

## The Melancholies of Being Young – A Scene Analysis of *Small Deaths*

Lynne Ramsay's short film, *Small Deaths*, is a piece that dignifies and grieves the losses felt by a woman throughout her youth. The film is steadfast in its defense of Anne Marie's losses, especially and perhaps most importantly in the third vignette, *Joke*. During the final scene of this vignette, Anne Marie's boyfriend and a group of men deceive her into believing a woman, who is complicit in the prank, has overdosed and is in need of an ambulance. The cinematic elements paint this titular prank as a schoolyard game and Anne Marie as the childlike victim. It is this comparison that underscores the pains of being a child and growing up: the pains from which the protagonist wishes to be liberated.

In the final scene of *Joke*, makeup and costuming work together to display Anne Marie's conflicting feelings of being young while simultaneously wishing to feel older. Throughout the short film, every iteration of Anne Marie wears polka-dotted fabric. As a child, it is her dress. As a teenager, her pants. Now, as a young woman in *Joke*, it is half of her shirt. Polka-dots are often associated with childhood. Therefore, this visual motif signals to the viewer that Anne Marie, while gradually shedding off her youth, still feels young as an adult. However, it is also made clear that she wishes to feel older. She wears makeup, large hooped earrings, and her shirt – despite being polka-dotted – is also cropped. Anne Marie's childhood is distinctly one surrounded by loss: the loss of her father's presence and the loss of innocence. Even now, at the end of her youth she has lost her dignity and her trust in others. It is understandable that Anne Marie would wish to rid the pains of her childhood by becoming older, and that desire manifests itself in her visual presentation.

Sound plays an important part in drawing parallels between the joke and a schoolyard game. The scene begins with a subjective point of view shot, and as Anne Marie scans the grim faces of the men and the 'unconscious' woman, the faint sounds of children playing can be heard off-screen. These sounds foreshadow the nature of this circumstance, that instead of a serious accident this is a mean-spirited prank. After Anne Marie falls victim to this joke, the off-screen sounds of a crying child signals to the viewer how she feels – upset, helpless, and stupidly naive. Here it is made clear that these seemingly innocuous games cause real harm. As the scene ends with Anne Marie slowly descending the stairs, the sounds of children joyfully singing “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” drown out the child’s despairing cries, effectively drowning out the melancholies of being young.

If sound largely creates a sense of playground folly, then it is the editing and camerawork that underscore Anne Marie’s victimhood. As the men barrage Anne Marie with demands to call an ambulance, the shots rapidly move from one face to the next and the camera jerks around to follow the chaos. This fast tempo highlights the overwhelming nature of being yelled at by adults, a common childhood anxiety. One man in particular who says, “Go fuckin’ phone! Move your ass!” is shot at a low angle. This placement of the camera from Anne Marie’s perspective gives him a monstrous and powerful appearance. Lastly, a close-up of Anne Marie’s face followed by a non-diegetic insert of a child’s face reflects her infantile feelings of being confused and scared by these frightening men. Both the camerawork and the editing establish that, for Anne Marie, youth is neither empowering nor joyful but rather victimizing.

Throughout *Small Deaths*, the viewer witnesses the losses that define Anne Marie’s childhood. Anne Marie’s perception of childhood is one of melancholy, not of happiness, and

this is made most evident in the final scene. Her costuming and makeup establish both her lingering youth and her rejection of it. Sound draws comparisons between the joke and schoolyard folly – effectively communicating the often-ignored pain that they may cause. Lastly, the camerawork and editing work together to paint the adult men as being frightening and Anne Marie as the scared child. *Small Deaths* asks of the viewer to recognize the pain of being young and to grant these pains dignity because – for Anne Marie and for many others – being a child is not all fun and games.