

## Generalities

### The Virgin Suicides, directed by Sofia Coppola, screenplay by Coppola, from the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides

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At the center of *The Virgin Suicides* are five sisters growing up in a comfortable Detroit suburb in the 1970s, all of whom take their own lives within the space of a year. The film is narrated collectively by a group of neighborhood boys, now older, who idolized and idealized the five girls.

The first sister to kill herself is the youngest, Cecilia (Hanna R. Hall). A doctor treating the girl after her first attempt at suicide remarks, “You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets.” Cecilia calmly replies, “Obviously, doctor, you’ve never been a 13-year-old girl.” Her second and successful effort to take her own life delivers a blow from which her sisters and parents perhaps never recover.

Nonetheless, her older sister Lux (Kirsten Dunst) makes an effort to have a life. She takes up with a handsome fellow student, Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett). They make a lovely couple. Unfortunately, Trip is overpowered by his feelings for Lux, or perhaps her physical reality, and abandons her the night of the big dance. Her arrival home at dawn sets off a family crisis. The girls are taken out of school, virtually imprisoned in their own home. Their mass suicide is in part a protest.

One of the themes of the original novel and Sofia Coppola’s film might be that the gap between male fantasy about female sensuality and sexuality and their reality has potentially catastrophic consequences. Another might be that any effort to stifle this sensuality and sexuality may also prove disastrous. In fact, various forces are at work destroying the girls, including their own inability or unwillingness to locate a secure or coherent place for themselves in the world.

The film suggests that adolescent girls are unhappy,

and that the people and institutions in their lives are incapable of understanding, much less addressing this unhappiness. As far as it goes, this seems a legitimate theme to pursue.

However, the film doesn’t go much farther than this level of generality. The excuse for the diffuse and ‘dreamy’ feel of the thing is that this is a collective memory, an idealized memory at that. I don’t think this is a legitimate excuse; memory can produce quite distinct, if distorted or false, images, and, anyway, the result is artistically unsatisfying. Everything simply seems vague, unfocused. For example, there is hardly a hint of the mid-1970s (aside from the soundtrack), or of the American Midwest, or of a suburban social milieu. The lack of concreteness and precision isn’t the result of hazy memory, but of limited artistic abilities.

The general diffuseness extends to every aspect of the film. The director doesn’t know what attitude to adopt toward the family—whether to smirk at its tribulations or sympathize with them, so she does both, and the two approaches negate one another. We’re left with little feeling for them. The attitude to fantasy is likewise contradictory. Presumably we’re meant to criticize the boys’ relatively banal dreams about the girls, creatures they hardly know. By casting attractive and alluring actresses, almost nothing like typical suburban girls, the film tends to reinforce fantasy; it adds its own manipulations to the mix. That can’t be helpful.

The worst thing is that the deaths themselves leave us more or less unaffected. Somehow the director, despite her undoubted sincerity, treats the events too lightly. The suicide of one girl or boy is a horrible event. It’s almost unimaginable that someone that young would choose not to taste life, even though we know its

difficulties. *Mass* suicide of the young is that much more horrifying and unimaginable. At that point such an episode, by the logic of its own implications, becomes a *social* tragedy. One would want to know all about the circumstances, to make sense of them, to do everything in one's power to ensure that such an event never took place again. One might even be obliged to ask: why are so many people so unhappy in the "greatest nation on earth"?

But *The Virgin Suicides* is an essentially complacent work. The emphasis is not on making sense of the deaths, nor on a critique on the girls' conditions of life, except in the most obvious manner (the mother represses them and the father stands by and watches). The director irresponsibly turns the suicides into something ineffable, mysterious, almost inevitable. Their dramatic presentation in the end is something of a gimmick.

We only see outlines of a drama, of tragedy. Like *Girl, Interrupted* and *American Beauty*, although more honest and straightforward than those works, *The Virgin Suicides* is an inadequate view of American life. All the truly difficult problems, the ones that matter, are sidestepped.



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