heard these days”¹. *Ratcatcher* (1999) is set in 1973 Glasgow during the Scottish national garbage strike. The main character, Jamie Gillespie (played by William Eadie), is a 12-year old growing up on an estate that looks increasingly wretched. James inadvertently causes his pal to drown in the local canal, and he flees the scene, apparently unseen. The film ultimately examines the fragility of evolving as a human being. The characters are observed moving from adolescence to adulthood, and in doing so their world becomes darker, and more tainted, as it does for James.

A review in *The Criterion* summed up the film's most credible feat of realism as such: “Utilizing beautiful, elusive imagery, candid performances, and unexpected humor, *Ratcatcher* deftly contrasts urban decay with a rich interior landscape of hope and perseverance, resulting in a work at once raw and deeply poetic”². The rawness of emotion portrayed in *Ratcatcher* is just one of the ways in which Ramsay creates a world where realism displaces fantasy. As a director Ramsay attempts to interject realism and authenticity into her films, in order to show things as they really are, and to steer away from the increasingly dominant Hollywood-esque genre of film that aims only to please, and entertain. She achieves this in *Ratcatcher* in a number of ways. Ramsay firstly draws authenticity out from within the story, through what is explicitly shown and at other times when the story and character motivations are unclear, and secondly through the cinematic techniques she uses to produce such shots.

¹ Graham Fuller, *Loach on Loach*, Faber and Faber, 1998, page xi

² <http://www.criterionco.com/asp/release.asp?id=162>

The national garbage strike in 1973 Scotland is seen primarily through the eyes of Jamie. “The theme of childhood,” Ramsay asserts, “is interesting because opinions are not yet set. The world is clearer, simpler, without the baggage of moral judgement. There is a certain absurdity of the adult world from this point of view.”³ Personally, and as a director, Ramsay tries to look at things from a child’s point of view. She makes it clear that *Ratcatcher* “doesn’t deal with the politics of the dustbin men’s strike, as Jamie wouldn’t”⁴. Instead, the audience is taken on a journey of experience as Jamie sees and feels it. Scenes and shots take their time, and things don’t tend to magically appear or happen as wouldn’t in real life. A moment in which time is key to the experience of the shot is when Jamie is on the bus. The length of the bus journey speaks more volumes about its meaning to Jamie than any words or explicit actions could. The audience believe Jamie got on the bus with the vague intention of following his sister, but his interest in her whereabouts soon wanes as the landscape around him becomes more rural, the ‘urban decay’ that is so claustrophobic loosens its grip, and time lends the viewers the most important feeling of all – one of timelessness, being lost both in time and space. Jamie – and thus the audience – do not care about the where’s and why’s of his journey, only that he is making this journey and is enjoying every moment of it. It has become an event in its own right, and this, when acknowledged, is both surprising and poignant. To enjoy the act of travelling as a novelty in itself, as opposed to the impatient need to arrive at a destination, is rare – and is resonant of Jamie’s situation at home; the lack of luxury, of space, and time.

Other moments are made more powerful, and more real, by being drawn out. These include Jamie’s act of somersaulting in the cornfields – an idyllic scene that does not stop simply when the audience have ascertained that Jamie is happy. Instead, the director waits until the audience achieve the full sense of *how* happy Jamie is in this space, colour and beauty – and why. In this way Ramsay manipulates the audience’s reaction to avoid sentimentality. This

³ *Ratcatcher* screenplay, Lynne Ramsay, 2000, foreword page vi

⁴ *Ratcatcher* screenplay, Lynne Ramsay, 2000, foreword page vi

freedom to move – in effect, breathing space – is a new concept for Jamie, and thus for the viewers, as they have been cooped up as well, seeing the world through Jamie's mind. In this way the spectators do not get freedom from Jamie's mind and viewpoint, but freedom along with it, and they are kept close to Jamie both emotionally and cognitively, relieved with him and for him at his new found paradisaal freedom on the new housing estate so far away from his home. This closeness that the director carefully sets up between the audience and the protagonist thus further enforces the authenticity of the film, aiding the spectator to empathise wholly with Jamie, neglecting ideals and relying completely upon the realisms that are obtained through his eyes in order to understand the situation.

The story is further made authentic by the other characters and themes that are present throughout. Jamie's relationship with Margaret Ann, myopic, slightly older, and serving as the local sexual punching bag, begins with a seemingly throwaway incident in which Jamie attempts to find Margaret Ann's glasses. Yet it is this act that cements their bond as two adolescents attempting to find their place in a competitive and unforgiving society. Unsurprisingly, the audience is not given a backstory to Margaret Ann's life – there is no rhyme or reason as to why she lets herself be taken advantage of by the local boys. There are a number of possibilities to choose from – she may be insecure, and finds affection or worth in this way. She may be attempting to become an apprentice in her mother's possible profession of prostitution, an occupation that is but hinted at. Ramsay clearly suffices to show the audience – and not tell them – the reasons behind actions or decisions. Jamie may have his ideas but the main feeling that is experienced by Jamie and the viewers is one of not understanding. Parts of the story previously had been narrated by the audience themselves, in an attempt to fill the gaps of information that is not offered to them, or to Jamie.

There is also a poignant comedy in this relationship that is derived from this lack of understanding. As Margaret Ann is slightly older than Jamie, her first instinct is to show her liking or gratitude to him by placing his hand on her leg. Yet Jamie, misunderstanding this act as one with a sexual orientation, is simply

interested in the scab on her knee. It is touching to witness Margaret Ann's pleasure in spending time with Jamie, especially in the bath, without having to perform unenjoyable sexual acts. Jamie also benefits from this relationship through being able to be completely himself. His moments of joy with Margaret are in part derived because he does not have to compromise his masculinity, be something he is not, or be forced to do something he doesn't agree with, such as in the incident when the boys are throwing Kenny's white rat Snowball around. Incidentally even the seemingly surreal animated episode in which Snowball, tied to the balloon, travels to its paradise of a moon made of cheese and meets other rats is resonant of a moment of total dreamscape. Ramsay wanted to show that being poor doesn't kill the imagination, and thus showed that even the most cruel situation can lead to a childish fantasy. Children can still maintain their innocence, gaining breathing space in a relentless environment. This fact, hopeful and true, suggests that even the most bizarre cinematic sequence can be profitable to the theme of authenticity – if the audience is seeing the world through Jamie's eyes, then anything indeed is possible.

Finally, Ramsay does not attempt to categorize any character in the film. The audience sees Jamie's delicately drawn family elliptically, "but they are so much more present because of that" Ramsay asserts⁵. They are fragmented, and thus need to be isolated from one another. It is not until late in the film that all the family members are seen together. Ramsay insists on painting her characters as, "not black and white. You can like and loathe them at different points, there are no goodies and baddies. You can have love and hate for the same person"⁶. This is certainly true at the beginning of the film – the audience does not like Jamie himself immediately at the start, as he is blamed for his friends death. In the same way, the family too is realistic, and the love and despair Jamie has for and within his family is heightened.

Since Jamie is a male protagonist, there is much pressure for him to collude to a pack mentality, and be desensitized in a tough environment. There is

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

little opportunity for emotional release. As he is just that bit younger than other boys in the neighborhood – 12 years to their 14/15 years of age – his options are to join them or get bullied by them. The image of Jamie walking along the riverbank behind the boys is comic yet depictive of a harsh reality – he is so much smaller and weaker than them that he has little option. Finding occasional solace in Margaret Ann and his dreams of heaven manifest in the new housing estate are his only outlets. Yet even these are dirtied, sullied, and out of his control – Margaret Ann is tainted by the boys, and can not stop giving in to their sexual demands. The fact that the family are failing to get the house they want is also – his father deems – Jamie's fault, for letting the inspectors into their current house whilst it was in a messy, dirty state.

Jamie's suicide in the final scene is ambiguous – the audience can only guess at Jamie's reasons for attempting to escape. Yet the film previously had been building up to just such a conclusion. Ramsay does not paint a picture of a boy in poverty that manages to take control and become successful – a one in a million story – but takes the viewpoint of one who, like so many others, cannot escape nor change their situation except through death. Jamie may have simply given up on life as his destiny is written in his harsh surroundings. The end could be seen as the death of childhood, or of the childhood spirit, and is open to many interpretations. A cycle that happened too fast, and could not be made sense of, this end is only part of a plot that lends itself to the development of authenticity. In real life, it is indeed hard to see the good, or positive outcomes, especially as a child, when one feels one is being controlled, as opposed to being in control. Jamie's guilt and disillusionment with the abjection that surrounds him leads him to do the only thing that is possible in his mind – jump into the canal.

Ramsay also projects authenticity through her films by her use of cinematic (as well as thematic) techniques. A chief example of this is her use of imagery to capture the perfect shot. "Ramsay's way with imagery – her sense of how and where to place the camera, and how to preserve the tone of a situation – makes the *Ratcatcher* a film of a unique kind: the most interesting and humane

British debut since Bill Douglas brought *My Childhood* to Edinburgh in 1973”⁷. An example of Ramsay’s stunning use of imagery is the beginning shot, with the child wrapping himself in a curtain. The scene is eerie, with its muted children’s voices, and the curtain that looks like a shroud, yet it is also real. It is an activity that children partake in, and the voices are real – they are simply slowed down.

“[Ramsay] has an eye for details, abstract and absurd, emotional mood and moment, and in each frame draws the viewers eye to something that can be at once casual and momentous. She rings together the social and the surreal to profound effect”⁸. To say that Ramsay is a director of the surreal is true enough, yet as Geoff Andrews said, “I don’t think Ramsay forces a surrealism, she finds surrealisms in the world”⁹. Ramsay takes the ordinary and extraordinary and juxtaposes them together, to create a visual montage that is both real and surreal. The curtain, to Ramsay, “for some reason...connected to the fact he was going to die later. It looked kind of like a shroud. It was just a sense of something foreboding”¹⁰. This sense of foreboding is resonant to that felt by the audience at certain moments in their own lives.

The location is very important to Ramsay in order to create a sense of authenticity. The scene is clear enough – the rubbish bags lay around and are kicked and played on by children, and provide the nest for which an influx of rats acquire a breeding ground. The canal, however, is a major location on which many scenes are shot. Ramsay in the foreword to the films screenplay comments that she views the canal as a character in itself, “it’s a place where kids do things they’re not supposed to do; it’s an illicit place”¹¹. It is also poisonous – it harbours death and destruction, both at the beginning and the end of the film, and is a place where humans can either escape, through death perhaps, yet also redeem themselves, like Jamie’s father, who prevented a small boy from drowning.

⁷ Andrew O’Hagan, Daily Telegraph. Cited in *ibid*

⁸ *Ratcatcher* screenplay, Lynne Ramsay, 2000, foreword page vi

⁹ Geoff Andrews interview with Lynne Ramsay, 28th October 2002, National Film Theatre

¹⁰ *Ratcatcher* screenplay, Lynne Ramsay, 2000, foreword page vi

¹¹ *ibid*

Since the location is a major icon in each film Ramsay makes, it must both look the part, and be very much of it's time, yet be timeless, so as to enable the audience to feel within this timeframe. The rubbish and clutter that lines each frame leads Ramsay to note that some shots almost look medieval; "it made the film seem timeless, not retro. There was less nostalgia, it was more believable. We mixed elements of 50's, 60's and 70's to create a more authentic look. Above all I tried to find beauty in ugly things"¹².

With a degree in photography, it is easy to see why the attention to detail is so great - "as a photographer, I got used to watching people, trying to find details that say something about them"¹³. Authenticity is created by detail – even the smallest detail can say a lot about a relationship – Jamie, putting his mothers laddered tights over her toes, for example. With her shots taken slowly, it gives the actors, the crew and ultimately the audience breathing space. In this way it is more powerful, it gives the audience room to explore all the carefully constructed elements in the frame. Cinema is not unlike photography in that the information is derived from what is shown, not what is said. Silence, and physical space within a frame to indicate how people are feeling about each other. Yet there are also differences to photography and film; Ramsay claims, "At times I think stills are more intense and I wonder what's going on outside the frame. The mystery in stills I find very different from filmmaking"¹⁴. This suggests that in film Ramsay attempts to capture not this mystery – but the opposite, the reality of each shot. Attention to detail, then, plays a major role in her work, to achieve this.

Further to this, the actors provide a springboard for which Ramsay can put her ideas into place. She casts by looking for, "interesting and not beautiful faces, unpretentiousness and focus, unselfconsciousness in front of the camera, people who internalise instead of externalise their actions".¹⁵ Just like Robert Bresson, Ramsay emphasises the quote, "I hate filmed theatre".¹⁶ Realism, Ramsay asserts, is the most important thing, even if it's achieved using conventional

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ramsay, interview, 1999

¹⁵ *Ratcatcher* screenplay, Lynne Ramsay, 2000, foreword page vi

¹⁶ Ibid

methods. This shows her dedication as a director to realism, ensuring nothing looks false or forced in her films. Working with children in *Ratcatcher* means that a new set of rules must be enforced, and this is the idea of not patronising or manipulating them. Ramsay's regular set up is to let the takes run on, "What excites me in a film shoot is the unexpected things that happen on the day. Sometimes I let things run and see what happens."¹⁷ Lines are played about with to see what feels right, and a more collaborative piece between the actor, the director and the crew is created. Too many takes makes children bored, and so the process must be kept to what is essential. Ramsay admits however to being "tough with [kids]. I push them and they push me. It creates mutual respect"¹⁸. Keeping the actors, whatever their age, fresh, interested, energetic but most importantly real, ensures that the shot captures the actor's actual emotions, a necessity if the final film is to be authentic.

In conjunction with this is the idea of spontaneity. Like Ken Loach, who also uses this technique, Ramsay does not tell her actors, adult or child, the story line of the film. In her eyes, it only "fills ones head with meaningless things – you can't have an idea of where you're ultimately going, and be realistic in the moment"¹⁹. Keeping the story line for each character a close secret ensures that they always act in the moment, and are not manipulating their emotions to fit into their future framework or destiny. Her films are made up of a series of scenes that create a story, and thus meaning. Her actors are kept fresh in each scene, and look forward to the development of their character as they act out fragments of it. This means that, despite time and budget preferences, Ramsay prefers to shoot her films in sequence, to gain through the actors, and indeed in her own mind, an authentic outlook of the process of development of the film – and not the finished product. Scripts are played around with, lines are discarded or inserted if it feels right for the actor and director, and the most important part of any scene, line or word is, ultimately, the meaning. Authenticity in this must be maintained throughout.

¹⁷ Ramsay, interview, 1999

¹⁸ *Ratcatcher* screenplay, Lynne Ramsay, 2000, foreword page vi

¹⁹ Ibid

Ratcatcher is at once a stunning film and also an extremely down to earth film, one in which an audience takes pleasure, but is not quite sure why. The journey that Jamie and the other characters make is so poignant, balanced, and real throughout that it is unnerving and also reassuring. Authenticity is something that requires hard work and effort to get it just right, and requires dedication for its cause. Making authentic, realistic film does not bring in money, yet it will create a much more powerful impact for those that see and can appreciate it. Ramsay herself has big plans for continuing this line of film, and perhaps in the near future more films that discuss and project what is real in contrast to the surreal, and the authentic, will emerge: "Who said that a film is never finished, just abandoned? I still dream of the perfect vision that disappeared somewhere between my head and the big screen. Maybe next time"²⁰. It is out of the minds of creative filmmakers – not cinematic money-makers – that authenticity is born. Once born, it will continue to grow, slowly but surely, until reaping the benefits from societies in years to come.

²⁰ Ibid, speaking in October 1999