

Article

World-Hating: Apocalypse and Trauma in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

Sean Desilets

Departments of Film Studies, English, and Gender Studies, Westminster College, Salt Lake City, UT 84111, USA; sdesilets@westminstercollege.edu

Received: 19 September 2017; Accepted: 6 November 2017; Published: 13 November 2017

Abstract: Lynne Ramsay's 2011 film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* alternates between two narrative times, one occurring before its protagonist Eva's son commits a terrible crime, and one after. The film invites us to read the crime as a traumatic event in Eva's life, an event of such terrible force that it transforms Eva's identity. This essay uses Jacob Taubes's understanding of Gnosticism to suggest that this event does not transform who Eva is, but rather how she knows. Like a Gnostic believer, Eva comes to understanding the fundamental ontological evil of community life. Eva's 'trauma,' her alienation from the world she occupies, predates Kevin's crime, but the aftermath of that crime reveals her alienation to her. The worldview thus presented by the film casts some light on how art house films are marketed. Like many middlebrow products, art house films present marketers with the challenge of concealing the fact that the commodity they are selling is indeed a commodity. This ambivalent distrust of the marketplace is a softened repetition of the Gnostic's anticosmism, and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* both performs and thematizes a displacement from the world that is primary, not contingent upon any traumatic event.

Keywords: *We Need to Talk about Kevin*; Lynne Ramsay; Gnosticism; trauma; independent cinema; marketing; Jacob Taubes

'Trauma' is a recent entry in a long series of concepts that seek to name a curious element of Western experience: what places us in the world (call it 'nature' or 'reality') seems paradoxically coterminous with what *displaces* us from it. This mirroring connection between placement and displacement derives from the human tendency to (mis)take ourselves to be radically different from everything else that exists. Two related factors distinguish the concept of trauma from other concepts directed at this problem (for instance, 'alienation' and 'neurosis'): the concept of trauma places special emphasis on temporality, and, in its psychological interiorization, it frankly acknowledges the coincidence of placement and displacement as the temporal locus of identity. Trauma is always a matter of memory or its failure, and as such, always stages a confrontation between present and past. For trauma, this moment of turning back to the past is the pivot upon which selfhood hangs. Trauma itself occurs in a paradoxical temporality; its pivotal character means it is decisively in the past even as its role as the basis of traumatized identity keeps it in the present as long as that identity exists. Meanwhile trauma, because it generates new identities for its victims out of material that intrudes from the outside, also forces us to recognize that identity itself is dependent upon the world from which it seeks to disentangle itself. In Freud's model, for instance, what makes trauma traumatic is the process by which external stimuli install themselves (or their psychic representatives) inside the borders that the psyche uses to protect itself from external threats (Freud 1961, pp. 35–36).

My description subordinates trauma to what I take to be a more persistent, even foundational problem: the coterminous quality of the placement and displacement. That way of conceiving trauma will be important to me because although I will be approaching a film *about* trauma, my means of approach will seem at first glance far removed from the affective frenzy that we associate with traumatic experiences. My reading of this film, Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011,

henceforth shortened to *Kevin*), can be understood as an effort to justify this conceptual hierarchy in which displacement precedes trauma.¹ *We Need to Talk about Kevin*'s protagonist experiences profound social displacement that seems to originate in a traumatic event, albeit one that culminates a long traumatic period. The film reveals that the displacement actually precedes the event, both temporally and logically. Just as importantly, the film's ambivalent participation in the cinematic marketplace marks its self-consciousness about the (as it were) traumatic effect of commodity status on artworks. In this, it is not different from most other art house films, which must approach their self-presentation as commodities gingerly because their very appeal *as* commodities includes a certain distrust of the mass-media marketplace (Newman 2009, p. 17). This essay begins by addressing the question of how *Kevin* presents itself to its audience and how that mode of address relates to the history of art cinema consumption in the US. It next turns to the text of the film itself, extracting from it a kind of explanation or allegorization of the logic behind this mode of address. I will read the film as a contemporary repetition of a very old and especially elaborate confrontation with the simultaneity of placement and displacement: the second-century phenomenon of Gnosticism—particularly as described by twentieth-century theologian Jacob Taubes. The upshot of this analysis will be an argument that the text of *Kevin* amounts to a version of the gnostic 'insight' that the properly initiated can read the signs of the world's foundational perfidy in the texture of the world itself, and that the reading of these signs presents the possibility of escape, even if it is only escape from delusion and not from the underlying misery of living in the world. My aim is to present Gnosticism as a moment in the genealogy of trauma, using it to excavate the links between the ambivalent marketing of arthouse films and this film's way of representing traumatized subjectivity.

1. Commodity–Trauma

The marketing of American art films may seem at first like a somewhat cold precinct in which to seek out the origins of trauma. But marketing is always a matter of exploiting consumers' fears and desires. In the case of the marketing of independent art house films, the trauma to be feared is the condition of being either a commodity or its consumer. Like many middlebrow products, indie films present marketers with the challenge of concealing the fact that the commodity they are selling is indeed a commodity. This mandate derives, of course, from the mistaken impression that art and commerce are at odds with one another, an impression that persists in the face of the perfectly obvious fact that most of our artistic experiences come to us directly from markets and cost money. Acknowledging that artworks are also commodities sits uncomfortably for us because we don't *feel* like consumers when we consume artworks. We approach them as means to understand and direct our aspirations, fears, and desires. People who seek out films like *Kevin*, which is adapted from a celebrated contemporary novel and which stars an actor (Tilda Swinton) whose career began in the films of the truly independent director Derek Jarman, do so at least in part because we believe such films to be directed at socially or culturally important problems. These problems are not the ones that are faced by marketers trying to sell commodities to large aggregates of people, and we thus hold to the belief that the primary authors of these films are artists and not marketers. These considerations help explain why the term 'independent' is still used to describe films whose engagement with multinational entertainment corporations is a necessary condition of their availability to the audiences they seek (Tzioumakis 2012, p. 139). The economic trajectory of the American art house marketplace has been well-documented, and its most pertinent feature has been massive participation by 'classics'

¹ *Kevin* is one of a series of apocalyptic genre-hybrid thrillers released into the American art house marketplace in 2011, alongside Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* (2011), Sean Durkin's *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011), and Zal Batmanglij's *The Sound of My Voice* (2011), and Mike Cahill's *Another Earth* (2011). For an assessment of how *Take Shelter* and *Martha Marcy May Marlene* also participate in the dynamic delineated here, see the chapter "Weak Apocalypticism," in my *Hermeneutic Humility and the Political Theology of Cinema: Blind Paul* (Desilets 2017). This essay represents an evolution in my reading of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in that it places the film's Gnostic sensibility in dialog with its marketing.

divisions of the major Hollywood studios, along with a few commercially-minded and well-capitalized production and/or distribution companies like Miramax. *Kevin's* case is somewhat complicated by the fact that it is not 'American,' though it is set in the US and was aggressively distributed there (by Oscilloscope Laboratories, an independent distributor founded by Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys, a visitor from another realm in which the term 'independent' aims at a mobile target). Here is how the [Hollywood News](#) (2010) described *Kevin's* financing: "Presented by BBC Films and the UK Film Council in association with Footprint Investments LLP, Caemhan Partnership LLP and Lipsync Productions, the film is an Independent/Jennifer Fox production in association with Artina Films and Forward Films." This language deliberately obscures what financial contributions each of these entities made to the film's \$7 million budget, but it seems safe to say that much of the film's financing came from British public sources (BBC Films and the UK Film Council). Every other entity listed here clearly hoped to turn a profit on the film (*Kevin* is Oscilloscope's third highest-grossing title ever and Artina's second, although its box office gross of \$10 million represents a relatively modest return on investment, and less than \$2 million of that came from US ticket sales).² In any event, the film's aesthetic reflects its imbrication in a robust corporate film distribution and production system: it generally displays a continuity style calculated not to alienate filmgoers, although the narrative structure is unusually complex and Tilda Swinton's performance is stylized enough to stand out.

The status anxiety that informs the film's marketing comes out most strongly in its presentation of its lurid subject matter. In the 'indiewood' era, the relationship between art cinema and genre cinema has been complex ([King 2005](#), p. 165). Much of the groundwork for American independent cinema's production practices was laid by horror and exploitation filmmakers like Roger Corman, George Romero, and Wes Craven ([Sexton 2012](#), p. 68). Even now, the 'mainstream' American films that are most likely to resemble American independent cinema in terms of budget and production processes are horror films. But because independent films must market themselves as works of art, and because critics wish to speak of these films that way, the genetic and industrial similarities between genre and art house films sometimes escape notice. Seeing the resonance between art house and genre production, and also the pitfalls of too close an association between them, most of the major studios developed and some still maintain separately-branded subsidiaries for genre and art house films ([Sexton 2012](#), p. 81). These marketing maneuvers seem entirely sensible in light of some critical responses to *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Even before the film was made, Lionel Shriver, the author of the novel upon which is based, expressed concern that the film would fail to do justice to the complexity of the novel's narrative (which is communicated in letters from the protagonist to her ex-husband) and instead play up the 'thriller' elements of the plot ([Arendt 2006](#)). Sure enough, several negative reviews purport to see through the film's gloss and find the bad genre film underneath. For Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* "masquerades as a psychological puzzle but is essentially a horror film full of decorous sensationalism" ([Brody 2012](#), p. 15). Similarly, David Thomson, detecting holes in what he takes to be the film's social realism, complains that "what seems like an attempt to deal with a real problem in child development topples over into being a horror film. Kevin gets far too close to *The Bad Seed* or *Damien* in *The Omen* for comfort and plausibility" ([Thomson 2012](#)). Behind all three of these reservations lies a valuation of psychological insight, which is associated with aesthetic value, over genre tropes, which are associated with shallow commerce. Whether these criticisms strike home or not, the film itself shares their assumptions. It belongs to a time-honored tradition in art house cinema of engaging sensational topics that might lend themselves to genre treatment, but approaching these topics using aesthetic and thematic resources that align better with the demand for psychological realism and social pertinence that are reflected in the critical assessments I refer to above ([Tzioumakis 2012](#), pp. 11–12). That *Kevin* did well critically overall suggests that it was more or less successful in

² This information comes from the websites ([Box Office Mojo 2017](#)) and The Numbers: Where Data and the Movie Business Meet ([The Numbers 2017](#)).

this endeavor. The film meticulously eschews genre elements. There are virtually no scenes of violence, no chases or ‘jump scares,’ little use of suspense except for one sequence late in the film whose payoff is at least as coldly ironic as it is horrific. In place of genre-associated formal elements, *Kevin* offers a complex narrative structure, a tendency to favor symmetrical and distant framing over expressionist ones, and a resolutely understated performance style. Even Ezra Miller’s performance of Kevin is quite retrained, although he manages to give his character a certain glowering menace. Tilda Swinton’s performance is stylized, but it is so strongly rooted in Eva’s frayed psyche that its higher volume seems entirely appropriate. It is not all that surprising that even as David Thomson compares the film to *The Omen*, one feminist scholar has linked it to Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*, a masterwork of feminist realism (Thornham 2013, pp. 4–5).

Still, these dissenting voices indicate that *We Need to Talk about Kevin* sits uncomfortably in an art house marketplace that challenges directors and producers to appeal to consumers without appearing to appeal to them. This problem stands out especially when one element of a film’s public profile resembles the appeal of films that are less shy about their status as commodity objects. *Kevin*’s sensational subject matter threatens to make its status as a commodity too visible. To ward off that threat, the film offers aesthetic elements: an elaborate narrative structure, meticulous pacing, and nuanced performances. As Thomson’s complaints indicate, critics and audiences also expect psychological and social realism in films of this sort (again, in contrast to the sensationalism of genre films). Trauma often plays a key role in facilitating this kind of realism. The psychological ticks and evasions associated with repression provide opportunities for actors to grant their characters psychological realism (think of Michael Shannon or Jessica Chastain), and the symbolic displacements that surround traumatic historical events often lend such narratives political gravity (as in the films responding to the dirty wars that prevailed in Latin America through the seventies and eighties).³ In the next section, I will argue that even as *Kevin* gestures at this kind of realism, it also invites an alternative reading that casts the film’s commodity-status in a different light.

2. Gnosticism and the Time of Trauma

These two images appear very early in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The shot of the white curtain (Figure 1) is the film’s first. Two sounds accompany it: that of a domestic sprinkler with its characteristic cadence at first, and then crowd noises layered over the sprinkler. That latter sound turns out to be a bridge to a series of images (including Figure 2 here) depicting the film’s protagonist, Eva, as she participates in the La Tomatina festivities in Valencia, Spain. The curtain veils a threshold that runs through the film—the threshold between its two narrative temporalities. The film cuts between these two timeframes; one occurs before Eva passes through the curtain (and ends when she does so) and the other documents her life after she has passed through it. The juxtaposition of these two images at the start of the film compounds these temporalities, as the scene at the Tomatina festival is actually the temporally earliest part of the pre-curtain segment of the film. Following the curtain with the festival suggests that the curtain gives on to this image of Eva, soaked in the flesh of tomatoes, held aloft by her fellow revelers. If the scene at the festival followed the curtain shot in the diegesis, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* would be a very different film. In this shot from the tomato festival, sociality is erotically charged. Eva delights in the press of bodies, slipping against one another and collapsing into a single monochrome mass of limbs and faces. But the relationship between these two images turns out to be excruciatingly ironic. In fact, on the other side of this curtain for Eva is not an experience of orgiastic social participation, but one of total alienation. The actual post-curtain Eva trudges through her miserable, lonely life in the film’s present, and everything that takes place before the curtain event is presented in flashbacks. Eva can only remember, painfully, what has been lost at the threshold of

³ These films include Luis Puenzo’s *La historia oficial/The Official Story* (1985, Argentina), Bruno Barretos’ *O Que E Isso, Companheiro?* (1997, Brazil), and Lucrecia Martel’s *La mujer sin Cabeza* (2008, Argentina).

the curtain, which is the film's image for the proximity of traumatic experience. I will suggest that something was gained there, too, and that figuring out the relationship between what has been lost and what gained in Eva's passage through the curtain is the real key to understanding the film both as a text and as a commodity. It turns out that the loss and gain are the same thing: Eva loses her connection to other people as she comes to recognize that the social world around her is pervasively vicious and hateful—an understanding from which she has been shielded by her relationship with her repugnant son, Kevin.



Figure 1. The White Curtain.



Figure 2. Eva at the La Tomatina festivities.

As I have noted, the narrative is organized around two temporalities, and they meet when the film returns to this curtain image late in its running time. The stark separation between these two temporalities, and their organization around a single pivotal event, suggest that although Eva has lived through a long period of trauma before the event associated with the curtain, this event is uniquely and decisively wounding. The reason, as we will see, is that this event shifts the identity of Eva's tormentor in such a way that previously *private* trauma becomes spectacularly public. In the film's present, its protagonist Eva lives in an unpleasant suburban community that seems particularly hostile to her. Her house and car are routinely vandalized, and her coworkers at a small travel agency either bully or condescend to her. Eva herself appears deeply traumatized. She endures her various humiliations with trembling deference, although she does stubbornly clean up after each incident of vandalism. In the shelter of her home, she drinks heavily and joylessly, eats mechanically, and startles at any sound that intrudes from the outside. Not much happens in this present-tense portion of the film, and everything that does happen (including her rare encounters with decent people) is designed to illustrate Eva's isolation. The narratively valuable events of the film are presented in flashbacks concerning Eva's difficult relationship with Kevin. These flashbacks document Kevin's conception and the entirety of his childhood. He seems to be a sociopath from birth, but his malignity manifests itself especially in his treatment of Eva, to whom he is relentlessly vicious. Kevin also immiserates Eva in

less direct ways. In this earlier phase of her life, Eva has been a successful and somewhat glamorous travel writer. Motherhood keeps her from travelling and forces her to work less. The family lives in Manhattan, which clearly accords with Eva's tastes, until Eva's husband Franklin convinces Eva to move to the suburbs on the grounds that it is a better place to raise children (the couple soon after has a second, much nicer, child named Celia). This is the same suburban community that torments Eva in the film's present.

The final sequence in the temporally earlier part of the narrative involves the image of this curtain. It occurs very late in the film, when it finally reveals the events that link the two narrative strains. Eva comes home after having learned that Kevin has massacred several of his classmates during a high school assembly. She enters the house, calls out for her daughter and husband, and gets no response. She approaches the curtain, which hangs in front of a door leading to the family's spacious back yard. As she passes the curtain, the sprinkler's sound, suddenly a bit like laughter, accompanies a tableau depicting the arrow-pierced bodies of Eva's husband Franklin and daughter Celia, lying in the yard; Kevin has murdered them, too. This day robs Eva of whatever sense of affective connection might have been available to her. Two of her family members are dead, and she is isolated from the one that remains both by his own actions and by his imprisonment.

Given all this, it may seem a bit perverse to claim that Eva gains anything when she passes through this white curtain. To get at what I think she *does* gain, I suggest that the film operates under a logic that owes a great deal to the second-century heretical tendency known as Gnosticism. Considerable scholarly attention has been directed at two ways in which Gnosticism influences modernity. The first (less interesting to us) is that the development of orthodox Christianity occurred in part as a response to Gnosticism.⁴ The second is that Gnosticism's assiduous cultivation of what we would call a hermeneutics of suspicion about the nature of the manifest world finds echoes in—and probably indirectly influenced—much post-enlightenment philosophy, psychology, and political theory.⁵ *We Need to Talk about Kevin* takes this skepticism to the extreme by suggesting that the social world in general is not only valueless but also pernicious. Under this understanding, existence in the social world is itself traumatic.

The more proximate cultural narrative informing *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is the narrative about trauma as a decisive pivot point in human experience. The film's narrative structure suggests an eventual understanding of trauma, under which time is split between two distinct ways of being embodied—unwounded, then wounded. But trauma itself undoes this narrative economy of before and after. It denies the priority of the unwounded body by knotting subjectivity to the moment of wounding. Gnosticism acknowledges this collapsed temporality of trauma. For the Gnostic, embodiment *itself* is conceived as trauma, independent of whatever might happen to a body once it finds itself on earth. There is no such thing as pre-traumatic embodiment.

For purposes of this discussion, I will borrow twentieth-century theologian Jacob Taubes' notion of Gnosticism, which emphasizes some elements of this complex phenomenon over others in an effort to understand how Gnosticism ramifies in modernity. Gnostic systems account for the presence of evil in the world by adducing a radical split between the demiurge who created the cosmos and a transcendent deity that has little or nothing to do with it. The world created by the demiurge not only *contains* evil, it is itself evil, or at least degenerate, because it is the product of a faulty deity. This false God's own existence is usually accounted for in Christian Gnosticism by way of allegorical interpretations of Hebrew scripture that imagine the Hebrew creator God falling away from the true

⁴ As Kurt Rudolph pointed out, several of the founders of the Christian church wrote heresiological texts against the Gnostics (Rudolph 1987, p. 9).

⁵ Ferdinand Christian Bauer makes this case in his 1835 *Die Christliche Gnosis*, and the tradition continues through the work of Jacob Taubes, whom I discuss in greater detail below (Taubes 2010, p. 137).

transcendent God whose only visible manifestation on Earth is Christ's mission.⁶ The created cosmos is the product of this false God. It is a terrible error at best, and an obscene blasphemy at worst.

One understands why the Gnostics might think that involvement in this ill-conceived world would be traumatic. They saw themselves as emanations of the true, transcendent God, trapped in material bodies as a consequence of whatever disaster resulted in the creation of the world. They were "Gnostics" exactly because they knew this state of affairs in broad outlines. The true work of Gnosticism was to penetrate the details of the great cosmic conspiracy, a complex web of feints, errors, and allegorical tricks that were secreted away in the Hebrew scriptures and other texts. Discovering the secrets of the fallen world was the path out of it, the path out of the degrading trap of embodiment.

Taubes stresses, however, that the path *out* of the degraded world is the path *in* to the Gnostic's soul (Taubes 2010, p. 102). Given that Gnosticism emerged in the second century, it is startling how thoroughly it addresses itself to a *subject* in a nearly modern sense of the word (Gold 2006, p. 151). Gnosticism anticipates both the epistemological uncertainty and the internalization that typify modern subjectivity. For Taubes, it also maps out the relationship between refusal of the world and historical disappointments. Here is one core element of Taubes's unique reading of Gnostic phenomena: it combines anticosmism with interiorization, and links both to a turning away from history. Taubes sees Gnosticism as "one of the ways in which Jewish and Christian groups react to the deferral of the *parousia*: the accent shifts from the cosmic and historical *parousia* to the entry of the divine into the individual soul. With the decoding of subjectivity, the scene is prepared for Gnostic mythology" (Taubes 2010, p. 73). Thus internalization represents an evasion of historical reality in two senses. First, earthly matters are all lumped together and turned away from in a radical privatization, for lack of a less anachronistic term (this is also in some senses a rejection of community itself; see (O'Regan 2001, p. 33)). Second, time itself ceases to unspool in its unpredictable historical way. When the apocalyptic process moves inside the mystic, it also becomes at least potentially synchronic: "[t]he historical schema of apocalypticism implodes with the disillusion about any predictions of the end of times and retreats inward" (Taubes 2010, p. 74). Instead of moving through time toward an apocalyptic telos (which has proven disappointing in not yielding the hoped-for revelation), the Gnostic moves through an interiorized *space* conceived as *already containing* the transcendence that has been lost in creation. That space is reached by means of what Taubes calls the 'decoding of subjectivity,' which is to say by unraveling the tricks by which the pneumatic spark that constitutes the Gnostic's true identity is locked away in the body and in the material world. Gnosticism ends in an understanding according to which the believer must overcome the forces keeping her apart from God using Gnostic ritual practice and (self-)interpretation (Taubes 2010, p. 68). The Gnostic thus turns ever more inward, in quest of the core of divinity that is buried in the filth of her body.

We Need to Talk about Kevin obviously *does* posit a traumatic moment that occurs during Eva's life. It posits many, in fact, and makes one the sole motive for its disjointed narrative. It thus may not seem to correspond to the model of trauma that I have associated with Gnosticism. The film's narrative structure, though, suggests another reading. After all, we do not know what has so decisively traumatized Eva until the film's conclusion, and up to that point what we get is a clear illustration that while Eva's trauma may have reached its crescendo in the grisly scene in her back yard, it really has a much longer trajectory that corresponds at the very least with Kevin's entire life. Just a little pressure on these two narrative strains reveals a network of connection that belies any simple before-and-after narrative—in other words, the film's narrative logic does not correspond to the reconstruction of events that it invites us to enact once it reaches the decisive threshold of the white curtain.

The most crucial connection between the 'before and after' of the white curtain is Eva's misery. The apparent difference between them is that on the before side Kevin ruins Eva's life, whereas on

⁶ These details will be found in one form or another in any account of Gnosticism. I draw primarily from (Rudolph 1987, pp. 53–275).

the after side the neighbors and coworkers that constitute her new social world do so. There are various ways in which these two persecutors are opposed to one another. Most importantly, the community's treatment of Eva is entirely explicable, if ungenerous. In fact, the petty, dreary, nature of the community's treatment of Eva is a feature of the film's social realism—along with the ostentatious acts of vandalism, she suffers minor slights, sideways glances, and little acts of everyday meanness. Kevin appears to represent a break from the film's meticulous psychosocial realism. His evil looks ontological, not socially determined. It emerges in his infancy and expands from there, despite the affluence of Kevin's family and the assiduousness of Eva and Franklin's parenting. The film emphasizes how thoroughly without explanation Kevin's malignancy is. The elements of his identity that *are* socially determined—his fashionability, his critical intelligence—only serve to accentuate the thing about him that is absolute: his fundamental nastiness and brutality. Kevin's anti-sociality goes beyond himself: it also isolates Eva from the social world that is supposed to have provided her with such pleasure in the past—a past visualized in the film exclusively by the scene at the tomato festival (and thus a resolutely mythical past). As her role as Kevin's mother increasingly monopolizes her life, Eva stops working, moves to the suburbs, and loses touch with her publishing contacts. Probably the most excruciating expression of the demoralizing isolation that Kevin imposes on Eva is a scene that takes place before the family has left the city. In it, Eva obtains temporary relief from infant Kevin's incessant crying by pausing near a loud construction site during a walk. Here the tension between the call of the public and the cage of the private, and their analeptic entanglement, find comical but telling expression. Kevin's childhood slowly closes Eva off from the social world. His adolescent act of orgiastic violence—surely an analog to the orgiastic quality of the tomato festival—concludes that trajectory without radically breaking from it.

Kevin's ontological evil, then, is a hostility to the social. Its function is to peel Eva away from the social world she values, and his hatred of that world is comprehensible in terms of the role he plays in Eva's life. It looks like Eva represents—if only in the form of nostalgia—a valuing of sociality, whereas Kevin denigrates sociality at every turn. But the film reveals the inextricability of Eva's and Kevin's attitudes in its two presentations of the white curtain. In the first, it juxtaposes the sound of the suburban sprinkler system in Eva's yard with the dull roar of the Valencian carnival. In the second, it reveals that what really awaits behind the curtain is a vastly darker tableau of ecstatic violation. Kevin's murderous rampage does not represent a break between two phases of Eva's experience. It instead reveals that the bucolic experience of the festival is coterminous not only with the ruthless limiting of Eva's life that results from her submission to heterosexual reproductive normativity, but also with the wretched life that she must live in the aftermath of Kevin's massacre. That Kevin kills *both* his classmates *and* his family is the last of his many acute social observations: the social world and the domestic world are not isolated from one another, but folded together in a network of meanness whose effect on Eva's life has no prehistory.⁷ The trauma of the curtain does not thrust Eva into a new way of living, primarily; it thrusts her into a new way of knowing.

Trauma is often conceived as a way of *not* knowing, as a point at which the epistemological resources of the human mind break down. As Cathy Caruth puts it, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 1996, p. 4). Gnostic anti-cosmism spreads traumatic non-knowledge across all manifest perceptions of the world. To see the manifest world is to look away from the only knowledge it can provide, the knowledge of its own profound degradation. On the other hand, Gnosticism offers that knowledge, terrible though it may be, as a genuine and absolute truth whose understanding is also a

⁷ The novel from which *Kevin* is adapted does not forge this link between the family and the broader society. Though the details are not entirely clear, the reader knows that Kevin has committed a massacre from early in the book. But Franklin and Celia's deaths comes as a surprise because the narrative is communicated in letters from Eva to Franklin, letters that suggest a continuing though estranged relationship between them (see Shriver 2003).

reversal of the traumatic wound that is existence itself. The knowledge of the Gnostic is structurally opposed to the knowledge of the manifest world, just as its content is a virulent disgust *at* that world.

Indeed, Eva learns that the social world she confronts in the absence of her family justifies Kevin's hatred of it. The collective virtually steps into the place left behind by Kevin's incarceration, continuing his merciless and arbitrary cruelty toward Eva—but taking away the alibi that Kevin himself represented in his inexplicable and aberrant asociality. The film's narrative thus depicts not a radical, traumatic break in Eva's experience, but rather the gradual convergence of the ontological evil represented by Kevin and the petty social evil represented by the community. They meet at the resolution of the parallel narrative lines, in the confluence of Kevin's massacre at the high school and Eva's discovery of the scene at home. The conclusion toward which the narrative moves, then, is that social evil and ontological evil are identical. Kevin's acts of violence amount to a chiasmic crossing of private and public, a hyperbolic airing of the family's dirty laundry that also marks itself as a revelation of the social world's dirty secret. The film offers a grotesque parody of the social-psychological claim that violent acts are socially determined. For *Kevin*, the social world is the proper home of the ontological evil that seems to reside in private individuals, and the relation between the two is not causal but synecdochic. This film is not at all a work of social realism in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a dark parody of realism that posits evil as inexplicable and pervasive.

In discovering the truth, Eva reenacts the Gnostic's journey, and the film thus illustrates certain features of Gnosticism that persist in contemporary western culture. Taubes indicates that Gnosticism emerges from disappointed messianic hopes. It takes only a glance at our shot of Eva held aloft by her companions in Valencia to see that Eva's social desires are at least iconographically messianic. Taubes also says that Gnostic anticosmism redirects myth in two ways: relocating it *inside* the Gnostic subject and synchronizing the telos of the soteriological trajectory of Judeo-Christian monotheism in the form of an emerging (self-)knowledge (Taubes 2010, p. 74). This film's narrative structure shows that the turning-inward of Eva's identity, which is easily misrecognized at first glance as the result of a trauma that occurs when Kevin commits his massacres, is in fact a fundamental, non-contingent trajectory of Gnostic revelation, designed to teach Eva the validity of Kevin's antisociality. The film displays all the crucial characteristics of Gnostic myth for Taubes: it depicts an inward turn that detemporalizes myth, recasting it as the self-revelation of the social world as worthy of the most virulent disgust.

I offer this grim reading of the film because it casts ambivalent light on the aesthetic-industrial practice of art house cinema as I discussed it in the first section of this essay. Taubes means his elaboration of Gnostic thought to cast light on how Gnosticism persists in modernity. Generally, attempts to use Gnosticism to address modern texts have addressed artifacts of high culture. Taubes himself links Gnosticism to surrealism (Taubes 2010, p. 101). Other critics have turned to Gnostic ideas to elucidate the works of Joseph Conrad (Henricksen 1978) and Thomas Pynchon (Eddins 1990), and Harold Bloom has argued for Gnosticism as a fundamental heuristic for understanding literary history as a whole (Bloom 1979). The tendency to turn the diagnostic powers of Gnosticism toward high culture, and especially toward modernist artworks, is a reflection and extension of modernism's use of esotericism to shield itself from its own commodity-status. Art house films make similar moves, though in vastly less sophisticated ways. Too much imbrication in the grubby reality of money would diminish the market value of art house films, which present themselves as elevated above mere commodity status by their aesthetic, political, or psychological insights. On the other hand, these very 'insights,' the material of psychosocial realism, impose a coherence on the world that Gnosticism resolutely denies in its understanding that corporeal life is itself a traumatic experience in the strongest sense—an experience of absolute and unbridgeable displacement. The complex narrative structure of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is an instance of the ambivalent and incomplete turn toward the esoteric that characterizes the industry's uneasy stance on its own production of commodities. The difference between *Kevin's* narrative and similar modernist gestures in other films is that this film's effort to evade or obscure its own degraded commodity-status presents itself as a revelation of universal degradation. *Kevin* exposes the tension between the aesthetic of realism and the logic

of trauma. To treat a traumatic event like Kevin's massacre as either a psychological or sociological symptom (the outcome of a culture that glorifies violence or of a woman's resentment of reproductive patriarchy, for example) amounts to taming trauma in the service of rational coherence. The aesthetic of rational explanation that poses as realism in much contemporary American culture stands at odds with the disruption and incoherence that trauma invokes. In the disruptive relationship between the aesthetic-industrial environment in which it participates and its Gnostic content, *Kevin* serves to circle a contradiction in art house film marketing, which seeks to assure audiences of their own superiority to the commodity-world by offering up the 'realness' of that world in the form of psychosocial coherence. I have called attention to Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as a failure of knowledge. In her analysis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Caruth proposes history as a knowledge that stands in the place of the inaccessible knowledge of trauma. The post-structuralist critique of reference, she writes, "is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, precisely at permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (Caruth 1996, p. 11). My account of art house film marketing seeks to find the history that this film's narrative cannot name. What emerges in *Kevin*'s gnostic narrative is a mirror-image of its own status as a commodity that must uphold one Manichean vision of the world (rooted in matters of taste and distinction) by denying another (the melodrama of genre narrative). The world-hating of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is, in the final analysis, a studied blindness to the marketplace to which films like this nonetheless assiduously address themselves.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Another Earth. 2011. Directed by Mike Cahill. Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight.
- Arendt, Paul. 2006. Ramsay Needs to Shoot a Film About Kevin. *The Guardian*. June 6. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jun/06/1> (accessed on 11 August 2017).
- Bloom, Harold. 1979. Lying Against Time: Gnosis, Poetry, Criticism. *Oxford Literary Review* 3: 4–15.
- Box Office Mojo. 2017. Available online: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/studio/chart/?studio=oscilloscopepictures.htm> (accessed on 11 August 2017).
- Brody, Richard. 2012. We Need to Talk About Kevin. *The New Yorker*. Available online: <http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/movies/we-need-to-talk-about-kevin-2> (accessed on 11 August 2017).
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Desilets, Sean. 2017. *Hermeneutic Humility and the Political Theology of Cinema: Blind Paul*. New York: Routledge.
- Eddins, Dwight. 1990. *The Gnostic Pynchon*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Norton.
- Gold, Joshua Robert. 2006. Jacob Taubes: "Apocalypse from Below". *Telos* 134: 140–56.
- Henricksen, Bruce. 1978. 'Heart of Darkness' and the Gnostic Myth. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 11: 35–44.
- Hollywood News. 2010. "We Need to Talk About Kevin" Starts Filming This Week. *Hollywood News*. April 23. Available online: <http://www.hollywoodnews.com/2010/04/23/we-need-to-talk-about-kevin-starts-filming-this-week/> (accessed on 11 August 2017).
- King, Geoff. 2005. *American Independent Cinema*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- La historia oficial/The Official Story*. 1985. Directed by Luis Puenzo. Washington: Koch-Lorber.
- La mujer sin Cabeza/The Headless Woman*. 2008. Directed by Lucrecia Martel. Culver City: Strand Releasing.
- Martha Marcy May Marlene*. 2011. Directed by Sean Durkin. Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight.
- Newman, Michael Z. 2009. Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative. *Cinema Journal* 48: 16–34. [CrossRef]
- O Que E Isso, Companheiro?/Four Days in September*. 1997. Directed by Bruno Barretos. Santa Monica: Miramax.
- O'Regan, Cyril. 2001. *Gnostic Return in Modernity*. New York: SUNY Press.

- Rudolph, Kurt. 1987. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Translated by Robert McLachlan Wilson. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Sexton, Jamie. 2012. US “Indie-Horror”: Critical Reception, Genre Construction, and Suspect Hybridity. *Cinema Journal* 51: 67–86. [CrossRef]
- Shriver, Lionel. 2003. *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Take Shelter*. 2011. Directed by Jeff Nichols. New York: Sony Pictures Classics.
- Taubes, Jacob. 2010. *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason*. Edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Amir Engel. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- The Numbers. 2017. The Numbers: Where Data and the Movie Business Meet. Available online: <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/production-company/Artina-Films> and <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/We-need-to-Talk-About-Kevin#tab=summary> (accessed on 11 August 2017).
- The Sound of My Voice*. 2011. Directed by Zal Batmanglij. Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight.
- Thomson, David. 2012. Thomson on Film: A Movie About a School Shooting That Ignores the Shooter. *The New Republic*. March 8. Available online: <https://newrepublic.com/article/101388/we-need-to-talk-about-kevin-swinton-ramsay-shriver> (accessed on 11 August 2017).
- Thornham, Sue. 2013. ‘A Hatred So Intense . . . ’ *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Postfeminism and Women’s Cinema. *Sequence: Serial Studies in Media, Film and Music* 2: 3–38.
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. 2012. *Hollywood’s Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the Independent Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinberg University Press.
- We Need to Talk About Kevin*. 2011. Directed by Lynne Ramsay. Brooklyn: Oscilloscope Pictures.



© 2017 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).