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« Extimacy and Sublimation in

The Virgin Suicides (Sofia Coppola, 1999) and *Restless* (Gus Van Sant, 2011) »

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Résumé

Sofia Coppola et Gus Van Sant ont créé de nouvelles formes de lenteur à travers une esthétique onirique employée pour dépeindre l'angoisse adolescente et l'intimité entre la jeunesse et la mort. Leur mise en scène, leurs plans d'ensemble et leur technique postmoderne de déréalisation mettent en valeur une esthétique unifiée de sublimation. Fondé sur une approche lacanienne, cet article s'intéresse à la notion d'*extimité* de la psyché adolescente comme *topos* fondateur dans *The Virgin Suicides* et *Restless*, ou comment les réalisateurs suturent un imaginaire fragmenté. On examinera ensuite la sublimation d'une souffrance intime convertie en fantasme, la jouissance cinématographique du réel partagé par les protagonistes et le public.

Mots-clés

mort, extimité, lenteur, jouissance, sublimation

Abstract

Sofia Coppola and Gus Van Sant have created new forms of slowness using oneiric aesthetics to portray teenage angst and the intimacy between youth and death. Their *mise en scène*, long shots and post-modern technique of de-realization enhance a feeling of emotional disconnection while promoting a unified aesthetic of sublimation. Using a Lacanian approach, this paper focuses on the notion of *extimacy* of teenage psyche as a founding topos in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Restless*, or how the directors *suture* a fragmented imaginary. It then explores the sublimation of intimate grief through fantasy, a cinematic *jouissance* of the real shared by the protagonists and the public.

Keywords

death, extimacy, jouissance, slowness, sublimation

In defiant opposition to the quickening of pace in mainstream American cinema, a distinctive narrative form devoted to stillness and contemplation has emerged in the work of a growing number of filmmakers over the last two decades, particularly in independent movies. Most widely exhibited on the festival circuit, this “cinema of slowness” has begun to signify a unique type of reflective art where form and temporality are emphatically present, and a diminution of pace serves to displace the dominant momentum of narrative causality. Michel Ciment defined this trend in an address delivered at the 46th San Francisco International Film Festival:

Facing this lack of patience and themselves made impatient by the bombardment of sound and image to which they are submitted as TV or cinema spectators, a number of directors have reacted by a cinema of slowness, of contemplation, as if they wanted to live again the sensuous experience of a moment revealed in its authenticity.¹

Sofia Coppola and Gus Van Sant have created new forms of cinematic slowness to portray teenage angst and the intimacy between youth and death in some of their movies. If the theme of adolescence can hardly be deemed original in American cinema, Sofia Coppola’s and Gus Van Sant’s *mise-en-scènes* (characterized by long shots and techniques of de-realization) convey the emotional disconnection of adolescence while promoting an aesthetic of sublimation.

Sofia Coppola and Gus Van Sant represent intimacy as connection and disclosure through visual effects that “extimate” the inner conflicts of their teenage protagonists. The directors create a sense of intimacy through aural encoding or graphic strategies in the filmic apparatus, dissolving the boundaries between interior and exterior in their cinematic world, as the characters look empty and absent from themselves while their environment is laden with a sense of isolation and impending doom.

The Virgin Suicides (1999) unfolds during the mid-1970s in an upper class suburban community in Michigan. It tells the tragic story of the five Lisbon sisters—Cecilia (age 13, played by Hanna Hall), Lux (age 14, Kirsten Dunst), Bonnie (age 15, Chelsea Swain), Mary (age 16, A.J. Cook), and Therese (age 17, Leslie Hayman)—all of whom commit suicide before finishing high school, as revealed during the introductory male voiceover. Coppola’s characters epitomize the dialectic of opacity and transparency while extolling an ephemeral *jouissance*—as the symbolical re-appropriation of the usufruct of a property but also as pleasure—,² always stemming from the relation between the protagonists and their environment. Indeed, her movies are often peopled by teenagers or young adults that seem lost in limbo, unfit to achieve the full metamorphosis into adulthood and can only find temporary bliss in some hierophanic moments of de-

¹ Michel CIMENT, “The State of Cinema”, Address delivered at the 46th San Francisco International Film Festival in 2003. <<http://web.archive.org/web/20040325130014/http://www.siff.org/fest03/special/state.html>>, accessed on 11 February, 2017.

² Jacques LACAN, *Le Séminaire XX – Encore*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, 10.

realization.³

Gus Van Sant also produces de-realization in his latest *Restless* (2011), a romance about young teenagers who meet during a funeral; cancer-stricken Annabel (Mia Wasikowska) coaxes Enoch (Henry Hopper) back into the world of the living. Van Sant weaves a tale of transcendence and sublimation of death through *extimating* grief by the uncanny intrusion of Enoch's ghost friend Kamikaze Hiroshi Takahashi (Ryo Kase), generating a poetics of slowness that resonates with Coppola's aesthetics. Both directors establish a paradoxical harmony triggered by an original stage of mourning thanks to a re-enchantment of a shattered imaginary and the advent of a jouissance of the Real. A sublimated projection of repressed fantasies is displayed on the screen and achieves suture,⁴ affording the subject the possibility to emerge within some aesthetic discourse. This article will therefore focus on the notion of extimacy of teenage psyche as a founding *topos*, analysing how the directors make the intimate visible. It will then explore the sublimation of an intimate grief through fantasy.

Extimacy in the films: the aesthetic of slowness and closeness

The term "extimacy" is an English translation of the French neologism ("*extimité*") coined by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to designate "this central place, this intimate exteriority, this extimacy, which is the Thing."⁵ Lacan identifies extimacy with the Thing after enigmatically describing this "Thing" as the "excluded interior",⁶ the "subject's inside" that becomes the "first outside", the first exteriority around which the subject orients his way.⁷ Since the Thing is always there, it becomes a sort of landmark for our journey through life. It is the fixed center of our movements. This point of reference is extimate, which means that it is intimate to us while being exterior at the same time. In other words, this extimacy does not simply reside in our outside world; it is the navel, the source of this world, as it exists for us. The Thing becomes our first outside because it has been excluded from our inside. Ian Parker draws on Lacan's and Miller's conceptualizations of extimacy by redefining it as the "intimate exteriority of the subject in discourse", a discourse that includes the most intimate to the subject, which is "outside" or "extimate to the subject, not reducible to it."⁸ Lacan explains this by conceiving the Thing, on the

³ As defined in Mircea Eliade a hierophany is an event in which one sensorily experiences a manifestation of the sacred. Mircea ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York: Harvest Book-Harcourt Brace, 1987, 10-12.

⁴ Jacques-Alain MILLER, "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)", *Screen*, Vol. 18, no. 4, 1977-78.

⁵ Jacques LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book 7, Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), trans. J.-A. Miller (ed), London: Routledge, 1992, 171.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ Ian PARKER, "Lacanian Discourse Analysis in Psychology: Seven Theoretical Elements", *Theory & Psychology* 15 (2), 2005, 172.

one hand, as the “mythic body of the mother” that is always looked for,⁹ and on the other, as the “first thing that separated itself from everything the subject began to name and articulate,”¹⁰ “the primordial real which suffers the signifier,”¹¹ but also the signifier itself and “the emptiness inherent in the signifier,”¹² “the emptiness” in the center of the real,¹³ the central cavity of “the vacuole.”¹⁴ This vacuole is that around which everything revolves. Though everything is organized by the signifying structure of language, there is still something real in the heart of everything.

In cinema, the access to intimacy is made possible thanks to various techniques which enable the directors to externalize fleeting and evanescent moments in the psyche of the protagonists. In a manner reminiscent of Tarkovsky’s insistence that “the dominant, all-powerful factor of the film is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame,”¹⁵ Sofia Coppola’s and Gus Van Sant’s cinematographic style is characterized by slow motion and a peculiar softness which *Restless* and *The Virgin Suicides* epitomize. The directors revisit the melodramatic form by using softness as a means of distancing from the terrible void and dislocation of the protagonists’ intimate world. Their representation seems to insist on a cinematic de-realization or dematerialization as the new condition in which the image prevails over the object so the virtual prevails over the real.¹⁶ They magnify the feeling of retinal persistence as their projected images form a clutter of fantasies persisting for a short time after the photogram has moved on, favoring the illusion of continuous movement.

Van Sant and Coppola thus resort to similar techniques to abolish, temporarily, the violence of the real: filters, veils, gauze, eerie soundtracks contribute to the synaesthesia of softness and slowness extimated on the screen. *The Virgin Suicides* is a good example of Coppola’s synesthetic imagination, combining senses and emotions to explore a new territory, that of the eroticism of extimacy, based on the dialectics of inside and outside. The most intimate is at the same time the most hidden. Therefore, paradoxically, the most intimate is not a point of transparency but rather a point of opacity. Intimacy is a forbidden zone for the subject. What is inside the subject is externalized through various signifiers which prevent direct access to the Lisbon sisters. The complexity of representation also stems from the fact that the fantasized subject appears as a collectivized instance. Indeed, while the girls seem to have an autonomous existence, as shown by their first individual appearance, the stress on their first names and on their suicidal choice, they nevertheless form a homogeneous whole, an idealized subject, of

⁹ Jacques LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book 7, Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., 130.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 146

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁵ Andrei TARKOVSKY, *Sculpting in Time*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987, 113.

¹⁶ Paul VIRILIO, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, 73.

which Lux Lisbon is the epitome, the vacuole.

The notion of extimacy implies a crossing of boundaries which cinema obviously favors. Extimacy can therefore, in a loose sense, be presented as a device to exteriorize feelings, subtle emotions, connections, notably between the characters and their environment. Mrs Lisbon, as a caricature of the ultra-conservative mother, promotes Christian fundamental values of morality and religiosity. She stifles her daughters with strict rules and dogma which actually disconnect them from the outside world, but also from spirituality. The girls only seem to reconnect and become whole in their oneiric contact with nature. Indeed, Sofia Coppola's extremely stylistic portrayal of nature can be regarded as hierophanic and sublimating notably in her shots of trees, clouds and skies. Trees are an essential motif to evoke hierophany and how objects can be raised to the dignity of the Thing in the movie.¹⁷ For example, the opening pre-credits sequence shows a suburban landscape with perfectly manicured lawns, but the notice for removal of a diseased elm tree due to be felled mars this idyllic picture. Something is rotten in the state of juvenile bliss and the tree operates as an element which foreshadows the tragedy. Like the trees, the girls are doomed. Yet, they are protected and revered as icons. When the men in orange jumpsuits eventually surround the elm tree after the girls have been shut away within their house by their mother, the Lisbon sisters emerge in nightgowns like magical creatures and encircle the tree, clasping hands, as if performing some ancient ritual [1:08:00]. Their victory is but ephemeral as a downward shot followed by a panoramic view provide the bigger picture and show rows of trees with red notices and men chopping off branches.

Before the credits, just prior to Cecilia's first suicide attempt, the sun is filmed shining through the leaves, with a characteristic tilt of the camera upwards as a visual manifestation of sublimation. After the cut to the bathroom in which Cecilia has slashed her wrists, the camera quickly moves to the outside around the neighborhood and then tilts up to the trees, the sky and the clouds. Lux's face is superimposed on the clouds with a mischievous smile as she winks at the audience. The screen is covered with multiple titles in various girlish handwritings and adorned with little hearts like teenage signatures. This process points at the scattering of the symbolic order as the written sign has lost its primordial signification and organized language becomes as evanescent and sublimated as the girls' blond hair. Written messages only make sense when they convoke clusters of images of the young girls freed from the constraints of the symbolic.

Actually, the insertion of writing on the screen leads to the girls' thoughts and inner lives as they rarely get to speak. It becomes a visual strategy both to extimate the voices of these silent creatures and to draw our attention to the process of creation. There are also many pages about the elm trees in Cecilia's diary, as the boys find out. They read pages of the book and this

¹⁷ Jacques LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book 7, Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., 138.

triggers the projection of images, for example a super 8 film of the girls on a boat which portrays Lux leaning and touching a whale. Then, an extreme close-up displays pages of the diary, filled with Cecilia's balloon handwriting, stickers, and drawings. Sofia Coppola presents a montage of diary pages with overlapping eerie and transparent images of the sisters in a sunlit field. She introduces a *mise-en-abyme* of desire when a unicorn appears on the screen, as the fantasy of Cecilia is recreated by the boys' imagination and projected for the public. Lux is wearing a bikini and flower lei and posing as usual. Mary writes in the air with a sparkler, Cecilia lies on the grass. Dazzling overexposure evokes the blondness of the girls and the bedazzlement of the boys. In general, the sunlight emerges from the background, behind Lux's head, and forms a magical halo around her face. Her features are then somehow slightly obscured, turning her into a mysterious and fascinating figure. Sofia Coppola uses split screens to depict the boys reading inside and the girls relaxing outside. Exterior shots convey a feeling of bliss which contrasts with the stifling atmosphere within the Lisbons' house: "We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy and how you ended up knowing what colors went together." [0:25:40] Sofia Coppola aptly describes the crushing power of society and conventions over individuals who can only break free by returning to simplicity and sensuousness in a communion with the natural world. The director uses such visual effects to *extimate* the awakening of the subject, providing the boys with some ironic insight into the female psyche.

Director Gus Van Sant also depicts the lives of young people in films that frequently focus on young men who are somewhat lost and removed from mainstream society, with death being a recurring theme—including in *Elephant* (2003) and *Paranoid Park* (2007). Gus Van Sant explores the theme of the alienation of the protagonist from his environment through penetrating close-ups and observational traveling long takes. His aesthetic of slowness uncompresses time in an effort to represent a sense of the phenomenological real. Herein lies the marked tension between fast and slow: speed perpetually risks gratuitous haste, fragmentation and distraction, whereas slowness intensifies the spectator's gaze, awareness and response to the protagonist's initiatory journey.

Restless takes place during a cold American autumn, which gives the film a melancholic feel and visually evokes the themes of death and time running out. While nature heads towards a long slumber, young Enoch makes his way through the world already frozen, devastated by the memory of his parents' death in a car accident. Disconnected and isolated, Enoch no longer engages in relationships either with his aunt or with other youngsters. He can be said to have actually developed an emotional deficiency characterized by an absence of intimacy with his surroundings as he refuses any form of closeness or reciprocity, which can be noted in his first rejection of any form of interaction with Annabel when she asks him questions. Yet in the midst of his self-imposed exile, Enoch finds his worldview changing because of the presence of

charming and intelligent Annabel Cotton.

Van Sant invites his actors to rehearse the played scenes silently without dialogue; the actors move through their lines internally, expressing their emotions with their eyes and faces. “Every single shot we did, we did a silent take”, says actor Hopper who plays Enoch. “The idea is the actors to feel the energy between each other and go with the rhythm of the scene. Doing the silent take brings so much to light—stuff that you don’t realize or understand when you’re speaking over it.”¹⁸ Indeed, silence enhances figures of extimacy as it places visual emphasis on gesture, dramatic action and expression. In that respect, *Restless* pays tribute to Hollywood melodrama because it insists on the protagonists’ inner dilemmas and the dissemination of the symbolic order, that of language, to magnify the jouissance of the Real, of the Kantian sublime—a pure thingness that underlies experience and surpasses our ability to describe or name it. Silence reinforces the impression of softness of the scenes and timelessness. For example, when Enoch is traveling on the bus or the two protagonists are photographed engaging in various activities, these are juxtaposed in cut transitions as in a photo-album. These elements symbolize their restlessness and eagerness to live to the full before Annabel’s inevitable death. Long takes act as the primary mode of formal presentation, signaling a renewal of the shot as an individual entity where *montage* is countered by unity and restlessness offset by delay.

Restless also expresses a feeling of suspension and atemporality, which stems from the attention to costumes. In a metonymic way, they tell a non-verbal story about the characters’ originality. Costume designer Glicker used a combination of both actual and re-created vintage in an attempt to style a wardrobe for Enoch that would be reflective of his experience: Enoch’s whole world is falling apart like his clothing. Annabel also inspired a vintage look combining clothes from the 1920s and 30s with pieces from the 1960s. Clothes sometimes add to her Jean Seberg look, for example when she is wearing a leopard coat and red gloves. Chromatic contrasts reinforce the symmetrical androgyny of the young couple with their short blond hair and thin silhouettes. There is also an atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties and *The Great Gatsby*, notably when they play badminton or when she wears a long pearl necklace. The bright colors Annabel is so keen on reflect the fleeting warmth of the sunlight flooding the funeral parlor through huge bay windows, telling a dissonant story of enduring hope and life. The autumnal yellows picked by director of photography Harris Savides represent leaves changing. As opposed to the overexposure and artificiality of the light on the Lisbon girls’ blond hair, the protagonists’ faces seem to be gently caressed by tender hues which highlight their blondness and youth. Light,

¹⁸ Interview with Henry Hopper. (August 2012), <<http://misserinmarie.tumblr.com/post/30660301351/one-of-van-sants-directorial-techniques>>, accessed on 11 February 2017. Van Sant also declared: “I’ve gotten in the habit ever since *Milk* of shooting an extra take in which the actors don’t speak. It’s something Sean Penn told me Terry Malick does. Now that I’ve seen *Tree of Life*, I see how he really puts the silences to use. He prefers to have action describe the scene rather than the words.” Interview with Gus Van Sant (August 2012), <<http://www.btlnews.com/crafts/gus-van-sant-returns-with-restless/>>, accessed on 17 September, 2016.

soundtracks, or close-ups on beaming faces contribute to showing on the screen how grief can ultimately be sublimated.

The sublimation of bereavement: displacement and the aesthetics of mourning

According to Lacan, when the cherished love object is adulated and elevated in sublimation (as is the case in troubadour and surrealist poetry), this serves, albeit temporarily, to complete the subject's existence, to relocate what Lacan terms the ego's "prehistoric Other"¹⁹—commonly perceived as the subject's 'other half'—without which the individual labors with a certain sense of existential vacuity. Lacan terms this unspecified sense of psychic lack "das Ding". The exact formula for sublimation given by Lacan is the raising of the object "to the dignity of the Thing,"²⁰ implying an undue exaltation of and overinvestment in the Other. In other words, from identifying a desirable "something" in the external world, the subject mythologizes and refashions it into the signifier of its complementary Other with the implications of dreamlike romance, false hopes and emotional self-deception this entails. For Lacan, sublimation is furthermore characterized by a circular quest or detour which consists in continually recuperating and re-finding the lost love object or "das Ding" and again "The element that fixes these movements, that model the return – [...] is the pleasure principle."²¹ In the seminar "D'un AUTRE à l'autre" (English title: "From One OTHER to the Other" though unpublished in English), Lacan will situate sublimation at the very center of the experience of jouissance according to the formula: "Sublimation as a means of reaching jouissance."²²

The boys of *The Virgin Suicides* can sublimate the girls' disappearance through their re-creative fantasies while, at the same time, conjuring up their own anguish:

It didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us, up here in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together. [1:33:08]

As the boys themselves grow older, their "thinning hair" and "soft bellies" signal the gradual approach of death. They must deal not simply with the lack of insight into the girls' motivation, but with the disintegration of what little knowledge they have. These decaying "pieces" are both abstract bits of knowledge and the disintegrating artifacts of the girls' lives that the boys have carefully collected and catalogued. Thus, the boys' aging memory is mirrored both in the

¹⁹ Jacques LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book 7, Ethics of Psychoanalysis, op. cit.*, 87.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 138.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

²² Jacques LACAN, *Séminaire XVI – D'un Autre à l'autre*, Paris: Seuil, 2006, 225-226.

decaying environment and their degrading bodies, just as the decay of the Lisbon household was mirrored both in the girls' dead bodies and in the disintegration of the Lisbon property.

According to Derrida's theory on deconstruction,²³ Sofia Coppola's film reverses the hierarchies between the invisible (or intelligible) and the visible (or sensible), between essence and appearance, between the soul and the body. The teenage girl becomes the essence of American teenage angst. The invisible uneasiness is rendered perceptible thanks to the uncanny soundtracks which highlight the dichotomy between the smooth envelope and the chaotic interiority. The gaze of the boys on the girls' bodies can thus be regarded as a fundamental *jouissance* of the real, while a *plus-de-jouir* occurs in the movie thanks to storytelling once the irretrievability of the loss is acknowledged.²⁴ Lux and her sisters exist only as objects of masculine desire and their deaths are sublimated through a process of re-creation, the way a liquid evanesces into gas. The girls' bodies are symbolically scattered throughout the movie and re-appropriated by the boys in an analeptic way, but also re-organized as a *mise en abyme* of the act of creation. When the girls are imprisoned inside their house by their mother and Lux is compelled to destroy her rock records, their dwelling, under the boys' scrutiny, becomes the objective correlative of the emotional decay they are undergoing. The lawn is no longer manicured, the façade looks derelict and the outer collapse, not unlike Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), epitomizing the inner decrepitude not only of the family but of a whole society, the booming world of Detroit before the demise of the automobile industry. Still shots of the home enable the director both to stage the petrification of the Lisbons' universe as the seasons pass, and the inexorable acceleration of time towards the tragic outcome.

For a while, the girls develop strategies of resistance against the prevailing malaise by leafing through travel brochures and being mentally transported to exotic lands. Sofia Coppola then stages a dissemination of the male protagonists' fantasies by featuring a photomontage of travel photos picturing the boys with the Lisbon sisters on vacation: badly framed close-ups, flower leis, sunburnt faces, pyramids in Egypt are organized as a slide show of vacation photos from trips they can only take in their imagination, until the screen blinks to black. The frame becomes flooded with a white light [1:12:00] and the sound of an empty slide cartridge can be heard: there are no more images to be construed, and the void is signified here, nothingness fills the screen with an ominous presence. Sofia Coppola also resorts to the split screen to portray the impossible physical meeting and intimacy between the boys and the girls and to re-unite them through creation and common sensory experience as they listen to popular songs from the 70s. Meanwhile she emphasizes the irreconcilable separation and the fragmentation entailed by

²³ Jacques DERRIDA, *La Dissémination*, Paris: Seuil, 1972, 12.

²⁴ In his seminar "The Other Side of Psychoanalysis" (1969–1970) Lacan introduced the concept of surplus-jouissance (French "plus-de-jouir") inspired by Marx's concept of surplus-value: objet petit a is the excess of jouissance which has no use value, and which persists for the mere sake of jouissance.

their situation. Only the gaze of the spectator is able to re-compose the fragmented and disseminated bodies of the girls. The spectator thus takes up the position of the fascinated group of boys who try to establish a non-verbal communication with the confined girls.

In *The Subject of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman explains that “Jean-Pierre Oudart refers to the spectator who occupies the missing field as the Absent One. The Absent One, also known as the Other, has all the attributes of the mythically potent symbolic father: potency, knowledge, transcendental vision, self-sufficiency, and discursive power.”²⁵ Quite simply then and prior almost to any semantic consideration, we are given access to the logic of the cinematic by means of this second reading which reveals the functioning of its images. Every filmic field is echoed by an absent field, the place of a character who is put there by the viewer’s imaginary, and which we shall call the Absent One. At a certain moment of the reading all the objects of the filmic field combine together to form the signifier of its absence. To make up for the failure of the symbolic order in American hyper consumption society, a collective narrative instance, a group of boys, reach out to a collective audience to re-member the bodies of dead girls and consider the possibility of a sublime recuperation.

Tragic young love has long been the subject of great drama, from Shakespeare’s star-crossed Romeo and Juliet to the tear-jerking sentiment of *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970). Echoing and evoking memorable film classics such as *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971) and recent indie hits such as *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004), *Restless* appears as another sad-ending love story, imbued with references to Edgar Allan Poe’s *Annabel Lee* (1849). Yet, the originality of the film and the screenplay written by Jason Lew comes from the strategy of displacement or conversion of grief into oneiric moments and poetical playfulness between the protagonists who develop an intimate relation with mortality and mourning. The most striking example of sublimation is the character of Hiroshi who acts as an uncanny psychopomp for Enoch and Annabel (whom he guides to the afterlife). He is the visual embodiment of Enoch’s connection to death and the manifestation of his obsession. But he also serves as a protective spirit, a guardian angel. His character originates in a children’s book *Cricket Music*, written by screenwriter Jason Lew about a Kamikaze ghost helping children negotiate difficult times.

The dialogues between Hiroshi and Enoch can be interpreted as an insight into Enoch’s inner struggle and a staging of the conflicting forces within the young man’s psyche, especially since he is otherwise totally alienated from his surroundings. Their relationship reconstructs another form of intimacy and exteriorizes in a very visual way—due to the meticulous costume of the Kamikaze—the relationship to one’s traumatic past. Hiroshi first appears after Enoch has to walk away from a memorial service after being spotted by an undertaker. They are playing a battleship game in Enoch’s bedroom. The camera slowly backtracks and the medium shot shows

²⁵ Kaja SILVERMAN, *The Subject of Semiotics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, 221.

Enoch is actually alone. Van Sant plays on closeness and distance to emphasize the dichotomy between Enoch's loneliness in his real surroundings and his intimate imaginary sphere inhabited by a friendly ghost. The viewers' second encounter with Hiroshi takes place after Enoch once again refuses to engage in any form of interpersonal relationship with his aunt Mabel, leaving the dinner table as she tries to mention prep school. After the stifling interior scene, there is a cut to the soft autumnal colors of the exterior, by a railway track, above a river. Enoch is learning to bow with a Kamikaze ghost guiding him. As he leans dangerously above the tracks, Hiroshi worries he might be about to commit suicide but Enoch reassures him, explaining he is past this. They run on the tracks and then throw stones at the train.

During another episode, Gus Van Sant re-enacts an uncanny triangular love scene, stressing the interconnectedness between Eros and Thanatos. Enoch serves as a go-between between Hiroshi and Annabel who can neither see nor hear him. But the young protagonist also manipulates the words of his friend and builds a new intimacy by using his imaginary ally to woo Annabel. Dramatic irony stems from the fact that the spectator can also see and hear Hiroshi, establishing a closer connection with Enoch's fantasy world. This device creates another cinematic space on the screen, staging a metadramatic element, highlighting the blurring of boundaries between effects of reality and illusion which cinema constantly allows.

Hiroshi is also granted a form of interiority because of his personal story: the reference to the letter he never sent to his beloved before embarking on his last and fatal mission gives him a universal human texture. He stands for the epitome of the real, a repressed history which always comes back to haunt the subject. His name is the shortened form of the city of Hiroshima. Images from the nuclear strikes on Japan provide a more spectacular reference to chaos and disruption which is not just confined to the diegetic space of the movie. They directly convoke other terrible images and events in the minds of the audience. The documentary sequence in black and white also serves as a counterpoint to the sweetness of Annabel's last moments. The violence of death and the cruelty of mourning become art so that the protagonist can achieve a new suture.

The concept of suture attempts to account for the means by which subjects emerge within discourse. Miller defines suture as that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing gains meaning at the expense of being. In "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)", he writes:

Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse . . . it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension—the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of.²⁶

Indeed, the inevitable death scene rehearsed by the characters allows them both to become

²⁶Jacques-Alain MILLER, "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)", *Screen* (1977-78), vol. 18, n° 4.

intimate with the idea of mortality, but also to find some distance through acting. There are several occurrences of this motif in the movie. One is the chalk drawing made by Enoch in the opening shot of the movie, and then with Annabel, establishing a temporary and imaginary bond between them as their chalk silhouettes are united. Another attempt at becoming familiar with death takes place in the hospital's morgue when the two protagonists, in a bluish and cold light, imagine the tragic fates of the corpses lying in the metal drawers. A last episode takes place when they enact Annabel's death scene with everything being arranged from the dialogue to the music. This is a mischievous metaleptic wink at the audience to show how conventional melodrama is staged. As Enoch rebels against the banal and sappy lines of the scenes, he wants to add his own morbid slant by including his stabbing himself, which Annabel utterly dismisses. Annabel, perhaps echoing Gus Van Sant himself in *Restless*, wants to displace tragedy to create a feel-good movie and her function is to teach Enoch a lesson in hope. She re-enchants Enoch's world and leaves a final smile on his lips during the memorial service, contrary to the Lisbon sisters' deaths which will forever maintain the boys in a crepuscular state of mourning and angst. At the end of *Restless*, Annabel's funeral buffet (full of junk food and colorful sweets) marks the redemption of the young hero who can participate in a common celebration and even deliver a speech. He relinquishes his former individualism as a sign of his transformation from a rebellious outcast to a young American adult finding his place in a community.

Conclusion

By choosing a cinema of slowness, both directors have artfully worked on the representation of death and the process of bereavement in their movies. They often stage the sublimation of boredom and isolation of the individual within society while weaving an aesthetic of intimacy. Adolescence is a central theme for them and it is their chief territory of cinematic experimentation because it best exemplifies a postmodern condition of disenchantment and isolation. And their portrayal of transition and painful metamorphosis goes along with formal reinterpretation of teenage movies, melodramas and strategies of transgression and displacement since this is the way they succeed in making an emotional state visible and converting morbidity into an artful game which prevents dislocation.

As films of independent cinema, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Restless* extol closeness and a patient gaze as a strategy to foreground the intimate voice of young marginalized subjects, disseminating the conventional and linear plots of their movies into a multiplicity of poetical fragments. The audience is offered a kaleidoscopic view of the real, as Enoch when he plays with a kaleidoscope and looks through it to cast a distorted and multi-faceted glance at the cold and white corridors of a hospital. The romantic stance of Enoch is a direct echo of Baudelaire's vision

of the artist “as a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.”²⁷ This very metafilmic device encapsulates the contradictory potentials of Gus Van Sant’s and Sofia Coppola’s art: it multiplies and fragments the subject’s and the viewer’s vision while focusing the gaze on a unified and single object, the screen onto which their films are projected, the ultimate *locus* where teenage intimacy can be extimated.

²⁷ Charles BAUDELAIRE, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), New York: Da Capo Press, 1964, 51.

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