Tracing Transhistorical Girlhood Through Sofia Coppola's Filmic Adaptations

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis proposes adaptation studies as a productive, yet vastly overlooked, framework through which to contextualize the work of American filmmaker Sofia Coppola. A substantial number of Coppola's films are adapted from both fictional novels and non-fiction texts, and approach conditions of contemporary girlhood from the context of varying geo-political and historical stories, events, and figures. This sparks an exploration of Coppola's signature cinema of girlhood as transhistorical, as the filmmaker transposes, re-creates, and reinterprets stories of women and girls from the past through her own contemporary perspective. The first chapter looks at *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), an adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel, and the reinterpretation of central narrative devices which transform a male-narrated story into a portrait of nostalgic girlhood. The second chapter looks at *Marie Antoinette* (2006), adapted from Antonia Fraser's 2001 biography, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. I position the film's anachronistic costumes and musical soundtrack as derivative of the adaptation process; not only working to situate the story of Marie Antoinette in recognizable, contemporary themes, but also reflecting Fraser's sympathetic and subjective approach to her biography. The third chapter looks at *The Beguiled* (2017) as both an adaptation of Thomas Cullinan's 1966 novel and a remake of Don Siegel's 1971 film. I examine Coppola's reinterpretation of the story's perspective and sympathy through the gender dynamic on-screen, while addressing what remains off-screen: Coppola's controversial decision to omit the novel's original Black characters. This research positions adaptation studies as necessary to a comprehensive understanding of the filmmaker's oeuvre, demonstrating the intertwinement of Coppola's signature theme of girlhood and her evocation of adapted period narratives. This results in a recurring theme of transhistorical girlhood in Coppola's films, through which the filmmaker repeatedly forms portraits of young women through transposed, palimpsestic stories and figures of the past.

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Introduction

This thesis illuminates the presence of adaptation and transhistoricity in the work of Sofia Coppola, a well-known American filmmaker and symbol of Hollywood royalty. Her films have met critical and academic acknowledgement for their focus on female adolescent centred coming-of-age narratives. The existing scholarship on Coppola's work adopts auteurist, transnational, feminist frameworks of analysis. This literature highlights the recurrence of girlhood in Coppola's films as a trope of postfeminist sensibility and a gender-informed reflection on this figure from the contemporary, privileged perspective familiar to the filmmaker. Vastly overlooked by this literature is the fact that a substantial number of Coppola's films draw on literature and non-fiction texts. Some of these reflect the conditions of being a young woman in different geo-political and historical contexts. Though largely overlooked elements of the filmmaker's reception, adaptation and transhistoricity provide necessary contributions to the understanding of Coppola's work and her concentration on representations of girlhood.

This analysis' methodology employs a combination of adaptation studies and feminist-informed approaches to film studies. I address adaptation as a transformative process using key terms of adaptation studies: reinterpretation, re-creation, and transposition. Reinterpretation will address the filmmaker's habit of shifting the male viewpoint of a literary source, resulting in a girl-centred narrative. This will be identified in each film's emphasis on the protagonist's experience and emotions as a young woman. Re-creation addresses Coppola's depiction of the historical setting and the spaces the female protagonists occupy. Coppola often explores how setting and the domestic space shape these young women. Details of mise-en-scène such as décor and costuming will reveal the filmmaker's re-creation of each adaptation's historical setting.

Finally, transposition concerns the shift in historical context that places female characters of the past into coming-of-age narratives that are relatable to contemporary audiences. In this regard, Coppola uses anachronisms in her adaptations which transpose the present into her images of the past. This will contribute to an understanding of her adapted stories as transhistorical. This thesis asserts historical adaptation as a crucial element in the filmmaker's oeuvre.

The analytic corpus of this research includes Coppola's debut feature, *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), adapted from Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel of the same name, and set in 1970s American suburbia. Additionally, Coppola's third film, *Marie Antoinette* (2006), which is based upon Antonia Fraser's 2001 biography of the French Queen titled *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. Finally, *The Beguiled* (2017), a southern gothic tale of the American Civil War which Coppola adapted from Thomas Cullinan's 1966 novel of the same name and remade from Don Siegel's 1971 filmic adaptation. These films have been chosen from Coppola's works because they are cinematic adaptations of books set in the past.

The corpus excludes two other adaptations in Coppola's filmography. The first is *The Bling Ring* (2013), based upon a 2010 article published in *Vanity Fair*, omitted because it depicts true present-day events of only five years prior to its release.[1] This is Coppola's only adapted film that depicts events from within twenty years of its production, and therefore is not relevant to this study. The second omission is *Priscilla* (2023), Coppola's most recent film, released during the writing of this thesis and about which no scholarly literature exists at this moment.

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[1] Nancy-Jo Sales, "The Suspects Wore Louboutins," *Vanity Fair*, March 2010, https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/share/e9cc0cc3-dbf1-4fab-8367-5fc7c05608e6.

Review of Literature

As stated above, the existing literature on Coppola approaches her representation of girlhood from a transnational and feminist lens. Conversations often surround her position as a privileged descendent of Hollywood royalty. As an auteur, her work is said to carry influences of European art cinema which, Pam Cook writes, is a common influence on the tradition of American independent cinema Coppola is aligned with.[2] There are debates surrounding Coppola's feminism; whether her films can be labelled feminist, or if they lean toward postfeminist sensibilities.

Anna Backman Rogers is one scholar who has championed Coppola's feminism in this discourse. In her book, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, Backman Rogers disputes the commonly criticized frivolity of Coppola's surface images, identifying feminist and political power in her cinematic mood, texture, and tone.[3] She has continually identified Coppola's work as self-conscious to the gendered nature of cinema, and defends that Coppola uses the cinematic image to achieve the female perspective, which is inherently political.[4] Also engaged in this discourse is Todd Kennedy, who legitimizes the usefulness of Coppola's films in tackling questions about the state of contemporary feminist film theory.[5] Contrary to this, Belinda Smaill argues that the director's protagonists are engaged with the contemporary wave of postfeminism.[6] In exploring these female protagonist's lives as they are entangled in postfeminist

[2] Pam Cook, "Sofia Coppola: Commodity Auteur," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 283.
[3] Anna Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 2.
[4] Anna Backman Rogers, "'You Cannot Go Deaf to Women's Voices': Feminism and the Films of Sofia Coppola," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 317.
[5] Todd Kennedy, "Off With Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur," *Film Criticism* 35, no. 1 (2010): 37.
[6] Belinda Smaill, "Sofia Coppola: Reading the Director," *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013), 156.

sensibilities, Smaill asserts that Coppola is so focused on the inner world of her characters that their exterior world and socio-political positioning within it are left unexplored.[7]

Another important body of work is Fiona Handyside's *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*. This book situates the filmmaker's representations of girlhood within the larger academic discourse on global girlhood. Handyside deems Coppola's filmography one of the most comprehensive and insightful for dissecting how the figure of the girl has come to be represented in contemporary culture.[8] Handyside explores the domestic space as elemental to Coppola's narratives of girlhood. She suggests that Coppola often depicts "exploded homes," which describes how complex domestic spaces become oppressive settings for the filmmaker's female protagonists, subverting their usual sense of familiarity and comfort.[9] Handyside's study of girlhood across Coppola's corpus is instrumental to this thesis.

Handyside and Smaill both refer to Coppola's representation of feminism and girlhood as contemporary, which makes her tendency to evoke narratives of the past peculiar and demonstrates the need for research that analyzes this through the adaptation process. By tracing Coppola's ability to turn stories of the past into portraits of contemporary girlhood, this research considers Coppola's female protagonists as transhistorical, resonating with her early 21st century audience. A group of teenagers growing up in 1970s Michigan, Marie Antoinette's life at Versailles in the 18th century, and the inhabitants of an all-girls boarding school in Virginia during the Civil War; despite centuries dividing these women, they are connected by shared feelings of isolation, the pressure of growing into women under predetermined roles and expectations, and the threat of objectification by men.

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[7] Smaill, 159.
[8] Fiona Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood* (London: I.B. Taurus and Company Limited, 2017), 5.
[9] Handyside, 98.

As stated previously, the transhistorical dimension of Coppola's work has been largely overlooked. However, there are a few publications that touch on it, upon which my analysis aims to build. Fashion is a common focus in literature on Coppola, and Heidi Brevik-Zender applies a transhistorical reading to the filmmaker's costuming and soundtrack in *Marie Antoinette*. Brevik-Zender references the provocative historical inaccuracy of mise-en-scène, arguing that it emphasizes history as a construct of the present, a form of transhistoricity.[10] Backman Rogers also defends the intentional anachronisms employed in *Marie Antoinette*. She suggests this to be the main avenue through which Coppola removes the queen from the historical events surrounding her figure and focuses solely on her isolation as a real and identifiable young woman.[11]

Lastly, Mackenzie Leadston writes on the transhistorical nature of *Marie Antoinette*, analyzing its intertextuality with an 18th century French novel that portrays the feminine subjectivity, similar to the film.[12] Leadston uses this comparative analysis to defend the anachronistic nature of *Marie Antoinette*. Looking at the intertextuality between Coppola's film and an 18th century French text, Leadston's article demonstrates the value in further research developing the filmmaker's transhistorical approach through direct adaptation. As well, much of this engagement with transhistoricity uses only *Marie Antoinette*, while *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Beguiled* are worth examining further. All three filmic adaptations similarly position young women of the past as figures of transhistorical, contemporary girlhood. My thesis will develop

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[10] Heidi Brevik-Zender, "Let Them Wear Manolos: Fashion, Walter Benjamin, and Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*," *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 3 (2011), 4.
[11] Anna Backman Rogers, "The Historical Threshold: Crisis, Ritual, and Liminality in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006)," *Relief* 6, no. 1 (2012), 81.
[12] Mackenzie Leadston, "Letters from An Austrian Woman: Adapting Transhistorical Girlhood in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*," *Modern Language Review* 114, no. 4 (2018), 613.

these discussions around the importance of transhistoricity in Coppola's development of her characters' stories.

Theoretical Frameworks

Adaptation theory forms much of my methodology and framework, in tandem with feminist and postfeminist approaches to film studies. The literature that forms my theoretical approach is outlined here. To begin, I turn to theories put forth for studying the transformative nature of adaptation. This prioritizes the departures made by Coppola that reconstruct her female protagonists' worlds, situating period stories as vessels for contemporary girlhood.

Adaptation studies began with the influence of George Bluestone's seminal book, *Novels into Film*. At the time of his writing in 1961, Bluestone saw value in examining the rise of adaptations in Hollywood; in the 1950s, just under half of the screenplays submitted to the Production Code were adapted from novels.[13] Bluestone points out the natural discrepancies between media and their artistic conventions, and his work forges a path to analyzing adaptation in a way that accounts for each medium's conventional autonomy.[14]

I look to scholars who apply terms to adaptation theory that encompass these conventional differences. In his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, Timothy Corrigan defines adaptation as the process by which "one or more entities are reconfigured or adjusted through their engagement with or relationship to one or more other texts or objects."[15] Choice terms like reconfiguration and adjustment account for any omissions or additions made in the adaptation process, including the representation of a historical event,

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[13] George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 3.
[14] Bluestone, 5.
[15] Timothy Corrigan, "Defining Adaptation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, edited by Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23.

Corrigan clarifies.[16] In building upon the foundation of adaptation fidelity, Dudley Andrew narrows down two other valid relational modes between film and literature; borrowing and intersection. Andrew proposes that adaptations can manifest as small parts of an idea borrowed in the process of creating an entirely unique work, or as outright remakes where the original and adapted version remain almost identical, if not for the change in medium. No matter how it is achieved, adaptation is merely "the appropriation of meaning from a prior text."[17]

Throughout each chapter, I primarily look to Linda Hutcheon, whose methods for viewing adaptation through a transformative lens form a large part of my methodology. Her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, challenges negative views toward postmodernism and parody in adaptation.[18] Hutcheon suggests that adaptation is either a reinterpretation, re-creation, transposition, or a process of intertextuality. Reinterpretation and re-creation account for the pieces of a source text that are appropriated and extracted, or disposed of, by the adapter to illustriously tell the story from their perspective. Transposition outlines shifts in genre, framing, context, and even historical accuracy. The process of intertextuality is what audiences are left with in the end; a collectively jumbled memory of various stories across media, traces of one embedded in another.[19] These concepts inform my approach to Coppola's adaptation process, as this study foregrounds the shifts made to recreate historical images of girlhood that correspond with contemporary female audiences.

The question of historical accuracy in the adaptation process is an important consideration for this study. The depiction of history is an elemental part of adaptation as a

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[16] Corrigan, 25.
[17] Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 29.
[18] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), XII.
[19] Hutcheon, 8.

transformed and re-interpreted construct. Hutcheon argues that part of the process of adapting is to update a text for its new demographic and cultural point-of-view.[20] Francesco Casetti describes this as mis-adaptation. He uses the example of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), which displaces its original tale from Elizabethan Verona to Los Angeles in the 1990s. The renowned Shakespearean play gains a new life to be received by its new cultural context. Casetti asserts that the inner workings of the adaptation process see an adapted text born into a different position in the world and in history. As such, the contexts of both texts are valid.[21] Dudley Andrew includes a powerful sentiment to this effect in his essay, "Adaptation": an adaptation is a form of discourse, it invites us "to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward which it points."[22]

This thesis lies at the intersection of adaptation and feminist film. Therefore, literature that approaches adaptation from a gendered perspective has deeply informed my approaches. Mary Eagleton writes on the woman author as a recurring figure in fictional novels, deeming her representative of a movement in which women take back their cultural legitimacy through the power to tell stories.[23] Shelley Cobb applies this notion to adaptations by and about women. A woman who adapts, either as screenwriter or director, is inherently inserting her perspective into a story. This is especially pertinent to women who adapt stories by male authors. The adaptation effectively becomes a site for amplifying the women's perspective and legitimizing her

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[20] Hutcheon, 8.
[21] Francesco Casetti, "Adaptation and Mis-Adaptation: Film, Literature, and Social Discourses," in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 83.
[22] Andrew, "Adaptation," 37.
[23] Mary Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

authorship.[24] For this reason, Cobb concurs with movements to deconstruct the fidelity-driven relationship between source text and adaptation. By dismissing the idea of the written text as standard and instead focusing on adaptation as a singular conception with its own meaning, female authorship can be further cultivated.[25] My approach to Coppola's adaptations echoes Cobb's efforts to extract unique authorship from stories told by women. This study will follow Cobb's framework to identify how Coppola insists upon the girls' perspectives in her adaptations of stories that originally dismissed them.

As this study prioritizes representations of girlhood, I also consult scholars of feminist film and girlhood studies. I first look to Patricia White, author of *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, who establishes the historical costume drama genre as a benchmark of cultural taste in the realm of women's film. One feminist perspective claims that the period drama functions by integrating women into histories that they have otherwise been erased from. White credits Coppola with launching this mode of "deconstruction" with *Marie Antoinette*.[26] This thesis is dedicated to uncovering how this type of deconstruction White writes about has been employed in Coppola's other portraits of girlhood borrowed from novels of another time.

Second, I turn to characteristics of contemporary postfeminist culture presented by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Tasker and Negra write that postfeminist culture tries to naturalize aspects of feminism, rendering femininity inevitable, and deeming feminist movements of the past

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[24] Shelley Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.
[25] Cobb, 10.
[26] Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 74.

irrelevant. It foregrounds women as independent consumers, sexually empowered, and open to educational or professional opportunities.[27] Postfeminist culture is also associated with the hyper-aestheticization of everyday life, which Tasker and Negra deem a characteristic of contemporary culture. Women who perpetuate commercial beauty standards are idealized, and the pleasure of self-expression is intensified.[28] Tasker and Negra's "In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies" suggests that we turn away from feminist versus postfeminist debates, instead focusing on the persistence of common concerns between generations of women, past and current.[29] The intention behind my study is similar; to trace how current postfeminist cultural contexts inform Coppola's representation of female characters from the past.

Another important element of this study is girlhood. Tasker and Negra associate girlhood as a central focus of some postfeminist media, where young women are positioned as symbols of postfeminist liberation. In postfeminist culture, girlhood is accessible to and provides a sense of escape for adult women. They refer to this as "the 'girling' of femininity."[30] For my basis of the characteristics of girlhood I turn to Catherine Driscoll's article, "Girls Today," in which she creates a timeline of how Western academic discussions of girlhood have shifted throughout modern history. Girls have always been viewed as sites that reflect new anxieties in response to changing cultural standards, the circumstances of which are in constant flux.[31] Driscoll acknowledges that it is nearly impossible to establish a universal sense of girlhood based upon

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[27] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
[28] Tasker and Negra, 7.
[29] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005), 108.
[30] Tasker and Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," 18.
[31] Catherine Driscoll, "Girls Today: Girls, Girl Culture, and Girl Studies," *Girlhood Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008), 13.

these factors.[32] My study does not attempt to label Coppola's representations of girlhood as universal, but instead aims to analyze Coppola's strategies of girlish representation from Driscoll's criteria. This will establish an understanding of Coppola's period adaptations and female characters as developed through common theoretical approaches to contemporary girlhood. Driscoll expresses that in the past girls have been considered representative of conformity, while girls today are associated with agency. She references a subsection of girl studies called "bedroom culture," in which girls are shaped by their private domestic spaces and their bedrooms become sanctuaries for experiencing girlhood.[33] Girlhood today is perceived through containment, Driscoll explains. This sentiment is relative to Coppola's tendency to explore female characters within the confines of their home, which manifests in various shapes and forms: the quintessential, suburban American nuclear family home in *The Virgin Suicides*, the Palace of Versailles in *Marie Antoinette*, or Miss Martha's Seminary for Girls in *The Beguiled*.

This research develops the transformative methods of framing adaptation by applying Hutcheon's key terms to Coppola appropriation of texts, and how various transpositions, reinterpretations, and re-creations drive her portrayal of contemporary girlhood. Coppola's body of work is one that exemplifies the use of adaptation in highlighting the history we have emerged from. Using girlhood as the focus, which scholars identify as a recurring theme in Coppola's oeuvre, this thesis reveals adaptation and transhistoricity to be elemental in our understanding of the filmmaker. As well, this research will reconcile the absence of adaptation studies in existing literature on Coppola.

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[32] Driscoll, 27.
[33] Driscoll, 21.

Chapter Breakdown

Over three chapters, this thesis analyzes Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, *Marie Antoinette*, and *The Beguiled*. As predicated above, I chose these films because they are cinematic adaptations set in the past. This thesis dedicates a chapter to each film and its source text(s), tracing the connections between each through transposition, reinterpretation, and re-creation of the historical narrative and its female protagonists.

Chapter one explores *The Virgin Suicides* alongside the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, which tells the story of the five teenage Lisbon sisters and their collective suicides from the perspective of a group of neighbourhood boys. This chapter proposes that the film's signature, feminine visual style is derivative of the adaptation process. Coppola's mise-en-scène, specifically the cluttered, girly décor of the Lisbon girls' private domestic space, demonstrates Coppola's reinterpretation of the novel's predominantly male point-of-view. Eugenides novel is narrated by boys who collect the Lisbon girls' personal belongings as a way to "know" them and to solve the mystery of their suicides. The insight they gain from these objects, however presumptive, in turn forms the reader's understanding of the Lisbon sisters as characters. Coppola's film repurposes the objects; rather than being filtered through the boys' perspectives, the viewer is welcomed first-hand into the private bedrooms and bathrooms of the Lisbon girls. I analyze the arrangement of these spaces, and how the film's mise-en-scène reflects the re-creation of the novel's use of objects and characters' belongings as key narrative devices.
I refer to scholars such as Suzanne Ferriss and Fiona Handyside, who have written on the importance of mise-en-scène in the domestic space across Coppola's oeuvre, ultimately demonstrating this at a site where Coppola establishes the female subjectivity in her adaptation of a novel that is otherwise told from a strictly male point-of-view.

In addition, this chapter explores transhistoricity in the film's Midwestern, suburban setting in the 1970s. In a 2020 seminar with the American Film Institute, Coppola says that she "wanted the film to be a memory, not set in the '70s."[34] She describes using contemporary music to help achieve this, for example. This chapter further proposes that the physical and temporal setting, marked by evidence of and heightened anxieties toward environmental decay during this era in America, also works to embody common characteristics of childhood memories associated with the experience of growing up in North American suburbs at any moment in time. Evoking the work of Bree Hoskin, I reference the film's status as a symbol of nostalgia, demonstrating that these qualities promote an association between the viewer's childhood memories, and the memory depicted on-screen: the Lisbon girls' tragic coming-of-age story.

Chapter two looks at *Marie Antoinette*, a historical biopic that takes creative liberties in detailing Marie Antoinette's life: from leaving Austria at age fourteen and arriving in France as the Dauphine, becoming Queen at eighteen, to the eventual fall of Versailles. Coppola's film is based upon Antonia Fraser's biography, which adopts a sympathetic perspective on Marie Antoinette's life story. This chapter analyzes Coppola's transposition of contemporary, anachronistic costume and soundtrack elements in Marie Antoinette's world. I propose that music and costume are part of the adaptation process in that they tell a story of their own, one that reflects Fraser's biography and her focus on the pressures Marie Antoinette faces as a young girl adjusting to new customs. Coppola reframes the context of this figure's life by emphasizing her personal experience and feelings as a young woman, similar to Fraser's book. The depiction of Versailles as a complicated and overbearing domestic space illuminates Marie Antoinette's

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[34] American Film Institute, *Sofia Coppola on the Music in her Films*, June 28, 2020, YouTube video, 1:54, https://youtu.be/olQckhOIFgQ?si=ZeKSVUWZ5jXXmy1V.

experience as Coppola's focal point, and the transposition of historical accuracy through anachronism situates the Queen as a transhistorical figure of both past and contemporary girlhood.

Chapter three deals with *The Beguiled*, adapted from Thomas Cullinan's novel. The film is also considered a remake of Don Siegel's 1971 film adaptation. The story follows the residents of a girls' school in Virginia during The Civil War, and a Union soldier who turns up injured on their property. This chapter addresses Coppola's reinterpretation of the story's perspective, shifting the sympathy to the female characters, whereas Cullinan and Siegel portray the male lead, Corporal McBurney, as the sympathetic victim. In doing so, I focus on Coppola's re-creation of the gender dynamics, both between the women and in their relationships with McBurney. I argue that Coppola creates a positive dynamic between the girls, as opposed to the novel's hostile environment. As well, Coppola's women are vulnerable and honest in their efforts to help McBurney, whereas Siegel portrays them as sexually deviant and violent. *The Beguiled* is also one of Coppola's most controversial films for its erasure of Black characters, especially as it deals with a story set in the American South during the Civil War. I propose that the adaptation's omissions are just as noteworthy as its reinterpretations, as this reveals the extent to which Coppola seeks to extract privileged stories of white girlhood and female isolation from the period stories she re-creates.

Through this research, I seek to better understand the current critical and academic perceptions of Sofia Coppola as a filmmaker by bringing to light this important component of her filmmaking. Adaptation and the use of transhistoricity play a large role in shaping her portrayals of girlhood. A significant portion of her work is adapted from historical narratives. Using adaptation theory as the main framework, this research unpacks Coppola's signature

girlhood as largely influenced by the historical narratives she adapts and traces her association with films on contemporary girlhood through transhistorical representations of women and girls of the past. Using Hutcheon's concepts of transposition, reinterpretation, and re-creation, this thesis compares Coppola's adaptations to their original sources through appropriated meaning, recontextualization, reframing, and the assertion of a feminine perspective in each story. Within Coppola's cinematic worlds, I turn to visual clues in mise-en-scène, the domestic space each protagonist exists within and how it shapes her character, as well as contemporary postfeminist sensibilities present in the historical narrative.

In a recent interview with Lynn Hirschberg, Coppola acknowledges one commonality between all her films: "…there is always a world and there is always a girl trying to navigate it. That's the story that will always intrigue me."[35] This thesis illuminates how adaptation plays a role in shaping the stories Coppola aims to tell. Throughout the next three chapters, I demonstrate how the Lisbon sisters, Marie Antoinette, and the ladies of Miss Farnsworth's plantation alike act as transhistorical vehicles for this story.

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[35] Kathryn Bromwich, "Behind the Scenes with Sofia Coppola: Memories from a Life in Film," *The Guardian*, August 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/aug/27/sofia-coppola-archive-memoir-memories-book-extract-lost-translation-virgin-suicides.

Chapter One

The Virgin Suicides

"Those Neighbourhoods Don't Change Much"

In 1999, Sofia Coppola releases her first feature film, *The Virgin Suicides*, adapted from Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel of the same name. Eugenides has stated that the mere translation of his novel to film inherently changes the story's meaning. During an interview on the film's set, Eugenides says: "the book is not character-driven at all. The only character, in a sense, is the collective narrator. You get a fragmentary knowledge of a lot of the characters…Now they're actually embodied by these really terrific actors. They become bigger characters than I'd imagined in the book."[36] The objective of this chapter is to examine how Coppola's adaptation of the story to a new medium results in an inevitable shift in her portrayal of the main female characters.

I examine Coppola's representation of the Lisbon sisters and their experiences of girlhood through belongings and consumer objects. While objects are a central element of Eugenides' narrative from the boys' perspective, Coppola's adaptation appropriates the meaning behind the Lisbon girls' personal possessions, visually representing girlhood. This analysis will consider the filmmaker's adaptation of a story set in the 1970s and her approach to illustrating the female experience in a way that resonates with viewers upon the film's wide release in 2000. The representation of girlhood in *The Virgin Suicides* is influenced by postfeminist culture, which began to have an impact on popular media targeting white, middle-class women in the

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[36] Justin Wyatt, "The Cinematic Style of Loss: Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 32.

1990s.[37] This analysis identifies the postfeminist sensibilities that were contemporaneous with the making and release of Coppola's film. This highlights the transhistorical qualities of Coppola's on-screen representations of girlhood that have become associated with her oeuvre.

To this effect, I consider Coppola's visual reinterpretation of the novel's use of objects in building the Lisbon sisters' identities, and how this is relative to early 21st century girlhood. In the next section, "Impossible Excursions," I introduce the narrative importance of objects as evidence toward the boys' mythologization of the Lisbon sisters' lives and deaths. Drawing upon Suzanne Ferriss' analysis of Coppola's characteristically intentional mise-en-scène in *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola*, I outline how the director translates the objects as a narrative device from book to screen. Specifically, Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* guides this analysis, as her book lays the groundwork for understanding adaptation as a "process of creation,"[38] which applies to Coppola's re-creation of the source text's treatment of the female characters as they are narrated through a male perspective.

This leads to the next section, "Caution: Open Door Slowly!" Here, I look at how Coppola subverts the function of the objects from the perspective of the male narrators in both novel and film. The re-creation of the Lisbon home and the visual evocation of décor in the girls' private domestic spaces are major sites through which Coppola establishes a representation of their identities and girlhood that transcends the boys' perspectives. The director asks the viewer to follow the objects as identity-building clues, as well, given the noticeable lack of dialogue from the girls themselves. For example, one tableau-like scene shows the sisters standing in silence together in the restroom at school. Lux (Kirsten Dunst) smokes near a stall, Therese

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[37] Tasker and Negra, "In Focus: Postfeminsim and Contemporary Media Studies," 107.
[38] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.

(Leslie Hayman) leans up against the wall, Mary (A.J. Cook) checks her appearance in the mirror, and Bonnie (Chelse Swain) fidgets with the faucet. In this space where the boys are not permitted and cannot make a record of what the girls are doing, the viewer gains no additional insight. Fiona Handyside argues that Coppola understands "the extent to which girlhood is a visual construction,"[39] which I build upon by proposing that the filmmaker largely invites her audience into the Lisbon sisters' world through visual images of their private spaces and surroundings. While the boys (in both the novel and film) collect the Lisbon girls' belongings as evidence toward an explanation of their deaths, the film viewer is asked to do similar detective work to get to know the protagonists. Fiona Handyside's book, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, enhances my analysis of Coppola's cinematic treatment of the Lisbon girls as visual characters outside of the boys' perspective, as this text offers a comprehensive overview of Coppola's treatment of girlhood on-screen.

Handyside also touches on the importance of the Lisbon home and its suburban setting to Coppola's re-creation of girlhood in *The Virgin Suicides*. She describes the Lisbon family home as an uncanny place where the girls are thrust into public view and forced to perform their girlhood, as if on a stage.[40] Following in Handyside's footsteps, my objective is to further develop the role of the home—specifically the décor and mise-en-scène of the girls' private bedrooms and bathroom—as elemental to the adaptation and re-creation of these female characters who lack individual agency in the novel. To illustrate the transhistoricity of girlhood presented on-screen through these objects, I turn to Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's writing on postfeminist culture and its impact on media. Their introduction on feminist politics and

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[39] Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, 49.
[40] Handyside, 125.

postfeminist culture centralizes commercial beauty standards and consumption as commonly associated with female characters.[41] As well, Rosalind Gill provides a pertinent lens through which to view Coppola's visual treatment of these female characters and their identities through consumption.

Lastly, in the section titled "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood," I further my exploration of this adaptation as transhistorical through Coppola's cinematic engagement with the setting and period of the novel: a suburb of Detroit, Michigan in the '70s, a time marked by environmental anxiety. The life and death of each Lisbon sister is inextricably linked to the environmental decay threatening them and their surroundings, the seemingly static North American suburbs. Referring to Catherine Russell's notion of parallax historiography, in which certain parallels are identified across the historiography of cinema based upon how we interact with the past from our position in the present. Russell focuses specifically on the parallels between early cinema and modern viewing practices and technologies, though she acknowledges that these parallels "point to the way that the forms and institutions of moving pictures are deeply implicated in social space."[42] This is pertinent to mapping Coppola's engagement with the past, though I focus on the relationship between novel and film and the parallels between each medium's historiographical approach to telling stories of the past.

Coppola discusses the cinematic potential she saw in the novel's suburban setting and 1970s time period in an interview with Wes Anderson, conducted prior to the film's release. Having spent very little time growing up in suburbia, Coppola describes feeling intrigued by its unfamiliarity to her, despite being such a constant in many North Americans' lives: "I didn't

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[41] Tasker and Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," 3-18.
[42] Catherine Russell, "Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 567.

want it to be about the '70s. I wanted it to look timeless. It seems like those neighbourhoods don't change much."[43] The intent of this chapter is to explore how Coppola's adaptation strategies serve the director's purpose to create this timeless feel. I argue that this transhistorical adaptation creates a parallax between the coming-of-age suburban drama set in the '70s and the present-day experiences of girls living in similar contexts.

Overall, I follow in the footsteps of scholars whose literature has touched on the central theme of girlhood in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* by tracing its importance through adaptation and transhistoricity. The filmmaker reimagines Jeffrey Eugenides' novel of childhood nostalgia, mystery, death, and destruction—the death of oneself and the breakdown of suburbia—by further blending the past and present beyond its dual timeline narrative. Discussing her attempt to maintain the male perspective while also teasing out the feminine aspects of the story, Coppola says that she aimed to interpret the "teenage girl world" of the novel: "I think of the movie as being feminine."[44] My chapter develops the conversation surrounding Coppola's signature representations of girlhood, arguing that adaptation and the reimagining of the setting play a large role in Coppola's success in turning this novel into a "feminine" film.

Impossible Excursions

I will begin with the film's depiction of the neighbourhood boys and their collection of evidence and mementos pertaining to the Lisbon sisters, which reflects how the novel functions. Eugenides recounts the mysterious suicides of five sisters from the outside perspective of a group of neighbourhood boys. Their inability to conceive of the girls as autonomous individuals

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[43] Anderson, Wes, "Sofia Coppola," in *Sofia Coppola: Interviews*, ed. Amy N. Monaghan (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 8.
[44] Rodrigo Perez, "Sofia Coppola Talks the Teenage Dream of Her Striking *Virgin Suicides* Debut," in *Sofia Coppola: Interviews*, ed. Amy N. Monaghan (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2023), 111.

informs the narrators' detached recollection of the Lisbons' lives. An example of how this is handled in the novel is the mixed-gender party hosted by the Lisbons. This is one of the few opportunities for the boys to properly socialize with the girls. This unprecedented access to their home stirs a revelation: "Instead of five replicas with the same blond hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings."[45]

Eugenides' male narrators provide an outside perspective on the Lisbon family, and the resulting story is largely fueled by a collection of the girls' personal possessions which they obtain to fill in the blanks. The boys have a collection of photos, news stories, makeup products, and even come to possess Cecilia's diary. Whenever these items are referenced by the narrator they are referred to as exhibits. For example, the boys describe the photo used for a newspaper article on the death of Cecilia: "On the torn-out page (Exhibit #4), Cecilia's penetrating face peers from between the sweatered shoulders of two cropped-out schoolmates."[46] The objects that have been collected to represent or make sense of the Lisbon girls are viewed by the boys as evidence in a mystery—merely a means to an end.

A key scene in Coppola's film that I will focus on takes place leading up to the girls' collective suicides. Inside one boy's bedroom, a tracking shot reveals all of the knick-knacks they have collected thus far that come to represent the girls in their eyes. As the camera captures the yearbook photos, diary, earrings, polaroid of the Lisbon home, hair clips, eyelash curler, nail polish, and even Bonnie's late admission slip, the narrator describes feeling like they have gone so long without seeing the girls that they were beginning to forget their faces. Despite the possession of their things, the Lisbons were slipping further away from them.[47]

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[45] Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (New York: Warner Books, 1993), 26.
[46] Eugenides, 97.
[47] *The Virgin Suicides*, directed by Sofia Coppola (Paramount Classics, 1999).

Fig 1.1 The boys' travel fantasy, depicted in a slideshow.

The boys go so far as to order the same travel catalogs that they notice in the Lisbons' mailbox. They assume that having been removed from school and society as punishment, the girls must be experiencing the world vicariously through the catalogs. So, the boys join in. The narrator describes browsing the catalogs as they imagine backpacking with the girls, taking off on "impossible excursions" in their daydreams to feel close to the girls. This narration is spoken over a slideshow depicting imagined photographs of the group along their travels (figure 1.1). Regardless of the fantasy, Coppola illustrates how the boys feel closer to the girls in a very real way by interacting with the same objects (in this case, travel magazines). The narrator says that the only way to feel closer to the sisters as they remain cooped up is through these thought up scenarios: "…which have scarred us forever, leaving us happier with dreams than with wives."[48] Even 25 years on, these grown men admit to feeling satisfied with their false proximity to the

[48] *The Virgin Suicides*, directed by Sofia Coppola (Paramount Classics, 1999).

Lisbon girls through items and mementos, so much so that it replaces real intimacy in their adult lives.

Coppola leans into the use of objects as narrative and character-building devices. The filmmaker ensures that the viewer also gets to know the Lisbons through their belongings. According to Suzanne Ferriss, Coppola is known for her mise-en-scène and the way she "meticulously organizes elements in the visual frame."[49] She demonstrates this here by paying close attention to the items, mementos, belongings, artworks, and photographs that make up the Lisbon sisters' world. As a result, the viewer is complicit in the boys' tendency to make assumptions about the girls based upon the things they own.

The visual importance of the objects on-screen reflect what Hutcheon calls the process of re-creation in adaptation. Hutcheon writes about the shift from telling to showing in the novel-to-film adaptation process: "description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images…there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot."[50] Coppola appropriates the novel's use of the objects as a device through which the boys narrate the lives of the Lisbon sisters from an outside perspective. For her adaptation, Coppola transcodes the objects into visual devices that invite the viewer themselves to look upon these representations of the Lisbon sisters, rather than rely on the narrator's written description. Coppola re-creates her adaptation by visually equating the girls with the objects they consume, forcing her audience to ponder their willingness to follow the narrators' lead in this way, which will be explored further in the following section.

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[49] Suzanne Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, and Celebrity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 102.
[50] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 40.

Caution: Open Door Slowly!

I propose that the Lisbon home, more specifically the private bedrooms and bathroom of the girls, function as sites where Coppola reinterprets the meaning of the objects and their significance to the Lisbon sisters through the process of adaptation. Whereas the novel only characterizes the Lisbon girls through the boys' focalization (as the collective narrator), the film can visually personify the Lisbon sisters. The viewer sees them outside the filter of an unreliable narrator. Thus, Coppola relies upon the home and the girls' belongings inside it, inviting the viewer to make similar speculations about these characters based upon symbolic, trivial objects. Furthermore, Coppola mirrors the sisters' progression towards death through the mise-en-scène of their personal spaces.

Among the literature on Coppola's explorations of girlhood on-screen, Fiona Handyside provides a valuable exploration of the important role of the domestic space in the director's films. Handyside writes that Coppola's homes epitomize uncanniness; where a place of sanctuary for most becomes unfamiliar and inflicts trauma for most of her female characters.[51] As a result, Handyside writes: "…it is not surprising that objects come to take significant roles, called upon to overcome significant lacks and conjure up proximity."[52]

Coppola's intervention in the girls' lives through the décor of their space is indicative of several postfeminist media tropes outlined by Tasker and Negra. The early 21st century brought about a culture of hyper-aestheticizing aspects of daily life, which Tasker and Negra see proof of in the postfeminist tendency to impose narrow beauty standards and to promote pleasure and self-expression.[53] To return to a quote from Coppola that was referenced earlier in this chapter:

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[51] Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, 120.
[52] Handyside, 121.
[53] Tasker and Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," 7.

this is how the filmmaker achieves her "teenage girl world."[54] By equating the Lisbon girls to the consumer products that make up their domestic space and therefore daily routines, the film reappropriates the symbolism of objects to situate these characters as products of postfeminist media culture.

This is best displayed by the film's opening and closing scenes. *The Virgin Suicides* begins with a montage of establishing shots of the Lisbon family's neighbourhood. The warm, serene images of the suburbs—neighbours watering their garden, preparing dinner on the barbecue, and children playing outside—are abruptly interrupted by a shadowy, cool-toned shot of a windowsill (figure 1.2). A steady faucet drip and distant sirens can be heard as the viewer takes in the myriad of personal belongings piled against the bathroom window.

Fig 1.2 Clutter on the bathroom windowsill.

The items refer to the presence of the girls in this home. Perched on the windowsill, which is adorned with shiny stickers, is a collection of nail polishes, jewelry and rosaries draped over ornate perfume bottles, and various makeup products and tools. These are everyday

[54] Perez, "Sofia Coppola Talks the Teenage Dream of Her Striking *Virgin Suicides* Debut," 111.

consumer products geared towards women and girls. This shot effectively introduces the audience to the Lisbon sisters before all of their faces have been shown. These are the items that make up the girls' daily routines; the formulas that make up their physical presence each day.

Following this, the film cuts to Cecilia (Hanna Hall) lying in a bathtub full of water that has developed a pinkish hue. She stares blankly at the ceiling as sirens draw nearer and the male narrator's voice-over begins: "Cecilia was the first to go."[55] The previous shot of the windowsill is presented without voice-over narration, allowing Coppola to introduce the girls herself before the boys have a chance. In contrast, the novel begins with a description of Cecilia's suicide attempt, presumably recounted from the paramedics' perspectives, who the boys describe becoming close with over the course of the year these suicides take place. Much of the language used to describe the scene pertains to Cecilia's body, for example that when she was found "her small body [was] giving off the odor of a mature woman,"[56] or that "they found the laminated picture of the Virgin Mary she held against her budding chest."[57] The scene of Cecilia's first suicide attempt in the novel is focalized by details pertaining to Cecilia's body, obtained by the boys from the paramedics who responded to the call.

In an act of showing-not-telling, and in transcending the boys' perspective given through voice-over narration in the film, Coppola provides the viewer a subjective glimpse into her female protagonists' lives through this image of the windowsill. She subverts the viewer's expectations based upon the novel, achieving what Hutcheon says the shift from telling to showing can do: when certain visual elements are added (or deliberately removed) from an

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[55] *The Virgin Suicides*, directed by Sofia Coppola (Paramount Classics, 1999).
[56] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 3.
[57] Eugenides, 4.

adaptation, the focus of a story can be transformed.[58] In this case, Coppola uses an image of everyday beauty products and jewelry to foreground the teenage Lisbon girls and their existence as autonomous people outside of the boys' psyches.

For this to be effective, the filmmaker's visual clues as to the female experiences of the protagonist must be relevant to the early-2000s viewer. Hence, the evocation of beauty products as representation of the girls. Handyside argues that Coppola's oeuvre is constantly grappling with the private and public, and production and consumption; fashion and beauty help to set up tension in her films, as they simultaneously represent and suffocate one's individual identity.[59] Coppola leans into consumer beauty products as identity-forming and lingers on those details in the Lisbon girls' home as a way of initially introducing the viewer to the protagonists. This speaks to a generation of girls at the turn of the century who, according to Tasker and Negra, are under the influence of a postfeminist culture "anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self."[60] It becomes natural for the early 21st century female viewer to identify who the Lisbon girls are: they are introduced first and foremost through the consumer beauty products that line their bathroom walls.

At the end of the film, the once cluttered home becomes devoid of such evidence of life, routine, or consumption. Having lost their daughters to suicide, Mr. Lisbon (James Woods) and Mrs. Lisbon (Kathleen Turner) are seen packing up and driving away from the empty house. Coppola then cycles through a series of still shots of the deserted home, revealing its dark and bare rooms. One image depicts a plastic covering over the couches that the Lisbon family once gathered on to watch television together. Another shot shows boxes packed with girlish trinkets

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[58] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 45.
[59] Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, 158.
[60] Tasker and Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,"

that have been left behind: a unicorn, a floral piggy bank, and what appears to be a novelty teapot (figure 1.3). The remnants of this now-lifeless home are preserved as if it has become a morgue. The removal of knick-knacks that once made up the family's day-to-day lives is a signal of the loss that has ravaged them. While the clutter was once used to introduce the main protagonists of the film, the removal of the clutter announces their permanent departure.

Fig 1.3 Moving boxes left behind in the Lisbon home.

This association between the Lisbon sisters' lives and their personal belongings is continually illustrated throughout the film as the home shifts to reflect the loss of Cecilia. Most telling is Coppola's depiction of Cecilia's bedroom before and after her death. When Peter Sissen (Chris Hale) joins the family for dinner one night, Mrs. Lisbon sends him upstairs to use Cecilia's bathroom. The viewer follows him upstairs to her bedroom door (figure 1.4) and as he pauses to take in her room. The camera pans over a detailed corner of her private space. It is warmly lit by multiple decorative lamps and candles, emitting a cozy glow that envelops the many handmade works of art, handwritten notes, and figurines lining her desk and walls. Cecilia's bed is draped in a canopy of mixed textiles, the most striking being a transparent curtain with black flowers. Though so much of her space is on display to Peter in this moment,

the bed is well contained by its adornment, suggesting the sanctity of a young girl's bedroom as a deeply personal place of privacy and rest from performance of the self.

Fig 1.4 Cecilia's bedroom door.

Making his way into the bathroom, Peter steps over a stuffed teddy bear, a tea set, sketches, one flip flop sandal, a pair of underwear, and tarot cards. Cecilia's bedroom is bursting with evidence of life. The floor and walls are covered in artworks and crafts that are suggested to have been created by Cecilia herself. Her inner thoughts and creativity manifest physically in this room.

The Lisbon sisters' spaces are highly decorative and overflowing with things. This is a stark contrast to the rest of the Lisbon home, which is bland in most common areas. The family watches television in a living room surrounded by beige walls, carpeting, and furniture. The basement in which the girls host a party is lined with dark brown wooden panelling and colourless furniture, brightened only by the few balloons placed for the occasion. Coppola illustrates the girls' self-expression through the implementation of vibrant objects that allow the sisters' personality to stand out against their stark home.

Following the death of Cecilia, however, the vibrancy of her bedroom dies, too. Mr. Lisbon enters the bedroom one night after noticing the window left open. The warm glow has since been replaced with a cool dreariness as the open window causes a visible draft in the room. It exists in a frigid state; almost everything inside the room now serves as a reminder of Cecilia's death. Furthermore, Mr. Lisbon spots an apparition of his deceased daughter in the corner of her bedroom. The life and warmth that once encapsulated a space that fostered the creativity and wonder of a young girl has now been replaced by a cold, haunting sterility. Cecilia's transition from life to death is mirrored by her bedroom.

Thus, the significance of objects and mementos representing the girls' daily lives functions beyond merely a direct translation of how these items are evoked by the novel. Under Hutcheon's characteristics, Coppola transcodes the meaning of the objects in her process of re-creating the novel's description of these items as the boys' collected evidence, or "exhibits,"[61] toward knowing these elusive characters. In doing so, the filmmaker equates these characters to their belongings, which serve as the sole visual clues the audience has to knowing the protagonists.

Hutcheon writes that a primary advantage when adapting a novel to the screen, and therefore employing cinematic techniques to the story, is that the visual medium: "can both direct and expand the possibilities of perception."[62] Although a performance medium such as film does not adapt a written text effortlessly, Hutcheon says, adding that films rely upon what Charles Sanders Pierce calls "indexical and iconic signs—that is, people, places, and things—whereas literature uses symbolic and conventional signs."[63] Beyond the novel's written

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[61] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 5.
[62] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 42-43.
[63] Hutcheon, 43.

descriptions of the objects, and the boys' first-person account of how these items were used to "know" the Lisbon girls, Coppola's film renders the objects visually symbolic of the characters who possess them. In this way, the viewer is prompted to join the boys in understanding and relating to these girls not through conventional dialogue or self-presentation (which is restrained), but through the visual signification of products, décor, and keepsakes that make up their everyday lives.

Additionally, the 21st century female viewers of this filmic adaptation are no strangers to media that places value upon consumption from a young age. Rosalind Gill outlines central postfeminist sensibilities that she identifies as applicable to contemporary popular media. Gill acknowledges that consumerism works to position femininity as something performed through the body, and in postfeminist media the body is equated to a woman's identity. In turn, Gill writes that a woman's body is treated as if "…requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to even narrower judgements of female attractiveness."[64]

By presenting the Lisbon sisters' collection of makeup, jewelry, and fragrances before the girls themselves, Coppola equates their identity to these products. In linking the state of Cecilia's bedroom, and the belongings inside it, to her life and death, Coppola likens the teenager's identity to the products she consumed in search of identity. The Lisbon sisters' experiences of girlhood mirror what have become norms of girlhood and early womanhood at the turn of the century, a pivotal moment from which Coppola crafts this adaptation to connect the Lisbon girls of the 1970s to her contemporary female viewers. Beyond this, though, the viewer is made

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[64] Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007), 150.

complicit in the boys' treatment of the girls by making assumptions about and indulging in the story of the Lisbons mainly through visual signs pertaining to the things they owned.

It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood

The events of both the novel and film are set in the 1970s and narrated by the boys as grown men 25 years after the suicides. As discussed, Coppola's version of the story grounds its representation of girlhood and femininity in postfeminist attitudes of the late 1990s. Yet, her depiction of the death of the Lisbons is tethered to the story's period and setting. The environmental climate of American suburbia during this time plays a large role in both the novel and film. The 1970s witnessed an increase in awareness of the ecology movement across the Anglosphere. In response, global organizations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are established at the top of the decade.[65]

Various visual and aural signs of ecological degradation gradually begin to command Coppola's suburban backdrop. Most trees that appear in outdoor shots have been tagged for removal due to the outbreak of Dutch elm disease; Cecilia makes a passing remark to her mother about a new addition to the endangered species list. Coinciding with the film's culminating suicides, a local processing plant deals with a spill that engulfs the neighbourhood in a stench. As they narrate the story from decades on, the men look back on the simultaneous deaths of the Lisbon girls and destruction of their surrounding ecosystems and suggest that the two were connected. Everyone who lives in the neighbourhood still associates the two.

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[65] Bree Hoskin, "Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2007), 214.

In terms of the setting, Laura Henderson has written on the sentimentality of cinematic place in Coppola's oeuvre. The filmmaker "offers the audience an experience of place that is suffused with emotion and affect."[66] Thus, Henderson argues, she is able to approach her cinematic settings in a way that reflects the viewer's visual perception and personal experiences of places.[67] For *The Virgin Suicides*, I propose that Coppola re-creates the experience of growing up in suburbia in a way that mirrors the viewer's memories associated with childhood, while linking her portrait of nostalgia and girlhood to the social and ecological climate of the early 2000s.

Many scholars have referenced the nostalgic power of the film's suburban setting. For example, Bree Hoskin writes that Coppola treats her suburban Michigan landscape as a universal image of nostalgia.[68] This is reflected in the scene leading up to homecoming, in which the boys drive the Lisbon girls to the dance. In the novel, the narrator describes feeling taken aback by just how talkative and perceptive the girls are. During the ride, they reminisce and gossip about the neighbourhood as it passes them by. The boys are once again forced to confront the fact that the girls are coherent beings: "Like us, they had distinct memories tied to various bushes, trees, and garage roofs."[69] In the film, Coppola includes this scene as one of the few moments in which the Lisbon sisters are seen engaging in unreserved conversation and making jokes together. As they drive through town, the boys appear stunned by the girls' knowledge and commentary on the neighbourhood, its houses, and their occupants.

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[66] Laura Henderson, "Psychogeography and Cinema(car)tography: Cinematic Tourism and Sofia Coppola's Films," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 356.
[67] Henderson, 364.
[68] Hoskin, "Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*," 214.
[69] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 124.

In the novel, this scene serves only to develop the boys' connections with the Lisbon girls, as the boys narrate the revelation that they have more in common than they thought. In the film, this scene prompts a sense of recognition in the viewer, who supposedly holds similar memories of their own associated with the specificities of childhood and the place in which it was spent. As the teenagers drive to the dance, Coppola includes warm-toned images of tree-lined streets, houses, and sunlight peeking out from behind the foliage. This sequence is reminiscent of memories themselves, or old home movies. By pairing visual images of suburbia with the girls' childlike gossip about the specificities of their neighbourhood, Coppola evokes a shared experience of place between the characters and the viewer—a place that is recognized as a universally shared symbol of nostalgia.

The nostalgic treatment of suburbia and the specific environmental climate of the 1970s are both elemental to Coppola's adaptation of this story and her visual representation of girlhood as timeless. In Catherine Russell's discussion on the notion of parallax historiography, she looks to the evolution of cinema as a reciprocal process through which our consumption becomes influenced by the way we interact with the past.[70] For example, archival practices reinvigorate and re-write early cinema through current technology. Russell writes: "this rewriting constitutes a valuable revision of the modernity of cinema as a site of shifting identities and viewing positions."[71] Throughout this chapter, I have identified a similar process of rewriting that occurs in Coppola's adaptation process. There is a parallax in the way Coppola and Eugenides approach the girls through objects; while the filmmaker speaks to contemporary postfeminist media culture by introducing the Lisbon girls and their identities to the audience through their beauty products,

[70] Russell, "Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist," 552.
[71] Russell, 553.

girlish décor, and collection of mementos, the novelist filters his creation of these female characters through the male perspective and understanding of what the objects represent. Though both Coppola and Eugenides focus on the same objects, their meanings are altered by Coppola's unique position in time as well as behind the camera, which allows her to visually personify what Eugenides' medium could not.

Finally, in an interview with Mark Ebner on *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola says: "The book took place in the '70s, and I wanted to be accurate…I didn't want to make it contemporary. I wanted the whole '70s style to be the backdrop and more subtle…and I thought that the story had a kind of timeless quality that I wanted to work with."[72] Ultimately, there is no attempt to override the 1970s period of the novel, but rather to follow that sense of timelessness by leaning into the inevitably unique and informed angle one has on a period story from decades on. Throughout her adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola creates something that transcends the boundaries of its temporal setting. She explores relevant anxieties and sensibilities of the postfeminist moment in which this film is released. Much of Coppola's reinterpretation of girlhood in this story is evident in its visual aspects. I have proposed that this is most noticeable in Coppola's reappropriation of what Eugenides introduces as evidence: the Lisbon girls' belongings, personal domestic spaces, and the products they consume. The characters' identities are constructed by these items, forcing the viewer to reckon with the state of postfeminist media at the turn of the century, and to become complicit in how the boys had treated the Lisbon girls all their lives.

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[72] Mark Ebner, "Like a 'Virgin'," in *Sofia Coppola: Interviews*, ed. Amy N. Monaghan (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 10.

Chapter Two

Marie Antoinette

Aural, Visual & Regal Adaptation

Sofia Coppola's third feature film and second filmic adaptation, *Marie Antoinette* (2006), is adapted from Antonia Fraser's 2001 biography, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. The film is often regarded for its visual style, particularly due to the ornate backdrop of the Palace of Versailles and the plethora of pastel-coloured gowns, sweets, and décor. This is complemented by a post-punk soundtrack with songs from contemporary bands such as New Order, The Strokes, and Gang of Four. The film's highly decorative image and the contemporary alternative music are often the main topic of discussion. In this chapter, I propose adaptation theory as a productive, and often overlooked, frame to analyze Coppola's transposition of the sympathetic narrative put forth by Fraser's biography of Marie Antoinette. I consider the ways in which the adaptation process informs Coppola's approach to stylistic choices in the soundtrack and costuming, which highlight Marie Antoinette's youth and link her story to characteristics of contemporary girlhood.

The biography by Fraser spans Marie Antoinette's life with an emphasis on the pressure she faces following her political alliance-forming marriage at age fourteen and subsequent relocation to France, where her every move would be scheduled, spectated, and scrutinized. Anna Backman Rogers calls Fraser's biography revisionist in its approach to the French Queen's life for its prioritization of Marie Antoinette's personal experience. In particular, the book traces her rites of passage from teenage Dauphine to young Queen, which Backman Rogers argues fits well into Coppola's oeuvre with her recurring themes of young women and girls navigating their

coming-of-age. Backman Rogers writes that Coppola's anachronistic approach to the film's style reflects the inner workings of Marie Antoinette's private world, which could not be conveyed through the historical costume drama's traditional generic forms alone.[73] Although Coppola's signature soft, dreamy style is taken to new heights with the extravagant world of *Marie Antoinette*, all meaning is not lost amid the parties, the decorative cakes, or the luxury shoes and jewels.

Similar to Backman Rogers, Rosalind Galt addresses criticism of the film's appropriation of Versailles as nothing more than a decorative backdrop for Coppola's anachronistic, apolitical portrait of Marie Antoinette. Galt argues that underneath the "girly frivolity" on the surface, the decorative image is precisely where the film makes its political intervention. One example provided by Galt is through Marie Antoinette's costumes, which demonstrate her struggle for bodily autonomy as the French court effectively takes ownership of her, dictating what she will wear and who will dress her each morning.[74] Additionally, Tim J. Anderson rationalizes Coppola's use of an anachronistic score, writing that the director often relies on music to drive the impact of key moments and to urge the audience to feel emotions alongside the characters.[75] On *Marie Antoinette*'s soundtrack, for example, Anderson identifies the common theme of songs about adolescent female desire.[76] In *Marie Antoinette*, contemporary popular songs function as the soundtrack to Marie Antoinette's feelings as a young woman.[77]

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[73] Backman Rogers, "The Historical Threshold: Crisis, Ritual, and Liminality in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006)," 81.
[74] Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 22.
[75] Tim J. Anderson, "The Feeling of the Moment: Music in the Cinema of Sofia Coppola," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 223.
[76] Anderson, 225.
[77] Anderson, 227.

The aforementioned works locate meaning in what are otherwise considered merely stylistic and frivolous costuming and soundtrack choices. The contentious reception of the film, as outlined by Nicole Richter, often points to "its obvious disregard for historical accuracy."[78] However, the stylization of costumes and music are intrinsic to Coppola's oeuvre. Suzanne Ferriss offers a comprehensive overview of Coppola's aesthetic as a filmmaker, indicating that: "Sound and music fuse with visual images in a complex audiovisual fabric to craft narratives about identity, appearance, and surveillance that center on clothing and other fashionable goods."[79] Therefore, my analysis focuses on the film's musical soundtrack and costuming as prominent elements of Coppola's aesthetic, as well as notably anachronistic visual and aural tools used to connect this historical figure to the film's contemporary audience. The existing scholarship on the function of Coppola's style and the evocation of anachronistic elements in *Marie Antoinette* discounts the important influence of Fraser's book. Below, I demonstrate that many of these stylistic choices in costume and music serve to re-create the sympathetic, revisionist narrative set forth by Fraser's biography of Marie Antoinette.

Beginning in the first section, "History as Adaptation," I establish the important ties between adaptation practices and retelling history, which are closely intertwined. This connection between adaptation and history illuminates the relevance of studying the process of adaptation in Coppola's historical biopic. This section evokes the work of Defne Ersin Tutan, who proposes that "all historical representations are radically adaptive and that the ways in which these alternative representations are conceived and perceived tell us more about the

[78] Nicole Richter, "The Journey: The Reception of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 54.
[79] Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, 2.

present than about the past they refer to."[80] Coppola's present-day influences and aesthetic choices for her portrait of Marie Antoinette's life are analyzed through this concept.

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* serves as a valuable resource here, as she explores history as discourse, a system of signs through which we aim to better understand the past. Postmodern historical literature forms meaning through the systems it deploys to convey past events as present historical fact. The postmodern works to situate the historical context as applicable to the present and simultaneously calls into question the notions of history and epistemology.[81] Hutcheon's work lays the foundation for a study of this historical adaptation that elucidates the ties between past and present, and its revisionist approach to the widely accepted historiographical accounts of Marie Antoinette's life.

In the following section, "I Want Candy," I look at the film's use of an anachronistic soundtrack and how contemporary songs are used to evoke Marie Antoinette's emotional response to complex situations and to build upon the character development Fraser writes about in her book. Next, in the sections "Dressing Up," and "Dressing Down," I explore the ways in which Marie Antoinette's costumes illustrate her evolution from teenage girl to young woman, as she is fashioned into her role at Versailles. From the modern-inspired, edgy black gown worn to the masquerade ball to the refined, simple white garments worn at her place of retreat, Marie Antoinette's consumption of fashion is representative of her current emotional state and a response to the conditions of her place in Versailles. Each subtle anachronism links Marie Antoinette to the contemporary girl navigating her own coming-of-age. Here especially I turn to

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[80] Defne Ersin Tutan, "Adaptation and History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 577.
[81] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), 89.

Ferriss' *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola*, which highlights the balance between the temporal and physical setting of *Marie Antoinette* and the anachronistic, contemporary touches that blur this line. These elements, she argues, allow Coppola's version of Marie Antoinette to be viewed as a "real girl," rather than a distant figure of the 18th century.[82] This text offers a strong foundation of the film's anachronisms from which I build upon the relevance of the adaptation process in Coppola's meaningful engagement with music and costume.

History as Adaptation

The study of adaptation is especially integral to Coppola's oeuvre when considering her period films. On numerous occasions, the filmmaker has discussed the relationship between her account of Marie Antoinette's story and the current moment. In a discussion with Jean-Christophe Ferrari and Yann Tobin, Coppola acknowledges that while the scale of Versailles and Marie Antoinette's lifestyle are in no way relatable to today's world, she hopes that the challenges Marie Antoinette faces growing up might be identifiable. In that sense, Coppola ultimately views her protagonist as "a young girl trying to make a space for herself in an environment that didn't fit her."[83] As well, Coppola tells Todd Gilchrist that her goal is to create characters who are identifiable as real people and transcendent of their lack of temporal proximity. For example, her characters in the film speak in anachronistic vernaculars, a decision she hoped would eliminate some of the period film clichés that stand in the way of the viewer relating to the film "on a human level."[84]

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[82] Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, 75.
[83] Jean-Christophe Ferrari and Yann Tobin, "Interview with Sofia Coppola: Characters Breathing, the Rustle of the Fabric," in *Sofia Coppola: Interviews*, ed. Amy N. Monaghan (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2023), 34-35.
[84] Todd Gilchrist, "Interview: Sofia Coppola," in *Sofia Coppola: Interviews*, ed. Amy N. Monaghan (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2023), 40.

It is clear that Coppola's adaptation process heavily relies upon tying the past to the present in a relatable way. Her interest in adapting Fraser's book to the screen lies in her ability to make a transhistorical connection between young girls today and the titular historical figure—a version of Marie Antoinette who transcends her temporal existence—by breaking down the historical divide between then and now, and emphasizing our fundamental, human similarities. Ersin Tutan's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* explores the reciprocity between history and adaptation, proposing that history itself be considered a form of adaptation. Similar to how the adapter sets out to transform a source text into something of their own, "the historian adapts the material she or he has at hand into a pre-planned scheme to meet a certain end."[85] Thus, Ersin Tutan argues that representations of history are more indicative of the present, in which the cultural climate informs how historians perceive the past.[86]

Similarly, Timothy Corrigan links the practice of adapting to human life itself; as a process through which people and cultures advance and change across history.[87] Corrigan acknowledges that the growing influence of adaptation on culture and epistemology is likely the result of postmodernism's rise around the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Postmodernism introduces a new form of contemporary knowledge, a perspective from which history itself is adaptable and reshaped by the present.[88] *Marie Antoinette* is a compelling cinematic example through which to explore both Corrigan's and Ersin Tutan's ideas. Coppola inserts modern music and fashion influences into her portrait of this 18th century French Queen, ultimately molding her character of Marie Antoinette into a blend of then and now.

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[85] Ersin Tutan, "Adaptation and History," 576.
[86] Ersin Tutan, 577.
[87] Corrigan, "Defining Adaptation," 25.
[88] Corrigan, 27.

Furthermore, Hutcheon's approach to postmodernism in historical fiction aligns with this sentiment, adding that "the postmodern…problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge."[89] Hutcheon expresses that postmodern texts destabilize the widely accepted identity of a historical figure, and subvert the grounds upon which their canonical narrative was previously formed.[90] Fraser's biography takes a notably sympathetic approach to the Queen's life. Throughout the book, Fraser cites Marie Antoinette's youth and lack of proper education during childhood as the main circumstances resulting in her inability to cope under the pressure. She is urged to balance her alliance to both Austria and France and is independently burdened with her and Louis XVI's inability to produce an heir in a timely manner. In the film, soundtrack and costuming become key visual and audible tools for adapting the emotional weight of these conflicts. In order to emphasize the version of Marie Antoinette that Fraser's biography puts to page—who is sympathetic to audiences due to her childlike naïveté and the impossible expectations of her dual alliance—Coppola turns to contemporary anachronisms. Given that adapted histories are shaped by the present, and our conception of the past is formed through the lens of the present, Coppola's adaptation relies upon its contemporary elements to connect current audiences to its protagonist.

"I Want Candy"

The musical soundtrack to *Marie Antoinette* elevates the emotional experience of the film's protagonist, rendering each of Coppola's song choices deliberate and full of subtext in any given scene. Beyond emotional resonance, I propose that the soundtrack becomes part of the

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[89] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 89.
[90] Hutcheon, 92.

adaptation process in that it also works to convey the narratives from Fraser's *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. As adaptation studies are concerned, Hutcheon advocates for the importance of the often-forgotten aural elements of a film. While many focus solely on the visual elements, music and the use of voice-over narration are instrumental to screen adaptations.[91] Hutcheon references sound editor Walter Murch in Michael Ondaatje's *The Conversations*, who expresses that music in film is "an emulsifier that allows you to dissolve a certain emotion and take it in a certain direction," a necessary tool for the adapter. Music helps to evoke the emotional core of the source material, while strengthening the current viewer's identification with the adapted story through familiar sounds.[92]

The music in *Marie Antoinette* is in fact familiar to a contemporary American audience; almost every song would be unrecognizable to the people of 18th century France. This is an example of what Hutcheon calls the common process of "cultural globalization" in adaptations: to translate a text from one culture or language to another. This often manifests as Hollywood "Americanizing" a text for its audience, writes Hutcheon, thereby infusing it with American culture.[93] In *Marie Antoinette*, this process is clear in every aspect of the soundtrack: the music, the characters' American accents, and the predominantly English dialogue. It is natural for a viewer to seek familiarity in historical films, writes Ersin Tutan. One often searches for avenues of personal recognition in the narratives they consume.[94] Coppola's use of music plays an important role in this process, and the composition of a film's soundtrack is, in fact, intrinsically connected to the adaptation process.

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[91] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 40.
[92] Hutcheon, 41.
[93] Hutcheon, 146.
[94] Ersin Tutan, "Adaptation and History," 579.

I propose that music in the film functions as part of the adaptation process by expressing Marie Antoinette's (Kirsten Dunst) emotional response to certain situations and pressures as outlined by Fraser in her biography of the Queen. To illustrate this, I turn to the series of letters Marie Antoinette receives from her mother, Empress Maria Theresa (Marianne Faithfull), and the musical montage that follows a reading of one such letter. Coppola uses music in these scenes to express Marie Antoinette's desire for escape from the daunting letters. Fraser often cites these letters in her book, for they are some of the most vital surviving documents pertaining to Marie Antoinette's personal life and relationships. Coppola includes a reading of one of the letters referenced in Fraser's book, in a scene that sets the stakes regarding teenage Marie Antoinette's inability to consummate her marriage to Louis XVI (Jason Schwartzman). The montage scene that immediately follows it, set to Bow Wow Wow's "I Want Candy," effectively emphasizes the stress caused by the letter from her mother. The juxtaposition of these scenes as well as the song's lyrics make this moment exemplary of Coppola's utilization of song in her adaptation process.

To begin, Fraser's book makes it clear that a main stressor for Marie Antoinette is the weight of both France and Austria's anticipation that she produces an heir. In a letter to her daughter, Empress Maria Theresa communicates her disappointment, explaining that consummation is a crucial act in solidifying the geopolitical alliance that her daughter represents. She compels Marie Antoinette to heed her advice for seducing her new husband, even when it contradicts the rules of the French court.[95] Fraser describes this conundrum as an example of how Marie Antoinette often felt she was pulled in two directions. In one of the letters Fraser

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[95] Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (Toronto, ON: Anchor Canada, 2001), 81.

references, Maria Theresa offers this marital advice to her daughter: "Everything depends on the wife, if she is willing, sweet, and *amusante*."[96]

In the film, Coppola includes this line in a scene during which Marie Antoinette reads the letter from her mother, narrated through Maria Theresa's voice-over, which goes on to compare her siblings' successful marriages to Marie Antoinette's failure in her own. Soon after, she attends the joyful birth of her nephew, but quickly retreats to her private quarters where she bursts into tears behind closed doors. This is understood to be a result of the pressure she is placed under by those demanding an heir: her mother, the French court, and the people of France.

Fig 2.1 A selection of desserts presented to the Queen.

This scene depicting Marie Antoinette's emotional breaking point is quickly interrupted by a tracking shot of various pairs of pumps as the opening beat to "I Want Candy" by Bow Wow Wow begins. Clips of Marie Antoinette and her ladies being presented with various shoes

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[96] Fraser, 84.

and textiles are interspersed with images of decadent cakes, sweets, and champagne being served (figure 2.1). Tokens are set out for a game of cards and gambling, one of Marie Antoinette's favourite pastimes, according to Fraser's book.[97] She tries on necklaces with various coloured gemstones, even fastening one around her dog's neck as the ladies request more champagne. At the end of this montage, Marie Antoinette is presented with and fitted in her tallest wig yet, a proper finale to the preceding images of excess.

All throughout this montage, Bow Wow Wow can be heard singing the chorus, "I want candy," repeatedly.[98] Marie Antoinette goes from falling to her bedroom floor in tears, exasperated by the stress of her mother's epistolic voice in her head, to marvelling at the luxury shoes, clothing, champagne and pastries at her fingertips. She takes momentary distraction in the things Versailles has to offer her, indulging in her childlike desire for more clothes, more cakes, more consumption. "I want candy" sums up her desires in this scene, a distraction from everything else. The succession of reading her mother's letter, followed by her pertinent breakdown over the birth of a royal baby other than her own, and finally the "I Want Candy" montage tells the story of Marie Antoinette's infamous indulgence and excess through the reality of her predicament. When the stress becomes too much for the 19-year-old, she turns to candy in its many forms.

Further illustrating this relationship between Marie Antoinette's stressors and her habitual indulgence, Fraser writes: "The levity, the lightness of spirit, the volatility…with which Marie Antoinette is so much associated in the popular mind (and in many historians' minds), can be traced back to this period, when disappointment in her marriage began to be masked by

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[97] Fraser, 141.

[98] Bow Wow Wow, "I Want Candy," by Bert Berns, Bob Feldman, Jerry Goldstein, and Richard Gottehrer, recorded 1982, track 1 on *I Want Candy*, RCA.

enjoyment of her position."[99] Fraser proposes that Marie Antoinette's response to the pressures of Versailles involved indulging in Versailles and all its luxuries, for a lack of anywhere else to turn. Coppola reimagines this on film through the montage of excess and consumption positioned directly after Marie Antoinette's breakdown, accompanied by a song that communicates frivolous desire.

Coppola touches on her decision to blend modern songs into her historical adaptation of Marie Antoinette's life, noting that the soundtrack is intended to express the general feeling of existing in a suffocating world. In her interview with Ferrari and Tobin, she says: "[The music] reflects the split between the official world of this court and [Marie Antoinette's] interior world."[100] This quote speaks to the filmmaker's motive of characterizing Marie Antoinette as a relatable girl in the contemporary age; Coppola's song choices reflect the Queen's attempts to temporarily escape the reality of her life, and the role she is assigned. Ferriss writes that this transhistorical approach to the soundtrack helps to define Marie Antoinette's life in the same way that it speaks to modern girls' lives and emotions. Throughout the film, the soundtrack keeps up with her emotional turmoil, cycling through sorrow, defiance, and back to contentment again. This experience is relative to the modern girl, writes Ferriss.[101] Additionally, in an interview with the American Film Institute, Coppola admits that the use of "I Want Candy" was written into the script for *Marie Antoinette*, despite this practice being considered taboo.[102] The song holds an undeniable part in the adaptation process, elemental in Coppola's storytelling as she reimagines Fraser's book.

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[99] Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, 145.
[100] Ferrari and Tobin, "Interview with Sofia Coppola: Characters Breathing, the Rustle of the Fabric," 36.
[101] Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, 76.
[102] American Film Institute, *Sofia Coppola on the Music in her Films*, June 28, 2020. YouTube video, 1:54, https://youtu.be/olQckhOIFgQ?si=9PoC7apaMKnbiy37.

Dressing Up

I now pivot to an analysis of the role of adaptation through the film's use of costumes. I propose that Coppola uses costuming to visually adapt Fraser's overarching storyline regarding Marie Antoinette's evolution from teenage Dauphine, to assuming the role of Queen at eighteen, to her eventual acquisition of and retreat to Petit Trianon. This is relative to the previous exploration of music and its expression of Marie Antoinette's desire for an escape from the pressure. Having explored the source of much of the Queen's stress with the analysis of the "I Want Candy" montage, I now examine the importance of modern fashion influences in that segment and how these elements help to convey Fraser's sympathetic account of Marie Antoinette's daily life. Finally, the juxtaposition between Marie Antoinette at the palace and at Petit Trianon provides a strong argument for Coppola's ability to visualize the protagonist's maturation through her appearance.

Evidently, any discussion of the film's anachronistic clothing leads back to the "I Want Candy" montage scene. This scene features a brief shot of Marie Antoinette trying on shoes, while a pair of Converse Chuck Taylor All Star sneakers lay among her collection (figure 2.2). The suggestion that shoes designed in the 1910s, and especially popular by the 1960s, exist in the dressing room of Marie Antoinette is one of the film's most glaring historical anachronisms. According to Calum Gordon, Chuck Taylor shoes have cemented their status as a cultural symbol over the years. The shoes, with a long history of being adopted by different subcultures and representing something unique to everyone who wears them, have come to be a recognized symbol of individuality and culture.[103] Their presence in Marie Antoinette's closet positions her

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[103] Calum Gordon, "Tracing the Chuck Taylor's Subcultural Style Legacy," *Dazed*, March 15, 2017, https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/34893/1/tracing-the-chuck-taylors-subcultural-style-legacy.

as a participant in this culture, one that is identifiable to the film's contemporary audience, therefore forming another tether between the protagonist and the current moment in time. Backman Rogers also suggests that the image of Converse is summative of Coppola's overall message, that historical and contemporary politics have collided: "If postfeminism dictates that women are the sum of their (consumerist) choices…*Marie Antoinette* sets forth that our 'progression' has been anything but progressive."[104] Further contextualizing this, Ferriss writes that the juxtaposition of Converse sneakers next to Marie Antoinette in her slippers likens her teenage world to the modern girl's teenage world; her slippers are just like our sneakers, we earnestly collect them and form attachments to them.[105]

Fig 2.2 Converse sneakers in Marie Antoinette's dressing room.

Given what has been discussed thus far regarding the context for this montage sequence, the masquerade ball scene is exemplary of Coppola's transposition of Fraser's book through anachronism in costumes. Providing a small but impactful taste of this with the Converse,

[104] Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure,* 134.
[105] Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, 75.

Coppola follows Marie Antoinette next to a masked ball in Paris, where she meets her future lover, Count Fersen (Jamie Dornan), for the first time. This sequence highlights her girlishness as it has been interpreted by Coppola for her film. Indulging in champagne and decadent sweets, getting dolled up in a contemporary-inspired dress, and sneaking out to a party with friends where she will dance to Siouxsie and the Banshees; Marie Antoinette leaves behind the place that holds her back in search of the fun, freedom, and connection she is often denied by the royal court and her marriage.

Fraser's biography describes this night at the opera ball in Paris as an important one, for it marks Marie Antoinette's first encounter with Fersen. Her party sets off for Paris in masks for added anonymity. She and Fersen meet at the ball and speak briefly without him discovering her true identity. Shortly after, she leaves as partygoers begin to speculate about her.[106] Over the course of the book, Fraser recounts many encounters between Marie Antoinette and Count Fersen, conceding that their rumoured affair is likely to have happened, though she cannot say for certain.[107] Coppola, on the other hand, uses this first meeting at the ball to reinterpret how a frustrated, deprived teenager might rebel against her unfulfilling marriage and the institution that upholds it.

In the film, Marie Antoinette's rebellion begins when she admits that she is forbidden from going into Paris for the masked ball without a formal reception, but her group makes the decision to sneak out of the palace anyway. At the ball, masked attendees dance to Siouxsie and the Banshees' 1978 pop-rock single "Hong Kong Garden." Marie Antoinette's costume is strikingly different, with just a thin strip of black mesh fabric across her eyes and a black dress

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[106] Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, 111.
[107] Fraser, 203.

uncharacteristic of the time period. Ferriss describes this gown as notably contemporary due to its black colour and see-through mesh sleeves, which expose more of her than they do conceal.[108] Later in the scene, Marie Antoinette and Count Fersen are seen exchanging drawn out glances from across the ballroom before he approaches to introduce himself. Coppola's reimagining of their first meeting is charged with desire, suggestive of the affair that is soon to take place. Though Fraser hesitates to confirm that Marie Antoinette had an affair at all, Coppola chooses to portray an intimate relationship with Fersen. His introduction to Marie Antoinette, and what he will come to represent as an avenue of escape and fulfilled desire for her, is complemented by her rebellion in this scene. Especially her costume, which not only rebels against the uniform dresses the court of Versailles would have her wear and the modesty of the masquerade ball, but also against the temporal bounds of the film's time period.

The film transposes a rather mundane night at the opera ball, as documented by Fraser, reimagining it through contemporary teenage angst and desire. Marie Antoinette has abandoned the conventional frilly dresses that she is ceremoniously dressed in each morning in favour of a daring, revealing, black party gown. This sequence—from the moment she receives the disappointed letter from her mother to the night she decides to act in favour of her own gratification—illustrates a transhistorical female desire to retreat into girlhood during times of distress. This attitude is explained by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in their introductory chapter to *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Tasker and Negra suggest that postfeminist media often portray female liberation as the "'girling' of femininity," wherein girlhood becomes a transcendent and evasive fantasy for women who feel

[108] Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, 74.

unfulfilled in adulthood. Girlhood becomes a respite for everyone, regardless of age, and this is often explored through consumption.[109]

In this regard, Marie Antoinette is similar to a teenager sneaking out of the house to attend a party. She gets dressed up in clothes she would not normally wear at home, breaks the rules by taking an unsanctioned trip into Paris after midnight, dances her responsibilities away and indulges in the romantic attention she craves from another men. Coppola explores Marie Antoinette's difficult position through the feeling of escape and lightness that comes with retreating into girlish fantasies. The Queen is infamously associated with her endless indulgence in sweets and champagne, new shoes, dresses, and custom jewelry. It is most often through anachronisms in costume and music that Coppola reinterprets Fraser's biography of Marie Antoinette in ways that reflect the 21st century female viewer.

Dressing Down

Finally, my analysis leads to Petit Trianon, a small estate down the path from the main palace. Taking refuge from the Palace of Versailles and the weighty responsibilities thrust upon her as Queen, Petit Trianon becomes a haven where Marie Antoinette indulges in leisure and a more laid-back way of life. Having just been crowned, King Louis XVI gifts Petit Trianon to his 19-year-old Queen as a retreat. At Petit Trianon, Coppola depicts Marie Antoinette spending time in the lush gardens with her daughter, feeding the farm animals, picking strawberries (figure 2.3), and frolicking through fields of wildflowers. She appears to enjoy solitude for the first time in the film. While at Petit Trianon, she takes a break from the frilly, pastel silks that are custom

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[109] Tasker and Diane, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," 18.

inside the palace. She is heard asking her dressmaker for something "more simple [and] natural to wear in the garden."[110]

Fig 2.3 Marie Antoinette picks strawberries at Petit Trianon

Coppola re-creates this period of Marie Antoinette's life, as told by Fraser in her book, through visual and stylistic symbols of simplicity and naturalness. In the biography, Fraser writes about Petit Trianon as an extension of the mythologization surrounding the Queen's excess. Gossipers claimed that the walls of Petit Trianon were lined with gold and diamonds, which Fraser disputes. Marie Antoinette was adamant about keeping a simple dwelling, but regardless, the small chateau was designed and built long before her arrival to Versailles.[111] Fraser maintains that Marie Antoinette valued a sense of privacy outside of the palace, where she was constantly on display. In Petit Trianon, she would dress down, cultivate personal hobbies, and host amateur theater performances with friends for fun.[112]

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[110] *Marie Antoinette*, directed by Sofia Coppola (Columbia Pictures, 2006).
[111] Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, 151.
[112] Fraser, 174.

Fraser's description highlights the integral role of Petit Trianon in Marie Antoinette's coming-of-age. At a crucial point in her adolescence—on the brink of her twentieth birthday and having just become the Queen of France—Petit Trianon is a symbol of Marie Antoinette's true desires in life, the leisure she craves in order to decompress from the demanding childhood she mourns. Coppola re-creates Fraser's description of Petit Trianon, and the impact it has on her life and coming-of-age, through costuming. As with the soundtrack and costume choices previously explored in this chapter, the scenes at Petit Trianon serve to recall the simplicity of childhood which Marie Antoinette craves now, having largely missed out on it. After receiving the keys from Louis XVI, she is shown lounging about Petit Trianon while enjoying a private musical performance. She welcomes her ladies to Petit Trianon, referring to it as her own heaven, pours fresh milk and serves her guests, whereas at the palace she would not so much as lift her own chalice during meals. The women are shown sprawled across a small boat, Marie Antoinette with her hand grazing the water as they are taken for a row around the pond.

Her new retreat is a place of freedom, where she may serve herself and pick her own berries in the garden, contrary to the customs of Versailles. It becomes a place where she neglects regal responsibility and indulges in personal pleasures outside of the excessive consumption that Versailles inspires. For example, Ambassador Mercy (Steve Coogan) is shown fielding complaints at the palace from people who have not yet received customary invitations to visit the Queen. When he approaches Marie Antoinette in Petit Trianon to reprimand her about this, we see that she is entertaining a small group of friends. In that moment, her defense to Mercy is that "this is my escape from all the protocol."[113] Her hair is now dyed a light pink

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[113] *Marie Antoinette*, directed by Sofia Coppola (Columbia Pictures, 2006).

colour, a signal that in this place she allows herself to transform from adult Queen to carefree girl, which is expressed through her anachronistically coloured hair, and simple white gowns.

Coppola uses clothing and music to explore Marie Antoinette's inner world and highlight her youth—having become the wife of Louis XVI at age fourteen—doing so in a way that echoes Fraser's central themes and concerns. Pam Cook sums this up very well: "For Coppola, Marie Antoinette was like a caged bird who found her escape from suffocating court etiquette, gossip and the glare of publicity by forging a personal style and identity through her clothes, designs for the palace and her private retreat."[114] As demonstrated in this chapter, Fraser writes of Marie Antoinette's often criticized frivolity as a symptom of the pressure she faces and the burden of pleasing both the Austrian and French people despite their conflicting expectations. She writes of Marie Antoinette's retreat to Petit Trianon and the semblance of a simple life she cultivates there as a result of this pressure. Coppola uses both music and costuming to tell these stories in her filmic adaptation, at the same time inserting anachronisms to cement the relationship between Marie Antoinette's inner world, and that of the contemporary viewer.

This process reflects Hutcheon's transposition, or transcoding, which occurs when a work of historical non-fiction is fictionalized or undergoes a shift in framing and context. Hutcheon explains that people look for a sense of community and closeness in historical fiction and non-fiction stories because we all share a sense of the past.[115] Fraser maps Marie Antoinette's childhood in Austria, her transition to Dauphine of France and eventually Queen, and the aftermath. Within Fraser's story exists the sympathetic account of a young girl who had been failed by her education, arranged into a marriage of alliance as a teenager, and grew up under

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[114] Pam Cook, "Portrait of a Lady: Sofia Coppola," *Sight and Sound* 16 (November 2006), 40.
[115] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 93.

strict foreign protocol and expectations. In each example outlined above, Coppola turns to music and costumes as avenues of evoking that version of the story. Backman Rogers argues that Coppola's audience relates to Marie Antoinette because: "Our sympathy—or even empathy—for Marie is elicited by our *affective* knowledge of her situation because we experience it with her…"[116]

Antonia Fraser provides her thoughts on the adaptation in Eleanor Coppola's supplementary footage, *The Making of 'Marie Antoinette*': "I adore the look of [the film] and I was thinking this is something film can do that I can never do. I can write page after page describing the beauty of Versailles…but I'll never do what Sofia or someone could do just with a look…it's so much stronger, the look of the clothes, than anything I could ever write."[117] It is clear that Coppola recognizes the unique advantage she holds in adapting a book to film. For *Marie Antoinette*, she exercises this through audiovisual links to the modern day, ensuring that her version of Marie Antoinette is seen by contemporary female audiences for what she was when arriving at Versailles: a girl.

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[116] Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, 126.
[117] *The Making of 'Marie Antoinette*,' directed by Eleanor Coppola (Columbia Pictures, 2007).

Chapter Three

"The Beguiled"

"The Fragility of White Womanhood"

My third chapter looks at Sofia Coppola's 2017 film, *The Beguiled*, an appropriate final instalment to this thesis for a number of reasons. First, and most straightforward, the film is Coppola's third adaptation, rendering this study a chronological overview of the filmmaker's first three adapted screenplays. Given that Coppola's is the second adaptation of Thomas Cullinan's 1966 novel, following Don Siegel's 1971 film, this analysis approaches the film as both an adaptation and a remake. Second, *The Beguiled* presents the opportunity to analyze one of the most critical elements of Coppola's films: those who are notably absent from them. Angelica Jade Bastién writes about the controversy surrounding the whitewashing of a main character and the omission of Black characters in Coppola's adaptation of Cullinan's American Civil War-set novel, stating that "the beauty and fragility of white women" has always been one of Coppola's "greatest obsessions as a filmmaker."[118]

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze Coppola's reinterpretation of gender dynamics and omission of Black characters in her adaptation of *The Beguiled*, keeping in mind the depiction of relationships and subjectivities that demarcate how this story is reimagined by Coppola for a late 2010s audience in mind. There is a significant shift in how each iteration of *The Beguiled* affords sympathy to its characters; while Cullinan's novel and Siegel's 1971 film portray the female protagonists as villainous, Coppola depicts them in a more sympathetic,

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[118] Angelica Jade Bastién, "How *The Beguiled* Subtle Tackles Race Even When You Don't See It," *Vulture*, July 10, 2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/07/the-beguiled-subtly-tackles-race-even-when-you-dont-see-it.html.

commendable light. As well, I identify a shift in the relationships among the group of female protagonists. Whereas Cullinan's novel creates a tense, hostile dynamic between the women, Coppola depicts a group of women with a shared sense of allegiance and camaraderie. Finally, this chapter addresses Coppola's deeply controversial omission of two Black characters from the original novel, recognizing this decision as inherently linked to the filmmaker's adaptive process of re-creation.

In the first part of this chapter, "Beguiled or Beguiler," I focus on Coppola's film as a remake of Siegel's, examining her sympathetic reinterpretation of the female protagonists as victims, not only of the film's male protagonist, but also of their circumstances as white women in the 1860s: having been raised to be nothing more than agreeable wives, and the isolation they faced when men left home to serve in the war. While Siegel portrays the women as blinded by their distrust of men and suggests that the amputation of McBurney is the result of violent rage and revenge, Coppola portrays the women to be apprehensive of McBurney, and deeply shaken by the events that lead to amputation.

In the following part, "Spaces of Womanhood," I compare the relationship between the female protagonists in Coppola's film and Cullinan's novel. While Cullinan portrayed the ladies as hateful and jaded from the beginning, and Siegel follows suit, Coppola rewrites the narrative; the girls of the Farnsworth school share a gentle, innocent, and childlike bond. These sections reveal how Coppola takes advantage of re-creation and reinterpretation in the adaptation process to reimagine the narrative with the feminine perspective in mind.

Lastly, the section "Race: Presence & Absence" tackles one of Coppola's most prominent controversies—her whitewashing of characters and omission of enslaved Black characters from this Civil War-set film—from within the context of adaptation, intertextuality, and how these

exclusions reflect the filmmaker's body of work as it has ultimately been built upon the adaptation, reinterpretation, and reinvention of period stories to fit her white, feminine subjectivity.

Coppola has expressed her desire to retell this story from the feminine perspective after watching Siegel's film for the first time: "I'd love to kind of flip it: to tell the same story but from a woman's point-of-view, what it must have been like for them. Not a remake but a reinterpretation."[119] The filmmaker herself uses terminology such as "reinterpretation," which directly reflects Hutcheon's process of creation in *A Theory of Adaptation*; to reinterpret and appropriate a text go hand in hand.[120] Coppola does both in this case, reinterpreting the gender dynamic as well as appropriating a Civil War tale and the backdrop of the American South for her own narrowed feminist message, one which notably excludes Black characters. Hutcheon argues: "the context in which we experience this adaptation—cultural, social, historical—is another important factor in the meaning and significance we grant to this ubiquitous palimpsestic form."[121] Drawing on Hutcheon's presentation of adaptation as a palimpsestic form, in examining *The Beguiled* I reveal the interdependence between Coppola's process of reinterpretation and the resulting transhistorical portrait of seven 19th century white American women and girls. The palimpsest that is *The Beguiled* in its many forms has been uniquely etched into by each cultural moment under which it was produced, as will be examined. Backman Rogers provides a fitting summation of this: "…as is common to Coppola's treatment of the historical costume drama, her

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[119] Guy Lodge, "Sofia Coppola: 'I never felt like I had to fit into the majority view,'" *The Guardian*, July 2, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/02/sofia-coppola-beguiled-i-never-felt-i-had-to-fit-into-the-majority-view-interview.
[120] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.
[121] Hutcheon, 139.

approach here reveals more of the complexity of contemporary feminist politics than the moment of its historical setting."[122]

Additionally, this chapter addresses a noticeable difference in the language, both in cultural criticism and scholarship, that is often used to describe each version of *The Beguiled*. For example, pertaining to the divisive gender dynamics between both films, Backman Rogers calls Siegel's film a "lurid and baroque quasi-exploitation film," while emphasizing that Coppola transforms hers into an "ambiguously told female revenge fantasy," which takes a look beneath the surface of what it means to be born a girl in the 19th century.[123] As well, in a 2017 profile on Coppola, Stephanie Zacharek refers to Siegel as a "tough-guy director," and describes his version of the film as "…essentially a macho vision in which a bunch of crazy women undo one man's life."[124] Finally, in an interview with Coppola for *The Guardian*, Guy Lodge calls her "sad, sensual" rendition of *The Beguiled* "about a million miles removed from Don Siegel's lurid, sweatily macho 1971 adaptation."[125]

These are just some examples of the wording used to call attention to Siegel's masculine version of the film while differentiating Coppola's for her soft, feminine approach to the story. Zacharek also adds that "…even though this new Beguiled retains some of the earlier film's plot details, it's very much a Sofia Coppola film,"[126] owing to her quintessential visual style but also the striking parallels to *The Virgin Suicides*. Coppola describes feeling a connection between the Lisbon sisters and the ladies of *The Beguiled*, who embody a more gothic, mature version of the

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[122] Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, 53.
[123] Backman Rogers, 91.
[124] Stephanie Zacharek, "Sofia Coppola returns with *The Beguiled*, which builds on 18 years of considered work," *Time*, June 15, 2017, https://time.com/sofia-coppola-best-director/.
[125] Lodge, "Sofia Coppola: 'I never felt like I had to fit into the majority view,'" 2017.
[126] Zacharek, "Sofia Coppola returns with *The Beguiled*, which builds on 18 years of considered work," 2017.

Lisbons.[127] *The Beguiled* is considered a marker of Coppola's progression from "a cinema of girlhood" to "a cinema of womanhood," as articulated by Michelle Devereaux, in which each female protagonist represents a different phase between girlhood and womanhood. Devereaux also argues that the film signals a maturation in Coppola's familiar subjects.[128]

In keeping with this sentiment of growing up, Coppola acknowledges that *The Beguiled* is different from her previous films; it tackles a new genre and features more dialogue-heavy storytelling. This is expressed in a profile done by Holly Brubach for *The Gentlewoman*, in which Brubach lauds Coppola for taking on a story that only men have previously told and doing so in a way that is relevant to concerns modern girls have about their own coming-of-age. Brubach writes that the film tackles questions women often share, such as "How to be a woman men take seriously? How to be yourself, surrounded by the expectations of friends, family, and strangers? How to come to terms with the power that beauty confers and calculate the price you're willing to pay for it?"[129] Although, Brubach (who reports from her point-of-view as a guest on the set of *The Beguiled*'s production) is left questioning whether this is really a Sofia Coppola film, due to its dark, gothic themes. To this, I suggest that taking a story about women of the past and unearthing relevant themes pertaining to what it is to be a woman in the 2010s is precisely a driving force behind much of the filmmaker's oeuvre, and specifically her adapted pictures. Robert Stam argues that some adaptations are born strictly of the creator's distaste for the original.[130] This is especially the case for adaptations of decades-old source texts, in which

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[127] Zacharek, 2017.

[128] Michelle Devereaux, "The Knowledge of Feeling in Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 100.

[129] Holly Brubach, "Sofia Coppola: The Unashamedly Feminine Filmmaking of Sofia Coppola," *The Gentlewoman,* no. 15, Spring & Summer 2017, https://thegentlewoman.co.uk/library/sofia-coppola.

[130] Robert Stam, "Revisionist Adaptation: Transtextuality, Cross-Cultural Dialogism, and Performative Infidelities," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 242.

the goal is to address problematic themes and revise them according to our current cultural atmosphere.[131] What follows is an examination of how Coppola redresses the source texts' handling of the female characters and their stories. However, this includes the ways in which she falls short of any meaningful revision of the original novel and film's handling of race.

Beguiled or Beguiler

The most prominent distinction between Siegel's and Coppola's adaptations of *The Beguiled* is how each director places blame and sympathy for the film's climactic murder and the events leading up to it. The story takes place in the early 1860s at Martha Farnsworth's Seminary for Young Ladies in Virginia, where few students remain as a result of the Civil War. One of the younger students, Amy, finds an injured Union soldier in the woods near the school's property one day while foraging. She leads him back to the Farnsworth plantation with promises to help heal his wounded leg, thus introducing Corporal John McBurney to a house full of women and girls, many of whom have been secluded from society—specifically from men—since the war began. What ensues is a battle of the sexes, in which McBurney recognizes the power he has over these vulnerable women whose suppressed desires become awakened by his presence. After the seduction and betrayal hits a boiling point, McBurney is killed by poisoning at dinner one night. Jamie Ann Rogers argues that both the novel and Siegel's 1971 film portray McBurney's killers as "murderous and vindictive," while Coppola's film stands firm in its belief that the women are within their rights to defend their property and safety in the wake of McBurney's erratic, threatening behaviour. Their actions are justified, says Rogers, by Coppola's positioning

[131] Stam, 247.

of the women as "rights-bearing universal subjects," acting out of "solidarity and self-preservation."[132]

The subjectivity of the female protagonists and their validity as individuals worthy of self-defence is at the forefront of the gender dynamics Coppola explores in her film. In a number of ways, it is the antithesis of Siegel's film. Five years after its release, Karyn Kay writes about the glaring misogyny in Siegel's adaptation of *The Beguiled*. Kay identifies a pattern of portraying women as manipulative and evil across his work. Kay cites this quote from Siegel himself on the making of *The Beguiled*, published in Stuart Kaminsky's book, *Don Siegel: Director*:

> "This is the story of a huge, powerful, beautiful man crippled in war who's befriended and helped into the school…full of innocent, virginal girls…behind the facade of innocent faces lurks as much evil as in a group of hoodlums…He sizes up the situation instantly and starts his beguilement of each and Johnny McBurney unknowingly becomes a trapped man—made helpless—by a bunch of sparrows."[133]

This quote makes Siegel's intentions for his adaptation of the film clear. Siegel includes a number of elements from Cullinan's novel (which Coppola skips over) suggesting the women to be culpable. First, the novel frequently draws comparisons between the school's headmistress, Martha Farnsworth, to men. In a chapter narrated by the character Emily, she observes that "if Miss Martha had only been born a man, she would have made a great contribution to the Southern cause."[134] Not only is this a reference to Martha's stubborn and strict nature as the headmistress, but the comparison to a Confederate soldier defending the South also alludes to her

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[132] Jamie Ann Rogers, "Making Whiteness: The Absent Presence of Race and Class in Sofia Coppola's Feature Films," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 342.
[133] Karyn Kay, "*The Beguiled*: Gothic Misogyny," *Velvet Light Trap* 16 (1976), 32.
[134] Thomas Cullinan, *The Beguiled* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1966), 47.

capacity for violence. The association of Martha with male tendencies is reflected in Siegel's film. The injured Corporal McBurney (Clint Eastwood) has just been carried to the school's front porch, and Martha (Geraldine Page) is shown holding his unconscious body. As she contemplates what to do with him, her voice-over narration speculates: "if this war goes on much longer, I'll forget I ever was a woman."[135] Siegel lets the viewer know that with the arrival of a man, even the most responsible woman at Farnsworth Seminary feels her genteel, ladylike exterior begin to slip. A Union soldier has wandered off the battlefield and into her arms, effectively bringing war and violence to their doorstep.

Cullinan's novel also portrays the female protagonists as suspicious and untrusting of all men. As if a part of their school curriculum, the novel is peppered with reminders that Martha has conditioned her students to trust no man. At one moment, Edwina reminds the younger girls: "Just as Miss Martha says, any kind of strange men are capable of doing harm to women."[136] This is also translated into Siegel's film. Siegel depicts a conversation between McBurney and Edwina (Elizabeth Hartman) in which he asks her why she appears afraid of him. Edwina clarifies that it has nothing to do with him, but that she does not trust any men—regardless of their alliance to the North or South.[137] Siegel fosters a dynamic in which the women at Farnsworth Seminary are blinded by their indoctrinated hatred and distrust of men, which reaches beyond their political alliances.

In response to Kay's claim that Siegel leans deeply into the "female demon" trope, Gina Herring provides an alternative reading of the film. Herring argues instead that the female characters in *The Beguiled* represent a subversion of the gothic genre and reverse the placement

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[135] *The Beguiled*, directed by Don Siegel (The Malpaso Company, 1971).
[136] Cullinan, *The Beguiled*, 12.
[137] *The Beguiled*, directed by Don Siegel (The Malpaso Company, 1971).

of sexual power.[138] Herring points out that each character who becomes intertwined with McBurney wants something, and they realize he can help them achieve it. Edwina holds romantic fantasies of caring for someone and longs to leave the school to begin a proper life, and here arrives a man in need of her care. Carol (Jo Ann Harris) is a student and an inexperienced teenager. With the ongoing war, she fears that McBurney may be her only chance to explore her burgeoning sexual desires.[139] Martha yearns for her brother, presumed dead, with whom she concealed an incestuous relationship. She craves the presence and care of a man at home who would tend to the property. McBurney's arrival seems an opportunity for Martha to be cared for again.[140]

However glaringly devious Siegel makes his female characters out to be, I argue that even these underlying motives that Herring outlines are partly stirred up by McBurney's arrival. He comes to understand the women's desires and manipulates them by using that knowledge to his advantage. The crux of Coppola's reinterpretation of the story is her re-evaluation of the women as vulnerable to McBurney's manipulation due to the culture that raised them to serve and be subordinate to men. In a similar vein, Herring identifies a "natural rage" motivating the women in Siegel's *The Beguiled*. She argues that the film is about "the way women are taught to repress real human emotion in order to play the part of ladies."[141] Despite having written this about Siegel's film almost twenty years prior to the release of Coppola's adaptation, Herring's sentiment illuminates the emotional repression that Coppola's film prioritizes in its quest to tell the story from the female point-of-view. As well, Devereaux argues that Coppola's film calls

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[138] Gina Herring, "*The Beguiled*: Misogynist Myth or Feminist Fable?" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1998), 214.
[139] Herring, 216.
[140] Herring, 217.
[141] Herring, 218.

into question the socially constructed restraints imposed upon girlhood and womanhood then and now.[142] As white women of a certain class in the Old South, the girls at Farnsworth Seminary are brought up to make attractive and agreeable wives, to serve their husbands, and raise their offspring, writes Devereaux.[143] This is supported by Richard Dyer's book, *White*, which briefly explores the Southern United States' ideals of pure womanhood, which intensified in the aftermath of the Civil War.[144] The post-war South makes an effort to preserve white womanhood as virtuous in a final effort to assert whiteness as special and angelic. This places white women under "unreal moral demands," writes Dyer.[145]

Coppola's film fixates on these oppressive standards the girls are raised under by emphasizing their true intentions for tending to Corporal McBurney's health. Although there are initially reservations about welcoming an enemy soldier into their safe, all-female space, all Martha and her girls know is to serve men. By depicting the emotional vulnerability of the women, Coppola reinterprets the dynamic between the ladies at Farnsworth Seminary and Corporal McBurney. She tells a story in which the women succumb to McBurney's charm, and sometimes even fear his authority. Only after he has taken advantage of each woman and tarnished their harmonious household do they turn on him. This is apparent during McBurney's climactic fall, which results in the amputation of his leg. Coppola handles this scene very differently from Siegel. In her film, Edwina (Kirsten Dunst) catches McBurney (Colin Farrell) in Alicia's (Elle Fanning) bed after he had promised himself to her. The camera adopts Edwina's point-of-view from the doorway, just barely capturing the shadowy figure of McBurney jumping

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[142] Devereaux, "The Knowledge of Feeling in Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*," 102.
[143] Devereaux, 93.
[144] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 127.
[145] Dyer, 130.

out of bed at the sight of her, lit only by residual moonlight. Alicia's figure remains in the dark, ensuring that McBurney is at the forefront of this betrayal. He chases Edwina out of the room as she backs away from him in fear, until she is up against a wall with her arms bracing against him in self-defence (figure 3.1). In a desperate act to push him off, Edwina winds up shoving McBurney down the staircase. This catastrophically reopens his leg wound, which has been healing for a few days now. Soon after, Miss Martha (Nicole Kidman) makes the life-saving decision to amputate the limb, while Edwina sobs in fear for McBurney's life and in shock of her own actions.

Fig 3.1 Edwina retreats from Corporal McBurney in fear (Coppola, 2017).

In Siegel's film, this scene serves to illustrate just how destructive and conniving the women are. First, as opposed to Coppola's camera taking on the perspective of Edwina, Siegel's camera adopts McBurney's perspective more than once. When Edwina catches McBurney in bed with Carol, the camera is positioned to show McBurney's view of Carol's naked body on top of him. He moves Carol to the side, revealing Edwina in the doorway. Later, after McBurney has been pushed down the stairs, the camera goes back and forth between his point-of-view multiple

times. From McBurney's position on the floor, we look up at the circle of girls gripping his body in different places, dragging his body to the dining room for amputation. In each film's most pivotal moments, Coppola and Siegel respectively place their viewers inside the perspective of the character they want to portray as the victim. Second, Siegel approaches McBurney's fall down the stairs as a moment of rage and violence by Edwina. Upon discovering McBurney in Carol's bedroom, she becomes irate and begins beating McBurney with a candlestick. She pushes him closer to the edge of the staircase with the force of her bludgeoning until he tumbles backward. Edwina yells after him: "I hope you're dead! Dead, dead, dead."[146] Siegel makes it clear that these women wish to harm McBurney; in this moment, Edwina pursues him with a weapon and wishes death upon him as he falls. Coppola reinterprets this exchange, as outlined above, by alternatively focusing on Edwina's feelings of betrayal in that moment. Realizing that McBurney is not the man she initially thought he was, Edwina backs away from him rather than pursuing him violently. She recoils and pushes him away in fear, inadvertently sending him down the stairs.

Further, Siegel uses juxtaposition to portray McBurney's amputation as a vengeful act. His film suggests that Martha seeks revenge against him for sneaking into another student's bed rather than her own. The fall happens immediately after Martha and McBurney are seen sharing a kiss on their way to bed. McBurney makes a comment about taking her brother's place, suggesting he would like to stay and be Martha's partner at Farnsworth. After putting on her finest nightgown, Martha falls asleep waiting for McBurney to sneak up to her room. A dream sequence is shown in which Martha fantasizes about him entering her room, beginning to kiss her body, and with them in bed is Edwina. They take turns kissing McBurney, and sometimes

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[146] *The Beguiled*, directed by Don Siegel (The Malpaso Company, 1971).

one another, until Martha abruptly wakes. She hears the altercation in the stairwell and jumps into action, moving McBurney's unconscious body to the table. Although others question the decision to amputate, Martha disregards any concerns, for her mind has been made up from the moment McBurney failed to turn up in her bed.

Fig 3.2 Martha's sexual fantasy about Corporal McBurney & Edwina (Siegel, 1971).

The next morning when McBurney wakes to find one of his legs missing, he accuses Martha of seeking revenge: "You dirty bitch. Just because I didn't go to your bed. Just because I went to someone else's bed." Offended, Martha responds, "I should have let you die screaming," before storming out.[147] Siegel asks the audience to empathize with McBurney, again placing the viewer in his perspective multiple times, including when he looks down to see the outline of a stump in the sheets where his right leg once was. Having just seen Martha's sexually charged dream about McBurney and Edwina, it can be assumed that she feels ashamed and rejected by

[147] *The Beguiled*, directed by Don Siegel (The Malpaso Company, 1971).

the Corporal, which is how she so effortlessly sets her mind on amputation, despite the voices of reason around her approaching the situation with pause.

Coppola's amputation scene can be analyzed as the antithesis to Siegel's. As established, the incident results out of fear and devastating betrayal rather than violence. There is no suggestion that Martha might be seeking personal revenge against McBurney. Edwina is the only adult who expected McBurney in her bedroom that evening, and she acts anything but murderous in the heat of the moment. For example, Martha determines that she has no choice but to amputate the leg, telling Edwina: "I can't repair it. I'm not a surgeon. He's losing so much blood…do you want him to die?" In between desperate sobs, Edwina repeatedly screams, "No, no!"[148]

Finally, Coppola's women and girls are not portrayed as man-haters the way Siegel's are. Martha, Edwina, and the girls have brought McBurney into their care because serving men is what they know. Martha is not instilling her girls with a fear of men the way her character does in Siegel's 1971 film. When McBurney first turns up at Farnsworth, injured and barely conscious, Martha enlists each girl's help in carrying his body up to the porch. Upon noticing his uniform, Jane (Angourie Rice) remarks that "he's a real Blue Belly. You know they rape every woman they come across," to which Martha snaps back: "would you stop that nonsense?"[149] This Martha does not entertain such thinking, let alone indoctrinate it in her lessons. As this section puts forth, Coppola reinterprets her iteration of *The Beguiled* to contemplate the women's side of the story, inverting much of what Cullinan and Siegel portray of the women. This ultimately paints them as vulnerable to McBurney's manipulation, whereas Siegel presents the women as

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[148] *The Beguiled*, directed by Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope, 2017).
[149] *The Beguiled*, directed by Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope, 2017).

manipulative. His film sets out to reveal the deviance that exists underneath a woman's soft exterior. Coppola explores how well-meaning society women bend over backwards serving men, and what they can become capable of when she is bent so much that she begins to snap. Coppola's reinterpretation of the women as victims is most notable in the shifts in point-of-view, emotional responses, and how her female characters speak of men.

Spaces of Womanhood

One discernible consistency through each of the above examples from Coppola's film is that the women and girls of Farnsworth Seminary operate as a unit from the start. That is to say, when they are not under McBurney's spell and vying for his affection, the girls share a sense of companionship and trust. In Coppola's film, the young girls at Farnsworth are friendly and playful with one another throughout their daily routines. Many of their interactions carry a sense of closeness and bonding, suggestive of their sisterly relationships that develop as a result of being raised together. This dynamic is reinterpreted from Cullinan's novel and Siegel's film, in which the ladies at Farnsworth are initially divided and hateful toward one another. I propose that the tight-knit dynamic between the women and girls of Farnsworth Seminary in Coppola's adaptation is a reinterpretation that distinguishes her adaptation from Cullinan's original novel. While McBurney's arrival disrupts their dynamic and drives a wedge between them, Coppola also ensures that her female protagonists appear as an intimate family unit. They are loyal to one another before McBurney's arrival and come together in the end when it matters most.

Cullinan's novel reveals a tension between the ladies of Farnsworth Seminary. Upon McBurney's arrival, the girls are already discontent and at odds with one another. The Corporal's presence only sets off an already ticking time bomb. A number of offhand remarks are made

about the other women throughout the novel. From Alicia's perspective, Miss Harriet (Martha's sister whose character is omitted/partially absorbed by Edwina's character in the films) is "certainly the only person in the world who cares from one day to the next whether I live or die, and that's more than you can say for anybody else around here."[150] As well, Marie describes feeling relieved by being sent to her room for the night with no supper, because then she does not have to "face the nightly competition at the table down below."[151]

To be sure, once McBurney is in the house, the sense of competition is naturally heightened. His arrival reinvents the competitive nature between the ladies, as he represents a coveted alliance and the possibility of a normal life that everyone is now vying for. Amelia, who initially finds McBurney injured in the woods and for this reason feels they share a special connection, declares that she "never felt very close to anyone at Farnsworth—except very occasionally Marie Devereaux—until I found Corporal McBurney…I decided on that first night, he was a person very much like me."[152] Amelia is one of the youngest students at the school, second only to Marie, which is why she concedes to sometimes feeling a bond with her. This small but mighty passage reveals to the reader how isolated Amelia feels having been caged in at the school with no family and few girls her own age, so McBurney becomes a convenient, fresh face to develop an affinity to.

Furthermore, Amelia is not the only one turning on other women. After pushing McBurney down the stairs, Edwina spends the morning weeping in her bedroom, where Emily delivers her breakfast. Emily becomes disgusted by Edwina once she realizes just how infatuated with McBurney she had become. Upon leaving the room, Emily expresses her distaste for all

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[150] Cullinan, *The Beguiled*, 13.
[151] Cullinan, 50.
[152] Cullinan, 55.

women, as a result of her peers' actions: "'Girls! Idiotic girls who can lose all their control and dignity over a worthless vagabond like McBurney.' As a matter of fact in my disgust, I think I was even beginning to disassociate myself from the entire female sex."[153]

Coppola reimagines this dynamic with her mealtime scenes. Rather than depicting a sense of competition, moments at the dining table are captured so as to highlight the girls' alliance, but also their playfulness together as children. For example, at the breakfast table the morning after McBurney's arrival, Jane and Marie (Addison Riecke) clumsily serve each other peas. The girls giggle when peas roll off their plate, and cheerfully declare their love of peas. As if in direct opposition to Cullinan's suggestion of competition at mealtimes, Coppola depicts their ability to bond over as trivial an object as peas, which in turn depicts their childishness and innocence. Coppola prioritizes telling a story of innocent girlhood, rather than animosity. Importantly, this exchange takes place immediately after McBurney's first night at Farnsworth, further displaying that, prior to his arrival, the school generally fosters an amicable environment among the girls.

Days later, when word spreads that Martha has finally invited McBurney to join them for dinner, the girls are seen rushing between bedrooms with gowns draped over their arms in excitement. They help one another dress up in their finest garments for the occasion. Emily (Emma Howard) is shown tightening Jane's corset to perfection. At the table, shots of pie being served, and tea being poured are accompanied by sounds of the girls giggling together. A tracking shot depicts Jane, Alicia, and Amy (Oona Laurence) passing whipped cream down the table as they smirk at one another and giggle uncontrollably. In this scene, Coppola maintains that even their efforts in vying for McBurney's attention are not possible without their teamwork

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[153] Cullinan, 200.

and alliance with each other. Additionally, McBurney is positioned at the head of the table, opposite Martha, while the girls sit beside one another and look down the table at him as a collective (figure 3.3). This formation alludes to the fact that, although the girls begin to make subtle jabs and remarks to garner McBurney's attention, they still form a team against him—the outsider. Farnsworth is depicted as a female space first and foremost; Coppola's reinterpretation of the novel prioritizes sisterhood in the face of McBurney's intrusion.

Fig 3.3 Alicia smiles at McBurney at the end of the table (Coppola, 2017).

In a similar vein, Devereaux has written about Coppola's spaces of womanhood and the importance of what lies beneath the surface of them. Coppola is concerned with the surface-level emotional mystery of other people and places, argues Devereaux, which is often all we have access to when it comes to others. "In her films, the world of ambivalence and ambiguity is the space of womanhood itself,"[154] writes Devereaux. Thus, the highly stylized, feminine, and pretty tableaux in *The Beguiled* suggest a feeling of ambivalence toward McBurney. Devereaux argues

[154] Devereaux, "The Knowledge of Feeling in Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*," 94.

that the ladies are often organized in the frame to express their solidarity to one another, above all else. Devereaux references a scene in which the girls gather for evening prayer in the parlour, and McBurney is invited to join (figure 3.4). Their multi-coloured silk skirts meld together as if forming a shield against McBurney, who is seated in the shadows just outside of their circle.[155]

Fig 3.4 Evening prayer (Coppola, 2017).

Coppola's adaptation reinterprets the relationship between the women and girls; they share a rapport and respect for one another, which exists in spite of the competition and desire that McBurney stirs upon arrival. Cullinan's female characters, on the other hand, are distrusting of and unkind to one another before the Corporal's arrival, and their internalized misogyny toward one another grows with his presence. Hutcheon writes that an adapter's personal history is often a driving factor in how that creator will choose to portray a text. The adaptation is almost always the product of the creator's personal politics, abilities, and aesthetic interests.[156] When

[155] Devereaux, 97.
[156] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 106.

watching an adapted film, the multitude of interpretive decisions made in the contexts of ideology, history, society, aesthetics, and the director's personal influence become clear.[157] The adaptation process allows Coppola to reinvent stories to fit into her oeuvre. This process is what makes possible her association with themes pertaining to the dynamic between groups of girls existing and coming of age in one space together, also demonstrated in *The Virgin Suicides*. Or, as with *Marie Antoinette*, the prioritization of girlhood and the young female perspective that becomes neglected throughout history. Hutcheon observes that adaptations often breathe new life into historical stories by updating the temporal setting, effectively transposing the past into current social and cultural contexts.[158] Though Coppola does not entirely remove her subjects from their original historical context, her dedication to extracting the female experience from stories originally told by men, such as Cullinan and Siegel, and which favour the male subjectivity, such as McBurney's, in turn revitalizes the source text to resonate with contemporary audiences.

An important aspect of updating adaptations to manage its reception by contemporary audiences is "the timely topic of race," Hutcheon adds. In her book published in 2012, Hutcheon gathers that adaptations of historical texts should and will begin to address this more often.[159] Merely five years later, Coppola released *The Beguiled*, which received notoriety for neglecting to address the topic of race in a meaningful capacity. The following section traces the controversy surrounding the representation of race that became lost in Coppola's adaptation of *The Beguiled*.

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[157] Hutcheon, 108.
[158] Hutcheon, 142.
[159] Hutcheon, 143.

Race: Presence & Absence

To have a worthwhile discussion about Coppola's *The Beguiled* in any context is to acknowledge the absences that permeate the film, and this is especially crucial to a discussion of the adaptation process. Cullinan's novel originally includes two Black characters: Matilda "Mattie" Farnsworth, a woman enslaved at the Farnsworth plantation, and Edwina, who passes as white and keeps parts of her lineage a secret, though Mattie can see that she has "got black blood in her."[160] In Siegel's 1971 film, the role of Edwina is whitewashed, erasing that part of her background. Mattie's character is renamed Hallie and portrayed by Mae Mercer. Coppola's 2017 adaptation does not include a single Black character. This decision is met with controversy, not only for the whitewashing of a mixed-race character and the erasure of a main Black character in the adaptation process, but also for the contradictory nature of retelling an American Civil War tale set in the South yet refusing to recognize the political context surrounding the story. Coppola's film rings with the constant sounds of gunfire in the distance, a reminder that war rages on beyond the Farnsworth property, and yet the only reference to slavery comes when Amy walks McBurney back to the school and briefly explains "the slaves left."[161]

In response to the backlash, Coppola published a personal explanation in *IndieWire*. First, Coppola unpacks Mattie's character as written in Cullinan's novel, suggesting that she is caricatured by the white man who wrote her: "…she is the only one who doesn't speak proper English—her voice is not even grammatically transcribed. I did not want to perpetuate an objectionable stereotype…Moreover, I felt that to treat slavery as a side-plot would be

[160] Cullinan, *The Beguiled*, 64.
[161] *The Beguiled*, directed by Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope, 2017).

insulting."[162] Second, she defends her depiction as historically accurate, citing historians and women's diary excerpts from the time confirming that many slaves had fled the South by then and most white women were living in isolation. The director asserts that her focus was always on the story of this isolation, and how women and girls on the cusp of a new world, and at different stages of their development, handle repression and desire when a man enters their space of solitude. "I thought there were universal themes, about desire and male and female power dynamics that could relate to all women," writes Coppola.[163]

The response to Coppola's defense is ultimately grounded in her established image as an auteur filmmaker. Corey Atad for *Slate* argues that the film is "completely stripped of its historical and racial context," and that a visual filmmaker like Coppola is merely attracted to filming the aesthetic of the antebellum South—its mansions, furniture, and clothing—while dismissing the labour upon which all of that is built.[164] Additionally, Rogers does not accept that Coppola avoids Mattie's character because of the insulting way she is depicted in the novel, as the majority of Coppola's adaptation strays from what Cullinan establishes in his novel, and surely there is space for the reconstruction of the main Black character. Rogers writes: "…the strength of Coppola's adaptation of the novel and film is in its *lack* of fidelity to the source material…"[165] (a thought process that this thesis examines across multiple adaptations by the filmmaker). Coppola's adaptation process appears to deem the revisionist redemption of Cullinan's white female characters necessary, while Mattie is left behind.

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[162] Sofia Coppola, "Sofia Coppola Responds to 'The Beguiled' Backlash—Exclusive," *IndieWire*, July 15, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/sofia-coppola-the-beguiled-backlash-response-1201855684/.
[163] Coppola, 2017.
[164] Corey Atad, "Lost in Adaptation," *Slate*, June 20, 2017, https://slate.com/culture/2017/06/sofia-coppolas-whitewashed-new-movie-the-beguiled.html.
[165] Rogers, "Making Whiteness: The Absent Presence of Race and Class in Sofia Coppola's Feature Films," 342.

Moreover, Coppola's use of the term "universal" further illuminates the overall importance of studying her adaptation process, and the intention behind her affinity to reinterpreting period stories. The filmmaker's understanding of universality reignites the common criticism that Coppola consistently applies a narrowed, privileged, and white viewpoint to her work, Backman Rogers writes of the making of *The Beguiled*.[166] This notion dismisses the vastly different realities and experiences of white and Black American women across history, argues Devereaux.[167] Coppola uses period stories in a specific way, and through them she extracts what she understands to be universal themes and sensibilities about what it means to be a girl or woman in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As conveyed throughout this study, these stories of the past become vessels for affecting her own experience as a modern American white woman. This, of course, results in inevitable exclusions.

Pertaining to the role of adaptation and intertextuality in how Coppola approaches race, there is a discussion that can be traced surrounding *The Beguiled* in relation to *Gone with the Wind*, Victor Fleming's 1939 adaptation of the novel by Margaret Mitchell. The film also romanticizes the South and depicts the Civil War from the perspective of a spoiled Southern belle, Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh). Coppola credits *Gone with the Wind* and its contemporary resonance as an inspiration for the film in her interview with Lodge: "I thought of seeing *Gone with the Wind* as a kid, and then tried to make something that's naturalistic—to be relatable even though it's another era…we tried to refer to the period but make it so you could connect."[168] Separate of this, Jamie Ann Rogers draws comparisons between each film's soundtrack, noting that *The Beguiled* includes repeated performances, humming, and instrumentals of 'Lorena,' an

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166 Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, 47.
167 Devereaux, "The Knowledge of Feeling in Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*," 100.
168 Lodge, "Sofia Coppola: 'I never felt like I had to fit into the majority view,'" 2017.

antebellum song that also appears in *Gone with the Wind*. Rogers also references the use of 'Lorena' in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), declaring: "The song, then, is associated with white supremacist film history, which is to say, with the dominant history of film."[169] In this vein, Hutcheon establishes a form of adaptation that works as a process of reception. An adaptation is a palimpsest within the viewer's memory processes; the work is a reverberation of everything it borrows from or builds upon, writes Hutcheon.[170] By evoking 'Lorena,' Coppola stimulates intertextual signification of Civil War-era films adapted from novels, namely narratives which also foreground a white perspective of the South.

Additionally, Bastién writes a thought-provoking piece about how a productive conversation around race can be extracted from the very absence of it in Coppola's film. Bastién draws her own similarities between Scarlett O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind* and the ladies of *The Beguiled*, primarily that characters like Scarlett and Martha "exalt white womanhood."[171] As a result, Bastién feels that Coppola's *The Beguiled* simultaneously functions as an "indictment of the very brand of womanhood she's been enamored with throughout her career—white, privileged, and unable to see the world beyond their own desires."[172] Bastién's argument is that erasing Black characters from the film (although fundamentally removing the Black woman's unique perspective) does not necessarily mean that Blackness and racism have been entirely removed from the story; this is impossible when telling stories of the South. The main women—Martha, Edwina, and Alicia—are representative of toxic whiteness. The adult women long for the Antebellum South, society, and status they once knew, while teenaged Alicia has no regard

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[169] Rogers, "Making Whiteness: The Absent Presence of Race and Class in Sofia Coppola's Feature Films," 343.
[170] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.
[171] Bastién, "How *The Beguiled* Subtle Tackles Race Even When You Don't See It," 2017.
[172] Bastién, 2017.

for the consequences of using her sexuality and cunning to her advantage as a white woman. She is forced to come to terms with the forced labour of Black people upon which her life is built, which Bastién aptly illustrates through a scene in which Alicia lazily and carelessly performs her chores in the garden.

Fig 3.5 Alicia & Emily tending to the land (Coppola, 2017).

Bastién's idea that the film continues to deal with race in the absence of Black characters is evocative of Dyer on whiteness. White people insist upon themselves as the "default human," with everyone else as the other, writes Dyer.[173] They do not see their privilege because they set the standards: "standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail."[174] This accounts for Coppola's assertion that her whitewashing of the film was done in part to ensure that the focus remains on the "universal" gender dynamics, which truthfully refers to her comfort in considering her experience as a white woman as all-encompassing. Dyer acknowledges that while the myth of the South insists upon whiteness, the South cannot ever be

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[173] Dyer, *White*, 2.
[174] Dyer, 9.

wholly white—that is not in its nature.[175] According to Dyer, "…whiteness as a race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen."[176] Coppola's film renders Cullinan's Black characters invisible, and yet the circumstances of these female protagonists are tainted by their complicity in the war, the vibrations of which are heard throughout the film. Coppola's adaptation is unmistakably misguided in its quest to foreground the gender dynamics at the cost of the story's essential racial politics, and yet it is through the adaptation process and in the glaring absences that toxic whiteness tells part of that story.

The character of Mattie in Cullinan's novel exists mainly to further the development of the white main characters. When the novel takes on her perspective, she recounts pertinent details about the Farnsworths' backstory that only she could know after years of serving the family. As well, her insight on Edwina's race helps to develop her character, one of McBurney's main love interests. Near the beginning of the novel, Mattie reflects upon the events to come: "I didn't have any notion then how much evil we got in us, all of us."[177] Her narration is all-seeing and prophetic, with her character serving more as an observer and a provider of information, and less a character with her own trajectory, save for the briefly mentioned, tragic backstory about the loss of her husband. In Siegel's film, Hallie is the subject of Martha's bitterness, or Doris' (Darleen Carr) racial slurs. Hallie serves as a reminder to the viewer of just how hateful they can be. However, in addition to this, Hallie is a character who carries pain and desire, just like the others. When McBurney discovers that the man she loved fled Farnsworth to avoid being sold off, he promises to help reunite them if Hallie is able to help McBurney leave the plantation. Though Hallie's character still functions to develop the white characters' mean-spiritedness at

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[175] Dyer, 36.
[176] Dyer, 45.
[177] Cullinan, *The Beguiled*, 8.

times, she also illuminates the ways in which the Civil War has caused her own isolation and desire due to much different circumstances than those of the white women.

As this chapter explores, Coppola's adaptation draws attention to the female perspective in a story that favours the male point-of-view. To achieve this, she reinterprets these characters that Cullinan and Siegel depict as calculated and evil, instead focusing on their sense of sisterhood and vulnerability to men, having been isolated for so long and raised to serve them. A sympathetic version of this story cannot wholly exist with Mattie (or Hallie) in the picture because her presence at Farnsworth immediately calls attention to Martha's, and her pupils', capacity for evil. This is especially unproductive of a film released in 2017, in the wake of the 2016 American Presidential Election which saw Donald Trump take office, and the national rise in racism and xenophobia that followed.[178] However, as demonstrated, it is also characteristic of Coppola, and her historical adaptations especially. Her approach to *Marie Antoinette* centred the Queen's sensibility and isolation at the cost of avoiding details surrounding her politics or the events leading to the French Revolution. What is absent from Coppola's adaptations is just as important as what has been reinterpreted, recreated, and transposed into them.

Given that Coppola's *The Beguiled* exists as both a novel-to-film adaptation and a remake of the 1971 film, this example is one of the most robust in terms of studying the adaptation process and Coppola's signature themes pertaining to girlhood. The film is constantly engaged in an active dialogue with its predecessors. Devereaux is correct to label it a "retort" to Siegel's film,[179] which is the clear product of New Hollywood influences following the dissolution of the Production Code in the late '60s. The 1970s saw a rise in experimentation with

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[178] Alexis Okeowo, "Hate on the Rise After Trump's Election," *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hate-on-the-rise-after-trumps-election.
[179] Devereaux, "The Knowledge of Feeling in Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*," 92.

"complex, ambitious movies characterized by ambiguous endings, cynical morals…" with "sexual rebels and even killers."[180] Where Siegel's film leans into the women as sexually devious and murderous, becoming what Coppola calls crazy caricatures, her female protagonists are reinterpreted as "strong women," whom the director makes a point to explore more in depth.[181] The marketing around her 2017 release targeted young women on social media, pushing the use of certain Twitter hashtags such as #Squad, #VengefulBitches (how McBurney addresses the ladies after waking up with only one leg), and #HBIC (Head Bitch In Charge).[182]

Backman Rogers suggests that, aside from the film's unfortunate oversights, the one thing it does well is "rethink the 'old circuits' of phallic visual culture [in cinema]."[183] Perhaps the filmmaker's focus becomes too narrowed around the gender dynamics, with the lack of attention to the story's racial context as proof. As this thesis examines overall, Coppola takes on adaptations which allow her to extend the subjectivity of women across history and the relatability of their experiences to women and girls today, which often overpowers everything else in the stories she adapts.

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[180] Maitland McDonagh, "The Exploitation Generation Or: How Marginal Movies Came in From the Cold," in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, eds. Alexander Horvath, Noel King, and Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 107.
[181] Lodge, "Sofia Coppola: 'I never felt like I had to fit into the majority view,'" 2017.
[182] Lodge, 2017.
[183] Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, 64.

Conclusion

Adaptation is intrinsic to storytelling; humans have been telling stories through various media for centuries. As a result, these stories become palimpsests, constantly evolving as if the subjects of a game of "telephone" spanning human history. This thesis is the result of over a century-long tradition of adaptation in Hollywood cinema. Beginning in the early 20th century, filmmakers turn to well-known fairy tales and novels to entice audiences, writes Timothy Corrigan, citing early examples such as *Cinderella* (1900) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1902).[184] The early decades of film history saw the medium cement itself in art and culture while developing its form largely through adaptations of existing material. Adaptation has continued to be present in key moments across film history since, writes Corrigan.[185] Dudley Andrew writes that the "study of adaptation is tantamount to the study of cinema as a whole."[186] To this, Corrigan adds that, for over a century now, the evolving definitions of cinema mirror the evolution of adaptation and film.[187]

This thesis has illuminated the weight of adaptation's presence in Sofia Coppola's films, revealing the prominence of adapted period stories in her signature cinema of girlhood. This results in a transhistorical portrait of girlhood which functions by bridging the temporal gap between the historical setting of the novels Coppola adapts, and the contemporary (female) viewer. Adaptation has always been present in the development of cinema, and this study raises the value of an adaptation-led approach to American auteur filmmakers which accounts for the

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[184] Timothy Corrigan, "Literature on Screen, A History: In the Gap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, eds. D. Cartmell and I. Whelehan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29.
[185] Corrigan, 35.
[186] Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 103.
[187] Corrigan, "Literature on Screen, A History: In the Gap," 30.

ways in which directors like Coppola adopt and transpose stories of the past to fit into their distinct oeuvre.

In this process, I have turned to some of the most prominent existing literature pertaining to Coppola's authorship. This research is born from an observation that much of this literature refers to Coppola's engagement with stories of the past, but few consider adaptation in their approach to Coppola's films. For example, Anna Backman Rogers' *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* is part of this corpus, a book dedicated to reinventing the conversation surrounding the decorative surface images Coppola has become known for. Through a feminist perspective, Backman Rogers argues that these images offer meaning and political engagement beyond their pretty surfaces.[188] As well, Suzanne Ferriss' book, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, which explores Coppola's use of clothing and fashion as part of her visual language,[189] touching on the simultaneous reproduction of past fashions while placing them into "creative transhistorical interchanges."[190] Lastly, another key text has been Fiona Handyside's *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, which positions Coppola's body of work as one of the most valuable insights on the figure of the girl in contemporary cinema.[191] Handyside offers a postfeminist-informed overview of how Coppola's films portray the subjective experience of growing up a girl in various settings and contexts. My thesis has built upon these touchstone texts, keeping the decorative image, the importance of fashion, and themes pertaining to girlhood at the forefront of this analysis. My research has demonstrated that adaptation is relative to each of these pillars of Coppola's authorship, as laid out by the scholars who have

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[188] Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, 2.
[189] Ferriss, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity*, 5.
[190] Ferriss, 9.
[191] Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, 5.

developed the existing literature on her body of work. Across three chapters, each addressing one of Coppola's adapted period films, I have demonstrated how adaptation—and what is or is not carried over in that process—plays a significant role in Coppola's signature, transhistorical girlhood on-screen.

In my first chapter, I have illuminated the reinterpretation at play in Coppola's debut, *The Virgin Suicides*. The film has come to be a symbol of Coppola's feminine style despite it having been adapted from a novel written by a man and narrated from a male point-of-view. This chapter explores how Coppola crafts a female-centred film despite the male narrator imparting his perspective on the story. I identify her use of objects in the mise-en-scène, and how the detailed, decorative domestic space in which the Lisbon girls are trapped becomes a character in itself; these objects invite the viewer into their worlds just the same as they had in the novel. Coppola's visual focus on the cluttered bedrooms and bathrooms of the Lisbon sisters, coupled with the environmental decay of the film's 1970s suburban setting, mimics childhood memories and nostalgia, inviting a transhistorical reading of the Lisbon girls.

In my second chapter, I focus on the relationship between adaptation and Coppola's use of anachronisms in *Marie Antoinette*. This chapter demonstrated that the use of contemporary music and anachronistic costume choices act as storytelling devices that further the narrative put forth by the source text: Antonia Fraser's biography, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. Though these are sometimes considered strictly aesthetic choices made by Coppola, I argue for their relevance in portraying Marie Antoinette's response to the pressure and isolation of moving to a foreign country and existing in their monarchy under unfamiliar rules and customs, which is a main focus of Fraser's book. The contemporary music tells a story of its own, while the evolution of Marie Antoinette's costumes reflects the various emotional states the Queen would

have been in at different stages of her life, and under different stressors, as described by Fraser. Adaptation, in this case, contextualizes aesthetic decisions that have, in the past, been ridiculed for their ahistoricism. It is through these choices that Coppola has achieved a transhistorical portrait of Marie Antoinette, one which foregrounds the subjective experience of her coming-of-age rather than the outsider's political perspective of her as Queen.

In my third chapter, I sought to distinguish Coppola's adaptation of *The Beguiled* from its predecessor, Don Siegel's 1971 version, and the original novel by Thomas Cullinan. I examined Coppola's subversion of the film's perspective and sympathy from male protagonist to the female protagonists. My focus on Coppola's portrayal of a positive dynamic between the female characters paired with their isolation and vulnerability revealed the ways in which Coppola reinterprets the gender dynamic in order to retell the story from the women's subjectivities. Additionally, this chapter approached the controversy surrounding Coppola's whitewashing and outright exclusion of Black characters in the film, situating the decision as a result of Coppola's desire to redirect sympathy to Miss Farnsworth, Edwina, and their girls. In the interest of reinterpreting the female characters in a positive light, the adaptation results in the removal of anything that might sour the characters and their relatability to the viewer. This functions at the expense of the necessary Black female perspective in a story taking place in the Americana South during the Civil War. Ultimately, the omissions and reinterpretations Coppola makes in adapting this film, in many ways opposite to the 1971 film, reveal her desire to reformulate the Farnsworth ladies as transhistorical victims of their patriarchal upbringing and moment in history, no matter how exclusionary.

In addition to developing the existing literature on Coppola's work through adaptation studies, this thesis also illuminates much of the cultural criticism dealing with adaptation,

intertextuality, and the ties to contemporary girlhood in Coppola's films. Anne Cohen's 2018 article titled "Why *Marie Antoinette* is Really *Mean Girls*, Versailles Edition" identifies the similarities between the historical world of Marie Antoinette and the contemporary wave of high school-set romantic comedy and teen drama films using Mark Waters' *Mean Girls* (2004). Cohen notes that both recreate the visceral experience of trying to navigate a gossipy, cliquey environment as a teenage girl who feels out of place. As well as, of course, all the pink.[192] Steve Persall draws comparisons between Coppola's and Siegel's *The Beguiled*, establishing that the primary differences lie in the fact that Siegel's film was released into "a man's world in 1971," whereas Coppola digs into a tale of feminist morality and reconsiders the male perspective through her own subjective lens as a contemporary woman.[193] Lastly, Hannah Strong, who has published articles and a book on the filmmaker, writes about the influence Coppola's films had on her own experience as a teenage girl. Strong recalls feeling like she could see a reflection of her own desire for freedom, feelings of desperate, unexplainable unhappiness, and confusion about boys in *The Virgin Suicides*. As well, she resonated with *Marie Antoinette* for its ability to bring a historical figure, who now exists as just a painting on a wall, to life through the "colour and noise and light and sadness," of adolescence.[194]

The aim of this thesis has been to apply adaptation studies to uncover a deeper understanding of the type of connection Strong describes. Coppola achieves a way of storytelling and filmmaking that transcends the temporal boundaries she works within, leading teenage girls

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[192] Anne Cohen, "Why *Marie Antoinette* is Really *Mean Girls*, Versailles Edition," *Refinery29*, July 10, 2018, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/07/203957/marie-antoinette-review-mean-girls-kirsten-dunst#:~:text=Marie%20Antoinette%20takes%20on%20the,Versailles%20as%20a%20high%20school..

[193] Steve Persall, "How Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled* Compares to the 1971 Version," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 27, 2017, https://www.tampabay.com/things-to-do/movies/sofia-coppolas-the-beguiled-compares-to-the-1971-version/2328592/.

[194] Hannah Strong, "What Sofia Coppola's Films Taught Me About Being a Teenage Girl," *Little White Lies*, June 24, 2017, https://lwlies.com/articles/sofia-coppola-films-the-virgin-suicides-teenage-girl/.

like Strong to connect on some level to the coming-of-age experience of people even as distant in history and class as Marie Antoinette. As this thesis concludes, tracing the adaptation process reveals how Coppola subverts the perspectives to reflect those of young women and girls, and injects her historical films with elements of contemporary culture. These decisions—whether they be changes, additions, or removals—can be understood as direct reinterpretations, re-creations, and transpositions of the source texts. Hutcheon claims that our engagement in time and space is always shaped by our society and culture. As such, any significant change in a story's context will affect how the story is interpreted.[195]

Coppola's engagement with historical figures and adapted stories only continues. Last year, Coppola revealed that she had been working on adapting Edith Wharton's 1913 novel, *The Custom of the Country*, into a series before Apple TV+ revoked the project's funding. Coppola claims that this had to do with executives' reservations surrounding the female protagonist's unlikability.[196] Her latest feature film, *Priscilla*, was released in October of 2023, coinciding with the writing of this thesis, and was therefore excluded from my scope. However, as the film begins to settle into Coppola's oeuvre, it offers a compelling point from which to proceed in further research. *Priscilla* is based on Priscilla Presley's autobiography, *Elvis and Me*. This adaptation perpetuates Coppola's fascination with stories of young girls feeling isolated after being thrust into a life of royalty (in this case, the wife of "The King of Rock and Roll").

As with the films studied here, *Priscilla* is another example of Coppola flipping the script, and telling a well-known story from a different perspective: the woman's. This dynamic is

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[195] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 142.

[196] Nardine Saad, "Sofia Coppola Slams Apple Execs for Defunding Her 'Unlikeable' Edith Wharton Series," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2023, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2023-10-30/sofia-coppola-apple-edith-wharton-series-custom-of-the-country.

heightened by the fact that Priscilla Presley is both the author of the source text and acted as an executive producer on the film. As well, the release of *Priscilla* came just a year after Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* (2022), a biography of epic proportions which tackles the legacy of Elvis Presley's career and relationship with his long-time manager, Colonel Tom Parker. As if in response to Luhrmann, Priscilla steps into the spotlight to share her side of the story through Coppola. In doing so, Coppola is sure to highlight that Priscilla was just fourteen when she first became swept up by The King's whirlwind life of stardom. Between graduating high school from Graceland, becoming a mother sooner than she expected, and spending much of her time at home while Elvis was away working, the story here is often one of loneliness rather than glitz and glamour. Lynn Hirschberg's interview with Coppola on the film's release, aptly titled "Sofia Coppola Finds Her Latest Muse," dives into Coppola's inspiration:

> "I could see how Priscilla's book could be a movie: When you're reading it, you feel like you're part of her experiences. For instance, she describes going into Elvis' bedroom for the first time…I remember thinking, it's intimidating enough to be in a normal guy's room for the first time, and then imagine that guy is Elvis!"[197]

Coppola is often reflecting upon how a novel or a famous icon's story could translate to the screen today. This is clear from the above passage, as well as the numerous interview excerpts that have been included throughout this thesis. Above all, it is clear in her adapted films. The adaptation process drives how she engages with contemporary, relatable themes of girlhood and female coming-of-age, and in turn her dedication to telling stories about the feminine

[197] Lynn Hirschberg, "Sofia Coppola Finds Her Latest Muse," *W Magazine*, September 28, 2023, https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/sofia-coppola-priscilla-cover-story-interview.

subjectivity and girlhood drive how she reinterprets a source text. Coppola is constantly finding her latest muse, and then reinventing her.

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