Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*

"Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances."
- Robert Hass

Sofia Coppola's 2000 film *The Virgin Suicides*, based on the 1993 novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, is a meditation on longing and suburbia, filtered through the collective consciousness of a group of males looking back from adulthood at the experience of their adolescence when they were infatuated with five girls in their neighborhood—the Lisbon sisters. The film begins with the attempted suicide of the youngest girl, thirteen-year-old Cecilia, and ends with the suicides of all of them. However, *The Virgin Suicides* concerns itself not with the reasons behind the five deaths, but rather, the film concerns itself with the subjective phenomenon of longing—adolescent sexual longing, nostalgic longing for the experiences of youth, and the dilemma of both physical and temporal distance evoked by the word "longing." The suburban landscape, presented at first as a type of residential playground where children play basketball, jump through sprinklers, and eat popsicles, is particularly significant. Its mundane familiarity and uniformity act as a universal space of nostalgia for the experience of childhood at the same time as it provides an innocuous veneer for the horror and mystery that reside behind the leafy foliage and the walls of the pleasant houses, thereby enabling *The Virgin Suicides* to be seen as a "suburban Gothic." That is, the thematic concern of *The Virgin Suicides*—the destruction of childhood—is as much about anxiety as it is about longing, thus sharing similarities with a Gothic literary and filmic tradition in which fear and desire are often inextricably linked. Moreover, like contemporary Gothic and filmic culture that regularly uses suburbia to turn everyday, relatable events into terror, the use of setting in Coppola's film is an integral component in that it gives a haunting immediacy to its concern with both remembering childhood and mourning its loss.

Coppola's film is set in suburban Michigan during the 1970s, an era characterized by an awareness of and anxiety over environmental degradation. According to Val Stevens, the seventies saw the growth of the Ecology movement throughout the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe:

> With the setting up of the Conservation Society, Friends of the Earth (FOE), Greenpeace, then the Ecology Party, and, later, the Socialist Environment and Resources Association […] it seemed that there were more ways than one of destroying life on earth. Population growth […] mounting pollution of air, land and sea, all loomed as insidious, but certain means of destroying our life support systems. (9)

Such apprehension over the gradual environmental changes induced by modern industrial society had found an ominous precursor in Rachel Carson's 1962 text *Silent Spring*, which introduces a discussion of DDT and chemical pesticides with a description of "a town in the heart of America" that awakes to

a spring without birds or flowers: "A grim spectre has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know" (qtd. in Buell 642). As such, Coppola's film presents a suburban landscape dotted with trees marked for removal on account of Dutch elm disease and an atmosphere that at the end is overcome by a swamp smell arising from a spill at a Plant that has increased phosphates in the lake. Cecilia mourns the fact that another animal has been added to the endangered species list and the four eldest Lisbon sisters protest the removal of a tree from their front yard. This sense of environmental decay acts metaphorically for the narrative's account of the short lives and suicides of the five adolescent Lisbon sisters—Cecilia (Hanna Hall), Lux (Kirsten Dunst), Bonnie (Chelse Swain), Mary (A. J. Cook) and Therese (Leslie Hayman). As the film narrates: "Everyone dates the demise of our neighbourhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry." In turn, the death of both nature and the girls acts as a symbol for the idea that the growth from childhood to maturity involves the destruction of a part of the younger self. It is not for nothing that the theme to Alice O'Connor's rite-of-passage debutante party is "Asphyxiation," inspired by the chemical spill, where guests wear glittered gas masks and eat lurid green ice cream. The Lisbon sisters die while everyone else grows up. Girls their age throw debutante parties; Lux's ex-lover Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett) recalls the affair from a detoxification ranch in his middle age; and the neighborhood boys live to tell the twenty-five-year-old story of the Lisbon girls. Coppola, in an interview given for the documentary *The Making of the Virgin Suicides*, articulates the symbolic space of loss and longing occupied by the sisters:

> The story's really a reflection of these boys when they're older looking back on this time when they all had this infatuation, this obsession, with these ideal girls and these girls are kind of these magical, beautiful creatures and there's always those kind of moments in life that are magical and perfect but they never last, and then you go on and they have always left something with you.

In an interview given for the same documentary, Eugenides expresses how the girls act as figures for the lost experiences of youth and for the type of infatuation that only comes with adolescence, stating, "it's a lot about voyeurism and memory and the sort of obsessional (sic) love that you have when you're thirteen or fourteen."

In this analytical context, then, Susan Stewart's writings on suburbia seem particularly resonant:

> Let me begin with the invisibility and blindness of the suburbs […] the absence of the landscape of voyage. The suburbs present us with a negation of the present; a landscape consumed by its past and its future. Hence the two foci of the suburbs: the nostalgic and the technological. A butterchurn fashioned into an electric light, a refrigerator covered by children's drawings, the industrial "park," the insurance company's "campus" […] Here is a landscape of apprehension: close to nature, and not consumed by her; close to culture, close enough to consume her […] to walk in the suburbs is to announce a crippling, a renunciation of speed. In the suburbs only outsiders walk, while the houses are illuminated as stages, scenes of an uncertain action. In these overapparent arrangements of interior space, confusion and distance mark the light. (1)

It seems appropriate that the suburbs should be the setting for *The Virgin Suicides*—the space of nostalgia for childhood and a space within which a slippage occurs between nature and technology, thereby illuminating the tropes of dying nature and dying childhood, emblematized by the Lisbon sisters. Moreover, just as Stewart sees the suburbs as an insular landscape where "only outsiders

walk," Coppola similarly strove to film parts of the action from the view point of an outsider. Describing the deliberately theatrical arrangement of Cecilia's death scene, Coppola explains:

> I wanted it to look like the final scene of a tragic opera, so I pulled back wide […] you see it from the neighbour's perspective, from the outside. The boys are shocked, they don't understand what has happened, and the audience can't tell at first either. Cecilia looks as if she's levitating—like a magic act. You're seeing it through the haze of memory, so things are left out and things are added to it. It's not as it really happened […] Jeffrey [Eugenides] calls the Lisbons the fever dream of the boys. I wanted to make the movie a fever dream. (qtd. in Winter 144)

The rest of the film similarly drifts between dream and memory. A. O. Scott notices how the film takes advantage of the cinematic medium in order to evoke this dreamscape of recollection: "Edward Lachman, the director of photography, shoots the bright colours of the 1970s as if through a layer of gauze. His dimmed, fuzzy tones suggest the darkening shades of memory" (*New York Times* E.1:16). The neighborhood boys conjure up images of the girls in a field with a unicorn and traipsing off to exotic locations with them, where even Cecilia is not dead, but living as an Indian princess in Calcutta. The purpose of these images is to expose the fantastical element integral to understanding the discrepancy between the "real" past and the "remembered" past. That is, these images remind the audience that the film's representation of the sisters, and the past in general, reside in the collective memory of the boys, a memory that both informs and is informed by their subjective longings in the present, manifested in their dreams. Their memory of the past may be susceptible to the erosive power of time, however, the fantastical images reveal how their memories, when they are rediscovered and recalled, are able to take on an independent life colored by fantasy. Indeed, Celeste Olalquiaga recognizes this strong compatibility between memory and fantasy when describing the phenomenon of recollection:

> Memories and idle fantasies slowly conform to the irregular panorama of the psyche […] memories […] often lie peacefully sequestered in the recondite folds of our mind, patiently awaiting the moment when they will be aroused from this entrapment to fly again on the wings of fantasy. (6-7)

After this surrealist journey to exotic locations, the film narrates, "the only way we could feel close to the girls was through these impossible excursions which have scarred us forever, making us happier with dreams than wives." These visions thus suggest that it is through dreams that both spatial and temporal distances are erased. However, these dreams, in which physical and temporal proximity are possible, also make clear the fact that a real proximity to the past is impossible to achieve. It is this dilemma of an irrecoverable past that forms the basis upon which nostalgia relies. Stewart's writings on what she calls "the social disease of nostalgia" suggest that nostalgia, recalling her thoughts on suburbia as presenting a "negation of the present," is inherently inauthentic "because it does not take part in lived experience," in the "real" world of the present. That is, while still an authentic, or "real" feeling, nostalgia denies the reality of the present and attempts to give the past an authenticity that is impossible to give, and thus the past it desires is "always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack." According to Stewart, what is remarkable about the nostalgic narrative is that its very existence self-consciously hinges upon this "felt lack":

> This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. The realisation of re-union imagined by the nostalgic is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure. Nostalgia is the desire to desire. (23)

Moreover, the fact that nostalgia will always fail to reach its false goal of finding an authentic past as a lived, unmediated experience ensures nostalgia's compulsive repetition: "Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition" (Stewart 23). The neighborhood boys thus compulsively recollect their experiences of the past: "Now whenever we run into each other at business lunches or cocktail parties we find ourselves in the corner 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." Furthermore, Stewart finds that nostalgia is created in the "spaces" formed by "disjunctions of temporality." Gulfs in time constitute nostalgia's longing to erase this gulf and return to a false place of origin that it will seek over and over again and never find. No matter how many times the boys "go

over the evidence," they admit that they "will never find the piece to put them back together." In turn, these visions in Coppola's film entertain a nostalgic myth of a complete intimacy with the past that is actually lost forever, what Stewart calls the "nostalgic myth of contact and presence." Apart from these dreamlike "excursions," the boys also attempt to satisfy a nostalgic desire for a past that increasingly grows more remote by locating authenticity in material objects:

> As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by the nostalgic myth of contact and presence. "Authentic" experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic and other fictive domains are articulated. In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance. (133)

Beginning with the procurement of Cecilia's diary, the boys "collect everything we could of theirs," and the film visually catalogues various and sundry items such as year book photographs, invitations, eyelash curlers, lipstick, records, hair brushes, and nail polish. This process of locating authenticity in material objects is, then, a legitimate means of attempting to satisfy nostalgic desire, acting, like dreams, as a medium through which the temporal disjunctions that constitute nostalgia are resolved through their dissolution. For an instant, desire is fulfilled. Moreover, echoing Stewart's writings on suburbia as a landscape of stagnation, the death of the Lisbon girls constitutes their entrapment in the stagnated world of nostalgia, their memory forever trapped in objects, repetitive dreams, and rows of pleasant houses on suburban streets. The boys will always be outsiders looking in and back at the Lisbon house, and the girls will always be inside, illuminating a lack of not only temporal, but also physical, proximity: "They hadn't heard us calling, still did not hear us, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time."

Of course, *The Virgin Suicides* is not only about remembering adolescence, it is also about mourning its loss and, as such, Coppola's film disturbs its fanciful nostalgic narrative by evoking a sense of unease characteristic of a Gothic literary and filmic tradition. Indeed, Marie Mulvey-Roberts, quoting Angela Carter, argues that for a text to be defined as "Gothic" it needs only to retain "a singular moral function—that of provoking unease" (xvii). Since Gothic as a literary form was initiated by Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, which features a haunted castle, supernatural elements, a mad prince, and frightened heroines, Gothic tropes such as setting, atmosphere, and style have been employed in literature and film to provoke this fundamental sense of anxiety. During the evolution of the Gothic cultural tradition, these tropes have increasingly been applied to mundane or familiar settings, such as suburbia or high school corridors, in order to enhance their disruptive effects. The literary work of Stephen King, films such as Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and Sam Mendes's 1999 *American Beauty*, and the television series *Desperate Housewives* have explored the dark side of small town or suburban life through the use of Gothic tropes such as the supernatural, violence, death, and entrapment.[1] In the case of *The Virgin Suicides*, all these tropes are employed in order to represent the dark side of its suburban haze of adolescent life. The Lisbon house, which Stanley Kauffman calls "the prettified locus of the death" (31), becomes the haunted castle through which its darkened rooms and basement the neighborhood boys creep only to stumble upon the lifeless bodies of the Lisbon girls. After the girls are grounded for Lux's failure to make curfew following their group date to a school dance, Lux's complaint that she "can't breathe in here" is reminiscent of Madeleine's entombment, or live burial, in the sleeping compartment of Roderick's house in Edgar Allen Poe's 1839 tale "The Fall of the House of Usher," while the various sightings of

Cecilia's ghost by Mr. Lisbon (James Woods) and the neighborhood boys Chase Buell (Anthony Desimone) and Tim Weiner (Jonathan Tucker) echo the preoccupation of many Gothic texts with the supernatural and the inexplicable. David Punter's suggestion that, in Gothic texts, the ghost "comes to menace the bodily with its limitations" (2) is poignant considering that *The Virgin Suicides* can be seen as concerned with the idea that the body's aging process involves the degradation and destruction of a part of the younger self.

Moreover, Coppola's film shares similarities with the Gothic due to its excessive qualities—its concern with obsessive longing. Clive Bloom asserts that "Gothic signifies a writing of excess" as much as it signifies social disturbance, and goes on to identify this theory of excess with "theories of the excessive body" such as blood, sweat, and tears (4). In turn, Coppola's film makes use of bodily functions to enhance its concern with the excessive sexual longing of adolescence. Peter Sisten (Chris Hale), invited over to the Lisbon house for dinner, rummages through their bathroom, sniffing a tube of lipstick and looking in awe at a closet full of boxes of Tampax tampons, and Dominic Palazzolo (Joe Dinicol), an Italian exchange student, declares his love for the young tennis player Diana Porter as he watches her wipe sweat from her brow. He even jumps from the roof of his relatives' house "to prove the validity of his love" after Diana leaves on vacation with her parents. However, while the film can be read as a meditation on the subjective longing of males, the film also provides episodes that focus on excessive female longing for a male object of desire—Trip Fontaine. As the film narrates, "all the girls at our school were in love with Trip." The film offers a fantastical montage in which he struts through the high school corridor to Heart's "Magic Man" as dozens of girls turn their heads in his direction. As the soundtrack implies, Trip, like the Lisbon girls, is able to take on magical properties, and the camera meditates on his face and body as he smokes a joint in his car and floats topless in his above-ground pool. Even Lux is shown, in a moment of superimposed imagery, to have Trip's name written in Magic Marker on her underpants. Cecilia's diary earlier reveals that Lux had written the name of Kevin the garbage man on her underwear and "cried on her bed all day" when her mother had bleached out all the "Kevins." Coppola's film, then, can be seen as concerned with gender-neutral excessive longing. Of course, according to Eugenides, this kind of excess only comes "when you're thirteen or fourteen" and, for Punter, this time of excess is ideal for the Gothic writer. Indeed, adolescence is "integral to Gothic." On a physical level, adolescence lends itself to "theories of the excessive body":

> Adolescence might be seen as a time when there is a fantasized inversion of boundaries. To put it very simply: we exist on a terrain where what is inside finds itself outside (acne, menstrual blood, rage) and what we think should be visibly outside (heroic dreams, attractiveness, sexual organs) remain resolutely inside and hidden. (Punter 6)

On an emotional level, adolescence certainly signifies an excess of desire:

> Gothic heroes are "incommensurate." Their relation to the world is posited on a pure trajectory of desire, with no appreciation of limits; the limits are for later, for an unimaginable maturity which will be marked by the ever-impending rule of law, when our bodies will bow down to the rule of "that which is" […] Thus Gothic will always appear to have to do with a kind of madness, an inexplicability: as Stephen King puts it in *Christine* (1983), the assemblages are "teenage car songs," "teenage love songs," "teenage death songs," all with lyrics never quite intelligible to the concerned adult. But there is therefore also a further shadow; as Gothic eludes the sliding under the sign of social normalcy, so also it carries with it tremulous memories of a past childhood (another "point of origin") in which freedom did not have to be defended so vigorously, in which self-consciousness had not reared its head. (Punter 13)

In this analytical context, then, it is understandable that many of the adults in the film are shown to be ignorant or misguided. After Cecilia's first suicide attempt, Mrs. Buell (Sherry Miller) suggests, "that girl didn't want to die. She wanted out of that house," to which Mrs. Scheer (Dawn Greenhalgh) adds, "she wanted out of that decorating scheme." An adult guest at Alice's debutante party jokingly bids farewell to the "cruel world" and falls into the swimming pool. He climbs out of the water and sarcastically cries, "I'm a teenager—I've got problems!" After the suicides, newsreaders confuse details and mix up the names of the girls, while Mrs. Lisbon (Kathleen Turner), who forces Lux to burn her rock records and tyrannically punishes her daughters by taking them out of school and

incarcerating them in the house, says in hindsight, "none of my daughters lacked for any love. There was plenty of love in our house. I never understood why." Her ineffectual husband talks to plants and sits staring up at the model solar system in his classroom. He hints at the adolescence he has lost when, during a conversation with Trip about football, he proudly remarks, "I was a safety in my day." Thus, attempts to blame the suicides on the parents—Chris Chang, while accepting that the suicides are essentially inexplicable, nonetheless suggests that "Turner, with a severe maternal air […] is not exactly above suspicion" (73)—are for the most part futile when it is considered, at least on a thematic level, that the parents are more victims of the limits of maturity and thus doomed never to understand the excessive teenage passion and angst of their children, rather than aggressors of the suicides. Indeed, Coppola's film can be seen as a dark artistic expression of the experience of anyone who has looked back on the obsessive crushes or rebellious actions of their teenage years and thought to themselves, "What was I thinking?" Moreover, the neighborhood boys, from the vantage point of twenty-five-years later and thus in their middle age, are also destined never to uncover the mystery of the Lisbon sisters. As they narrate, "in the end we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptiness mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name." As Punter observes, Gothic "carries with it tremulous memories of a past childhood," and as such the neighborhood boys are destined only to speculate and dream about the past. The suicides must remain a mystery never to be solved, like nostalgia itself that never finds an end point but instead runs disconsolately round and round in the mind, dependent on the fantasy of memory and the evocative inanimate objects that the past leaves behind. Toward the end of the film the camera hovers over the empty, dimly lit Lisbon

house while the neighborhood boys narrate, "[…] what lingered after them was not life, but the most trivial list of mundane facts." It is no wonder, then, that the film's website is cluttered with these banalities: photographs, album covers, and the cover art for the aptly titled board game "Mystery Date."

Like the seemingly banal material vestiges of the past, the suburbs are loaded with significance in Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, acting as a universal space of childhood experience, a space onto which is projected both the hope and hopelessness of nostalgic longing—the hope for a return to an authentic past and the hopelessness of the fact that this past is lost forever. In fact, Coppola herself lives in the suburbs and drew upon her own residential status as inspiration:

> There's something weird about it. It's appealing to me because I live in suburbia. I've seen photos of suburbs in Iceland and Japan and here in America, and there's always something similar about them. They have a really similar feeling. All over the world, the suburban experience is the same. (qtd. in *Denver Post* 92)

As the camera sweeps over the leafy suburban street, the film ends, poignantly, with this sense of universal longing, narrating, "it didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but that we had loved them." Over the rolling credits comes the music of Air and the vocals of Gordon Tracks, and the audience is left with an eloquent summary of the film's ultimate preoccupation with excessive teenage longing in a traditional childhood space:

> *I'm a high school lover*
> *And you're my favourite flavour*
> *Love takes hold*
> *Of my soul*
> *You're my playground love.*

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Note

[1] Particularly noteworthy here is Stephen King's interest in the end of childhood. Rob Reiner's film *Stand by Me* (1986), adapted from King's short story "The Body," tells of four twelve-year-old boys from the small American town Castle Rock who become privy to the whereabouts of Ray Brower, another twelve-year-old boy who had been hit by a train while on an excursion to pick blueberries. Before telling the police, the boys set out on a journey to see the body for themselves. The tale is a meditation on the end of innocence, symbolized by the dead body, as much as it is a nostalgic celebration of the adventure of adolescence.

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