

Title: From rivers to reservoirs: *Swimmer* (Ramsay 2012) as psychogeographic cinema

Abstract:

In *Swimmer* (2012) Lynne Ramsay makes a compelling case for a British psychogeographic cinema that takes its audience off the nation's streets and into its waterways. The proposition recalls – but moves beyond – the earlier sensorial explorations of Glasgow's canals seen/heard/felt in her first feature-length film *Ratcatcher* (1999).

Keywords: psychogeography, British cinema, water, *dérive*, *Swimmer*, Lynne Ramsay

Paper:

In the lead-up to the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics, the Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay was among four British filmmakers commissioned by the BBC and Channel 4 to make a short film for the concurrent London 2012 Festival. With the loose brief 'inspiration' (Ramsay in Calhoun 2012: 63), the quartet produced remarkably different work, from the cross-generational comedy *A Running Jump* (Leigh 2012, 35 min.) to the youth drama *What If* (Max & Dania 2012, 27 min.) and from probing documentary *The Odyssey* (Kapadia 2012, 29 min.) to Ramsay's impressionistic tone poem *Swimmer* (2012). All the films refused a direct reference to the Olympics and only Ramsay's film offered a vigorous engagement with sport, albeit without the usual narrative of training and competition.¹ Ramsay's film was also the only one to move the focus outside of London, away from the hustle and bustle of the capital's streets and pavements and into its waterways and beyond.

The 17-minute black-and-white² film *Swimmer* charts a young man's (Tom Litten) journey through the watery environs of the UK, connecting narrow urban backwaters to the reed-filled rivers of the English countryside.³ Its sensory exploration of the UK, which

eschews a clear spatial trajectory and temporal linearity in favour of associative evocations of place, positions *Swimmer* as part of a ‘strong but subtle’ (Scovell 2017) trend for psychogeography in British cinema. As with better-known examples of the sub-genre, such as Patrick Keiller’s *Robinson* trilogy (*London* [1994], *Robinson in Space* [2007] and *Robinson in Ruins* [2010]), the film’s haphazard mapping of place is a means to explore and experience its lived complexity, taking note of the affective qualities arising from both its material and non-material forms. *Swimmer* is unusual, however, in that it replaces psychogeography’s usual creative and critical practice of urban walking with that of endurance swimming.⁴ In this way, the film significantly extends the watery concerns Ramsay first broached in her debut feature *Ratcatcher* (1999) via Glasgow’s canals and a visual and thematic motif of immersion (see Kuhn 2020: 52–60).

Indeed, freed from the narrative ambition – though not the dramatic one (see Ramsay in Calhoun 2012: 63) – that tends to dominate feature-length work, Ramsay’s short film is able to offer a more sustained engagement with the motif of immersion. This is immediately apparent in *Swimmer* through a title sequence that refuses the cinematic convention of an establishing shot in favour of one that positions the viewer in open water looking at the horizon. At this point, the audience seemingly shares a (if not ‘the’) swimmer’s point of view. Water then begins to creep up the screen, and the early sounds of drips and splashes that served as an audio bridge between the production credits and the film’s first shot give way to an ominous soundtrack of militaristic drum beats (borrowed from Peter Brook’s 1963 film *Lord of the Flies*). It seems inevitable that the camera and, accordingly, the audience will soon be fully submerged.

While there is an element of menace in the audio-visual composition here, the camera’s continued, purposeful movement underwater soon dispels the association with death that (watery) immersion can often mean in Ramsay’s work. It is not quite like the accidental

canal drowning that occurs in *Ratcatcher*'s opening minutes nor the lake burial that occurs in her later film, *You Were Never Really Here* (2018), both of which preference an observational mode. Here, instead, the camerawork seems to be asking or, perhaps, challenging the audience to take note of the usually hidden underwater environment. For it is from this attentive position that we become more fully aligned with a swimmer's distinctive perception and experience of place and, thus, have the opportunity to gain new insights on place and how we exist with – and within – it.

Indeed, sharpening our focus on the watery surrounds at this early juncture is how the audience first becomes aware of the film's central swimming figure. He emerges in the distance as an ill-defined being, a subaquatic creaturely figure, moving through the murky depths of the cold water (Fig. 1). He propels himself towards the camera via a powerful butterfly kick and, once his full athletic form is revealed, the film's title appears on screen – momentarily punctuating his journey. By initially offering unusual in-water and underwater point-of-view shots and then undercutting the audience's assumption that they belong to the swimmer of the film's title, Ramsay cements her interest in upending cinematic conventions and, accordingly, offering fresh or alternative understandings of place and the human-habitat relationship. But, unlike the earlier *Ratcatcher*, in *Swimmer* her focus is an entire country rather than one of its discrete cities.

<Insert Fig 1>

Figure 1: The swimmer propels himself towards the camera. Screengrab.

Defamiliarizing the familiar is clearly an important part of this effort. *Swimmer* achieves this not only via underwater shots that take the audience below the usual threshold of visibility but, also, in the idiosyncratic and sometimes waterlogged sound design that

interweaves ambient noise (rustling reeds, bird noises, the soft splash of water) with British orchestral music and popular song as well as snippets of dialogue from key British films, including Tony Richardson's similarly sport-focussed *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962). The film's interest in recalling Britain's earlier cultural works and inserting them into the present emphasises Ramsay's conceptual approach to filmmaking but, more specifically, suggests how she is alert – and alerting us – to the complex dynamics of a country's past and the ways in which they feed into an understanding of its present. In this regard, the film motions to a more nuanced and complete sense of the nation, one that embraces both positive and negative facets of its identity. The result is 'a bitter-sweet and edgy sense of Britishness' (Basnicki 2012). On its cinematic release and subsequent television screenings, the film thus offered a daring shift from the celebratory feel the country generally acquired in summer 2012 and sought to project across the globe.⁵

Concern for the taboo, transgressive and less appealing elements of British national identity are most clearly signalled in *Swimmer's* extended homage to Brook's *Lord of the Flies*. This occurs not only through the soundtrack, which employs the earlier film's musical theme at various points, but also in its re-enactment of school boys violently pursuing a figure from outside their ranks. After following the swimmer along a rural river where he is accompanied by a joyous refrain from the 1930s song 'The Very Thought of You' (as sung by Al Bowlly), and then on a quieter stretch as the river's bank steepens into rock, the camera soon locates small figures perched on narrow overhangs. The children's solitary watchful positions and camouflage attire prompt suspicion in the viewer, gaining strength via muffled hunting cries and obscured visual details. As *Swimmer's* cinematographer, Natasha Braier explains, 'I kept the kids pretty dark, almost in silhouette, with just a little bit of information. I thought that made it more interesting and even frightening (in Oppenheimer 2012: 16). The line 'victory is ours' signals the boys' attack, with arrows and spears piercing the water in

search of the swimmer. The powerful physicality of this sequence, where the fully submerged swimmer twists and turns to avoid injury, and the assault quickens as more armed boys plunge into the water, can be read as (national) reckoning of sorts which ultimately leads to reconciliation and rebirth. This resonates with aspects of psychogeography that author Iain Sinclair finds useful: ‘In my work, the pains of the past need to be appeased – or they will come back’ (in Jeffries 2004).

In Ramsay’s earlier work, *Ratcatcher*, once the body sinks it does not return to the surface of its own accord. For the drowned Ryan (Thomas McTaggart) and near-drowned Kenny (John Miller) adult characters intervene, dragging their bodies from the canal.⁶ For the film’s protagonist, James (William Eadie), his re-emergence from the canal at the film’s end requires an intervention from the director, in which she offers a fantastical second ending to replace his drowning. In an interview for *Vertigo*, Ramsay elaborates on the ambiguity of the film’s conclusion: ‘It was always going to end with them coming through the field with the furniture [...] he’s going down in the water and what is projected for him is like his fantasy’ (2003: 14). In *Swimmer*, however, Ramsay offers an alternative route for the sinking body, one where its agency is restored. She signals her approach halfway through the film, following the boys’ attack on the swimmer. As the soundtrack quietens, the audience first observes his seemingly lifeless body drift down towards the river bed (Fig. 2). There is then a fade to black. It is a fleeting transition though, as the swimmer soon emerges via an overhead medium close-up. His arms move up the screen slowly, and he purposely pushes the imperceptible water aside to assist his travelling body. He is active once more.

<Insert Fig 2>

Figure 2: The swimmer’s body drifts downwards after the boys’ attack. Screenshot.

There is a useful link to be made between this series of shots and the notion of the *dérive*, espoused by the Situationists and closely linked to the practice of psychogeography. But, while the shots that show the swimmer's sinking body offer a literal visual referent of the *dérive*'s much-promoted aimless quality, the frenzied movements of the preceding attack and the later purposeful breast stroke are also important. Together this section of the film makes sense of what Carl Lavery (2018) notes is the *dérive*'s heterogeneity, the many contested and contradictory meanings that ultimately dispel the easy assumption that 'to drift' is to flow without friction.

In Lavery's examination of the concept, the *dérive*'s watery connections also come to the fore. This is achieved by looking to the term's French etymology – the thirteenth century meaning of *dériver* is 'divert water' (via the Latin *rivus* 'stream') – and, then, to early practice:

In its original use, the drift is elemental, a process that exposes the body – 'any body whatever', to reconfigure a phrase from Deleuze's work on cinema (2005: xi) – to water, entangling it in a universe of chaotic currents and unpredictable speeds. (2018: 2).

From this position then, *Swimmer* offers a compelling case to consider and champion a psychogeographic cinema that takes the audience beyond the dominant practice of city walking. It is a film which plays with a variety of watery environments and the (e)motions they prompt and sometimes demand. From the serene undulating butterfly stroke in open water at the film's start to the later frenetic underwater tumbles in a river and, then, to the unswerving front crawl across a reservoir near the film's conclusion, the audience is required to take seriously the swimmer as a psychogeographic practitioner.

Although *Swimmer* resists the idea that purposeful movement is excluded from the *dérive* and, by association, psychogeography, it does promote a mental, physical and sensorial journeying that is destinationless. This quality comes to the fore in the film's second half, marked by the insertion of an apposite line from Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout*: 'I'm sorry to bother you. We're lost'. At this point, the film makes significant use of elliptical editing as the swimmer is taken from the countryside river to an urban waterway before finding himself on foot in woods and, then, in sight of a fairground. The cacophonous soundtrack here initially suggests distress at the quick, irregular shifts in the landscape but the audio progresses to ensure an extended and more comprehensive reading. Using another snippet of borrowed film dialogue, this time from the new wave classic *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, the soundtrack suggests that varying emotional states are a fundamental part of the process and purpose of long-distance journeys, of which the swimmer – like the runner Colin Smith (Tom Courtenay) – undertakes:

It's hard to understand.

All I know is that you've got to run,

run without knowing why,

through fields and woods.

And the winning post's no end,

even through barmy crowds

might be cheering themselves draft.

That's what the loneliness

of the long distance runner feels like.

By calling attention to the difficult and uncomfortable feelings inherent in protracted journeying, *Swimmer* again tallies with the *dérive*, as discussed by Lavery: ‘Drifting is a condition full of hope *and* terror, pleasure *and* pain, possibility *and* danger, and different subjects undergo it in different ways (2018: 2). It also furthers the audience’s understanding of the swimmer’s journey as cyclical. Thus, the easier rhythms and uninterrupted movement he enjoys towards the film’s end are not to be read as a celebratory conclusion of his country-wide travels.

Indeed, in a marked reference to *Ratcatcher*, Ramsay offers a double ending of sorts, one befitting the equivocal (dis)position of the swimmer-psychogeographer. As with the earlier work, *Swimmer* signals its end section with a long shot of the protagonist in water (Fig. 3) followed by a close-up that captures his disappearance from the surface and the water’s subsequent stillness. But, while *Ratcatcher* follows these shots with an underwater observation of James’s sinking body and refuses the ‘straight, happy ending’ (Ramsay in Elsey 2003: 14) that the wheat field sequence provides by returning to the submerged James during the end credits, *Swimmer* offers the reverse. The film fades to black after the swimmer vanishes from sight but he reappears and returns to his journey once the end credits begin. Located in the river once more, and accompanied by the upbeat ‘The Thought of You’ used in an earlier section, there is the suggestion here of the film re-starting.

<Insert Fig 3>

Figure 3: The swimmer’s floats in the reservoir at a distance. Screengrab.

Of course, while the swimmer may be caught in the perpetual rhythms of the UK’s waterways, the audience must return to an on-shore environment. This is an exciting prospect, though. For, in *Swimmer*, Ramsay has given us fresh perspectives on place that can

be taken forward. As author-psychogeographer Will Self explains: ‘The land seen from wild water is another country, waiting to be rediscovered as you stagger ashore, while the water itself cradles you in its diluvian embrace’ (2007: 244). Here, then, Ramsay’s film serves as metaphorical water from which we emerge at the film’s end. We are now ready to (re)engage with on-shore life and (re)explore the places in which we live.

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¹ In Max & Dania's *What If* the interest in street sports (free-running, BMX, skate-boarding) is less sustained and blends with other forms of urban art and entertainment (e.g., rapping). Leigh's film references several sports (swimming, football, road cycling) but his engagement is yet more casual, with the activity often relegated to the background.

² Despite an early 'romantic' notion to shoot on black-and-white film, *Swimmer* used colour stock to ensure fine detail and then desaturated and colour graded in the digital intermediate process (see Braier in Oppenheimer 2012: 12).

³ Location filming occurred in Devon (see Oppenheimer 2012: 14) and London (see Anon n.d.) but the film's impressionistic style suggests the swimmer traverses the entire UK.

⁴ Several of Andrew Kötting's films including his debut feature *Gallivant* (1996) move beyond the urban but remain tied to the practice of walking while others such as *Swandown* (2012), his collaboration with psychogeography-led writer Iain Sinclair, rely on watercraft. In *Swandown*, the watercraft is a swan-shaped pedalo.

⁵ Kapadia's *The Odyssey* takes a direct approach when it comes to engaging with the country's difficult recent history, offering a portrait of London that includes archive news footage of the 2005 bombings (which occurred the day after London was awarded the Olympics) and the 2011 riots.

⁶ This is seen in the case of Kenny and implied in the case of Ryan, via a shot of three adults standing above his lifeless body.