

# Literature Reimagined: Sofia Coppola's Reinterpretation of *The Virgin Suicides*

By Ian LeCheminant

Sofia Coppola's adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, transports audiences back in time, to the 1970s, and forces us to question the ways in which we often romanticize the past. The filmic version of this story is a high fidelity adaptation which revolves around the themes of "the destruction of childhood," "the social disease of nostalgia," and urban decay.<sup>1</sup> Both mediums confront Durkheim's conception of "dualism in human nature," which is the need for there to be a proper equilibrium between the needs of the individual and the larger society as a whole, and C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination," which is the extent to which individuals can see their place and connections to the larger whole.<sup>2</sup> Both mediums attempt to deal with the place of repressed individuals in a society where "[i]ndividualism lies at the very core of American culture," as stated by Bellah.<sup>3</sup> How Coppola truncates, cuts, exhibits and opens up the novel onto the screen and, thus, transforms Eugenides' prose into a series of cinematic images is the reason why the film has such a meaningful impact on viewers, despite the fact that it forces the audience to reflect on some of the darkest aspects of the society in which they live and attempts to make sense of them. As Graham Fuller writes, "Her [Coppola] meticulously faithful transposition of Jeffrey Eugenides' incantatory prose to the screen has resulted in nothing less than a timelessly romantic suburban myth that could become a cult classic."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bree Hoskin, "Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*," *Literature/FilmQuarterly*, 35, no.3: 214-218.

<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Bulman. *Hollywood Goes to High School* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Fuller, "Death and the Maidens," *Sight and Sound* 10, no.4 (April 2000): 1.

First, let us explore the two ways in which the suburban youth films are generally handled and conceived by Hollywood. According to Robert C. Bulman, suburban high school films, unlike urban high school films, tend to emphasize identity formation and freedom of expressive individualism. Urban high school films tend to highlight the hard work and self-sufficiency of utilitarian individualism.<sup>5</sup> Understanding these differences is key; for both Coppola's filmic adaptation and the novel itself are built entirely around this "typical" suburban high school narrative framework. However, I would argue that the plight of the adolescent individual is made more prevalent in Coppola's filmic adaptation. Eugenides' novel is much more of a macro-somatic commentary on the plight of the individual in white suburban American. This message to the reader is made possible through extended narrative sequences where the environmental decay and economic downfall of suburban Detroit are confronted. For example, in the book we are presented with detailed descriptions of citywide environmental decay caused by the polluted lake, fed by the General Motors plant which is, ironically, the economic life blood of the city. The expositions on the presence of the annual "fly fish season" and its increasing severity are instead truncated in the film and are alluded to by employing a green/blue haze in the film's *mise en scene*. The presence of this haze is most noticeable on the prom dance floor and its full effect is realized at Alice O'Connor's debutante party where green filters and props are present in every frame. To further emphasize how Eugenides' text is more focused on a macro-somatic commentary regarding the plight of the individual within the constraints of American suburbia is made evident in passages such as the following: "Something

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<sup>5</sup> Bulman, *Hollywood Goes to High School*, 80-85.

sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls... [t]he Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens...”<sup>6</sup>

So, how and why does Coppola shift the film’s focus toward the plight of the teenaged adolescent individual? She does this most obviously by cutting the previously mentioned sequences on the fly-fish season, extensive descriptions on the demise and degradation of the Lisbon house, following in the wake of the first suicide by Cecelia, and by cutting out characters such as Miss Kilsen and Old Mrs. Karafilis and their respective sub-plots. The latter examples also serve to emphasize further Eugenides’ macro-level critique of the suburbs, by giving the reader further evidence of the town’s degradation, via Miss Kilsen’s false social work credentials and Mrs. Karafilis’ longing for a bygone life in her native Greece.

Coppola’s goal in the film instead is to explore and display the confusion and transformative years of adolescence. Shifting the focus of the story entirely onto the effects this suburban environment has on the teenagers and how they either work or fail to achieve a “false” sense of balance within it. This shift in story focus is emphasized by her explorations on “gender-neutral excessive longing” and displays of both the male and female gaze to reinforce the plight of our protagonists as they navigate their way through this remembered portion of their lives and how those who survive, continue to display aspects of it as they age well into adulthood.<sup>7</sup> These continued displays of curiosity and affection are made evident, by the presence of voice over narration throughout the film to represent the boy’s reflections and memories of the past. The dualism that surrounds gender in this story is best displayed during a scene of the film I have titled *Communication Montage*.<sup>8</sup> This sequence in the film is found in

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (New York: Picador, 1993), 226.

<sup>7</sup> Hoskin, “Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides*,” 218.

<sup>8</sup> See appendix for shot list and temporal editing descriptions.

pages 187 to 195 in the book. It exemplifies this theme of excessive longing in the haze of a decaying suburbia. This scene demonstrates Coppola's best and most pronounced use of diegetic sound in the film to illustrate the feelings of both the sisters and the boys who long after them, feelings which are never explicitly stated, or spoken out loud in either version of the work. The adaption of this sequence demonstrates Coppola's highly effective use of cutting dialogue, combining scenes, and replacing of highly detailed prosaic passages with images.

In contrast to the text, the filmic version of this *Communication Montage* omits Mr. Lisbon answering the phone and instead replaces the action with one of the sisters, most likely Lux. Already this change in the narrative shifts the audience's focus towards the relationships that both we and the boys desire to have exist between them and the Lisbon sisters. The elimination of both Mr. Lisbon's initial answering of the phone and Mrs. Lisbon subsequently slamming and hanging up the phone, allows us to focus on experiencing this fantasy. This omission also serves as a shutting out of their surrounding domestic environment and helps the audience to understand the sense of escape that is manifested by the boy's fantasies of their imagined experiences with the girls which are only further intensified by the upcoming musical dialogue exchanges made possible via telephone transmission. In this sequence, scenes are combined in two prominent ways: one through the quick transitions between musical pieces—we never hear a song play out in its entirety. This has an effect on the temporal pacing of the film and adheres to the quick cutting between shots taking place not only in this sequence but throughout the duration of the film. The cohesion between the soundtrack and editing further serves to illustrate the “gender-neutral excessive longing” felt between both the sisters and their

infatuated male counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Lines in the text such as “Stark plaintive voices sought justice and equality” and “Song after song throbbed with secret pain” are condescended and manifest in the film via a horizontal split in the frame showing how the groups are separated by distance.<sup>10</sup> The positioning of various cuts of the girls above the mostly static image of the boys sitting in a semicircle, together in the Larson’s house across the street, illustrates the boy’s fantastical desires and yearnings for the girls. As Fuller writes, the girls have become an “idealized projection of our own desires and inadequacies.”<sup>11</sup> This message is further emphasized by two very important but symbiotic cuts which take place in both frames—cuts in the top frame to Lux holding the telephone receiver and simultaneously in the bottom frame cuts to Chase holding the phallic-like telephone handle. Both phones are of the same make and serve as a metaphor or allusion to both their desires and curiosities for each other. Later on in the film, this connection between Lux and Chase is further emphasized by Lux’s unbuckling of his pants moments before she goes into the garage to end her life in the comfort of her parent’s car. This combination of framing, cutting, and use of soundtrack music that is at times both diegetic and non-diegetic serves to illustrate extended descriptive sequences in the novel which display the pondering of both love, desire, and curiosity being felt between both Lisbon sisters and their star-crossed crushes. This scene in the film works to transform the novels narrative and plot points by cutting dialogue such as “Thinking back, we decided the girls had been trying to talk to us all along, to elicit our help, but we’d been too infatuated to listen” and replacing them with images of both sexes longing for each other.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hoskin, “Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides*,”.

<sup>10</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 191.

<sup>11</sup> Fuller, “Death and the Maidens,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 193.

This scene is essential to Coppola's adaptation and the subtle shift in thematic sensibilities she brings to the project. This scene, for a brief moment, shows the perspective of the sisters amidst the mess that has become their lives and illustrates to us that even though they are already dead at the film's start, we are given insight into the life that existed within them but was suppressed by a multitude of factors, parents, community, and social mores. Their lives were ended by the by sprawling but eroding suburbia they were born into by chance.

On the other hand as Roger Ebert wrote, "It is not important how the Lisbon sisters looked. What is important is how the teenage boys in the neighborhood thought they looked."<sup>13</sup> Coppola may just be expanding on the fantasy of the boys in this sequence; perhaps, all of it was imagined. This juxtaposition of endless possibilities alludes to the power of film to transform a text with a clear narrator into a work enriched with endless possibilities and interpretations. As Ebert states, "In a way, the Lisbon girls and the neighborhood boys never existed, except in their own adolescent imaginations. They were imaginary creatures, waiting for the dream to end through death or adulthood."<sup>14</sup>

*The Virgin Suicides* is a high fidelity adaptation. The film contains all the key hallmarks of the text. The book, however, is more of a macro-somatic commentary on the plight of the individual in white suburban American. This is made evident through various subplots within the text, and through extended and lush detailed descriptions of the slowly diminishing community, which is supposed to be an idyllic blue-collar Detroit suburb. The book's focus is easily summed up in one key passage, "Capitalism has resulted in a material well-being but a spiritual bankruptcy."<sup>15</sup> Coppola's adaptation instead has more of micro-level focus and uses the Lisbon

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Roger Ebert's review of the film, see bibliography for links and citation information.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 226.

girls' downfall as a surrogate for Eugenides' overall theme dealing with issues of urban decay and economic downturns. Coppola instead explores the effects these environmental factors have on the confusing and transformative years of adolescence. This is evident by her focus on "gender-neutral longing" and is manifest through her highly effective use of adaptation techniques such as cutting of dialogue, the combining scenes, and the replacing of highly detailed prosaic passages from the novel with images. Coppola's film leaves a mark on its audience, as well as leaving the audience wanting to know more and implicates us as voyeurs equal to the neighborhood boys' fascination with the Lisbon sisters. For "...Coppola's American beauties also have a purpose: to remind us all that our teenage triumphs and traumas and the phantoms who provoked them, are as alive as they ever were."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fuller, "Death and the Maidens," 5.

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