

SOUND *and* VISION

He's Gone: Musical Reflection in Lynne Ramsay's *Morvern Callar*



Lynne Ramsay's work is not for the faint of heart. She's only made four films in almost twenty five years, but I've yet to encounter a filmmaker who demonstrates the notion "quality, not quantity" more awesomely than Lynne Ramsay. I love all her films, and all for different reasons. But none of them (few films at all, really) come close to *Morvern Callar*.

Morvern Callar is my new favorite movie. To call it one of my favorite films feels unfair since it's barely been nine months since I first saw it, but in the nine months since I saw it, it's been my favorite film.

I tell everyone to watch it, perhaps because it has a strange, intriguing title, but mainly because it's one of the best art films I've ever seen, certainly of this century. And, other than the work of Kenneth Anger and David Lynch, it's my pick for the best use of outside music in film. Its aesthetic posits sound as vision. For that reason alone, it's the most perfect film I can think of for this column.

The setup is simple: a woman (Morvern) cradles the body of her recently-deceased partner, James. A typed note flashes on a monitor behind them. Reading the note, it seems to raise more questions than answers; the only thing concrete is a mixtape cassette James left behind for Morvern.



Ramsay portrays grief somewhat positively, as a motivator rather than a hindrance. It's somewhat grim but totally beautiful, far more life-affirming than funereal. Lost in the world of her portable tape player and headphones, Morvern's relationship with the music is not about coming to terms with her partner's death, it's about understanding her own life.

I love Morvern Callar, but she isn't a role model. Instead of confronting James's suicide, she does everything she can to ignore it. She appears expressionless from the first moment we see her, telling her friends little more than "he's gone". It's a sneaky tale of reinvention set upon the backdrop of a sole final artifact. Her decisions are made for no one but herself.

Intense partying seems to be Morvern's immediate escape, and while not necessarily glorified, it's certainly not condemned. Kathleen McDermott's performance as the giddily impish partner in crime complements Samantha Morton's Morvern so sharply, and anchored by Ramsay's direction, the fun of femininity outweighs the tragedy behind Morvern's mask. Then again, she never seems to be all that upset.

Morvern is so damn weird. But she's so fucking cool. She's the quintessential character I don't admire but still adore. I love Morvern Callar. And it's clear Lynne Ramsay does, too. And then Samantha Morton delivers such a thoughtfully nuanced performance it's impossible to believe anybody loves Morvern more deeply than Morton herself. The freedom these women present is infectious.



Based on a novel by Alan Warner, which I admittedly have not read, I have read of its differences.

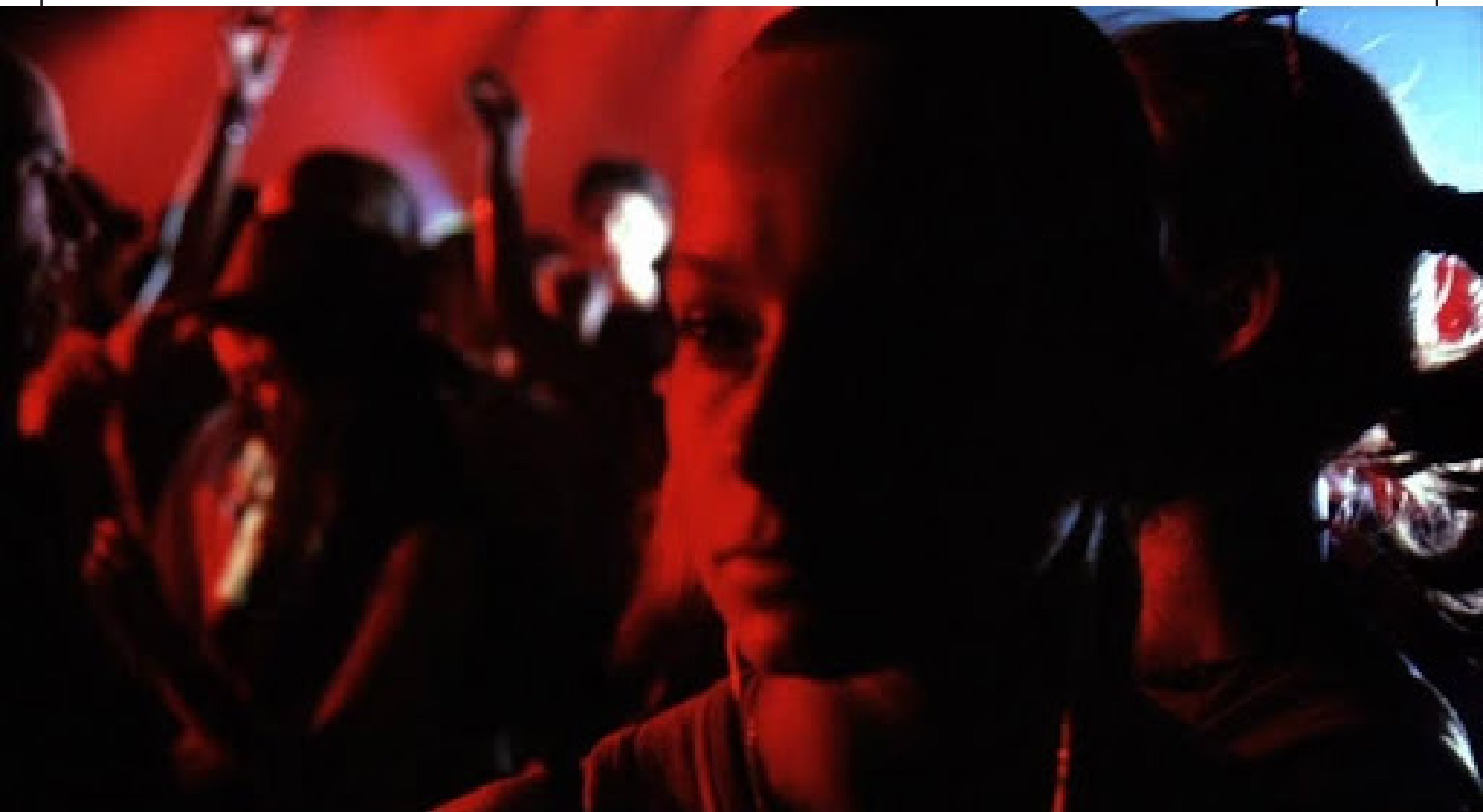
- 1) The book has a different ending.
- 2) The book features several references to Abel Ferrara's *Ms .45* (another favorite of mine) which are unfortunately absent from the movie.
- 3) Though the novel includes several references to specific songs, few of them appear in the film. This could be due to the fact that the songs featured in the novel are Morvern's chosen soundtrack, not from James's mixtape. So, despite the fact that it's an adaptation, the most cinematic element of the film was Ramsay's own creation.

Coming just three years after her feature debut, *Morvern Callar* stands apart as Ramsay's most beautiful film both emotionally and visually.

The look.

The *texture* of the film.

The lysergic grain that permeates every frame.



It feels like an arthouse classic from the jump, expertly lit and exquisitely shot. The slow-paced, often wordless narrative allows us to soak in the visuals even more.

Texture is key in *Morvern Callar*, almost even more so than the images captured. It's a highly tactile film, from the opening image of Morvern caressing her partner's fatal wound to the sonic contrast of analog and digitally-recorded music. There are references to psychedelia, colorfully hallucinogenic imagery revealing frenzied techno parties, cut to the record skipping unpredictably where a DJ once was, the same sweaty bodies we saw dancing not a second ago now strewn about a stranger's floor, asleep in the afterglow. And it should come as no surprise this was shot on celluloid. So yeah, texture is key.

I continue to be amazed by Ramsay's fearlessness, especially when tackling bleak subjects in a vibrant way. Music is important for a few key moments in all of Lynne Ramsay's films, but the template of *Morvern Callar* allows for a seemingly endless inclusion of outside music. Mid-to-late century art rock collides with the contemporary catalog of Warp Records to create a sublimely unique musical palette that's been talked about since its release.

At least four Can songs, a handful of sixties folk-pop classics and a slew of material from Aphex Twin, Boards of Canada, Stereolab and Broadcast (all bands absent from the book) lift Ramsay's images higher than anywhere else in all of her oeuvre.



A moody Stereolab song scores a walk through the woods. Electronic music over natural decay.

A track from Ween's country album plays on a jukebox in a bar, reminding us humor is always present, just sometimes hidden.

Can has the first song on the mixtape, and more of their music plays during various festive scenes. Through the speakers of a car in Morvern's hometown or in the background of a party in Spain, Morvern Callar and Can are inseparable.

A wicked cool Felliniesque camera trick in a cemetery acts as a coda before an ending to end all endings, featuring his final song for her. From *Sight and Sound's* October 2002 feature on the film: "it's as spooky and memorable a romantic ending as any in contemporary cinema." Mourning has never been more beautiful. It gets me every time.

Samantha Morton gives a truly masterful performance and Lynne Ramsay's craft has never been more fully realized. The adventure combined with the music makes for one of the most rewarding viewing experiences I can recommend. If you don't watch many art films, I think this will give you a new appreciation for them. If you frequently watch art films, I think this one will stand out.

It's as beautifully haunting as cinema can be. One of my top ten films for sure.