Mapping her-self: 'Ma and Da', *Small Deaths*, *Gasman* and the 'mobile home'

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ABSTRACT

Challenging the view of home as the very opposite of voyage, Giuliana Bruno suggests that houses and films share certain similarities insofar as both could be considered inherently mobile sights/sites of passage. Taking this as a starting point, this article considers the ways in which the vignette and the short film act as a vehicle for the young girl's 'domestic travel' in Lynne Ramsay's 'Ma and Da' from *Small Deaths* (1996) and *Gasman* (1998).

Keywords

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Lynne Ramsay's *Gasman* develops the fragment of perception first glimpsed in 'Ma and Da'; that is, it tells the story of a young girl beginning to discern the contours of an adult world defined by compromise and duplicity and her place within it. Navigating this world involves an exploration of the domestic realm, not just as a point of departure, but as a terrain upon which questions of gender and mobility may be mapped. Approaching Ramsay's films from this perspective draws on the work of Giuliana Bruno (2007), whose female traveller, or '*voyageuse*', embodies a kind of mobile spectatorship that traverses the traditional (gendered) opposition of home vs. travel.

Moving away from the idea of cinema spectatorship as organized around a fixed, central perspective, Bruno considers cinema — 'motion pictures' — as a series of 'moving' views inhabited by the spectator. According to Bruno, '[t]here is a mobile dynamics involved in the act of viewing films, even if the spectator is seemingly static. The (im)mobile spectator moves across an imaginary path, traversing multiple sites and times. Her fictional navigation connects

distant moments and far-apart places' (2007: 55-56). This is not only a case of travelling to far-flung locations however, for 'houses, like films, […] can tell stories of journeys and of travels within' (2007: 105). For Bruno, thinking in these terms 'houses' gender differently, displacing the (male) narrative of travel as conquest and home as a stable point of origin, in favour of a kind of (female) nomadism marked by exploration and dislocation, where 'home' is also a site/sight of passage (2007: 64). In this way, Bruno's model of cinematic 'site-seeing' reimagines the relationship between (movie) house, home and voyage and, in so doing, facilitates 'a critical shift from spectator-voyeur to spectatrix-*voyageuse*' (2007: 157).

To some extent, both 'Ma and Da' and *Gasman* share the tendency, evident across a range of cinematic registers, to cast the child in the role of witness. The notion of the child as inherently innocent — what Emma Wilson describes as the 'dominant fantasy in whose terms children have been variously represented, protected and desired' — provides a poignant counterpoint to the scenarios of disappointment and disillusionment to which they attend (Wilson 2005: 331). In this vein, Anne Marie in 'Ma and Da' and Lynne in *Gasman* (both played by Ramsay's niece and namesake, Lynne Ramsay Jr) observe dysfunctional family dynamics, articulated in gendered patterns of departure and return. Nevertheless, their agency is not restricted to an act of static spectatorship, however perceptive. Ramsay's reconfiguration of the relationship between interior and exterior spaces transforms her young protagonists from innocent bystanders to imaginative travellers, both within and without the 'mobile home' (Bruno 2007).

The myth of the male odyssey has structured storytelling for centuries. In mainstream cinema, the association of man with travel and woman with home persists in popular genres, shaping our perception of time and space, movement and stasis, along profoundly gendered lines. As Bruno puts it, 'while man is synonymous with adventure, woman becomes synonymous with home. In such a way, the distinction between woman and home is collapsed

so that woman *becomes* home. Superimposed, the two are equally static' (2007: 80). In 'Ma and Da', the first of three vignettes that make up *Small Deaths* (Ramsay 1996), Ma (Anne McLean) coifs Da (James Ramsay) in preparation for his night out. Her final question — 'will ye be hame [home] tonight then?' — goes unanswered as he shuts the door behind him, leaving her and Anne Marie lined up visually in doorways that connect the interior spaces of their home. Similarly, in *Gasman*, Lynne's mother (Denise Flannagan) prepares her family for a Christmas party at the local pub, our only glimpse of her face obscured by the glare on the window she stands behind to watch their departure. In this light, both films conform to the familiar paradigm whereby women are contained within the home, framed by windows and doorways from which they watch men leave and return at will. However, the depiction of the domestic sphere as inherently 'moving' complicates the conventional identification of home — and woman — with stasis.

According to Bruno, '[t]ravel culture is written on the techniques of filmic observation' (2007: 62). To explore this, she revisits Eisenstein's interest in the tradition of *vedute*, or cityscape painting composed from a succession of views, as a pre-cinematic model of montage. Comprising panoramic as well as street level views from various locations, these detailed depictions incorporate a number of spectatorial positions, as distinct from the monocular, immobile prospect of rectilinear perspective (2007: 61). Like the *vedutisti*, who painted their surroundings from a range of different vantage points, variations in camera height, distance, angle, as well as editing and camera movement articulate a cinematic experience of space that is multiple and mobile (2007: 62). These 'moving views' can extend to the home (2007: 87). As Bruno argues:

> Mobilizing its encompassing embrace, film has absorbed the touristic drive to ascend to take in the larger 'scape' as well as the desire to dive down to ground level and explore private dwellings. In such a way—that is, by incorporating a multiplicity of viewpoints—cinema has reinvented the traveler's charting of space (2007: 84).

In this sense, Ramsay's films bring a 'mobile' sensibility to bear on the domestic realm. Her protagonists are restless: rolling, running, and scooting in circles from room to room. They are endlessly engaged — to borrow Bruno's trope — in a form of 'domestic travel', while editing and camera angles 'mobilize' the domestic space via a fractured perspective.

When we first see Anne Marie in 'Ma and Da', she is shot from above, lying on the floor in a small room furnished in the style typical of many working class homes in the 1970s. The 'bird's eye' angle, more typical of exterior shots to provide a totalising point of view, gives us a heightened perspective on the restricted space as rich in sensory and narrative possibilities. In the next shot — a close-up of Anne Marie's face framed at her own eye level — she is transported, both by the story she reads and by the voices and sounds coming from outside the house; the border between interior and exterior is permeable and easily accessed via acts of the imagination. Framed in the doorway of the adjoining kitchen, Ma and Da seem worlds apart, strangely distant with each other despite their physical proximity, as Ma carefully combs and sprays Da's hair. What begins as small talk one might hear in a hair salon segues into a stilted exchange that reiterates the elision of man with travel and woman with stasis. The cinematic presentation of space, however, undercuts the idea of the interior (and interiority) as intransitive, drawing and redrawing the home and its inhabitants in terms of shifting patterns of details and dynamics. Isolated close-ups of hands and faces are juxtaposed with an elevated perspective that expands the remit of the domestic environment, while the mirror offers a different view of Ma helping Da get ready to leave.

The opening of *Gasman* extends this impulse towards partial perspectives, insofar as it is both deeply invested in, and a fragmentary presentation of, the domestic topography. Eschewing a 'master' shot that would chart the domestic space along a central sight line, Ramsay offers an elliptical presentation of the home as a series of 'moving' views. Close-ups

of hands show shoes being polished, sugar being poured over a toy car; Lynne's bare feet run in excited circles on a patterned carpet, before being thrust into thick tights and patent party shoes. Ramsay's protracted focus on shots of hands, feet and parts of bodies at the beginning of the film amplifies our sense of the domestic as animated by its inhabitants. Composed from multiple perspectives that are not aligned with any single point of view, Ramsay's 'mobile home' resists abstraction as an inert point of departure.

In *Gasman*, the idea of travel is also of particular thematic concern. As Bruno puts it, 'the notion of home, conceived as the opposite of voyage, is the very site of the production of sexual difference' (2007: 86). Viewed as a point of departure and return and identified as female, the home represents the origin: 'the womb from which one originates and to which one wishes to return' (2007: 86). 'Travel as metaphor' thus entails a voyage of self-discovery, from whence the protagonist desires a return to the sameness they once possessed; 'the anxiety of the (male) voyager is the fear that, upon return, he may not find the same home/woman/womb he has left behind' (2007: 85). As Bruno argues, this scenario operates as a persistent fantasy in (male) travel writing, literature and film. The perception of the voyage as circular is much more complex for the *voyageuse* however, for whom narratives of origin, separation and loss are structured differently. Instead of a scenario of possession and return, female travel is more often figured as a state of flux — 'a constant redrafting of sites' — where the boundary between voyage and home is far less stable (2007: 86).

Relieved of the burden of narrative resolution, Ramsay's short films are not round trips, curtailed by the expectation that what one left behind will remain the same. Speaking of *Small Deaths*, Ramsay describes the 'small deaths' or 'tiny moments' that her child protagonists experience as 'like a slight switch in perception that makes you view the world in a different way' (Ramsay quoted in Aitken 2007: 76). In 'Ma and Da', the final shot of Anne Marie's face maps her psychic dislocation after her father's departure — 'When will my Da be hame?' —

activated by her outward, speculative gaze. In *Gasman*, Lynne, our young *voyageuse*, extends the process of 'imaginative travel' initiated by Anne Marie. Lynne leaves the maternal space behind and sets forth with her father (again played by James Ramsay), enacting the revised allegiance hinted at by Anne Marie's faltering rendition of the first line of the song 'Ally Bally Bee': 'sittin' on yer ma – daddy's knee'. Lynne's enthusiasm is set against her brother Steven's (Martin Anderson) reluctance; she is a 'Daddy's girl', telling her mother to 'shu' up' when she hurries her but responding sweetly — 'Coming, Daddy!'— to her father's imperative. The 'voyage of discovery' undertaken is not what she expects however, precipitating the painful realisation that she is not, in fact, 'Daddy's girl', or at least, not Daddy's only girl. The playful allusion to *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming 1939), when Lynne clicks her party shoes and parrots her version of the famous line — 'There's no place like home; no place like home' — thus summarizes the film's central narrative concern: Lynne's expedition exposes the foundational myth of home as fixed point of origin and return as false. That the encounter with her doppelganger takes place on a disused railway track is apposite; stretching in both directions but with no final destination, the abandoned railway lines map the bifurcation of 'home' that subtends Lynne's familial dislocation.

Carried away from home by her father, the dream-like quality of Lynne's departure is enhanced by the depth of field and intensified light produced by a partially closed iris. At this point, Lynne's perception is coloured by her fantasy of 'family'. Her arrival at the pub, strongly coded as a masculine space, is ironically accompanied by the song 'Where's your Mama gone?' by *Middle of the Road*, blaring from the sound system. Mobile camerawork, elliptical editing and slow-motion all conspire to support a sense of time and space as distended, punctured by a shot from Lynne's point of view that confirms the scenario foreshadowed by Anne Marie's singing at the beginning of 'Ma and Da': someone else is sitting on her Daddy's knee. While Steven's pretend gunshot at his father's back, coupled with the fact that when he enters the

party he does so in time with the line 'Where's your papa gone?', suggests that his own process of symbolic patricide has already taken place, Lynne's disenchantment with the father figure is crystallized in this moment of clarity, when she gains a new perspective on the scene.

The final shot of *Gasman* shows Lynne from behind as she drops the stone intended for her interloper's retreating back. The party is over and what began in a spirit of adventure has evolved into an altogether different kind of expedition, which fundamentally redraws her sense of her 'self' and her place in the world. As Bruno puts it, '[T]here is possession implied in positing an origin which was enjoyed, lost, and capable of being reacquired' (2007: 86). Lynne's territorial impulse — 'Get off mah Daddy's knee!' — is not sustainable in light of the 'switch in perception' she has experienced as a result of her excursion. Positioned in the middle of the moonlit railway lines, facing away from her father and unmoored from the domestic realm — and the woman's place within it — as a stable, singular reference point, Lynne's 'site-seeing' offers a different view of the relationship between her 'self' and 'home', made up of multiple perspectives.

In relation to Ramsay's first feature, film critic Peter Bradshaw notes that *Ratcatcher* 'restor[es] an almost ecstatic perception of the simple fabrics and textures of everyday living' (Bradshaw 1999: n.pag.). As well as capturing the 'heightened awareness' that Ramsay brings to often disregarded aspects of physical reality (see Kendall 2010), describing Ramsay's cinematic perception as 'ecstatic' — in the etymological sense of 'standing outside oneself' or being 'out of place' — speaks both to the ways in which Ramsay's cinematography creates 'moving pictures' of the domestic realm liberated from a fixed point of view, and to the literal and figurative exploration of interior and exterior spaces undertaken by her young protagonists. For Bruno, 'dislocation has always marked the terrain of the female traveler' (2007: 86). In 'Ma and Da' and *Gasman*, Ramsay's *voyageuses* forge narrative paths across disparate places

and from different points of view, mapping and remapping themselves and their relationship to the 'mobile home'.

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