
Postfeminism, Ambivalence and the Mother in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011)

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Abstract

*Despite concerns that, with the rise of popular feminism, we may be post-postfeminism, a postfeminist sensibility is “both intensifying and becoming hegemonic.” What is notable about this renewed postfeminist sensibility is its “turn to interiority,” interpellating subjects through an affective script of happiness and positivity. The mother is a central subject in this construction; she is called forth to display blissful joy and happiness at all times. In contradistinction to the demand for maternal happiness, this article suggests that maternal ambivalence is an emotional state where the hegemony of postfeminism’s affects can be registered and critiqued. Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) illuminates the feminist political strategies at work in the representation of maternal ambivalence. Reading the film’s mother through ambivalence, this article argues that *We Need to Talk about Kevin* offers a radical departure from postfeminism’s affective orientation towards maternal happiness.*

Introduction

With the rise of mainstream feminism in media culture, Rosalind Gill asks: “Are we now *post-postfeminism*?” [1][#N1][emphasis in the original]. In answer to her question, Gill argues that a postfeminist sensibility has persisted. Indeed, this postfeminist sensibility is “both intensifying and becoming hegemonic.” [2][#N2] What is notable about this renewed postfeminist sensibility is its “turn to interiority.” [3][#N3] As Gill details, this hegemonic postfeminist sensibility is an increasingly “*psychologized one*” [emphasis in the original], where the affective script is one of happiness and positivity. [4][#N4] A central discursive subject interpellated through this construction is the mother. Although the “good mother” has always been presented as happy, critics of postfeminism point out that the traditional affective dimensions of motherhood have intensified in the contemporary moment: good mothers in the twenty-first century must appear “blissfully happy” and “love every moment of their motherhood.” [5][#N5]

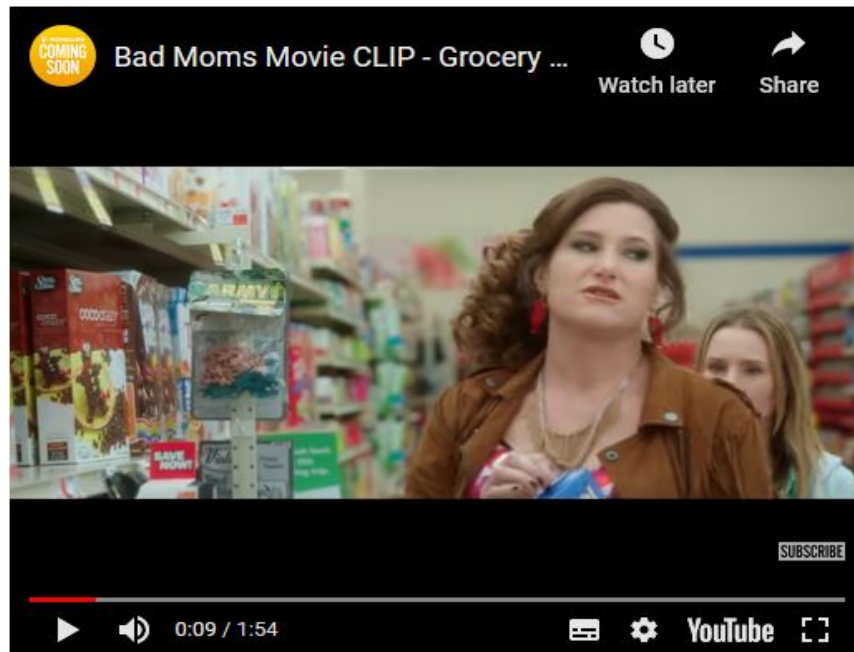
In contradistinction to the demand for maternal happiness, I suggest maternal ambivalence as an emotional state where the hegemony of postfeminism’s affects can be registered and critiqued. Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) (referred to as *Kevin* from herein) illuminates the feminist political strategies at work in the representation of maternal ambivalence. Based on Lionel Shriver’s 2003 novel of the same name, the film tells the story of Eva (Tilda Swinton) as she reflects on her experience as a mother to Kevin (played first by Jasper Newell and then, when a teenager, by Ezra

Miller), with her husband, Franklin (John C. Reilly). A difficult child, the film hints at a terrible event involving Kevin before eventually revealing at the end of the film that Kevin killed his father, sister Celia (Ashley Gerasimovich) and several of his schoolmates. In this article, I read Eva's primary emotional response to mothering as one of ambivalence. Drawing out the key moments in which Eva's ambivalence is foregrounded, I suggest that *Kevin* offers a radical departure from postfeminism's affective orientation towards maternal happiness.

The Cinematic Mother

The figure of the mother is increasingly visible in contemporary media culture to the extent that, as Shani Orgad argues, she is hypervisible. [6][#N6] With the growth of the number of representations of mothers in media culture and the rise of motherhood studies in academia, the mother is a central figure for critical analysis. In film history and film studies, the mother has held a contentious position. As E. Ann Kaplan argues the mother is, in a sense, everywhere but "always in the margins" with "few scholars interested in understanding her positioning or her social role from *inside* the mother's discourse" [emphasis in original]. [7][#N7] Yet, as Lucy Fischer argues, with the "woman's picture" being "one of the few commercial paradigms to authorize a complex female protagonist," the maternal melodrama is a key site through which representations of mothers are debated. [8][#N8] Kaplan argues that *Stella Dallas* (1937), a key maternal melodrama in the cycle of films from the 1930s and 1940s, "perpetuat[es]...oppressive patriarchal myths." [9][#N9] Linda Williams, meanwhile, takes issue with Kaplan's argument. While Williams argues that the "device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical" of the maternal melodrama in general, she challenges Kaplan's argument that *Stella Dallas* satisfies patriarchal demands for the repression of the active and involved aspects of the mother's role. [10][#N10] Williams reads the film's subject positionings as "multiply identified," resulting in a complex representation of a mother's subjectivity, particularly through her ambivalent position under patriarchy. [11][#N11]

Despite a recent diversification of roles available to mothers in contemporary Hollywood cinema that go outside the traditions of the nuclear family, such as the working mother, single mother, and the lesbian mother, as Claire Jenkins argues, the contemporary mother's role and her narratives are still limited. [12][#N12] Cinematic mothers are often demonized or deified, offering a narrow range of maternal representations that often serve misogynistic and conservative ends. [13][#N13] For example, Sarah Arnold's recent survey on mothers in the horror film identifies two prevailing representations: the Good Mother and the Bad Mother. While the Good Mother "valorises self-sacrifice, selflessness and nurturance," [14][#N14] the Bad Mother is a "multifaceted and contradictory construct" who, at times, "reject[s] her traditional function of self-sacrifice and devotion," and, at other times, fanatically conforms to the institution of motherhood. [15][#N15] Jo Littler also identifies another trend of "bad mothers" or, more precisely, "mothers behaving badly" in films such as *Bad Moms* (2016) and *Bad Moms Christmas* (2017). Presented as "behaving badly" through hedonistic behaviours (such as drinking and partying) and chaotic domestic lives, these mother figures offer "minor challenges to the patriarchy and large amounts of neoliberal responsabilisation" but fail to offer "structural social solutions" to the inequalities faced by mothers. [16][#N16] What is significant about Littler's evaluation for this article is her identification of pleasure as offering these mothers temporary solutions to the contemporary neoliberal crises of overwork and under-provision in social reproduction. The "bad mom" has fun participating in hedonistic, risqué behaviour and moments of carnivalesque excess. In other words, Littler's analysis identifies a new social type: a mother figure which is crystallised through pleasurable affective dimensions.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD8MN4mHkyU>

Figure 1: Pleasurable affects only offer minor challenges the patriarchy in *Bad Moms* (2016)

I will return to the affective dimensions of mothering and the significance this has for the mother's ideological representation momentarily. First, I want to situate these cinematic mothers within the framework of postfeminism and what Tisha DeJmanee calls postfeminism's "turn to interiority." [17] [#N17]. Postfeminism, I argue, can help illuminate the functions and implications of these maternal affective presentations. I will outline the key developments in postfeminism, including the significance of affect to this development, before locating the mother within this construct.

The Postfeminist Mother and Affec

Postfeminism is a contentious term that has variously been considered an epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with "difference," a historical shift within feminism, or a backlash against feminism. [18] [#N18]. However, as Angela McRobbie persuasively argues, postfeminism "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved." [19] [#N19]. For Rosalind Gill, postfeminist is contradictory by nature, where feminist and anti-feminist themes are entangled. Core themes within postfeminist discourse are: "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift in objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference." [20] [#N20]. Following the economic recession after the 2008 financial crash and the resurgence of feminism in popular culture, with celebrities such as Beyoncé, Emma Watson and Taylor Swift announcing themselves as feminists, critics have asked whether we are "post-postfeminism?" [21] [#N21]. On the contrary, critics have elucidated the adaptability and resilience of postfeminism since the mid-2000s. With neoliberalism becoming more pervasive, Gill argues that "postfeminism has tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic." [22] [#N22]. Moreover, critics have identified distinctions between different kinds of mediated feminisms occurring within this postfeminist landscape. Catherine Rottenberg argues for what she

sees as the rise of neoliberal feminism, akin to the corporate-friendly “feminism” espoused by Sheryl Sandberg and Ivanka Trump. [23][#N23] Sarah Banet-Weiser, meanwhile, points to the rise in a popular feminism, marked by highly-visible “feminist” statements made by celebrities and corporations. [24][#N24] Therefore, although critics have complained that postfeminism’s ubiquity is boring and frustrating, [25][#N25] it remains an important and compelling term through which to locate and analyse contemporary iterations of femininity, including motherhood.

What distinguishes the present moment of postfeminism, beginning in the late 2000s and running through the 2010s, from its previous iterations is the intensification of affect. Gill’s original conceptualisation of postfeminism as a “distinctive sensibility” already, as Marie-Alix Thouaille notes, “hints at the ways in which it circulates through, and is produced by, emotions and affects.” [26][#N26] Postfeminism, then, has always been conceptualised as a form of “affective tyranny,” with subjects interpellated through specific gendered affective scripts. [27][#N27] However, considering the development of the postfeminist sensibility since her original 2007 article on the phenomenon, Gill argues that a postfeminist sensibility is “becoming increasingly dependent upon not simply an individualized register but also a *psychologized* one built around cultivating the ‘right’ kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: aspiration, confidence, resilience and so on.” [28][#N28] Postfeminism attempts “to shape what and how women are enabled to *feel* and how their emotional states should be presented.” [29][#N29] Although critics such as Thouaille and Catherine McDermott argue that the “affective turn” in postfeminism has led to a “bad feeling,” with texts such as *Girls* (2012–2017) and *Young Adult* (2011) illuminating the “cruel optimisms” of postfeminism as felt by the female characters, [30][#N30] the dominant emotional state demanded by postfeminism is one of positivity: “Postfeminist culture...increasingly ‘favours’ happiness and ‘positive mental attitude’, systematically outlawing other emotional states, including anger and insecurity.” [31][#N31] The postfeminist subject is solely responsible for creating her own happiness “by thinking positive thoughts and making good choices.” [32][#N32] Even with the rise of popular feminism, the postfeminist subject is called to be a “happy” feminist, “one that is about uplift, that is decidedly not about being what Sara Ahmed (2010) has called a ‘feminist killjoy’.” [33][#N33] Women must “remain positive and upbeat in the face of continuing inequalities, pathologizing affective responses such as vulnerability and anger that register the injurious nature of neoliberal capitalism.” [34][#N34]

The mother is intensely interpellated through this affective script. Motherhood has always been a central subject position for and within postfeminism to the extent that postfeminism staunchly celebrates mothering. As Diane Negra argues, “motherhood redeems, it transforms, it enriches, it elevates.” [35][#N35] The intensification of idealised motherhood is what Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels call “new momism.” “New momism” is “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.” [36][#N36] Negra, Douglas and Michaels argue that mothers are called to be dedicated wholly to their child at the expense of their own sense of selfhood. [37][#N37] Moreover, the mother must derive intense satisfaction and pleasure from doing so. Although the “good mother” has always been “basically content, and children are, essentially, wonderful repositories of nothing but joy for those who bear and look after them,” critics of postfeminism point out that traditional affective dimensions of motherhood have been intensified in the contemporary moment. [38][#N38] “Good” postfeminist mothers in the twenty-first century “inevitably appear blissfully happy, to ‘have it all together’ and to love every moment of their motherhood.” [39][#N39] As Rottenberg illuminates, modern middle-class motherhood participates in what Ahmed calls the “happiness turn,”

particularly when attempting to negotiate family and paid work: “The notion of pursuing happiness through finding the right work-family balance thus becomes a normalizing matrix, and a form of governmentality, which interpellates all aspiring middle-class women, and helps shape and direct women’s aspirations, desires and behaviors.” [40][#N40] Problems faced by some mothers, such as maintaining a career alongside caring responsibilities, can be managed – even “fixed” – if only women have a positive mental attitude and prioritise happiness and well-being, rather than addressing structural inequalities and social injustices.

By making apparent the role of positive maternal affect in the contemporary postfeminist landscape, I want to suggest an emotion that can function as an alternative political strategy: maternal ambivalence. If positive affect, such as happiness, is, as Ahmed argues, an orientation towards an object that promises happiness, then maternal ambivalence is a resistance towards this orientation. [41][#N41] In this article, I suggest that the possible feminist implications of maternal ambivalence are illuminated in Ramsay’s film, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. By reading Eva, the mother protagonist, as a figure of maternal ambivalence, I suggest a possible affective departure from this postfeminist orientation.

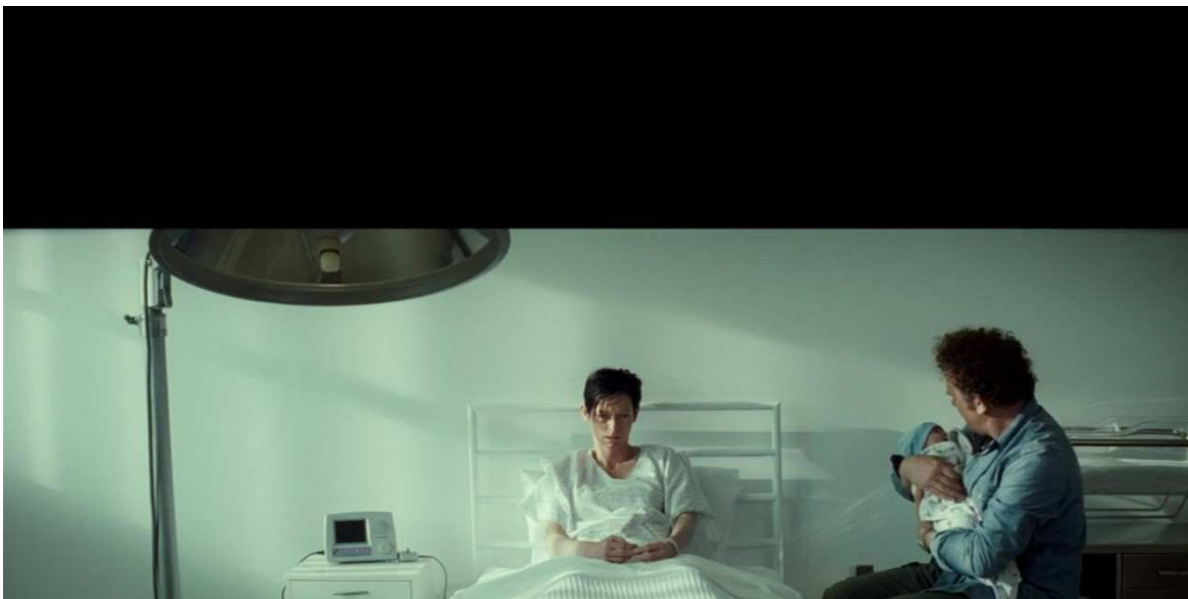
Erica D. Galieto similarly reads *Kevin* through maternal ambivalence, doing so from a psychoanalytic perspective. [42][#N42] In contrast, following Tatjana Takševa’s identification of maternal ambivalence as arising out of broader social, cultural, and political contexts, I identify maternal ambivalence as a socio-political and cultural response to displays of hegemonic postfeminist mothering. [43][#N43] My reading, then, is more in line with Sue Thornham’s, who positions Eva’s “hatred for the child” within the dominant discourses of American “new momism,” arguing that it offers a “critical re-appraisal of this latest postfeminist celebration of feminine fulfilment.” [44][#N44] While this context provides the backdrop to Thornham’s analysis of the film’s generic legacies, I depart from Thornham’s analysis to offer a more thorough reading of *Kevin* through its historical postfeminist context. Shriver’s novel, from which the film is adapted, is set during the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. It interrogates the concept of the “good mother,” throwing into relief “the demanding (and superficial) performance of effective mothering called forth in the conservative milieu of mid-eighties American culture.” [45][#N45] The film, released in 2011, brings us into the new millennium – a time where, as I have demonstrated, the affective demands on mothers (and women more broadly) were increasing and postfeminist ideologies of “new momism” were intensifying. In what follows, I critically draw out the key moments in the film where these postfeminist politics are cited to contextualise and situate *Kevin*’s representation of the mother within the broader affective-discursive representations of motherhood circulating around the text.

***We Need to Talk about Kevin*: Maternal Ambivalence**

Kevin offers an intense rendering of the mother’s perspective. This follows on from Ramsay’s previous films, which also foreground their protagonist’s point-of-view. In *Ratcatcher* (1999), Ramsay claims she was “trying to go into the psychology of the scenes...trying to get under the skin of it a bit, inside [lead character, James’] head.” [46][#N46] Similarly, in *Morvern Callar* (2002), the audience is “encouraged to share Morvern’s experiences, both physical and emotional, through a cinematic style that privileges her sensory point of view.” [47][#N47] *Kevin* intercuts between scenes of Eva in the present day (where the film hints at a terrible recent event involving her son, Kevin) and Eva’s past experiences mothering her difficult and manipulative son. The film eventually reveals that Kevin has killed his father, sister Celia and several of his schoolmates in a pre-meditated attack, for which he is serving time in jail. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Eva is ambivalent towards her position and

experience as a mother. The film, after all, involves an extraordinary and atypical experience of mothering, which is perhaps beyond the realm of normative mothering experienced by most women and represented primarily in media culture. However, not only do multiple scenes occur before the terrible event, suggesting that Eva's ambivalences were felt before Kevin's massacre, but the film, in its singularity, enables a critical re-evaluation of maternal feelings. Functioning as a collective social and cultural fantasy, the film syphons off taboos around maternal feelings *in extremis*, allowing a subversion of typical affective scripts of motherhood.

Eva's experience of motherhood is primarily presented through a series of flashbacks interspersed with scenes of Eva's life in the present day as she recalls memories of her adult life. Multiple scenes show Eva remembering her difficult experience as a mother to Kevin, often sitting, standing or lying in repose as she reflects on key moments. Eva's expression as she reflects on her memories is for the most part ambivalent. Likewise, her emotional response during significant mothering moments, such as when pregnant and post-partum, is also ambivalent. Ramsay makes Eva's emotional state legible through external formal and spatial cues. For example, Eva's ambivalent expression as she recalls memories is often supplemented with a formal excess of colour and sound. She is often doused in red light as she recalls these memories, and the sounds from the past and present bleed into each other, creating, as Bolton argues, "an inescapably visual" penetration of Eva's psyche, suggesting "her psychological overwhelm through colour and form." [48]. [N48] Moreover, the production design and *mise-en-scène* create a diegetic space that often reflects Eva's emotional state, such as the hospital room after she has given birth to Kevin. The whiteness of this space – the walls, bed, blanket, gown and equipment – with its overt, expressionist design supplements Eva's despondent expression, creating affective meaning and making legible her emotional state as one of ambivalence towards new motherhood. This contrasts with Eva's moment of joyful mothering as suggested by the yellow, softly lit hospital room in which she gives birth to Celia, the child with whom she has a loving relationship. Eva's distressed response at spontaneously meeting the mother of one of Kevin's victims at the supermarket is also supplemented with affective intensity through the excessive redness of the soup cans behind the close-up shot of Eva's face. The shot's use of anamorphic format renders a shallow depth of field and pushes Eva's face to the foreground of the frame. As the film's cinematographer, Seamus McGarvey argues, this format is particularly suited "to express[ing] interiority or what is in someone's mind." [49]. [N49]





[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0044.106-00000002.jpg\]](#)

Figure 2: Eva's ambivalence towards new motherhood

Ramsay's expressive use of sound and colour often focuses on sensuous, tactile details – what David Trotter calls “haptic narrative” – to create an affective, affecting cinema. [50][#N50] In *Kevin*, tactility occurs in several moments, such as through close-up shots of Eva laying out egg shell shards and picking the dried paint caked in her hair. At one point, Kevin eats lychees as his parents discuss his sister's suspicious eye accident. The lychee's juices and crunchy texture, foregrounded in the extreme close-up shot and sound mixing, uncomfortably suggest the eyeball Celia has just lost. Raymond de Luca points to the centrality of skin to this sensuous materiality, arguing that Ramsay's display of skin works to get under *our* skin: “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.” [51][#N51] This sensuousness, then, is crucial for “approach[ing] a character's psychology.” [52][#N52]

Building on previous scholarship on Ramsay's affective cinema, I argue that Ramsay makes Eva's interiority and emotional life legible through these formal cues to offer an affective presentation of motherhood in contradistinction to hegemonic postfeminist ideals of pleasurable mothering. I move away from critics such as David Forrest and Stella Hockenull who argue that Ramsay, along with other British filmmakers such as Andrea Arnold and Duane Hopkins, foregrounds a “poetic and aesthetically bold approach” to her subject matter, while relegating “social and political agendas” to the background. [53][#N53] While *Kevin* is not strictly a poetic realist film, Ramsay's continued use of expressive style demonstrates how, in fact, she uses this expressive form precisely to represent socio-political and cultural issues. This is evident during moments in *Kevin* when Ramsay explicitly engages with postfeminist politics. In one scene, Ramsay visually cites the postfeminist mother to position Eva outside this construction. In a flashback scene set in a changing room before a pre-natal exercise class, Eva is surrounded by pregnant women wearing tight exercise clothes, with many exposing their baby bumps in crop tops and sports bras. These women embody both the postfeminist ideal of maternal femininity – the neoliberal “pregnant beauty,” whose “tight, white, youthful body” with its “perfect little bump” is on spectacular display [54][#N54] – and evoke the figure of the “yummy mummy” – a “type of mother who is sexually attractive and well groomed, and who knows the importance of spending time on herself.” [55][#N55] Wearing a baggy smock top and sweatpants, Eva is visibly set apart from these women. The camera reveals several close-ups of the “baby bumps” of the other women, parodying the hyper-visibility of the pregnant body in the last few decades, before zooming in on Eva's face as another pregnant woman begins stretching close to her. [56][#N56] Invading Eva's personal space,

the camera registers and intensifies an increasing feeling of claustrophobia and compounds Eva's emotional "out-of-placeness."



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0044.106-00000003.jpg\]](#)

Figure 3: Eva fails to embody or perform happy postfeminist motherhood

Placed in the centre of the frame, Ramsay ensures Eva's emotional response to this overwhelming representation of postfeminist maternal femininity is central to the spectator's attention. Swinton's performance of Eva's emotional state is clearly not one of postfeminist maternal bliss. Rather, it is one of maternal ambivalence. This is made further legible when pregnant Eva leaves the changing room and walks down the corridor followed by a gaggle of young girls dressed in pink ballet leotards and tutus who run ahead of her, bumping into her and blocking her path as they go. Ramsay's use of back-lighting and the black tiles in the diegetic space of the corridor cast Eva into shadow in contrast with the pink-clad, brightly lit girls. This external space positions Eva outside of images of idealised postfeminist femininity as embodied in the youthful hyper-girlishness of the young ballet dancers and consolidates Swinton's affective performance as one of ambivalence towards her identity as a pregnant woman and soon-to-be mother within a postfeminist landscape. [\[57\].\[#N57\]](#)

Ramsay's presentation of motherhood is one constructed against dominant postfeminist iterations of motherhood as maternal ambivalence offers a significant affective counter to postfeminist's demands of pure maternal bliss. Rozsika Parker identifies maternal ambivalence as "not an anodyne condition

of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side.” [58]. [N58] I am less interested in taking up Parker’s definition of maternal ambivalence in terms of a mother’s individualised feelings of love or hate for the child, but instead consider ambivalence as a response to the conflicting cultural expectations set up by the dominant contemporary discursive image of the “good mother.” Following Tatjana Takševa, maternal ambivalence is not only a personal, individual and emotional response to parenting but “is borne out of and situated within the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which mothers live,” particularly via postfeminist ideologies of “new momism.” [59]. [N59]

Takševa stresses that maternal ambivalence is particularly felt by white, educated, middle-class women “with careers or commitment to work outside the home, whose sense of self prior to having children has been defined in relation to a more public and professional identity.” [60]. [N60] Eva’s “resistance” to dominant affective maternal discourses, then, is a particularly white, middle-class, Anglo-American response. Nevertheless, maternal ambivalence can be imbued with political potency as it functions as an affective counter to the dominant constructions of postfeminist and neoliberal mothering. As Takševa argues, maternal ambivalence is key to challenging dominant discourses of motherhood and empowering mothers themselves: “[A]mbivalence is a powerful force propelling mothers into a ‘distinctly maternal subject-position’ from within which they actively make meaning of their own past, their own identity demands as well as the subject-positions of their children.” [61]. [N61] In foregrounding Eva’s feelings of maternal ambivalence, Ramsay enables an interiorised space to emerge that challenges the affective script of the postfeminist mother.

I have suggested here that Swinton’s performance of Eva – her muted and, at times, ambiguous emotional response – can be read as one of maternal ambivalence; in other words, following Ahmed, as an emotional response *away* from or in contradistinction to pleasure and joy. Jackie Stacey considers Swinton’s performances of “styles of underperformed emotion” across her career, which she reads through Lauren Berlant’s theory of “flat affect.” [62]. [N62] Stacey argues that Swinton’s performance of “flatness” brings a quality that contradicts conventional expectations of feminine emotional expressiveness; Swinton’s flat affect “unmakes and remakes conventionalised femininities especially as articulated through popular genres in which women’s interiority is so frequently the register of affective intensity.” [63]. [N63] I am compelled by the implications of Stacey’s argument, which suggest that Swinton’s performance of flatness “places centre stage the history of cinematic femininity as a cluster of stylized conventions, as something which has to keep being made up, worked on, approximated, achieved and reinvented.” [64]. [N64] Motherhood, here, becomes another culturally constructed gendered role and another facet of Swinton’s gender play in cinema. I am also wary, as Stacey warns us, of over-reading the body that is unforthcoming. [65]. [N65] However, I suggest that reading Eva’s emotional state as one of maternal ambivalence offers a flexible model where multiple conflicting emotional states can co-exist. Moreover, using Stacey’s argument as a point of departure to read Swinton’s performance in *Kevin* more specifically as a performance of socio-political maternal ambivalence enables us to position this gendered affect as a critique of the governing affective registers in dominant images of motherhood.

We Need to Talk about Kevin: Maternal Choices?

Dejmanee argues that the turn to interiority in contemporary postfeminism is a call for the postfeminist subject to turn inwards both physically and emotionally: the turn is “characterised by a concern with interior spaces – reviving domesticity and the importance of finding and securing a home – as well as internalised consumption – replacing material consumption with the quest for self-

actualisation.” [66][#N66] It is notable, then, that Eva rejects both these interiors: the emotional and the domestic. Although Eva’s home in the present day becomes a haven by offering her temporary moments of voluntary solitary confinement away from her public identity as a “bad” mother (which is evidenced by her assaults at work, in the supermarket and on the street), domestic space is primarily presented as an emotional and physical trap for Eva, recalling second-wave feminists’ critique of the home as a cage, trap or prison for the (white, middle-class) mother. [67][#N67] In contrast, travel, both as a means of professional work and as a mode of mobility and autonomy, is constructed as a spatial configuration in opposition to Eva’s experiences in the domestic realm. As an exasperated Eva tells baby Kevin: “Mommy was happy before little Kevin came along... Now Mommy wakes up every morning and wishes she was in France.” In this last section, I want to explore the trope of travel further to contextualise my reading of Eva’s presentation of maternal ambivalence within the film’s broader destabilisation of postfeminist subjectivity.



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0044.106-00000004.jpg]

Figure 4: Eva refuses to turn inwards, both emotionally and spatially

The film gestures to the difficulties of Eva’s identity as both a mother and as a travel writer when Franklin objects to Eva going to Ecuador for two months. However, Eva’s successful travel business suggests she continues to pursue and achieve professional success alongside motherhood; a crucial indication of the good, middle-class neoliberal mother, and a move away from the domesticated housewife as the ideal maternal subject position. Although the image of the “happy housewife” has not disappeared from the public imagination, and some mothers do “stay at home,” as Orgad surmises, “the ‘supermom’ or ‘career mother’ has assumed centre-stage in the Western cultural media landscape.” [68][#N68] Yet, intense mothering and domesticity become entangled in middle-class women’s waged labour in complicated ways, what Petra Bueskens calls the “new sexual contract.” [69]

[#N69]Angela McRobbie details these new modes of mediated maternalism, arguing that mothers are encouraged to stay in the labour market, often taking up a feminised domesticated wage labour role such as “mumpreneur,” to “confirm and enhance the core values of the neoliberal project.” [70][#N70] Through careful individualised financial planning and family management, the mother is compelled to “balance” work and home life. The investment in marriage, motherhood and domestic life as the benchmark of successful femininity is not only in marked contrast to the “mismanaged lives” of the “abject mother” – working-class, single, welfare-dependent, young – but also legitimizes “intensive” and “pleasurable” mothering as “a mode of investment in the human capital of infants and children, while also countering any presumed loss of status on the part of the stay-home mother who now directs her professional skills to ensuring the unassailable middle class status of her children.” [71][#N71]

The contemporary white, middle-class mother subject occupies a complex position within contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal culture, with her subjectivity tied up with her intense caregiving role to the child and domesticity, as well as professional work and consumption. Although, on the surface, Eva appears also to strive to “balance” her waged work and childcare duties, I want to offer a more complex reading of her travels, to which her professional self is tied. For Thornham, Eva’s travels represent an imperial adventure undertaken by the “rational” Western subject. [72][#N72] While I do not dispute that the “liberation” and “freedom” through which Eva frames her professional life and travel adventures are determined by her privileged position as a white Western woman, I want to point to the ways in which the film complicates the “rationality” on which this subject position rests. Specifically, I argue that the film does this by mocking the notion of “choice” undertaken by the rational, Western subject, particularly in a postfeminist and neoliberal context.

In an early scene, Eva makes the conscious decision – or choice – to become pregnant, with the moment of conception marked with Franklin asking, “are you sure about this?” “Choice” of course is a critical if contentious word in feminism’s vocabulary, particularly in relation to women’s reproductive rights. [73][#N73] Although, as Charlotte from *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) exclaims, “the women’s movement is all about choice!”, the postfeminist moment under which it is uttered recuperates this “choice” on which this liberation of women depends within its own agenda. As Gill argues:

One of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action. [74][#N74]

In the contemporary postfeminist moment, Douglas and Michaels argue that the decision to become a mother is the only meaningful “choice” a woman can make, thus undermining the very agency and rationality upon which this decision supposedly rests. [75][#N75] Eva’s “choice” to become a mother, like her “choice” to travel, is based on a Western postfeminist and neoliberal fantasy that promises autonomy and agency, even as it works to curtail them.

Therefore, even as the film confirms Eva’s privileges as an affluent, mobile, white Western woman, it also works to critique the ideology of “choice” upon which the rational postfeminist and neoliberal subject depends. The moment of Kevin’s conception is presented as part of Eva’s memory alongside flashbacks of Eva at La Tomatina festival and Eva and Franklin running through streets during the early, heady days of their relationship. Linking pregnancy and maternity to Eva’s “exotic” travels

alludes to motherhood as the symbolic “new frontier.” Eva lies on her bed as she recalls these memories, and the images of the past and present blend into one another. Red lighting overwhelms each frame, joining the past and present in a visual palette. The diegetic sounds of sirens and Franklin’s voice in the flashbacks bleed into the present scenes. Through images and sounds, this scene collapses time and space. This, I argue, destabilises the postfeminist construction of an empowered female subject. In voiceover, Franklin hails Eva to return home asking: “When are you coming home? I miss you... I love you.” This is reinforced just before Kevin’s conception when Franklin says to Eva: “Promise me you’ll never go away again.” The film, then, frames Eva’s “choice” of motherhood as an interpellation into heteronormative femininity and a recuperation within domesticity. The irony, of course, is that motherhood has come to define present-day Eva to such an extent that she is now a social outcast; as I argued earlier, her home is her only safe space as she has been literally and metaphorically outcast from public spaces and iterations of acceptable motherhood following Kevin’s crime. However, it also suggests an inevitable failure of postfeminism’s promises of motherhood. As Eva recalls these memories, the kernel of postfeminism’s failed promises becomes lodged into the past scenes. Swinton’s performance of maternal ambivalence eschews postfeminist reassurances of the fulfilling and redemptive aspects of motherhood and femininity; the promise of happiness embedded in the image of the happy family is confirmed as a myth. [76]. [N76] Even the moments of romantic love and empowered “choices” (namely Kevin’s conception) are now marked with futility, mocking even the possibility of Eva as an empowered subject of postfeminism and neoliberalism.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that the film’s ambivalence towards motherhood is twofold: it represents ambivalence through Eva’s emotional response to being a mother, and it displays ambivalence towards the postfeminist sexual contract mothers are compelled to enter into. Postfeminism obliges women to make the “choice” of motherhood, promising happiness, contentment and fulfilment if mothers can only “balance” childcare and waged work properly and display positive affective dimensions of mothering successfully. *Kevin* reveals the emptiness of such promises. Through a powerful portrait of motherhood, *Kevin* offers an affective counter to dominant iterations of “blissful” postfeminist motherhood through its foregrounding of Eva’s emotional state of ambivalence. In addition, by locating this affective interpellation within the context of “loss” of waged work, as literalized and metaphorized through travel in the film, *Kevin* destabilises the affective promises made by postfeminist motherhood. If, as Ahmed argues, “political movements have struggled *against* rather than *for* happiness,” then *Kevin*’s display of ambivalent emotional states reveals the extent of the feminist politics embedded in these images. [77]. [N77] *Kevin* points to the complexities of a mother’s internal emotional life, opening up the possibility for more nuanced discussions and representations around such maternal affective dimensions.

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Notes

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3. Tisha Dejmancee, "Consumption in the City: The Turn to Interiority in Contemporary Postfeminist Television," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19.2 (2016): 119. ♦ [\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
4. Gill "Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism," 610. ♦ [\[#N4-ptri\]](#)
5. Valerie Heffernan and Gay Wilgus, "Introduction: Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century—Images, Representations, Constructions," *Women: A Cultural Review* 29.1 (2018): 4. ♦ [\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
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8. Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6. ♦ [\[#N8-ptri\]](#)
9. Kaplan, quoted in Fischer, *Cinematernity*, 14. ♦ [\[#N9-ptri\]](#)
10. Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides the Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 300. ♦ [\[#N10-ptri\]](#)
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15. Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film*, 68. ♦ [\[#N15-ptri\]](#)
16. Jo Littler, "Mothers Behaving Badly: Chaotic Hedonism and the Crisis of Neoliberal Social Reproduction," *Cultural Studies* (2019): 17-18, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2019.1633371. ♦ [\[#N16-ptri\]](#)
17. Dejmancee, "Consumption in the City," 119. ♦ [\[#N17-ptri\]](#)
18. Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007): 148. ♦ [\[#N18-ptri\]](#)
19. Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004): 255. ♦ [\[#N19-ptri\]](#)
20. Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 149. ♦ [\[#N20-ptri\]](#)
21. Gill, "Post-postfeminism?" 611. ♦ [\[#N21-ptri\]](#)
22. Gill, "Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism," 609. ♦ [\[#N22-ptri\]](#)
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 29. Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism,” 618.♣ [#N29-ptri]
 30. See Thouaille; Catherine McDermott, “Genres of Impasse: Postfeminism as a Relation of Cruel Optimism in *Girls*,” in *Reading Lena Dunham’s Girls: Feminism, Postfeminism, Authenticity and Gendered Performance in Contemporary Television*, ed. by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 45-60.♣ [#N30-ptri]
 31. Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism,” 610.♣ [#N31-ptri]
 32. Janice Peck, quoted in Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism,” 620.♣ [#N32-ptri]
 33. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation,” *Feminist Theory* (2019): 9, DOI: 10.1177/1464700119842555.♣ [#N33-ptri]
 34. Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism,” 619.♣ [#N34-ptri]
 35. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 65.♣ [#N35-ptri]
 36. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 4.♣ [#N36-ptri]
 37. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 15-46; Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 24.♣ [#N37-ptri]
 38. Ann Oakley, *From Here to Maternity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 6.♣ [#N38-ptri]
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 40. Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 46. See also Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).♣ [#N40-ptri]
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 48. Bolton, *Film and Female Consciousness*, x.♣ [#N48-ptri]
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65. Stacey, "Crossing Over," 253. ♣ [#N65-ptri]
66. Dejmancee, "Consumption in the City," 120. ♣ [#N66-ptri]
67. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 2010); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997). ♣ [#N67-ptri]
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73. See Sara Hayden and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein (eds.), *Contemplating Maternity in an Era of Choice: Exploration into Discourses of Reproduction* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010); Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002). ♦ [\[#N73-ptri\]](#)
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76. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 45. ♦ [\[#N76-ptri\]](#)
77. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 2. ♦ [\[#N77-ptri\]](#)

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