EXAMINING THE TRANSLATION OF MENTAL ILLNESSS FROM PAGE TO SCREEN IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* AND *GIRL, INTERRUPTED*

Martha Gerrard-Wright

Nottingham Trent University

English (BA) Hons

N1093035@my.ntu.ac.uk

Abstract:

This article examines the depiction of mental illness in Jeffrey Eugenides' T*he Virgin Suicides* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, and how these depictions are translated to the screen in their respective adaptations, directed by Sofia Coppola and James Mangold, respectively. It also explores the connection between the concept of idealised womanhood, and how this is in conflict with women experiencing mental illness.

Keywords: Film, Trauma, Feminism, Mental Health, Gender, Adaptations

Jeffrey Eugenides debut novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) explores the lives of the five fictional Lisbon sisters and their subsequent suicides, told from the first person plural perspective of a group of local neighbourhood boys who watch them from afar. Whilst the events of the novel are set in 1970s Michigan, the narrative follows the boys thirty years after the deaths of the mysterious and alluring sisters as they attempt to piece together why the girls killed themselves. Though the boys task themselves with documenting the girls' lives, relying not only on their own memories but interviewing others with close relationships to the girls, reading diaries and collating physical evidence, they are never truly able to fully understand the girls. The Lisbon sisters remain as much a mystery to the boys in their adult lives as they did as teenagers, they are never able to attain the degree of closeness to the girls that they hope for, and are only able to tell the story of the Lisbon sisters from an outside perspective. In contrast, Susannah Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (1995) is an intimate and raw insight in to her eighteen months spent in a psychiatric hospital in 1967 following her suicide attempt. Whilst the narrative voice in *The Virgin Suicides* is that of outsiders trying to gain access to an experience they will never understand, Kaysen's memoir speaks directly from her lived experience of dealing with mental illness, placing the reader in front of a direct, unforgiving reality. Both Kaysen and Eugenides works were adapted into films within ten years of publication, and the directors- James Mangold and Sofia Coppola, respectively, took distinctly different approaches to portraying mental illness on screen.

The boys' inability to gain full insight into the lives of the Lisbon sisters allows them to mythologise the girls, becoming fascinated by the girls' mundane routines, enraptured by their diary entries and captivated by any and all minor interactions they have with one another. They collect any evidence they can find of the girls: underwear, diaries, razors. Anything the girls left behind the boys assign value to, desperate to figure the girls out.

Even mundane, ordinary or even unhygienic objects are looked at with childlike wonder and revered by the boys, as it brings them closer to the girls as people. In the novel, the descriptions of these objects are plain, and emphasise the normal nature of the girls, however Coppola's adaptation shows the boys investigating these girls' things as though they are novel, romantic objects (Monden 2013). Because they are unable to fully understand the girls they pedestalise them, which is reflected in Coppola's cinematic choices. The narrative is portrayed as an investigation- as something the boys all collaborate on in order to make sense of the girls, however though they are reminiscing on the girls now thirty years on, their fascination with the girls starts as teenagers, which Coppola reflects with onscreen annotations throughout the film. As the sisters, Mary, Lux, Therese, Cecelia and Bonnie are introduced for the first time, the shots of them emerging from a car freeze on their faces, accompanied by their names, written in juvenile bubble writing- evocative of a teenage diary entry. However, the idealisation of the girls reflects a much larger theme in Eugenides's work; the Lisbon family act as a microcosm of wider American suburbia. They are presented as the perfect nuclear American family; a white, heterosexual married couple and their five beautiful daughters. Mr And Mrs Lisbon are able to hide the dysfunction tearing apart their family because of their social standing in their community. Just as the gloss of appearances is able to hide the dark underbelly of suburban communities, so too can the Lisbons hide their family unit falling apart. Mrs. Lisbon takes further extreme measure to restrict the girls- pulling them out of school and limiting their interactions with the outside world. The novel is also set twenty years before it was published, evoking nostalgia to the reader, which Coppola wanted to amplify by using the 'hazy, backlit style of 70's playboy photography'[1]. By utilising warm tones, lens flares and smooth camerawork, Coppola was able to translate the romanticisation of the Lisbon sisters. Through the camera lens we see the girls the same way the boys did in the text; beautiful and enchanting. Years after the girls' deaths, they are still frozen in this sentimentalised state- as the final passage depicts how the boys 'couldn't imagine the emptiness of a creature who put a razor to her wrists'[2]. As the boys are still unable to recover from the shock of the girls deaths, they fossilise them in their youth, unable to glean any meaningful understanding of what led the girls to that fate. Coppola's direction reflects this; as the narrative follows the girls, so too does the camera, never shying away or pulling focus from the girls. The film has countless shots of the sisters smiling, embracing, laughing- emphasising their youth and humanity in the eyes of the boys, however the scene depicting their suicides neglects to show their faces, Only the feet of two of the sisters, and a lone arm of Lux Lisbon, hanging out of a car with a cigarette still half lit is shown of their deaths. The boys inability to make sense of the Lisbon sisters downward spiral is documented in the novel; their rigorous documentation of the girls lives serving as a last ditch effort to heal their trauma. In the film adaptation this is represented by the separation of the girls as they had imagined, and the girls in reality. The shots of the dead girls are dark, cool-toned and static, starkly different to the images of the girls throughout the film, and directly contrasting their introductory scene. Though the girls had been suffering from mental illness for months, it had rarely been noticed by the boys until this point, and Coppola's sudden change in style in these shots evokes to the audience the sheer shock the boys felt. Coppola does not ease the audience in to facing the girls' deaths. The abrupt nature in which the audience learns of the girls' deaths reflects the brutality of suicide.

In contrast, Mangold's adaptation of Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* opens with a cold, bleak shot of a decrepit room, littered with needles and dirt, before focusing in on the main character, Susanna. After a quiet introduction, suddenly the audience is transported to the emergency room of a hospital, going back in time to

Susanna's suicide attempt. The change in scene is abrupt and chaotic, showing in full how Susanna is restrained to her hospital bed, intubated and sedated whilst being treated for an overdose. This immediate thrust in to a traumatic and disquieting scene reflects the non-linear structure of the novel, whilst also serving to evoke the often turbulent nature of mental illness. In the opening pages, Kaysen describes her roommates sudden breakdown as a 'tidal wave of blackness'[3] breaking down over her head, connoting the devastating loss of control that often comes hand in hand with mental illness. Both the film and memoir follow this overarching theme of losing control, but follow this theme in different ways. Kaysen's memoir jumps back and forth between different key moments in her stay in a psychiatric hospital, and detailing intimate character studies of those around her. Mangold is able to reflect the essence of the book however, through his cinematic choice of colour grading. The hospital is depicted in the film as largely white; a sterile, unforgiving, austere environment. Whilst the patients admitted to this hospital are troubled, and yearning for some semblance of comfort and connection, they are stuck in a cold and clinical setting, with many strict rules and routines set in place in order to help them recover. However it is the exertion of these rules and routines over Susanna that leave her feeling less autonomous, which leads to her wanting to rebel. This mirrors the control the parents of the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*, who limit the girls' personal freedoms in an attempt to save them from their subsequent inevitable fate. It is Lux Lisbon in particular who lashes out against her parents' conservative rule, smoking cigarettes, sneaking out and engaging in promiscuous behaviour, which can be compared to the character of Lisa In Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted.* Susanna is drawn to Lias's unpredictable and hedonistic nature. Lux and Lisa both struggle with mental illness, manifesting in problematic behaviours- they both often put themselves in dangerous positions. Lux has unprotected sex with strangers, and Lisa often escapes from the hospital. Both Lux and Lisa are played by conventionally attractive actresses in their respective adaptations; the girls are thin, white and blonde, representing a western societal ideal, however their behaviours directly oppose this perfect image. As Lux's mental health deteriorates, she begins to have unprotected sex with strangers on the roof of her house at night, and in doing so, loses some of her worth in the eyes of the boys. She retreats in to herself, her isolation reflected by the now muted colour grading of the shots of her. Lisa's generally abrasive personality in tandem with her engagement in typically masculine behaviours mark her as an unfeminine other (Chouinard 2009), contrasting with the societal expectation of how a girl who looks like Lisa should behave. Mangold and Coppola subvert audience expectations by showing both Lux and Lisa's mental declines in a raw, unglamorous fashion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bell, Keaton, 'Sofia Coppola on the 20th Anniversary of *The Virgin Suicides*: "It Means a Lot to Me That It Has a Life Now"', *Vogue, https://www.vogue.com/article/sofia-coppola-interview-the-virgin-suicides-20th-anniversary (*accessed 1st November 2024)

Chouinard, Vera, ' Placing the 'Mad Woman': Troubling Cultural Representations Of Being a Woman With Mental Illness In *Girl, Interrupted', Social and Cultural Geography,* 10.7 (2009), 791-804

Eugenides, Jeffrey, *The Virgin Suicides* (London : Picador, 2018)

Kaysen, Susannah, *Girl, Interrupted* (London : Virago Press, 2000)

Monden, Masafumi, ‘Contemplating In a Dreamlike Room: *The Virgin Suicides* And The Aesthetic Imagination Of Girlhood’, *Film, Fashion & Consumption*, 2.2 (2013), 139-158

---

[1] Keaton Bell, ‘Sofia Coppola on the 20th Anniversary of *The Virgin Suicides:* “ It Means A Lot To Me That It Has A Life Now”’, *Vogue, https://www.vogue.com/article/sofia-coppola-interview-the-virgin-suicides-20th-anniversary* [accessed 1st November 2024]

[2] Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides,*(London: Picador, 2018) p243.

[3] Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted,* (London: Virago Press, 2000) p5.