Male nostalgia is a dead teenage girl

The romantic nostalgia of idealized traumatic female adolescence in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*

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Abstract

The historic portrayal of the teenage girl in cinema as a mythical, sexual, hyper feminine and contemporary creature makes way for a specific but fairly common trope. Namely a trope where the teenage girl is used to elicit nostalgia and romance for the male protagonist, specifically because of her trauma and pain. The connection between the youth, femininity, pain and her status as contemporary is what makes the teenage girl an especially nostalgic object. Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* is a film that perfectly highlights and exaggerates this trope. By analyzing this film as well as comparing it to earlier examples, this essay will problematize this portrayal and locate its roots. This essay will analyze these examples and compare them to the general portrayal of the teenage girl in cinema during the twentieth century. By looking at *The Virgin Suicides* through the theory of the male gaze and the female spectacle, Coppola's highlighting of this trope becomes clear. This essay concludes that it is unclear if Coppola subverts or simply leans into this trope, but it becomes evident that it is a trope built on the fact that pain and deadness is the height of perfect femininity. Perfect femininity in turn can only be achieved during adolescence, and therefore, the trauma of female adolescence becomes nostalgic.

Keywords

Teenage girls, female adolescence, nostalgia, perfect femininity, Sofia Coppola, girlhood, female trauma

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1. Introduction

1.1 *The Virgin Suicides* and nostalgia

In Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* from 1999, we follow a group of boys and their intense fascination with a group of sisters in their neighborhood. The story takes place in the early 1970s, but it's being told from the perspective of one of the boys, now as an adult in 1999. He leads the viewers through the loose narrative by voice over, and early on lets the viewers know that this is a story that ends in tragedy. By the end of the film the sisters will all be dead by suicide, and the story we follow is the narrator trying to piece the puzzle together; who were the Lisbon sisters, and why did they kill themselves? The film is almost entirely made up of mental images. Memories and fantasies, both his own and constructed ones based on what he has heard from others over the years. In these mental images, the sisters are portrayed in the most romantic way possible thanks to the slowing down of time, close ups, soft lighting, dream like music and highly feminine clothing. The narrator has a nostalgic, idealistic and romantic idea of the Lisbon sisters and specifically their pain. To him them, their femininity and their tragedy, represents the now lost youth of his teenage years. This type of portrayal of the teenage girl and her trauma is not isolated to this specific film, it's something that can be found in many places in cinema and popular culture in general. In the specific case of *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola heavily leans into this trope in order to highlight it. In this essay I will explore how Coppola leans into the trope of traumatic female adolescence being framed as nostalgic, how the trauma of girlhood is turned into an ideal and how *The Virgin Suicides* confronts us with the reality of it.

1.2 Research questions

My aim with this analysis is to find the mechanics behind the trope of traumatic female adolescence being used for nostalgia. How the history of the portrayal of the teenage girl in cinema has created this morbid ideal. Specifically I wish to analyze *The Virgin Suicides'* use of this trope and placing the film within a larger context. By doing so it becomes clear that *The Virgin Suicides* is more so exaggerating this trope in order to highlight it, rather than unconsciously reproducing it. My main goal is to show the mechanics behind this trope, and how *The Virgin Suicides* leans upon earlier uses of it. The questions this essay will answer are thus the following; How was the trope of traumatic female adolescence being romanticized and used for male nostalgia created, and how is it used in *The Virgin Suicides*?

1.3 Rationale

One reason for choosing this subject is the lack of discussion of the teen film in general. It's a genre fairly forgotten in the domain of film studies, despite the major influence it has had on especially American popular culture since the 1950s. These days when you speak of the teen film, what comes to mind tends to be the comedic high school film with a female protagonist where the plot revolves around the stereotypical dynamic between high school cliques, and the protagonist's male love interest. Movies like *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) and *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999) are all good examples of this that have had major impacts on pop culture. These movies tend to focus on the dynamics between teenage girls, but I am more interested in how the dynamic between the teenage male protagonist and his female object of desire is portrayed in the more drama leaning teen film; The male coming of age story. How come many male coming of age stories rely so heavily upon the protagonist defining his teenage years by a suffering teenage girl? I believe this portrayal of girlhood, the teenage girl being a tool for male nostalgia in the teen film genre, is severely underdiscussed. When a feminist reading is applied to the teen film genre, it is often the heavy sexualization of the teenage girl that is discussed. How this sexualization directly connects to her trauma, and how that trauma through cinema has been portrayed as an ideal for the teenage girl in and of itself, is something that is still left to explore.

The trope that I am describing is certainly not the only representation of the teenage girl. In fact, a fairly common trope known as "The manic pixie dream girl" (the happy go lucky girl who seems to have no problems of her own, but solely exists to make the male protagonist a better person) could be described as the exact opposite of this trope. But unlike the manic pixie dream girl, the suffering teenage girl used for male nostalgia, has no name, and often goes by unnoticed. I believe that this is due to the fact that the suffering teenage girl tends to be portrayed more seriously, and as more of a sympathetic character than she often is otherwise. Since the teenage girl is often reduced to a comedic or hyper sexual archetype, this sympathy is something many long for. One can conclude that in order for the teenage girl to be treated seriously on screen, she must suffer. Because of this, I believe it's very relevant to discuss and analyze the way in which this suffering and trauma is created in cinema, the trope's orgins and the reason it's still commonly used in the male coming of age story to this day. And specifically, how Coppola uses it in *The Virgin Suicides*, as I have not found any research on this specific subject in relation to this film (nor at all).

1.4 Previous research

Much of the relevant research about the film has been focused on the symbolism of the suicide and it's connection to femininity, as well as how the film being constructed by collective memories impacts its pacing, reliability and portrayal of the sisters. A lot of research also touches upon the films relation to nostalgia, but the specific idea of idealized romance of traumatic girlhood being used for nostalgia in and of itself, is something still left to explore.

The symbolism of the suicide in the film is something Michele Aaron explores in *Cinema and Suicide: Necromanticism, Dead-already-ness, and the Logic of the Vanishing Point*. She argues that in cinema the representation of suicide has little to do with the act of killing itself, but rather that it is a stand in for something else.[1] Aaron states that you can find a unique, feminine aestheticization of suicide in cinema.[2] In *The Virgin Suicides,* suicide has less to do with the act of killing, and is more of a representation of a certain idea of what a woman is, a highly romanticized, sexualized, male idea of womanhood, Aaron describes.[3] She argues that while *The Virgin Suicides* is ironically highlighting this view of womanhood, it simply repeats the aestheticization of female suicide and exploits it.[4] According to her, Coppola simply locates *The Virgin Suicides* within this tradition of the romantic idea of the self sacrificing woman, without critiquing it.[5] The sisters are simply references to other iconic self sacrificing female figures, who themselves are just a symbolic idea of the self sacrificing female ideal, a male fantasy.[6] For this Aaron uses the term *necromanticization*, society's idea of the woman as an embodiment of a romance with death.[7]

Masafumi Monden also explores the connection between femininity and suicide in *Contemplating in a dream-like room: The Virgin Suicides and the aesthetic imagination of girlhood*. He argues that committing suicide the sisters gain their agency back, which in and of itself is a feminized way of dying.[8] Monden argues that unlike most films about female adolescence Coppola does not

[1] *Michele Aaron, "Cinema and Suicide: Necromanticism, Dead-already-ness, and the Logic of the Vanishing Point", Cinema Journal, Volume 53, Number 2, 76*

[2] *Ibid., 76*

[3] *Ibid., 81*

[4] *Ibid., 80*

[5] *Ibid., 81-82*

[6] *Ibid., 78*

[7] *Ibid., 76-77*

[8] *Masafumi Monden, "Contemplating in a dream-like room: The Virgin Suicides and the aesthetic imagination of girlhood", Film, Fashion & Consumption, Volume 2, Number 2, (June 2013), 141*

treat feminine girlhood as something shallow and negative. Instead, *The Virgin Suicide* portrays it as something mystical and profound according to Monden.[9] In this film girlhood becomes a dream-like and intriguing fantasy, he argues.[10] In *The Virgin Suicides* girly girls are both fragile and assertive, he continues.[11] He argues out that by adding references to earlier classic literary female icons of 'opposing' ideals in the characters, Coppola creates a new, more profound idea of girlhood.[12] Monden claims that the film empowers this sort of girly femininity, without the girls having to turn to masculine ideals to gain respect.[13] But at the same time, he continues, the very fact that this sort of assertive girly femininity can't exist without a tragic ending, shows that it's still not an entirely positive portrayal, something that is yet to be found in American cinema according to him.[14] I too am interested in exploring the relation between suicide and femininity, but instead of viewing the suicides in the film as a way of gaining agency back from a patriarchal world, I will look at the suicide as the ideal result of a woman's destiny in a patriarchal world. The idea that Coppola treats girly femininity with a respect that has rarely been seen before may be worth exploring in her other works, but I would argue that in this film, rather than treating it with respect, she purposely shows the idealized view of girlhood through the male gaze. In my reading of the film it is not a film that strives to portray girlhood in a positive light, it's about showing how traumatic girlhood is seen as a female ideal and used for nostalgia.

Bree Hoskin discusses what part nostalgia and its connection to materialistic objects play in *The Virgin Suicides* in her article *Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's The Virgin Suicides.* She argues that this is a film largely made up of the act of longing, both in terms of romantic desire, but also in terms of longing for youth itself.[15] She writes that nostalgia can never be fully authentic, as it per definition denies the real.[16] This is why the sisters, as well as the cooler, older boy Trip are the only ones able to exists in the magic place of distorted time in the film, as they only exist in this fantasy world of nostalgia.[17] The now grown men try to make the

[9] *Ibid., 141*

[10] *Ibid., 144*

[11] *Ibid., 145*

[12] *Ibid., 145*

[13] *Ibid., 154*

[14] *Ibid., 155*

[15] *Bree Hoskin, "Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's The Virgin Suicides", Literature/Film Quarterly, Volume 35, Number 3, (January 2007), 214*

[16] *Ibid., 216*

[17] *Ibid., 218*

nostalgia authentic by placing it in material objects, as the nostalgia is then transformed into objective facts.[18] She writes that by doing this the Lisbon sisters are forever trapped in nostalgia, in these objects that the boys collect.[19] She concludes that *The Virgin Suicides* is about mourning the loss of youth, of an authentic past that no longer exists.[20] This is symbolised by placing the film within the suburbs, a place that in itself signifies lost childhood.[21] When I explore nostalgia in the film, I will largely focus on the usage of femininity and female pain in and of itself as a nostalgic construct, but also its relation to the objects Hoskin describes.

Anna Backman Rogers, on the other hand, reads The Virgin Suicide as the opposite of nostalgic. In *Ephemeral bodies and threshold creatures: The crisis of the adolescent rite of passage in Sofia Coppola's 'The Virgin Suicides' and Gus Van Sant's 'Elephant'*, she examines the film's use of clichés, and how it subverts them. She argues that Coppola uses iconic imagery borrowed from soft pornography, advertisement of the 70s and photography, in order to highlight exactly how thin and shallow this representation of the female body is.[22] Through placing immediately recognizable imagery, that traditionally has uncritically positive associations, within this tragedy it forces the viewer to look beyond them and examine them.[23] It shows exactly how shallow these representations are and places the girls within a larger societal context.[24] We see the roles ascribed to these girls, and we understand why they chose to end their time in this world, and the imagery then becomes sinister, Rogers writes.[25] By viewing the sisters through this sinister imagery of well established clichéd representations of femininity, it makes for a more in depth and complex representation of female adolescence, and not a nostalgic one.[26] While i agree that as a viewer we're not meant to read the film as nostalgic, it still clearly shows that the narrator in fact does view these images as nostalgic, as what we're seeing is his direct memories.

[18] *Ibid., 217*

[19] *Ibid., 217*

[20] *Ibid., 217*

[21] *Ibid., 215*

[22] *Anna Backman Rogers, "Ephemeral bodies and threshold creatures: The crisis of the adolescent rite of passage in Sofia Coppola's 'The Virgin Suicides' and Gus Van Sant's 'Elephant'", NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies, Volume 1, Number 1, (Spring 2012), 152*

[23] *Ibid., 150*

[24] *Ibid., 155*

[25] *Ibid., 151*

[26] *Ibid., 157*

In *The Virgin Suicides Reverie, Sorrow and Young Love*, Justin Wyatt discusses *The Virgin Suicides* as a story structured by memories by a collective narrator. Wyatt argues that since what we see is a collective memory of five different boys, and since twenty five years have passed, we are not simply being told a story of objective facts, but an unreliable narrative.[27] He writes that though we see a story told from the memories of the boys, not all of these memories are theirs or even real.[28] Aside from certain key points within the narrative, we can't be sure of what really happened, as the collective narrator in the film is an unreliable one he continues.[29] Wyatt arrives at the conclusion that the mystery of the film is not why the sisters committed suicide, but why it has fascinated the boys for so long and how they process this trauma.[30] According to Wyatt, what we're seeing is the boys positioning themselves as witnesses in order to comprehend this tragedy, to turn the traumatic events into a loose narrative that they can place themselves in, as a way to give the meaningless meaning.[31] While it is true that in certain ways the boys insert themselves into the narrative the way Wyatt describes, it's also equally relevant to examine how by placing themselves as witnesses (innocent bystanders) they exclude themselves from the narrative that lead to the deaths of the sisters, namely their fetishism and voyeurism.

Debra Shostak explores how the novel *The Virgin Suicides* and Sofia Coppola's adaptation of it, both make use of the collective narrator. In the book the narrators are represented as an impossible, unified voice of all five boys together, speaking in unison 'we', but that doesn't quite work in the film. In the film we hear one actor doing the narrating voice over, and in this context his 'we' instead makes him into a representative of the group, Shostak argues.[32] He is speaking as himself, but using all of their collective memories.[33] Shostak writes that because of this, what would be viewed as simply fleeting, subjective memories in the novel are turned into objective facts in the film. As instead of simply hearing the memories described, we get to see them presented in a visual narrative.[34] She argues that this contributes to the film being less of a critique of the boys'

[27] *Justin, Wyatt, The Virgin Suicides Reverie, Sorrow and Young Love. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2019, 40*

[28] *Ibid., 41*

[29] *Ibid., 40*

[30] *Ibid., 48*

[31] *Ibid., 48*

[32] *Debra Shostak, "Impossible Narrative Voices": Sofia Coppola's Adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides's The Virgin Suicides", Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, Volume 15, Number 2, (January 2013), 184*

[33] *Ibid., 184*

[34] *Ibid., 192*

obsession with the girls, and instead lets the viewer *become* the boys and indulge in their fascination.[35] This interpretation of the narrator as one of the boys acting as a representative for all of them is one that most closely aligns with the reading of the film as a loose narrative made up of subjective memories and dreams, the one that will be explored in this essay.

1.5 Method and material

1.5.1 Method

To answer my questions, I will start my analysis with a discussion of how the teenage girl has been portrayed in American cinema and popular culture over the twentieth century, and how the historic portrayal of her directly correlates to the trope that I am describing. I will then analyze how the fact that *The Virgin Suicides* is a story with a very clear point of view told directly from the memory of the narrator, affects the way the Lisbon sisters are portrayed. Specifically, how this contributes to their hyper femininity. Next I will explore the teenage girl's connection to the contemporary and her status as a representation of her time, and how this makes her nostalgic when viewed in retrospect. I will then move on to describe how the Lisbon sisters are remembered by their pain in the mind of the narrator, why feminine pain is nostalgic, and a few selected examples of films using this very trope throughout film history. Next I will proceed to explore why morbidity and deadness in women is seen as attractive, especially for the teenage girl, and how this can be seen in *The Virgin Suicides*. Finally, I will analyze how turning the Lisbon sisters into spectacles viewed through the male gaze contributes to their attractiveness and absolves the boys from any responsibility in their tragic fate.

1.5.2 Material

To discuss the history of the portrayal of the teenage girl I will mainly use Ilana Nash's *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*.[36] In *American Sweethearts* Nash thoroughly goes over how the idea of the teenage girl is something that popular culture has constructed and reinvented over the decades. Nash specifically looks at popular culture's representation of the teenage girl from the 1930s up until the late 1960s, as well as how we still see traces of these portrayals in the fictional teenage girls of today. This historical overlook is crucial when it comes to analysing this specific trope that I'm interested in. This book will be used as an historical overlook of the representations of the teenage girl in the twentieth century, as these

[35] *Ibid., 197-198*

[36] *Ilana Nash, Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006)*

representations and thereby the construction of the teenage girl is the very reason the idealized portrayal of female trauma is so effectively used to elicit male nostalgia.

To explore how *The Virgin Suicides* makes use of the fact that it is a story told directly from a memory, I will use Bernard Stiegler's theory on primary, secondary and tertiary memory.[37] He describes this theory in his essay *Filmens Tid*. He writes that the invention of tertiary memory (the possibility of identical repetitions, through inventions such as the phonograph and the film camera) makes it clear that our memory makes selections based on our previous experiences.[38] When we listen to an identical repetition of a temporal object, such as a melody, we will discover new things about the melody every time.[39] This proves that memory is never objective, and that our perception is always part illusion[40]. When we apply this theory to *The Virgin Suicides*, it becomes clear that what is shown on screen is the secondary memory of the narrator, and how the viewers see the Lisbon sisters, is simply what the narrator's perception deemed relevant at the time.

When I analyze the Lisbon sisters' status as spectacles viewed through the male gaze, I will use Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.[41] In this essay Mulvey coins "the male gaze" as a term, and explains the phenomenon of the woman as spectacle only viewed through this gaze. While male characters drive the narrative forward, the female characters are used to freeze and slow down the narrative, contributing very little to the story. Through the male gaze the protagonist acts as a surrogate for the viewer, and the act of looking at a woman becomes an erotic spectacle in and of itself, Mulvey writes.[42] I will look at the way *The Virgin Suicides* positions the Lisbon sisters as just spectacles seen through the male gaze in order for the narrator to turn their trauma into a nostalgic fantasy.

[37] *Bernard Stiegler, "Filmens tid", in Konst och film. D. 2, Texter efter 1970: Skriftserien Kairos Nr 9:2, red. Trond Lundemo (Raster förlag, 2004)*
[38] *Stiegler, 196*
[39] *Ibid., 195*
[40] *Ibid., 192*
[41] *Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in Feminist Film Theory: A Reader, edited by Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 58-69.*
[42] *Mulvey, 68*

2. Analysis

2.1 The history of the teenage girl in American popular culture

In *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*, Ilana Nash explains that though the representation of teenage girls in American pop culture has changed over the decades, one thing has always been true, namely that teenage girls are rarely represented as three dimensional human beings, and more often than not solely exist as a representation of society's desires or nightmares.[43] She describes how in film, books and television, the idea of the teenage girl has always been that she is something other, alien, the complete opposite to the dominant Self, namely the adult male (to whom most works of fiction traditionally speak from the perspective of, even if they are not the protagonist).[44] Nash explains that this is due to the teenage girl's position as both a child and a woman. Since the dominant Self is an adult male, children and women have through history been represented as exotic and erotic, something *Other*, she writes. Both groups lack the abilities and qualities that make up what makes the adult male the adult male, therefore teenage girls suffer from a double lack of abilities.[45] Due to this 'a double emptiness' as Nash puts it, the teenage girl has through history been the perfect object for the attention of the patriarchy as she consists of the child's lack of experience and the women's lack of rationality and agency.[46] Nash writes:

> The liminality of the adolescent girl makes her simultaneously disturbing and attractive to the patriarchy. Poised between innocence and experience, her combination of a womanly body and a childlike mind offers male authorities the best of both worlds: a female both pure and ripe, young enough to leave unchallenged the dominance of mature men, but old enough to be 'hot'.[47]

And also: "In the case of teenage girls, the paradox of cherub and she-beast maps neatly onto pre existing paradoxes of good and evil that apply to grown women; femininity marks the teenage girl in ways that parallel and reinforce how she is marked by youth."[48] The teenage girl

[43] *Nash, 2*

[44] *Ibid., 4*

[45] *Ibid., 19*

[46] *Ibid., 22*

[47] *Ibid., 23*

[48] *Ibid., 22-23*

is therefore the embodiment of the female ideal. Her youth is a mark of femininity itself. She has submissive qualities that the adult woman can not have. This erotic idea of perfect femininity, is then nostalgic in and of itself, as it can only exist during adolescence. Of course, to the adult man his attraction to the teenage girl is not limited to the teenage girls of his youth, but that does not hinder the idea of the teenage girl to be nostalgic to him, as she embodies the female ideal both of the 1940s as well as the 1990s, i.e the child's lack of experience and the woman's lack of rationality and agency. To the adult male, the relation to the teenage girl never has to change. As a person she is a disposable object, a time capsule where the male dominance is never threatened thanks to her ideal youth. In Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993), Matthew McConaughey's character says the following, which perfectly showcases this relationship: "That's what I love about these high school girls, man. I get older, they stay the same age."

In a film like *The Virgin Suicides* the nostalgia of the teenage girl becomes even more evident, as it's a story told from the perspective of a now adult man as he recalls his intense obsession in retrospect. This type of story, a now adult man recalling his teenage years through his intense fascination with females of his youth, is one that can be found several times through film history. We find it in *Summer of'42* (Robert Mulligan, 1971), *The Year My Voice Broke* (John Duigan, 1987) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Stephen Chbosky, 2012). What these films have in common, is that they are all period pieces with a male adolescent protagonist whose story is largely defined by his fascination with a specific female friend or girlfriend. A girl who in turn will be dead or have tragically gone away by the end of the film. In all these films the object of desire (the teenage girl) is not only typically feminine coded through looks, but also through her trauma and pain. This pain, which defines her character, is caused by things such as abortion, premarital sex, rape, miscarriage, cheating boyfriends or overly strict parents. These problems all fit into a specific category of pain closely associated with the problems of the teenage girl. Specifically the pain of the teenage girl who goes against the picture perfect, pure, virgin ideal. These problems define the female characters in these films, and they are a big part of why the male protagonist grows obsessed with her. Through the decades, the teenage girl has been defined by these female specific problems in the pop culture of the anglosphere, most commonly the American one, which is where the modern high school genre and this specific romanticization of adolescence has its roots. As Nash writes about the portrayals of teenage girls in the 1950s, their storylines were commonly about rape or pregnancy or other dark sexual themes.[49] We see a similar thing in the 1940s, where the

[49] *Ibid., 178*

portrayals of teenage girls in popular culture were as disobedient, determined creatures with storylines about dangerous sexuality, Nash writes.[50] Through the decades, she continues, adolescence has been portrayed as a much more dangerous time for girls than for boys.[51] Nash goes on to describe how this is due to the fact that for the most part the storylines of teenage girls in popular culture, tended to represent everything that was deemed wrong or dangerous about contemporary society.[52] Although this has been true for portrayal of all youth, due to the fact that teenage girls have been less of three dimensional people and more concepts that embody societal fear and desire, they have rarely been represented as anything else. These portrayals of the teenage female and her close association with this specific category of pain, has as we can see helped shape the mythical idea of the tortured teenage girl, who we find in *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Year My Voice Broke*, *Summer of'42* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (all of which are American films, except for *The Year My Voice Broke*, which is Australian). The tortured teenage girl is therefore a perfect object for male fascination and desire. Her youth creates her ideal femininity, which in and of itself is closely associated to pain. In other words, the pain that comes with female adolescence is the ideal femininity.

2.2 Forever defined by femininity

2.2.1 Bernard Stiegler's theory on memory

To see how the pain of the Lisbon sisters is closely connected to their perfect femininity, one must analyze how the sisters are defined by the narrator. As this is a story constructed by memories of an unreliable narrator, what the viewers see is only what the narrator remembers, the idea he has constructed of the Lisbon sisters. That view is an excessively feminine one. When discussing the memories that *The Virgin Suicides* is made up of, one is talking about what Bernard Stiegler refers to as secondary memory in *Filmens Tid*. According to Stiegler, there are three types of memory our mind is made up of, primary memory, secondary memory and tertiary memory.[53] Primary memory, he explains, is what makes us capable of the perception of a present. A sense of 'now' that is not connected to a specific point in time, but instead to the sense of existing and rendering

[50] *Ibid., 124*

[51] *Ibid., 124*

[52] *Ibid., 125*

[53] *Stiegler, 189*

our current impressions.[54] Secondary memory is what we usually refer to as memory, the act of recalling something that has already happened.[55] Finally tertiary memory is the technically constructed memory, the act of being able to record or film something in order to attain identical repetition.[56] Through the invention of tertiary memory, such as the phonograph and the film camera, and being able to replay a temporal object such as a melody, we can now see that our perception of the temporal object changes everytime we listen to it, despite it being identical, Stiegler explains.[57] The second time we listen to an identical recording of a melody, we will notice things we did not notice the first time, and forget things we noticed earlier, Stiegler writes.[58] This is due to the fact that without oblivion primary perception would not be able to exist, Stiegler continues.[59] Our primary perception is dependent on the fact that a selection is made. Based on our earlier experiences a criteria is formed, and our primary perception will make a choice in what is being stored as our secondary memories, he writes.[60] Our secondary memories are therefore always a reduction of the present in order to make place for new perceptions. Because of this, Stiegler continues, our secondary memories are always to some degree fiction and illusion, as the idea of a completely objective primary perception is impossible.[61]

What we can conclude from this if applied to *The Virgin Suicides*, is that what we see in the film is a recollection of secondary memories. Memories made up of things the narrator's consciousness deemed relevant based off of his own personal criteria at the time. His memory of the Lisbon sisters is therefore a reduction of what they were, and to some degree an illusion. By analysing the films portrayal of them, his view of them, we get an idea of what his criteria at the time deemed relevant and what made them attractive to him.

[54] *Ibid., 189*

[55] *Ibid., 189*

[56] *Ibid., 189*

[57] *Ibid., 195*

[58] *Ibid., 195*

[59] *Ibid., 196*

[60] *Ibid., 196*

[61] *Ibid., 192*

2.2.2 The girly aesthetic

Extreme close up of Lux Lisbon, in the memory of the narrator.

On ten separate occasions in the film, Lux, the sister who gets the most screen time, is shown in extreme close ups. In these close ups, she is reduced to an eye with long eyelashes, a lipglossed smile, long hair, a foot with well groomed toes or a hip with pink, childish underwear. These close ups are the result of a reduction, they are the details that stuck in the mind of the narrator. They are what he defined Lux by, what his primary perception deemed relevant and what stuck in his secondary memory. Not only are these a reduction of her to specific body parts, but also a reduction of her to the most hyper feminine physical traits. This reduction is the result of fetishization of the hyper feminine ideal that the teenage girl embodies. On several occasions these shots are in slow motion, signaling another layer of hyper focus. Aside from the extreme close ups of Lux, we never see the sisters in anything but aesthetics of the hyper feminine. The film uses a typically 'girly' style with its soft lighting and pink and warm colour palette to begin with, but the hyper feminine aesthetic is highlighted in the images of the sisters. Almost every time we see them, they're dressed in white beautiful dresses, (a colour associated with purity and virginity) or female school uniforms. Even in scenes where it's obvious that the narrator was not present but has constructed these memories based on imagination, this is what they are wearing. In his fantasies of the sisters, we see them playing on a golden lit field, surrounded by unicorns. The unicorn itself is associated with a girly type of playful femininity, signaling that their playing is childlike. These fantasy images are too partially in slow motion, highlighting their place as fantasy and illusion.

2.2.3 Hyper feminine objects

Tampons found by one of the boys as he looks through the bathroom in the Lisbon house.

Aside from their hyper femininity being shown through clothing, color palette, lighting and specific cinematic effects, it is also highlighted through the specific objects that the narrator closely associates them with, what he refers to as 'souvenirs'. During his obsession with the Lisbon girls, he and his friends collected as much as they could of theirs. These souvenirs were everything the boys had to remember them by in the end. In his own words: "Collecting everything we could of theirs, the Lisbon girls wouldn't leave our minds. But they were slipping away. The colour of their eyes was fading, along with the locations of moles and dimples. From five they had become four, and they were all living in the dead, becoming shadows." This is said while the camera pans over these objects, indicating that it's through these objects he now defines them, while the sisters themselves are becoming shadows. These objects we see are not just objects, they are typically feminine coded objects. They are tampons, makeup, diaries and jewelry. We get several close up shots of these souvenirs, both the ones the boys have collected and keep themselves, and the ones visible in the Lisbon home. At one point in the film one of the boys finds himself alone in the bathroom in the Lisbon house. The camera sweeps over their tampons and makeup, and the boy picks up a lipstick to smell it. As he does this the image transforms into a close up of Lux in the same fantasy scenario mentioned earlier, and the sound goes from diegetic to a romantic score.

The narrator's primary perception of the Lisbon girls at the time reduced them to details of their body parts, the most hyper feminine physical traits and their most feminine objects. This is how they are defined by him, this is the illusion of them that now exists in his secondary memory.

2.3 Eternally contemporary and eternally nostalgic

2.3.1 The inherent femininity of the trendy teenage girl

Traditionally the teenage girl is a contemporary archetype, a representative of her time. As stated before, she tends to embody what is deemed wrong or dangerous about the current state of society. As Nash puts it, the portrayal of the teenage girl is rarely as a timeless creature, instead she is the face of the still new and unsure in order to further alienate her from the dominant self and showcase her otherness.[62] According to Nash, the teenage girl has through the decades rarely been portrayed as a nostalgic figure, she is inherently contemporary and the opposite of timeless, unlike her male counterparts.[63] The teenage girl in the twentieth century has been closely associated with the new and modern culture, she writes. In America at the time, teenage girls were believed to be biologically more likely to be consumed by the new, dangerous cultural forms Nash continues.[64] Through the decades, girlhood has always been closely linked to the at the time contemporary, she concludes.[65] Relatively modern examples of this include films such as *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) and *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995). Interestingly enough, both these movies deal with the common makeover trope. In both films we are introduced to a misfit girl who has yet to be indoctrinated to the true, contemporary girlhood of high school, who over the course of the film transforms into the perfectly trendy, modern teenage girl. In *Mean Girls*, the main antagonist Regina George embodies everything about the contemporary pop culture of 2004. She has all the trendiest clothes, listens to the right music, watches the right tv-shows and knows all the newest slang. When the protagonist Cady early on in the film is invited over to Regina's home, Regina spitefully asks Cady if she even knows who is singing the music she just put on. Foolishly, Cady guesses The Spice Girls, a band who by the time would have been terribly out of style as their commercial peak was eight years earlier. It's made clear that Cady is not girly, as she is not modern or trendy in the slightest. When asked to put on something pink, she borrows her male friend's polo shirt, looking decidedly non feminine on her. As mentioned before, Cady becomes more and more

[62] *Nash, 123*

[63] *Ibid., 123*

[64] *Ibid., 123*

[65] *Ibid., 140*

like Regina over the course of the film, but by the end she returns to her previous, less aggressively feminine, less trendy self. We see the same narrative in Clueless. In both these films the message is that this idea of girlhood is very much a social construct, one that girls are foolish for forcing upon one another. That by returning to less trendy and feminine styles, they're being themselves. Although both films are leaning into their satirical qualities and even the girliest of characters are ultimately not painted as bad guys, they both still lean into the idea of girlhood as a representation of the shallowness of contemporary society, and that teenage girls are naïve and dumb for falling for it. As we can see teenage girlhood is to this day closely associated with contemporary pop culture, and its girliness is used to show why said culture is flawed and shallow.

2.3.2 Retrospect turns the contemporary nostalgic

The Lisbon sisters in their prom dresses.

As Nash points out, this is why teenage girlhood more commonly than not is far removed from nostalgia. However, in the context of looking back at one's youth in retrospect the teenage girl becomes especially nostalgic precisely because of her close association with the contemporary. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon sisters are more closely connected to the 1970s than any of the other characters. They are the only characters whose music taste we get a sense of when Lux is forced by her mother to burn her rock records as punishment for staying out late. At the time the rock genre was by many adults considered to be damaging for the youth, as it was believed it would

encourage them to rebel against adult society. In this very scene, rebelling against her parents is exactly what Lux was punished for. In tears she lists the name of bands such as Kiss and Aerosmith as she throws the records into the fire. The sisters are also more closely associated to the 1970s than any of the other characters due to their fashion. Their white, yellow tinted, long, flowy dresses with detailed, decorated sleeves are one of the clear signs that this is not a contemporary story. Before they are off to prom, we get a shot of the four of them posing together all wearing dresses like these. The nightgowns that we see the sisters wear on several occasions are very similar to the prom dresses, and very far removed from the nightgowns teenage girls would wear in 1999, when the film was released. When the boys find the girls after they have committed suicide, the only images we see of them are of legs on the floor dressed in orange, flared jeans with platform heels, and legs dangling from the ceiling dressed in white stockings and 70s style heeled saddle shoes. While the sisters are undoubtedly 70s in their fashion, the boys are simply dressed in jeans and t-shirts in a more timeless manner.

2.3.4 The nostalgia of contemporary advertisement aesthetics

As both Rogers and Wyatt points out, it is easy to find references to the advertisement of the 1970s in the representations of the Lisbon sisters. Rogers brings up that the way the sisters are framed, styled and shot is very similar to the advertisement, soft pornography and photography of the 1970s in order to highlight the clichés of this representation of the teenage girl.[66] Rogers also refers to Coppola herself who explains that she took inspiration from specific commercials from the 1970s for specific sequences in the film.[67] In the fifth chapter of *The Virgin Suicides Reverie, Sorrow and Young Love,* titled *The Advertisement Aesthetic and Youth Culture of The Virgin Suicides*, Wyatt discusses exactly this, and writes; "This connection is made both explicitly and implicitly within the film: the neighborhood boys are inspired by advertising and actively create imaginative shots and scenes that feel heavily indebted to the images and icons of 1970s advertising."[68] The similarities between the aesthetic in the portrayal of the sisters and the iconic imagery of 1970s advertisement is clear, making them clear representatives of the 1970s in the memory of the narrator. Through this aesthetic, their music, and their fashion, the Lisbon sisters are what represents the era in which this film takes place. To the narrator, they are what define the time of his youth. Their close connection to what at the time was contemporary, is part of what makes them nostalgic objects.

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[66] *Rogers, 152*

[67] *Ibid., 154*

[68] *Wyatt, 66*

2.4 The nostalgia in feminine pain

2.4.1 The sexy forbidden fruit

The femininity of the Lisbon sisters is closely connected to the pain they are subjected to. The very reason the narrator to this day remembers the Lisbon sisters so well and continues to reminisce about them, is due to their tragic fate. This fate is the reason the narrator is telling their story. In other words, pain they were subjected to is what deems them worthy to remember. While the sisters were still alive the reason they were so eternally fascinating to the boys was (besides their perfect femininity) because of their position as forbidden fruit, the result of how strictly their parents controlled them. This makes them objects one could see, not touch. In an early scene in the film, we hear the youngest sister's, Cecilia's, therapist explain to Mr and Mrs Lisbon that Cecilia's (first) suicide attempt was a cry for help; "I know you're very strict, but I think that Cecilia would benefit by having a social outlet, outside of the codification of school. Where she could interact with males her own age." We then get a shot of the parents and Mrs Lisbon looking offended that he would insinuate her parenting to be insufficient. Thus the film makes it clear early on that the sisters' pain was caused by their parents ascribing to the idea of girls as pure, fragile creatures that must be protected (controlled). The sisters are not allowed to interact with boys unless their parents are present. Meaning that the only times the boys actually interact with the sisters, any romantic pursuit is impossible. This impossibility only makes them more tempting. We hear one of the boys desperately declare this mere seconds before he stumbles upon Bonnie's dead body: "These girls are making me crazy. If I could feel one of 'em up just once!" In other words, the misogynist idea which justifies the act of strictly controlling one's daughters, is part of what makes the sisters so attractive to the boys. What is pain for the sisters is pleasure for the boys, albeit unconsciously.

2.4.2 Remembered by her pain

Because of this, the narrator defines the sisters not only by their femininity and their association to the decade of his teen years, but also by their pain. This is evident in his retelling of his memories. Of course, the narrator's memory of the Lisbon sisters has continued to change over the years, and his memories of his time with them one can surely assume have transformed post their deaths. Thus, the way the viewer sees Lisbon sisters is through his memories, which in turn have transformed over the years with the knowledge of their tragic fate. In this version of the Lisbon sisters, their femininity is instantly associated with their tragic fate. In the opening shot of the film,

we see Lux standing on the street while licking a lollipop. As many others such as Rogers[69] and Monden[70] have pointed out, this is an image eerily similar to the one on the famous poster for *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962), of the fourteen year old title character taking part in the same act. Just like the character Lolita, Lux is fourteen (established by a freeze frame of her getting out of the car as the narrator tells us her age). When we see Lux sunbathing early on in her film, she is dressed in a orange/red, patterned bikini, just like the iconic orange/red, patterned bikini Lolita wears while sunbathing in the film. (though the film is in black and white, the bikini was colored orange/red and sometimes blue in the advertisement for the film).

Lux in the very first shot on the film, and the poster for Stanley Kubrick's Lolita.

As we can see Lux is evidently aesthetically closely connected to the character of Lolita. But even beyond the aesthetics they are portrayed in similar ways. They are both portrayed as alluring, assertive, mythical, and most important of all, sexual creatures. The connection between Lux and Lolita is clear. From the very first shot of Lux the viewer is urged to associate her with a character whose purpose is to be taken advantage of by an older man. Although Lux is not taken advantage of by an adult, she is taken advantage of by Trip Fontaine, an older boy in her high school. While Lux is equally enthusiastic about her relationship with Trip to a start, their relationship is what

[69] *Ibid., 154*

[70] *Monden, 141*

causes Lux the pain that will finally push her over the edge. After repeatedly begging their stricts parents, the sisters are finally allowed to go to the prom. But only if they are escorted by a group of boys the parents have approved of, and Lux is escorted by Trip. By the end of the night when the boys are meant to take the sisters home in time for their curfew, Trip and Lux are nowhere to be found. While the rest of the group leaves, Lux and Trip have sex on the football field. Trip is clearly the dominant one while Lux is merely following his lead, and by the end Trip leaves Lux alone on the field and drives home. Lux wakes up alone and returns home in a taxi early in the morning. This is what causes her parents to finally take the sisters out of school and completely isolate them in the house, the final nail in the coffin.

The consequences of Lux being taken advantage of by an older boy is a key moment leading up to her suicide. After her death the narrator's memory of Lux is then transformed. From the very beginning of the story he now remembers her through association with Lolita. Lux now embodies the idea of the sexually attractive teenage girl, young enough to be taken advantage of but old enough to be considered hot. This is both what makes her so attractive and what causes her this great pain. It is then through the experience which caused her this pain, that the narrator remembers her. Her likeness to Lolita is the first thing we see of her, and it's an image the narrator has because of how she was taken advantage of. This feminine associated trauma is our introduction to her and an essential part of her persona in the mind (memory) of the narrator. It is therefore clear that it's because of, and through the lense of this pain he remembers and defines her.

2.4.3 Other examples of the same trope

Like mentioned before, teenage girls being remembered through their feminine associated pain is something one can find several examples of in film history. In *Summer of'42* the protagonist Hermie recalls his youth in the 1940s, and his relationship to Dorothy. Dorothy is unattainable to Hermie as she has a husband who is out fighting in the war. Dorothy lives a lonely life because of this, and the two of them slowly develop a relationship. When Dorothy finds out her husband has passed away, Hermie finds her crying and drinking, and the two of them have sex for the first time. Just hours after them sleeping together Dorothy leaves, leaving Hermie a note saying that it was for the best. The film ends with Hermie sorrowfully saying that he never knew what happened to her after that, but that he will never forget her. The loneliness and misery that comes with being an army wife is what makes Dorothy unattainable, attractive and impossible to forget.

In *The Year My Voice Broke*, we follow the protagonist Danny as he recounts his teenage years and his friendship with Freya, who he was secretly in love with. Freya is known for being attractive as well as slightly promiscuous, earning her a negative reputation among the towns adults. Freya starts dating Trevor, a boy Danny strongly dislikes because of his criminal tendencies. Trevor ends up being arrested and taken to a detention center, and in his absence Freya reveals to Danny that she is pregnant with Trevor's child. Freya does not want to marry, and when she learns that Trevor has died, she decides to run away and hide in an abandoned house they have spent the night in before. There she suffers a miscarriage and hypothermia. At the hospital, Danny reveals to Freya that he has figured out who lived at the abandoned house they both were so interested in, namely Freya's biological mother who died when she tried to give birth by herself in the house. Through his investigation Danny has learned that Freya's mother was a prostitute. In order to escape the stigma that comes with this new information, Freya decides to run away. She promises to keep in touch, but adult Danny reveals that he never saw or heard of Freya again. Freya's pain is caused by experiences heavily associated with femininity, pregnancy and miscarriage and bad reputation for sexual promiscuity. Like in *The Summer Of'42*, she is unattainable because of a relationship that is portrayed as the root of her pain.

This pattern continues in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. We follow the protagonist Charlie as he starts high school and finds comfort in a new group of friends. He especially grows attached to Sam, a girl a couple years older than him who he becomes great friends with. He reveals to the viewer that Sam has a bad reputation due to her sexually active past, but that he is in no place to judge her. As Charlie falls in love with Sam, she starts dating an older guy who ends up cheating on her. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is different from the other examples, as Sam actually gets a happy ending despite the hardship she went through (the film is also significantly more recent than the other examples, as it was released in 2012). The film ends with Charlie watching Sam as the two of them ride in a car together with their friend. However, it is still a story told in retrospect about the protagonists teenage years and how they were defined by his relationship to Sam. A girl who was unattainable to him because of a relationship with another boy, portrayed as the root of her misery, and whose pain was caused by society's negative view of sexually active girls. This view is something none of the films work to challenge in any substantial way, even though it's a big part of the narrative. Instead, it's framed as sins they can be loved in spite of. Sins that make them worthy to remember.

2.5 The morbid teenage girl as a cinematic ideal

2.5.1 The attractive deadness in women

We have been shown repeatedly throughout history that teenage girls are worthy of remembrance because of their pain and trauma, specifically pain and trauma associated with femininity. The male protagonist is represented as a compassionate, good person for loving her in spite of her baggage. He loves her even though she fails at living up to the ideal of the teenage girl who is happy, carefree and causes no trouble. She is more work and harder to love than a teenage girl is allowed to be, but he loves her anyway. In the 1940s when the teenage girl first started to be more commonly portrayed as a troubled, sinful creature, a counter ideal to the picture perfect simple teenage girl, started taking form. Back then, the teenage girls on screen could be troubled and sinful, but were scolded and rebuked for their bad behaviour, Nash explains.[71] In the 1950s when it started to become more common to represent teenagers in general as sympathetic and complex characters, the representation of the troubled teenage girl changed.[72] This is where the troubled teenage girl transformed into a creature that could be loved despite her troubled nature, which is the creature we see in the previously mentioned films. As long as she herself suffers from these sins (the sin of being unattainable, of sexual promiscuity, the sin of pregnancy), she can still be loved by the protagonist. Not only does her pain highlight her femininity and vice versa, it also gives the protagonist a chance to be portrayed as a non judgemental and compassionate person. This concept, in combination with the centuries old ideal of the romantic deadness of women, is what makes trauma and pain so romantic in teenage girls, especially if self inflicted.

Magda Romanska writes about the romantic beauty of the dead female body in *Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia*. She explains how Shakespeare's character Ophelia perfectly represents, and contributed to, the romantic deadness of women being seen as a feminine ideal.[73] Romanska explains that according to the patriarchy's ideals the female body has reached the full potential for its beauty once it's dead.[74] She describes how this ideal is still evident in the fashion magazines of today, where we see models channeling Ophelia's fragility and deadness in order to

[71] *Ibid., 131*

[72] *Ibid., 168*

[73] *Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia", Women's Studies, 6, 34 (September 2005), 486, 25/4/2020, doi: 10.1080/00497870500277914*

[74] *Romanska, 486*

achieve the aesthetic of the morbid female ideal.[75] Nash also touches on the ideal of the dead (passive) female body. She states that part of why the dead or sleeping female body is deemed attractive and has been portrayed as such in popular culture over the century is due to the fact that in its unconscious form it is completely without agency and therefore incapable of threatening the male dominance.[76] If you weigh in the history of romantic portrayal of the morbid teenage girl, it is only logical that the suicidal and self harming teenage girl becomes an ideal in and of itself. Through this lense, the act of self harm can then be likened to the act of putting on makeup. A woman making an effort to come as close to the female ideal as possible is an attractive quality in and of itself. Being suicidal, self inflicting pain and self hatred is a female ideal not only because it brings her closer to the romantic deadness of the female body, but also because a troubled woman is an opportunity for a man to love her in spite of this, and be seen as compassionate and good.[77]

2.5.2 Cool, self-destructive girlhood on TV

The portrayal of the suicidal and self hating teenage girl is to this day very common in teen oriented media, especially in television. Laura Palmer from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, Mark Frost, 1990-1991) is a classic example of a teenage girl constantly inflicting pain and danger upon herself, only to be properly loved and romanticised once she's dead. Once we've seen her beautiful corpse, and learned about her traumatic life to the full extent. In more recent days, we see the morbid teenage girl twice in the british teen show *Skins* (E4, 2007-2013). Both in Cassie in season one and two, and in Effy in season three and four. Cassie's character arc revolves around her anorexia, and Effy's around her depression and drug abuse. Both of them attempt to commit suicide, and are both portrayed as highly attractive. In the teen show *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-) we follow Rue in her battle with drug addiction and suicidal tendencies, and in the same show we follow Jules who self harms through abusive sex. In *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-) we are introduced to the tragic life of Hannah Baker through a series of tapes she left behind as a suicide note, based on a book from 2007 by the same name. In the first season of *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-), we follow Violet, a dark, morbid teenage girl who is depressed and suicidal and repeatedly expresses these thoughts through voice over. In all of these examples, the morbid teenage girl and her act of self hatred and harm is framed within a cool, romantic aesthetic.

[75] *Romanska, 487*

[76] *Nash, 21*

[77] *In reality, her troubled nature is of course not something he loves her in spite of but because of, since female pain as we have established is closely connected to her femininity, and the ideal of the morbid teenage girl.*

Highlighting her morbid tendencies as something that gives her depth, complexity and intelligence. Although it may not be intentional, there is no denying the romance these arcs are framed within. And so, the romance of the morbid teenage girl lives on.

2.5.3 The Lisbon Sisters' final strive for eternal feminine beauty

The portrayal of the dead or sleeping teenage girl, the passive body as ideal beauty and attractiveness, is an old trope one can find in fairy tales (such as Snow White) and classical art, as well as in the popular culture of the twentieth century, Nash describes.[78] In addition to how this makes her incapable of threatening male dominance, it also allows her to be properly studied. Nash describes how the body of the teenage girl in the popular culture of the 1900s has been treated as a scientific object, something to be examined.[79] The alienation of the teenage girl, her status as a mythical object impossible to understand, makes her less of a human being and more of an object of fascination. Her passive, dead or sleeping body then allows her to be probed and inspected. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon sisters exist as objects to be studied and examined by the narrator and his friends. What's left of them is viewed as evidence rather than memories, which the narrator describes early on in the film; "Now whenever we run into each other at lunches or parties we find ourselves going over the evidence one more time. All to understand those five girls, who, after all these years we can't get out of our minds."

On several occasions the narrator describes how he will never come to understand the sisters, no matter how hard he tries. At one point he says the following: "We knew that they knew everything about us, and that we couldn't fathom them at all", insinuating that the sisters are well aware of their position as mythical objects in the eyes of the boys. This knowledge plays an important part in how the story ends. The last thing the sisters do before they take their own lives, is invite the boys over to their house. Lux urges them to come over. She lets the boys think that they are there to save the sisters by helping them get away from their strict parents. Once they get there Lux tells the boys to wait a few minutes, and leaves them alone in the house. The boys start wandering around, and stumble upon Bonnie's dead body hanging from the ceiling. As they start running out of the house they run past Theresa's dead body on the floor. A few moments later the voice over reveals how all the sisters had all died while the boys were standing in the house, thinking they were waiting for them. Why Lux invited them over to find their dead bodies remains a mystery to

[78] *Nash, 21*

[79] *Ibid., 22*

the boys. But when you take the history of the morbid teenage girl into consideration, it becomes a lot more clear. The sisters are well aware of the boys' intense fascination with them. By becoming dead, passive bodies they fulfill the female ideal of the romance of feminine misery. They embody the female ideal of succumbing to patriarchal violence, of allowing oneself to become completely non threatening to male dominance. They embody the female ideal of allowing oneself to be examined and probed, and the ideal of eternal beauty of the postmortal female body. Romanska describes the lust for this final form of beauty in her analysis of Ophelia: "Denied her voice and her right to listen, she receives post-mortal beauty as her consolation prize."[80] By ceasing to exist they give in to the pain inflicted upon them by patriarchal society, and gain post-mortal beauty in return. By inviting the boys over and making them witnesses, they have reached what Romanska calls the full potential for female beauty.

One of the boys in front of Bonnie's dead body.

Like noted before, teenage girls become worthy of remembrance thanks to their trauma, and especially their deaths. What the sisters are doing when they set the boys up to come face to face with their dead bodies, is securing their legacy and place in their memories. More than two decades later the boys are still examining the sisters and trying to figure out who (or what) they were. The sisters taking control over their fate this way can be looked at as a way of gaining back their agency,

[80] *Romanska, 498*

which is what Monden argues in his text.[81] However, that idea only furthers the idea of female suicide as something romantic as it frames it as something that leaves the now dead teenage girl as the winner. The idea that the teenage girl can gain her agency back this way is fasle, it's a trap to trick her into thinking she has something to gain off of fulfilling the patriarchal ideal of the beautiful, dead female body. Now the female body is completely passive. The teenage girl is forever remembered through her self harm, feminine pain and the attractiveness of it all. And finally she allows her body to be studied and examined as the mythical object it is believed to be.

2.6 The female spectacle and the male witness

2.6.1 Laura Mulvey's theory on the female spectacle and the male gaze

Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, where the term the male gaze was first coined, is essential when analysing a film like *The Virgin Suicides* that relies so heavily upon it. It is a film where the act of the male protagonist looking at his female object of desire is what makes up the entire narrative. The objects of desire in question, the Lisbon sisters, exist merely as objects to be looked at and desired. They stop the narrative flow by being shown in slow motion and sweeping camera movements and are being viewed through a voyeuristic lense that highlights their femininity and eroticness, and their existence is more as representatives of nostalgia, fear and desire, than as actual characters. They are a clear example of what Mulvey describes as the female spectacle.

In her essay Mulvey describes how the mainstream film language has coded a unique erotic way of looking, specifically applied to the act of looking at women.[82] She describes how cinema is inherently voyeuristic, as it gives the viewer a peak into a private world where they are always looking in from the outside.[83] The paradox of the cinema consists of looking at someone as an object in a voyeuristic manner, and at the same time looking at someone (or through the eyes of someone) and seeing oneself in an act of self identification, Mulvey writes.[84] The woman embodies this paradox, as she is most often viewed through the eyes of the male protagonist who acts as a stand in for the viewer.[85] While the man holds the power to move the narrative forward, the woman

[81] *Monden, 154*

[82] *Mulvey, 60*

[83] *Ibid., 61*

[84] *Ibid., 62*

[85] *Ibid., 63*

freezes the narrative, Mulvey continues. As well as moving the story forward, the male protagonist also holds the power turn the woman into an erotic fantasy by the act of looking, a power now in the hands of the viewer for whom he acts as a surrogate.[86] The woman thus exists as a spectacle. Instead of moving the narrative forward, she exists to represent the desires and fears of the male protagonist.[87] As a character herself she has little to no importance, she is simply an icon.[88] We see her feminine beauty and attractiveness through the eyes of the protagonist who based on his actions holds the power to determine the camera movements and editing through which she is framed, Mulvey writes.[89]

Mulvey describes this as fetishistic scopophilia, it's not about the power of changing or controlling the female character (as she often does not contribute to the narrative and doesn't have to develop), but controlling the way in which she is looked at.[90] This act of the male protagonist (and therefore viewer) looking at the woman is part of the female spectacle, Mulvey concludes.[91] When the eyes of the protagonist and the viewer merge, Mulvey describes it like this: "For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no man's land outside its own space and time."[92] The spectacle of the woman transforms her into an icon of eroticness, fear and desire for the male protagonist, and she is no longer confined to the concept of time.

2.6.2 Who controls the narrative?

Although the narrative revolves around the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*, the sisters are not what drives the narrative forward. They simply exist within the mind of the narrator who moves the story forward through his memories and fantasies of the sisters. While one could argue that they do affect the narrative by taking their own lives, I would argue that they still are powerless over the story being told. We know from the very beginning that the sisters will be dead by the end of the movie. What drives the story forward is not the acts of the sisters, but the narration and memories of the narrator, who shows the parts of the sisters he finds interesting and attractive (which is their femininity and their pain). The story being told is not about the Lisbon sisters, but

[86] *Ibid., 63*

[87] *Ibid., 63*

[88] *Ibid., 63*

[89] *Ibid., 64*

[90] *Ibid., 65*

[91] *Ibid., 68*

[92] *Ibid., 63*

a story about how they affected the narrator's life, pre and post their deaths. Apart from their suicides, their actions have very little to do with this fascination as the interaction between the narrator and the sisters is sparse. They actually meet in real life no more than four times, and only talk on the phone once. It is also revealed early on that the boys' obsession with the Lisbon sisters started before the narrative of the film, as we're told one of the boys was spying on Cecilia when she was found after her first suicide attempt. Meaning, the sisters had to do nothing except exist as attractive and unattainable, to spark the boys' interest.

2.6.4 The "To-be-looked-at-ness" of the Lisbon sisters

As mentioned before we see this fascination portrayed in the film going by the use of surrealist effects such as the extreme close ups and distortion of time. The act of looking and taking the sisters in from the outside, is part of the fascination. The ten different extreme close ups of Lux where she is reduced to fragments of her body and the romantic fantasy images of the girls show us just this. One of these fantasy images is shown two minutes into the film, where we see a double exposure image of Lux winking into the camera as she stands among the clouds. When we're introduced to the rest of the sisters three minutes into the film the sisters seem to freeze time. As they step out of the car one by one, the frame freezes and their names appear next to their faces as the narrator tells us their age. Just like Mulvey describes the female spectacle, the Lisbon sisters freeze time and slow down the narrative, in order to remind the viewer of their femininity and attractiveness, locating the desires of the narrator. Throughout the film we only see the sisters by themselves (not surrounded by the boys or their parents) on three occasions, all of these scenes no longer than a minute, and most of the time we see them through the eyes of one of the boys, gazing at them from across the street or through fantasy images. At one point the voyeurism becomes even more blatantly obvious, when we even see Lux through a telescope as the boys spy on her from their balcony. The voyeuristic looking is always present in *The Virgin Suicides*, as the sisters main purpose is to be looked at.

2.6.5 The anonymous witness

The fact that we as viewers know so little about the boys, makes this voyeuristic view even stronger. Although the film is told from their perspective, they are hard to identify. Their names are only mentioned in passing and it's hard to remember who is who due to how little we see their faces. With the boys being close to anonymous, they are the perfect surrogate for the viewer. We already know that what we see is a story told through memories of the narrator, but having the boys be this unidentifiable makes it even more clear that this is a story being told from a very clear point

of view. But despite this anonymity and the fact that we don't actually know who out of the boys is the narrator, we still feel closer to him than to any of the sisters. While the film revolves around the Lisbon sisters and they do take up most of the screen time, they are still portrayed as mysteries impossible to understand. They are unknowable. But when it comes to the narrator, we know many of his secrets and desires despite his anonymity. By creating a close to anonymous and at the same time intimate narrator the film puts us directly into his mind while he tries to solve the mystery that is the Lisbon sisters. This is the paradox Mulvey describes that creates the female spectacle. Identifying oneself with the protagonist, who has the power to turn the female characters into erotic objects.

The sisters making a choice and ending their own lives could be seen as holding power over the narrative, if it wasn't for the narrator. Had the narrator not told us from the very beginning that the sisters would be dead by the end of the film, their suicides would have been what moved the narrative forward. But due to his narration and the title of the film, we know how their story will end. Every image of them is now viewed with both the narrator and the viewer having their death in mind. If the narration did not exist, or was at least not told in past tense, the actions of the sisters would impact the story. Now the narrator tells us before it has already happened, and thus the climax is not what the sisters will do, but how it affects the narrator. By framing the story this way the narrator has turned himself into a witness to an unsolved crime. What we see is a witness's story being told. In the role of the witness, the narrator's gaze is now made important. This also what Wyatt argues in his analysis.[93] However, the act of the role of the witness in this case is voyeuristic in and of itself, and part of the female spectacle. Mulvey discusses this in her text, and uses *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) as an example. When the story places the female character not on the same side as the spectator, but as the one being voyeured on, she immediately is made more attractive, Mulvey argues.[94] When the protagonist sees her the way the audience would see her on a screen, (Mulvey uses Lisa in *Rear Window* as an example) she is immediately made more attractive, thanks to the language of eroticness cinema has created.[95] In *The Virgin Suicides* the narrator places himself as a witness for several reasons. Firstly in order to justify his gazing by giving it some kind of importance. Secondly, because by viewing the sisters from afar

[93] *Wyatt, 48*

[94] *Mulvey, 67*

[95] *Ibid., 67*

the way one would in a movie, the sisters fulfill the fantasy of the female spectacle. By existing as spectacles, they fulfil another female ideal created by the media in popular culture.

Thirdly, by becoming witnesses they can view themselves as innocent bystanders. While Wyatt argues that the boys turn themselves into witnesses in order to process the trauma caused by the tragedy, this also allows the boys to free themselves from any blame. The film generally presents the parents, especially Mrs. Lisbon, as who to blame for the sisters death. We first see this early on in the scene where Cecilia's therapist suggests that their strict parenting was the reason for Cecilia's suicide attempt, followed by shots of Mrs Lisbon looking offended. We see it again in the end where we hear Mrs Lisbon say the following: "None of my daughters lacked for any love. There was plenty of love in our house. I never understood why…", showing that she still did not recognize any faults in her parenting as everything she did was out of love. It is Mrs Lisbon that forces Lux to burn her rock records, and it's Mrs Lisbon who is hesitant to letting the girls go to the dance with her husband more so following her lead. The narrator also informs us that Mrs Lisbon adds three inches of fabric to the sisters prom dresses, and it's Mrs Lisbon who yells at Lux when she comes back after her night with Trip. Unlike his wife, Mr Lisbon is a more of a sympathetic character. We never see him set any of the strict rules, and he is the one who manages to convince his wife to let the sisters go to the prom. The film makes it clear that in the narrator's mind the sisters' death are a result of Mrs Lisbon's inability to separate love and control. By doing this, both the father and the boys are left without blame, even though it's a story about the effects the patriarchy has on the teenage girl. By positioning themselves as witnesses, the boys don't have to take responsibility for their reproduction of patriarchal ideals. They don't have to take responsibility for spying on Cecilia through the bathroom window, gazing at Lux through a telescope, collecting their belongings, reading Cecilia's diary, and most importantly, turning the sisters pain into the very basis of what makes them so attractive. They don't have to take responsibility for the fact that these actions reproduce the same ideals that Mr and Mrs Lisbon force upon their daughters. They don't have to take responsibility for the fact that they're reproducing an ideal that makes this pain a goal for the teenage girl.

The film ends with a speech from the narrator that starts with the following sentence: "It didn't matter in the end how old they had been or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them". The fact is, they didn't know the girls for more than their pain and unattainability, and their death is the reason they remember them to this day. Their pain and unattainability is ultimately what they love about them. And by turning the sisters into spectacles they become objects of nostalgia that

exist outside of time and space, outside of the real world. Turning them into spectacles diminishes the boys' involvement in this pain, as they were only looking in from the outside.

3.Conclusion

What one must keep in mind is that in my analysis my perspective is limited to the western, and especially American representations of the teenage girl, as that is the history I have studied. However due to the fact that American cinema has dominated the market for most of the twentieth century, its representations will have affected the rest of the market (and general culture) as well. However, since one can find examples of this trope being used during different parts of the century, and the fact that its roots can be traced back to the earliest cinematic portrayals of the teenage girl, it becomes evident that it's a relevant part of female representation that should be studied. As previously mentioned though, this phenomenon is not just limited to the cinema, and by looking at different parts of popular culture such as literature and music, one could further theorize about the development of this trope, and its effect on cinema and the culture at large. The sexualization of the teenage girl in popular culture is a subject often discussed, but its direct connection to her trauma, and this trauma in and of itself being portrayed as a romantic and nostalgic ideal, is fairly underdiscussed, which I hope to have successfully highlighted.

By looking at the history of the representation of the teenage girl in cinema, the trope of traumatic female adolescence being used as a tool to create male nostalgia makes sense. Girlhood being closely connected to new, modern culture makes her an inherently contemporary archetype, but when viewing her in retrospect she becomes inherently nostalgic, a representative of lost time. Her status as something other and alien, created by her double lack of abilities makes her mythical and ethereal. The lack of abilities (agency and rationality, never a threat to the adult male) also makes her especially easy to take advantage of, and thus makes her especially attractive. Her femininity is then marked by her youth, because as we can see the ideal femininity heavily involves being subjected to patriarchal pain. Her status as mythical and alien, along with her lack of agency and rationality makes the dead body of the teenage girl the most extreme ideal of morbid femininity. The dead, passive body of the female teenager represents the patriarchal trauma she is the victim of, her self inflicted pain as well as her status as a mythical object to be examined. All of which are part of the perfect femininity, which can only fully be found in the teenage girl. Thus, traumatic female adolescence becomes male nostalgia.

This trope is what Sofia Coppola leans on in *The Virgin Suicides*. By structuring the story around the memories of the narrator and making it a film based on his mental images, the fact that we're being shown an incredibly subjective view of the sisters is made evident. This is highlighted by the usage of surrealistic effects such as the extreme close ups, double exposures and the distortion of time, as well as the overtly romantic fantasy images. This along with the relative anonymity of the boys creates a clear point of view, which exaggerates the sisters positions as spectacles. By viewing the sisters mainly through looks and gazes with the usage of the effects previously mentioned, she furthers their position as concepts rather than characters. This showcases how they exist outside of time and space, making it clear that what we're seeing is an illusion that now exists in the secondary memory of the narrator. This clear point of view makes the film's voyeurism obvious, and the boys' status as witnesses is on the forefront. Finally, by forcing the boys to come face to face with the dead bodies of the sisters they are for a split second confronted with the reality. In that scene they are no longer spectacles. They don't exist outside of space and time, they no longer exist at all. Coppola uses and plays on the trope of the nostalgic pain of female adolescence, but unlike the earlier examples that use this trope, the protagonist, and therefore the viewers, are abruptly confronted with the reality of the situation. When we are confronted with their dead bodies, we are confronted with the nostalgic ideal of painful female adolescence, and it's non nostalgic reality. Or alternatively, takes the exploitation of the dead teenage girl to the extreme.

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