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The Sound of Memory in Sofia Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides*

Sophia Coppola’s 1999 directorial debut, *The Virgin Suicides*, is an adaptation of Jeffery Eugenides’s novel about five teenage sisters who commit suicide, and the neighborhood boys who struggle to figure out why. While the action takes place in 1970s suburbia, the film’s scope reaches the present through the boys’ lifelong search for understanding.

The plot is set up as a mystery. That said, *The Virgin Suicides* is not really about why the Lisbon sisters took their own lives. It’s a film about memory, loss, and longing. Coppola herself alludes to this in an interview for the short film *The Making of the Virgin Suicides*: “There’s always those kinds 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” (qtd. in Hoskins 214).

This paper will explore how Coppola evokes in her audience those feelings of poignant remembering through her auditory craftsmanship. Sound is a crucial aesthetic element in *The Virgin Suicides*, but it has been mostly overlooked by scholars and critics, who instead have focused on the film’s arresting visual style. *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott writes that Coppola “succeeded in her efforts to find a visual idiom appropriate to the lush melancholy of the novel’s language” (2000). Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* also waxes poetic about Coppola’s visual artistry: “flashes of backlit cinematography…summon the characters’ lost world, with its stifled experience and receding fantasies” (2012).
While critics were right to praise Coppola for her visual craftsmanship, I will be looking beyond cinematography and mise-en-scene to investigate the overlooked, but critical, role of sound to capture and transmit the essence of memory in the film.

Sound in *The Virgin Suicides* elicits an uncanny specificity of time and place, while also leading the audience to participate in that world through the more subjective lens of feelings and recollections. Coppola’s auditory elements trigger a visceral response that leaves the viewer with a sense of both the clarity and ambiguity of memory. This paper will offer three examples of Coppola’s sound strategy - focusing on dialogue and effects, music, and voiceover narration - as evidence that in *The Virgin Suicides*, what is heard is every bit as crucial as what is seen.

In the first example, which highlights dialogue and effects, it is a few days after Cecelia, the youngest of the Lisbon sisters, has leaped from her bedroom window, landing on the spiked poles of the fence below. Neighbors gather in the Lisbons’ front yard and attempt to reestablish normalcy. Moms whisper quietly with one another, unheard by the dads across the lawn, who can only deal with the incomprehensible tragedy by organizing a project to rip out the iron fence on which Cecelia impaled herself. The men, whose voices dominate the audio track, sublimate their emotions in favor of physical strength and engineering know-how; the women try to talk through their feelings while not really going deep, taking pains not to bother the men. The specifics of what they say don’t really matter. It’s the ambient sounds of suburbia that resonate.

Coppola builds an effects track that further cements the feeling of a typical 1970’s weekend in a neighborhood where men and women stick to their proscribed roles. The loud clanking of a chain and revving of a truck motor contrast with the light tinkling of a pitcher and glasses being brought out on a tray by one of the moms. The successfully downed fence bangs across the lawn, followed by an uncomfortable silence. Here, Coppola removes the dialogue
track entirely, keeping only the background sounds of birds to button the scene. The group is left in front of the Lisbon home speechless and uncertain about what comes next.

We are going to screen this first example of Coppola’s sound strategy two times, to underscore the effect of sound: first, with visual elements only, and then again with the audio track included. This documentary-like scene, in which there are no sweeping music cues and no dramatic speeches, affirms film scholar Bree Hoskin’s observation that in The Virgin Suicides, “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” (214).

Please mute the sound when watching this first clip:

https://vimeo.com/266966921

Now, by contrast, here’s the scene again, this time with the dialogue and effects tracks intact. Please make sure the sound is turned on:

https://vimeo.com/266966438

It is the sounds that Coppola chooses in this scene which construct “mundane familiarity and uniformity.” It’s how a child might remember this day in this particular place, invisibly listening in on the world of parents, not quite understanding the subtext, but attaching to these otherwise ordinary neighborhood tonalities a darker association that will lurk in the auditory memory, poised to be triggered at some unpredictable time in the future.
While the director chooses in scenes like this one to evoke memory through the deliberate omission of musical score in favor of naturalistic sound, she carefully inserts music elsewhere in *The Virgin Suicides* to conjure the sense of a lost past. In the second example of Coppola’s sound strategy, popular song speaks not only to the emotions of these characters in this setting, but also to the personal memories of each member of the audience.

The director’s creative instincts are in synch with contemporary scientific research. In the article “Music Evokes Vivid Autobiographical Memories,” published in the journal *Memory*, neuroscientists Amy Belfi, Brett Karlan and Daniel Tranel share their clinical findings linking music and memory. The inspiration for their research is a common human experience described in the study’s introduction:

One of the most salient and evocative experiences associated with music is hearing a song that unexpectedly triggers a distant memory. A strain of “Knock Three Times,” for example, could prompt a vivid image of lying in a bed on a hot summer night with the window open, listening to the local AM radio station in your hometown when you were thirteen years old (979).

But even without scientific corroboration, Coppola intuitively understands the connection between music and memory, evident in the second example of her sound strategy. In this scene, the Lisbon parents are attempting to protect their daughters from further tragedy by keeping them at home, away from all outside influences. The girls reach out to the film’s admiring circle of boys through the communication technology of their era – the telephone. The sisters and the boys take turns dialing each other, holding the telephone receiver to a record player, and listening en masse to early ‘70s hits that speak to adolescent loneliness and angst. Even if audience members
don’t already know The Bee Gees’ “Run to Me” or Carole King’s “So Far Away,” the songs’ impact is universal and immediately felt by anyone who has ever been a teenager.

The phenomenon of shared listening amplifies the sense of longing in the scene, because while the Lisbon sisters and their admirers are ostensibly looking to connect with one another through the language of music, Coppola shows them actually existing as collections of individuals, each person basking in the ballads’ melancholy very separately from one another. Each is lost in his or her own private world of meaning, as the songs conjure up powerful yet undefinable emotions. At that age, so many things feel so meaningful, and a song – especially when accompanied by the evocative crackle of needle on vinyl - can convey some of that profound, if ambiguous, significance. What is clear is the sense of pensive separateness that each character, as well as each viewer, feels while listening.

https://vimeo.com/266966454

Even if the particular songs heard here aren’t already known by the audience, the scene brings us back to the memory of those songs that we do remember, and to our own nostalgic yearning for something that’s lost to the past, even if we don’t exactly know what it is.

While music is key in evoking memory and longing in the film, the third element of Coppola’s sound strategy – voiceover narration – may offer even greater lingering resonance. Throughout the film, a male voice guides the chronological plotline. The narrator never identifies himself as anyone more specific than a member of the group of boys obsessed with the Lisbon girls. He’s speaking decades after the suicides, yet it’s unclear exactly how old the speaker is; he doesn’t sound like a teenager, but also not like the middle-aged man that his regretful reflections
imply. Coppola’s choice to keep the speaker’s specific identity ambiguous allows the audience to join the collective “we” of the narration, which represents the boys’ shared struggle to find coherent meaning in their formative experiences.

In a scene during the girls’ parent-imposed “house arrest,” the narrator shares that “the girls’ only contact with the outside world was through the catalogs they ordered...with pictures of high-end fashions and brochures for exotic locations.” The narrator recounts how the boys buy the same catalogs, and spend hours of buddy-time together, imagining alternate realities where they join the girls on far-flung adventures, and indulge in some mild sexual aspiration. It seems to be all in fun, until the last line of the narrator’s recollection, which is almost thrown away amid the jaunty music and clicks of an imaginary slide carousel: “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.” In this plaintive moment, the narrator engages the present-day audience to experience, along with the boys, the pain of never moving past this unhealed wound, even while revisiting the details of childhood again and again.

https://vimeo.com/266966494

“Making us happier with dreams than wives;” it's in the audio track where the boys’ happy fantasies from the early 1970s collide with the narrator’s decades-later admission that neither he nor his friends have ever truly been able to move on from their shared trauma. It becomes startlingly clear that, for this collective “we,” memories – whether real or imagined - have become more important than actual life. As Bree Hoskin suggests:
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 (219).

This idea stays with the audience well after the final credits roll. Sophia Coppola’s careful construction of her film’s audio elements plays an essential, if unheralded, role in sending the viewer out of the theater full of wistful introspection. For all of us, there are sonic triggers that summon the places and experiences that molded us, memories which sometimes restrain us from being able to step into fresh chapters of life. Sophia Coppola uses this power of sound throughout The Virgin Suicides to force each viewer to confront memory, longing, and loss. While making the viewer aware of the dangerous stagnation that her characters embody, the director may also be urging each of us instead, to envision our own futures as open to all possibility; connected to, but not imprisoned by, our past.
Works Cited

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