

DISSONANCES BETWEEN DELEGATED NARRATOR AND MEGA- NARRATOR: FOUR STRATEGIES FOR UNDERMINING THE VOICE-OVER IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

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INTRODUCTION

The diverse range of complex relationships that can often be inferred from the juxtaposition of a voice-over narration and the images that accompany it can sometimes hinder the viewer's efforts to reconstruct a film's intended meaning. While some voices are in harmony with the content of the fictional framework, others hint at discords ranging from the most blatant contradictions to tiny discrepancies, from the complete absence of awareness to minor oversights, any of which result in a case of unreliable narration (Booth, 1983). A film like *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) highlights the extent to which audiovisual storytelling can be structured on the basis of a highly marked separation between the narrator's verbal statements and what can be inferred from the way the events of the story are depicted on screen.

In view of its complexity and the challenges posed by its narrative framework, this film merits an in-depth narratological analysis, although to help clear the ground some interpretations will also be drawn from other fields, which will be mentioned below.

The Virgin Suicides is one of the most prestigious works by its director, Sofia Coppola, and is also a landmark title in contemporary American independent cinema (Wyatt, 2018), specifically in one of its most productive genres, i.e., films that attempt to construct a *poetics of crisis* as a way of expressing the difficulty or even impossibility of progression through certain rites of passage, such as adolescence, mid-life crisis, or death (Backman Rogers, 2015). This *poetics of crisis* or *poetics of transformation* involves a reconstruction of clichés and genre conventions, but as part of a subversive operation that empties of the crisis of its meaning.

Ever since its release, *The Virgin Suicides* has been the subject of extensive discussion and debate from the perspective of gender studies. Scholars in this field have sought to explain the kinds of roles, archetypes and discourses underlying the film's representation of femininity, as well as how it reformulates the iconographic motifs of the feminine in popular culture (Bolton, 2011; Monden, 2013; Backman Rogers, 2015, 2019; Cook, 2021). Other researchers have identified a post-feminist sensibility in the film (Woodworth, 2010; Handyside, 2013; Kennedy, 2010, 2015), pointing out themes far removed from the critiques and claims of second- and third-wave feminism (Garrido-Rodríguez, 2020) because, in contrast to creative works in which gender is founded on determinations of class, race, politics or sexual orientation, Coppola's *heroines*, according to Woodworth (2010: 138), are Caucasian girls who spend their free time doing nothing (often in their underwear), shop compulsively, and exhibit a markedly passive attitude. On this basis, authors such as Small (2013: 152) argue that neither *The Virgin Suicides* nor any of Sofia Coppola's other films are explicitly feminist, although the multifaceted complexity of the design of her female protagonists justifies an analysis from the perspective of feminist theory.

A diverse range of other studies (albeit all taking a feminist approach) affirm Coppola's unique status as one of the most important American filmmakers of recent decades (Ortner, 2013; Strong, 2022), as the heir to the American New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s given the way she updates some of its main concerns (Lin Tay, 2009; Kolker, 2000), and as a director who uses the sophisticated surface of her films, permeated with seductive overtones, to articulate a criticism of the worlds in which they are set, revealing an implicit ideological foundation with an atmosphere of perplexity and alienation that undermines any hint of pleasure (Backman Rogers, 2019). A similar perspective is taken by Ferris (2021) in her mon-

ograph on the filmmaker, although with a very specific focus on fashion, defining the concept as a means of masking the identity and a source of misinterpretations between the inner and outer worlds of her characters.

These and other scholarly contributions will be cited in this article. However, they are considered only as a complement to an essentially narratological reading aimed at breaking down the complex formal device underlying *The Virgin Suicides*, a task that has not been carried out with sufficient precision in any of the studies of the film to date. To this end, this article draws on the work of Jost & Gaudreault (1995) in *Le Récit cinématographique*, making use of their concept of the *great imaginer* or *mega-narrator*, understood as the authority situated outside the diegesis who articulates the whole textual structure of the work, and consequently its effects of meaning, often referred to as the *enunciation*, *subject of the enunciation*, *enunciating entity* (Gómez Tarín, 2013: 32) or *implicit author* (Booth, 1983). This mega-narrator may delegate the task of narration upon a character, with or without a defined identity, whose location may or may not be specified in diegetic terms, and who may or may not be made visible on the screen. The interrelation of these variables allows for four possible ways of classifying the voice, according to whether the narrator exists inside or outside the fictional world (*intradiegetic* or *extradiegetic*, respectively) and whether or not the narrator takes part in the events narrated (*homodiegetic* or *heterodiegetic*). In addition, in order to identify the cognitive scope of the information that the narration offers the viewer, the limits of spectatorial knowledge can be defined based on the concept of *focalisation*, while the nature of the viewer's visual and auditory access to that knowledge can be defined using the concepts of *ocularisation* and *auricularisation*.

The theoretical parameters outlined above will be applied in an effort to clarify the discourse of the film text, i.e., the moral or ideological po-

sition or perspective taken (Gómez Tarín, 2013: 31-32). However, when the enunciative subject assigns the task of narrating a story to a character, not only does this foster a belief that the diegetic universe is represented according to that character's subjectivity, but the narrator's verbal interventions tend to become a way to clarify the overall meaning of the story. The construction of this diegetic placement is supported by three levels of representation: *staging* (the content of the image), *framing* (the types of shots and camera movements) and *sequencing* (the narrative arrangement of the images) (Cassetti & di Chio, 1991: 124-183). Theoretically, these levels should all be consistent with the narrator's enunciations. However, this consistency can be disrupted by the inclusion of *unsettling elements* on any of the three creative levels, resulting in semantic elements that are out of keeping with what is suggested by the voice-over narration. In such cases, the mega-narrator would be calling the faculties of the delegated narrator into question. In other words, the viewer would be provided with specific knowledge that exceeds the cognitive aware-

ness of the authority responsible for telling the story.

The opening moments of *The Virgin Suicides* leave no room for misunderstanding, as the series of brightly lit images that introduce us to daily life in the neighbourhood where the film takes place, with sunlight sifting through the trees to the sound of tranquil extradiegetic music, end quite abruptly. The scene cuts to an image with cold tones while the music fades out to be replaced by the sound of dripping water; then suddenly we cut again to the vacant stare of Cecilia, one of the Lisbon sisters, framed in a medium close-up showing her half-submerged face in a bathtub filled with bloodstained water. The drastic shift in the staging, framing and sequencing, while the voice-over states blandly that "Cecilia was the first to go," foreshadows the conflict between what the narration conveys and the staging of the fictional setting.

THE LITERARY SOURCE

The Virgin Suicides is based on the novel of the same name by Jeffrey Eugenides, published in 1993,

Image 1



which tells the story of the suicide of five teenage sisters in Grosse Pointe, a suburb of Detroit, in the mid-1970s. The book uses an unreliable narrator (Shostak, 2009) who, adopting the first person plural, is identified as a kind of collective memory constructed out of different testimonies and thus legitimised by consensus, although in fact it is one of the boys in the story who, out of a fascinated obsession with the sisters' beauty, and without ever revealing his identity, has assumed the role of storyteller. His narration is underpinned by an irony that ultimately undermines his narratorial authority. It is not so much that throughout the narration he frankly reveals his inability to explain the suicide of the five girls, but that at no point does he become aware of the ideological framework that shapes his own discourse. Eugenides's tight control over the plural voice betrays a narcissistic deception (Shostak, 2013: 191), as in the end it is the boys' subjective impulses that pave the winding path taken by the story and vest it with its nostalgic aura. As the story progresses, what emerges is the presence of a subject of the enunciation or implicit author who endorses the male gaze (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 72).

It is clear that the narrator and those he represents have failed in their attempt to crack the mystery of the Lisbon sisters because of their limited access to their story. Through the repeated use of the first person plural, the focus of the story ultimately settles on how a narrative agent approaches and manipulates the content of the narrative rather than on the content itself. In this sense, the protagonists of the story are not really the five ill-fated teenage girls but the boys who are besotted with them (Shostak, 2013: 197-198). The narration is saturated with longing for a group of girls whose images are constructed out of the desires, fantasies and obsessions of these young males, and thus the objects of their attention are obscured by their own private dreams and delusions. Eugenides himself asserts that the *supposed* protagonists are always seen at a distance; they

are mere creations of their observers, and the variety of points of view considered by the narrator render it impossible for them to exist as an exact entity (Abbot, 2018). In short, this narrative agent

attempts to control the story, to overlay interpretations, to proclaim meanings and attribute intentions. For him, for all these boys, the Lisbon sisters are hothouse flowers, girls behind glass, with the boys as thwarted white knights. This is courtly love, with all the chasteness and objectification the term implies, and its primary purpose is not to honor or understand the Lisbons but to glamorize and romanticize the boys' own longing. (Abbot, 2018)

From this perspective, with reference to the film version, Wyatt (2018) argues that given the fact that the narrator is telling this story twenty-five years after the events occurred, his partiality in the choice of details is obvious. Some of those details are taken from the experiences of the four boys who collectively construct the story, but others come from the materials and testimonies of others. In fact, Wyatt identifies the story as being articulated around five sources: the individual personal memories of the boys; collective community memories; documentary evidence, such as diaries; interviews with key characters; and miscellaneous comments made by Grosse Pointe residents. This heterogeneity of sources, combined with the long interval between the events and their recollection, would explain why certain scenes could on close analysis be identified as exaggerated and unreliable. However, such a conclusion might be extended to any narrator navigating between homodiegetic and hetero-

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diegetic status, as is the case of the narrator in *The Suicide Virgins*, but also of the narrators in many other films whose reliability is never questioned. In the case of Eugenides's book, the incessant jumble of information and opinion, and the questions this raises as to the accuracy of the account, justifies this uncertainty. In the film, on the other hand, if we ignore its literary source and focus on its organisation as an autonomous work, there is insufficient evidence to affirm, as Rogers (2007) does, that

the entire body of the film becomes a journey through fantastic dream and memory scapes that render the more seemingly realistic and conventional sequences equally false and provisional. Related in retrospect, every scene is coloured by the romance of memory and fantasy that is a central theme of the film. (Rogers, 2007)

In opposition to Rogers's assertion, the argument of this article is not that *all* the images are rendered false in themselves, but that the voice that articulates and interprets them is ultimately discredited through a series of textual strategies that have not been sufficiently explored, resulting in readings of the real objectives of the film adaptation that are open to debate. Shostak (2013: 181-182), for example, interrogates the cinematic apparatus on the basis that the unreliable narration of the original work dissipates in its on-screen version. In contrast with the literary medium, cinema makes use of expressive registers that impede the dominance of a verbal narration; in other words, cinema resists the appropriation of a single perspective, which in semantic terms means that the adaptation takes an ambiguous direction as it struggles to reconcile its multiple expressive devices. According to Shostak, the assignment of the enunciating voice to a single actor undermines Eugenides's proposition of an *impersonal* narrator due to the presence of a single voice and gaze, despite the use of the first person plural; it automatically creates a character, however slight that character's distinguishing features (such as

the tone, timbre, or pacing of his voice) may be. Consequently, the narrative voice in the film lacks the anonymous, collective dimension of the novel's. Similarly, Shostak points out that the abstract and even mythical representation of the Lisbon sisters, without the exposition of the original text, is short-circuited in the film by the girls' embodiment with the physical attributes of five different actresses (Shostak, 2013: 184-185). Her conclusion is that while Eugenides's text is an ironic novel offering a gendered ideological critique, its film adaptation ends up being a nostalgic romance (Shostak, 2013: 182). The film's discourse is inconsistent due to the lack of a critical distance: the camera is not attached to an identifiable diegetic point of view or perspective.

This assessment of Coppola's film is rejected outright here because the aim of the cinematic adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* is not to generate a homogeneous discourse or to reconstruct the singular, uniform perspective of the original novel. On the contrary, the filmmaker exploits the multiple devices of audiovisual language to articulate a story that relies on the dissonances between the meanings conveyed by the voice-over, which *presupposes* the existence of a collective character with certain values and beliefs, and those offered by the mega-narrator, who is attributed with the responsibility of constructing the diegetic universe. We are guided through that universe by the voice (staging), the types of shots and camera movements chosen (framing), and the whole panoply of narrative techniques (sequencing), some of which, as they break the transparency, constitute indelible signs of the mega-narrator's activity. In this article, it is argued that these explicit signs, but also other less obvious patterns, contribute to the construction of a discourse that runs parallel to that of the voice-over, undermining the latter's authority and assumed competence. While Backman Rogers (2019: 26) puts forward a lucid argument that the film *betrays* its own narrative, the aim of this

article is to identify more clearly just how this betrayal occurs and what its implications are.

Aware of the particular status of the narrative voice in the textual body of a film, Coppola proposes a strategy that could only be implemented using cinematographic language. Like any enunciating voice to which specific images are assigned, the sound-image relationship in a film may be defined by unity and cohesion, but it also may be characterised by gaps or disparities that produce a split between one register and the other. This is observable in *The Virgin Suicides*, as the narrative voice is not the only channel in the film that conveys a meaning that here is not as unambiguous as it is in Eugenides's book, as there are other vectors of meaning resulting from the configuration of images that disrupt the perspective of the narrator's exposition. This leads to a dislocation between what we see and what we hear, or more specifically, between the voice-over narrator and some of the traces of the enunciative subject, even when the implications of those traces do not actually contradict or subvert (in appearance, at least) the factual logic posited by the narrator. Specifically, there are four devices that open up pathways of meaning running beyond the boundaries established by the verbal narration. Thanks to these four strategies, viewers are able to acquire a broader knowledge

of the story than that possessed by the main narrative agent.

STEREOTYPING AND IRONY

The first of these strategies involves the blatant stereotypes present in the *staging* of the sisters, which accentuates their physical beauty and evokes an inscrutable, ethereal quality while eliding the more *earthly* aspects of their personalities (Monden, 2013). This subjective, stereotypical depiction is even more obvious in the sequences where the images and their composition are intended to express the fascinated gaze of the boys. To achieve this, Coppola uses extradiegetic sound and visual elements that are childish and even ridiculous, in the purest tradition of the teen film (Hirsch, 2020). In the opening sequence, for example, the screen fills up with different handwritten versions of the film's title, presumably reflecting the way the male characters might have written it in school notebooks; these images then fade into a superimposed close-up of Lux, one of the Lisbon sisters, gazing at the camera and offering a seductive wink.

But the film also features various shots depicting the boys' mental images that take this stereotyping to the extreme of caricature. By way of example, late in the film we are offered a brief

Image 2

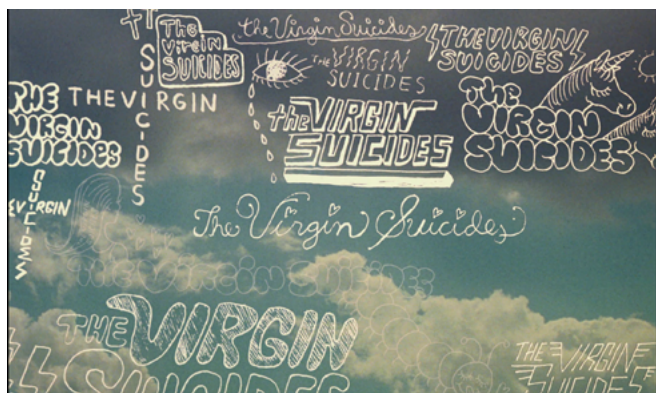


Image 3





Image 4

montage of daydreams juxtaposed with bizarre optical effects when the boys are reading Cecilia's diary. The scene adopts a visual and sound aesthetic characteristic of television advertising in the 1970s to highlight the sensual qualities and attractiveness of the girls, who are *exposed* in very specific situations, such as jumping, swinging, dancing, or sitting in a field. This not only underscores the subjective nature of the images and their distortion of reality, but also reveals the influence of the visual conventions of 1970s photography (William Eggleston and Sam Haskins), advertising (the Timotei and Breck shampoo campaigns), and *Playboy* magazine (Backman Rogers, 2012: 154), sources that construct an image of women defined by beauty and sensuality, but also exuding an aura of fragility and mystery.

The use of these visual motifs in both the *mental* images and the *real* images allows Coppola to play with the stereotypes, but on different levels, establishing dialectical relationships between the two temporal planes: a more distorted stereotype in the boys' fantasies of the Lisbon sisters; and a subtler yet no less eloquent stereotype of the enunciation in the staging of the fictional world. The effects of this aesthetic conception, diluted but perceptible in the construction of the whole diegesis (Wyatt, 2018), prove very different in the desolate sequence in which Lux leaves the football field where she spent the night with Trip and takes



Image 5

a taxi home to face her parents. It is worth noting that in this sequence, even while the same advertising aesthetic predominates, the character's despair, conveyed by an ominous blue tone, contradicts the values suggested in previous scenes and points towards a more troubled and disturbing state of affairs. This is why when the visual codes of the 1970s return to the screen, the result is not an exercise in wistful nostalgia but an interrogation of its nature, a revelation of its artificiality, and the exposure of the veil that obscures rather than enhances the gaze of the collective narrator.

The second semantic vector that serves to represent the fictional setting is the use of irony—and significant doses of black humour—in the depictions of the behaviour of the adults (Cecilia's psychologist, the priest who tries to console Mrs Lisbon, Trip Fontaine's father, the residents of Grosse Pointe), and in general in the images reflecting the suburban setting where the story takes place. The ignorance or even downright stupidity of the adults in most situations renders their actions and reactions entirely useless. Thus, for example, the frustrated efforts of Ronald Lisbon, the girls' father, to convey his passion for aeronautics to listeners who abandon him in mid-sentence, or the imaginary conversations he has out loud with the plants in the corridor of the school where he works, completely oblivious to anyone who tries to speak to him, convey a tone of acid sarcasm.

This sarcasm also emerges in the form of black humour in dramatic moments, such as when the ambulance taking Cecilia to the hospital after her first suicide attempt is leaving the Lisbon home just as her mother rushes out with a child's bathrobe but is unable to stop the paramedics, resulting in a ridiculous situation given the tragic context. Later, after Cecilia's successful second suicide attempt, we witness an incident that borders on the grotesque, when a group of neighbours are unable to pull out the wrought-iron fence on which the teenager was fatally impaled, and they decide to pull it out by tying it to a truck. The image of the vehicle dragging the fence around the neighbourhood carries a similarly grotesque overtone.

ALIENATION AND DECLINE

The two elements of stereotyping and idiotic adult behaviour, which quickly become evident to the attentive viewer, are overlooked by the narrator, who is limited to directing the story through concise, mostly superficial observations, like points in a routine report. In this respect, there are striking dissimilarities between the novel's omnipresent narrative voice and the film's narrator, whose appearances are more restricted and whose influence is complemented, and at times subverted, by the visuals. In this way, Coppola's film conveys a dissonance between the world represented and the narrative voice. Moreover, this dissonance or disconnection is identifiable in another area, where the third semantic vector operates: on the human landscape of the diegetic framework, as the personal and family relationships are marked by disaffection and alienation, both among the group of teenage boys obsessed with the Lisbon sisters and among the sisters themselves. As physically appealing as these characters may be, they all lack psychological traits that could distinguish them individually. Indeed, the four friends who are given so much screen time, and who are associated with the main narrative voice, are ul-

timately, apart from their physical features, just as indecipherable and inscrutable as the objects of their desire. Human interaction in the film is markedly cold, with very few signs of physical contact or proximity, and the conversations are short and almost always trivial. An illustrative example of this can be seen when Father Moody visits the Lisbons' home to console the family after Cecilia's suicide. During this visit, Ronald Lisbon is so absorbed in a football match on television that he barely acknowledges him, while Mrs. Lisbon, sitting in her bedroom with her back to the door, offers no more than a slight nod when the priest calls to her from the doorway. The scene then cuts abruptly, leaving no possibility of proximity between the characters.

The result is that both groups, the boys and the sisters, are presented as abstract, anonymous entities in a suburban landscape of stagnation and alienation (Hoskin, 2007: 215). This is partly the product of the girls' imprisonment in their own home, but it also reflects the mental limitations of the collective narrator. As noted above, this narrator proves incapable of deciphering the signs and unmasking an "American way of life" that has shaped both his location and his gaze within it: the narrator identifies the details of the setting, but never their larger context, defined by his community's practices, rituals and habits. The community's members are stripped of their individuality, and behind their façade of order and comfort lie hidden tensions and anxieties. It is a context that draws inspiration from Bill Owens's photographs in his book *Suburbia* (1973), as Coppola herself has acknowledged (Gevinson, 2013).

Although they only intuit their social imprisonment (which, obviously, goes beyond the confinement imposed on them by their parents), the Lisbon sisters are the only ones who dare to commit an act of rebellion so brutal that it astounds their neighbours, who are never able to understand the nature of that rebellion even with the passage of time, and who therefore car-

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ry on unperturbed with their social customs and rituals. One example of these is the extravagant debutante ball held a year after the first death of a Lisbon sister (Cecilia), where the guests wear gas masks to neutralise the putrid smell coming from a nearby lake that has been contaminated with industrial waste. Asphyxiation is a prominent theme of the story, but the reactions to it are antithetical, as against the collective ignorance there is an attempt at revolt that will never be interpreted as such. From this perspective, as Rogers (2007) points out, the “white picket fence” world of *The Virgin Suicides* bears some resemblances to other films that reflect the contradictions of the American dream using what has been called a “suburban Gothic” style (Dines, 2012), such as *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) and *Little Children* (Todd Field, 2006).

It is no mere coincidence that Coppola includes several scenes that offer us a present-day view of a character whose testimony is key to the information collected and processed by the collective narrating voice: Trip Fontaine, who achieved a feat that his peers could only ever dream of by sleeping with Lux, whom he subsequently abandoned in the football field where they had spent the night. This is the fourth vector of meaning. While the novel includes interviews with various other characters, the only such interview in the film is with Trip, who is given a voice and a face. This is a crucial choice given its drastic repercussions on the meaning conveyed by the film text. According to the original screenplay, the scenes showing the adult Trip at the Betty Ford Clin-

ic telling of his romance with Lux are defined as “flashforwards”. However, if we assume that these scenes are associated with the narrative action of the anonymous voice telling the story, who would also be the hypothetical interviewer asking Trip questions from behind the camera, these scenes should be understood not as flashforwards but as flashbacks, as they reveal, albeit very incidentally, the narrative circumstances under which the story is being constructed (Coppola, 2000: 41). Researchers such as Rogers (2007) explain the narration as occurring in a present that is only made visible by the appearances of the adult Trip, while the rest of the story is told in the past tense.

In any case, the voice of the main narrator stops, the story line shifts to a present elided until now and we see Trip, in 1997, who provides testimony to the narrating voice-over in the context of an interview. Returning to the past, he explains his love affair with Lux and concludes that despite

Images 6 and 7



what he felt for her, to this day he cannot explain what drove him to abandon her unexpectedly on the football field where they had spent the night together. The main narrator until now has been extradiegetic and homodiegetic, directing the story from an omniscient perspective while remaining entirely invisible. It is therefore impossible to overlook this sudden change to the structure of the narration, which now becomes intradiegetic, especially when, at the conclusion of Adult Trip's testimony, we discover that the location where he has been speaking to an off-camera interviewer is a rehabilitation centre he has been admitted to, as revealed by the interruption of a voice off-screen reminding him that it is time for his group therapy.

With just a few subtle brushstrokes, the narration informs us that this erstwhile high-school heartthrob is a living symbol of failure, decline and ignorance, as he is still unable to offer any explanation for his abandoning a sleeping teenage girl in an open field at night, even while he claims that despite having loved many women since then, none of them were like Lux, and that at least in retrospect he is content to have "tasted" a kind of love that most people will never know. The visual dissonance between the two versions of this character is striking for the evidence it offers of the ravages of time: he is transformed from

a young, handsome Adonis admired by boys and girls alike—depicted with certain parodic touches drawing once again on teen film conventions the first time he enters the scene, underscored by the song "Magic Man" (1975) by the rock band Heart—to a pathetic individual whose looks have faded, wrestling with psychological problems in a centre for addictions. Trip's decline, his debilitated image and his ignorance can be extrapolated to the delegated narrator himself and his *frustrated* existence, especially considering that in the past Trip had been the sublimated figure representing everything the other boys longed to be. This is, in fact, the only explicit licence taken by the mega-narrator to give a *visible* face to the demise of the notion of masculinity embraced by the boys, about whose present we discover very little due to the *acousmatic* status of the narrative voice itself (Chion, 2004: 32). They are individuals doomed to return again and again to the same nostalgic bubble while time marches on inexorably and they remain utterly incapable of solving the mystery that has been consuming them since adolescence, along with the myths and idealisations that have fed it. Needless to say, the collective narrator avoids any kind of judgment of Trip's character, or the connections between his decline and the tragedy of the Lisbon sisters. If, as Backman Rogers (2015: 28) suggests, this film is saturated with the spectre of death, these brief scenes in the present should also be interpreted in terms of this looming shadow.

However, making Trip visible does more than expose the nature of those who constructed the narration with their individual perspectives and contributions; it also envisions a hopeless present and smashes the illusion (yet again, but even more clearly) that the story was ever being told from a perspective in consonance with that of the voice-over. As this article has sought to show, the enunciative subject uses certain stylistic features as strategies to offer a semantic landscape that stretches beyond the horizons of the verbal narrator.

Image 8



CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this analysis, in accordance with its guiding objective, can be summarised as follows:

Despite its status as a landmark work in contemporary American independent cinema, serving as an exceptional intersection of debates on archetypes, roles and conflicts of femininity from feminist and post-feminist perspectives, and even as a milestone in the filmography of its director, *The Virgin Suicides* demands an exhaustive analysis of its narrative foundations in order to decipher the complex discourse it contains.

Adopting a narratological approach, this article has explored the dichotomy between the enunciating voice that structures the story and certain characteristic patterns of the diegetic framework orchestrated by the mega-narrator, but also by the formal choices that shape the textual body of any film. This dichotomy points towards the question of unreliable narration, as certain elements of the staging of this film's fictional universe employed as recurring patterns and semantic vectors undermine the reading offered by the delegated narrator, who neither mentions them nor integrates them into his reasoning.

There are four stylistic elements used in this way in the film: (1) the influence of visual conventions of the 1970s, allowing the filmmaker to play with stereotypes in the processing of memories, with certain parodic twists reflecting the adolescent nature of the male gaze; (2) irony or a kind of understated humour that emerges in response to the evidence of ignorance and stupidity in the adult characters, even in tragic situations; (3) a general alienation that turns the residents of this suburban neighbourhood into automatons devoted to their community habits but stripped of any hints of individuality; and (4) the shadow of decline looming over the protagonists' understanding of masculinity, suggesting a present with no real purpose other than the eternal idealisation they cling to.

The narratological perspective taken here offers a more effective framework for the development of an interpretative roadmap that considers previous readings of the original novel and its film adaptation, corroborating questions that have been pointed out in previous studies while challenging others. In more general terms, this article constitutes a contribution to studies of the role of voice-over narration in cinematographic language and proposes an approach to the question of unreliable narration, a concept clearly in need of further research. ■

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DISSONANCES BETWEEN DELEGATED NARRATOR AND MEGA-NARRATOR: FOUR STRATEGIES FOR UNDERMINING THE VOICE-OVER IN THE VIRGIN SUICIDES

Abstract

Since its release, *The Virgin Suicides* has attracted scholarly interest as a landmark work in contemporary American independent cinema and as an exceptional intersection of debates on roles, representations and conflicts from feminist and post-feminist perspectives. Although the book on which it is based has been the subject of extensive analysis related to the question of unreliable narration, this aspect has not been widely explored in the case of the film, whose expressive and formal mechanisms have not been effectively identified. This article offers a reading of the film in narratological terms with the aim of dissecting its discourse, with reference to two key concepts: the *mega-narrator* or *great imaginer*, who articulates the audiovisual narrative as a whole, and the *delegated narrator*, to whom the mega-narrator assigns the task of telling the story verbally. In contrast to voice-overs that act in lockstep with the representation of the diegetic world, in this film there is a dissonance between the former and the latter arising from four semantic vectors used by the mega-narrator to undermine the voice-over's authority: stereotyping, irony, alienation, and decline. These four vectors also provide clues to the mystery of the story, despite the delegated narrator's self-declared inability to solve it.

Key words

Narratology; Film studies; Voice-over; Film adaptations; Flashbacks; Sofia Coppola.

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DESAVENENCIAS ENTRE NARRADOR DELEGADO Y MEGANARRADOR: CUATRO ESTRATEGIAS PARA DESLEGITIMAR LA VOZ RELATORA EN LAS VÍRGENES SUICIDAS

Resumen

Desde su estreno, *Las vírgenes suicidas* es una obra que aglutina interés como hito del cine independiente norteamericano contemporáneo y como encrucijada excepcional de roles, representaciones y conflictos de raigambre feminista y postfeminista. Si bien su origen literario cuenta con análisis que delimitan el fenómeno de la narración no fiable en que se sustenta, no ocurre lo mismo con la transposición fílmica, cuyos mecanismos expresivos y formales no están lo suficientemente dilucidados. Este artículo plantea una aproximación hacia la película desde demarcaciones narratológicas con el fin de diseccionar su discurso, en virtud de las cuales recurrimos a dos nociones esenciales: el *meganarrador* o *gran imaginador*, que articula y vertebra la obra audiovisual en su totalidad; y el *narrador delegado*, al cual el primero le cede la facultad de contar oralmente la historia. A diferencia de la voz unificada con la codificación del universo diegético, lo que en este largometraje hallamos es una discordancia entre las dos figuras a la luz de cuatro vectores semánticos mediante los que el ente enunciadore socava la autoridad de su *subordinado*: estereotipación, ironía, incomunicación y decadencia. Cuatro vectores que, asimismo, proporcionan las claves del enigma del relato pese a la declarada incapacidad de la instancia delegada para resolverlo.

Palabras clave

Narratología; Cine; voz over; adaptaciones cinematográficas; flashbacks; Sofia Coppola.

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