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From Page to Screen: Analysing the male gaze and the unreliable narrator as storytelling mechanisms in *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides*

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To my dear Avó Lininha, who would have loved to see me discuss the patriarchal view on women.

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Porto, 8 de setembro de 2024

Maria Gonçalves Machado

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Table of Contents

DECLARAÇÃO DE HONRA / *DECLARATION OF HONOUR* **4**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS **5**

ABSTRACT **7**

RESUMO **8**

STILLS **9**

INTRODUCTION **10**

I. ON THE MALE GAZE **14**

II. FREUD AND SEXUALITY **20**

III. THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR **25**

IV. *MISE-EN-SCÈNE* **31**

1. COSTUMES 32
2. COLOUR 35
3. SPACE AND DÉCOR 36
4. ACTION AND PERFORMANCE 39
5. POSITION OF THE CAMERA 40
6. FRAMING 42

V. *LOLITA*: NABOKOV *VERSUS* LYNE **44**

1. NABOKOV'S *LOLITA* 44
2. GETTING MORE UNRELIABLE 50

VI. *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*: EUGENIDES *VERSUS* SOFIA COPPOLA **56**

1. EUGENIDES'S THE VIRGIN SUICIDES 56
2. BORROWING THE MALE GAZE 63

CONCLUSION **67**

REFERENCES **71**

BIBLIOGRAPHY 71

DISCOGRAPHY 73

FILMOGRAPHY 73

WEBLIOGRAPHY 74

Abstract

The focus of this dissertation is an attempt to deconstruct the male gaze and unreliable narrator present in the narratives of *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* and their respective cinematographic adaptations. Initially, there will be an analysis of theoretical background regarding the concepts of the male gaze, and unreliable narration, as well as the elements of the *mise-en-scène*, and Freudian theories of sexuality. Consequently, I will be assessing the novels *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov and *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides through a close-reading approach, later comparing them to Adrian Lyne's and Sofia Coppola's respective adaptations, through the light of the previously established theoretical background.

In this dissertation, I intend to understand how the concept of male unreliable narrators can misconstruct the feminine images of their narratives, but also to explore how it can be used as a storytelling mechanism to create a more complex and satirical narrative that, ultimately, serves as a criticism of the same characters who practise it.

Keywords: male gaze, unreliable narrator, image, woman.

Resumo

O foco desta dissertação é uma tentativa de desconstrução dos conceitos de olhar masculino e narrador não confiável presentes nas narrativas de *Lolita* e *The Virgin Suicides* e as suas respetivas adaptações cinematográficas. Inicialmente, será feita uma análise das bases teóricas em relação aos conceitos de olhar masculino e narrador não confiável, bem como os elementos do *mise-em-scène*, e as teorias de sexualidade de Freud. Consequentemente, irei analisar as obras *Lolita* de Vladimir Nabokov e *The Virgin Suicides* de Jeffrey Eugenides através de uma abordagem de leitura atenta, posteriormente comparando-as com as respetivas adaptações de Adrian Lyne e Sofia Coppola à luz das bases teóricas previamente estabelecidas.

Nesta dissertação, eu pretento perceber a forma como o conceito de narradores masculinos não confiáveis podem distorcer as imagens femininas das suas narrativas, mas também explorar a forma como estes podem ser usados como mecanismos de *storytelling* para criar uma narrativa mais complexa e satírica que, fundamentalmente, funciona como uma crítica das próprias personagens que os praticam.

Palavras-chave: olhar masculino, narrador não confiável, imagem, mulher.

Stills

FIGURE 1: *LOLITA* 33
FIGURE 2: *LOLITA* 33
FIGURE 3: *LOLITA* 34
FIGURE 4: *LOLITA* 34
FIGURE 5: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 34
FIGURE 6: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 34
FIGURE 7: *LOLITA* 35
FIGURE 8: *LOLITA* 35
FIGURE 9: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 36
FIGURE 10: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 36
FIGURE 11: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 36
FIGURE 12: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 36
FIGURE 13: *LOLITA* 37
FIGURE 14: *LOLITA* 37
FIGURE 15: *LOLITA* 38
FIGURE 16: *LOLITA* 38
FIGURE 17: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 38
FIGURE 18: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 38
FIGURE 19: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 39
FIGURE 20: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 39
FIGURE 21: *LOLITA* 39
FIGURE 22: *LOLITA* 39
FIGURE 23: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 40
FIGURE 24: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 40
FIGURE 25: *LOLITA* 41
FIGURE 26: *LOLITA* 41
FIGURE 27: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 42
FIGURE 28: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 42
FIGURE 29: *LOLITA* 43
FIGURE 30: *LOLITA* 43
FIGURE 31: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 43
FIGURE 32: *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* 43

Introduction

What do *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* have in common? What drew me to work on these narratives was the fact that, upon initially reading the first page of either novel, I was expecting a female story. Perhaps only later, when rereading them with a more mature view, did I realise how mistaken I was. What I initially believed to be a female narrative is controlled by a male gaze so profound that the reader never gets to learn anything about the girls at all. Or rather what they learn is a distorted perception of their actions and inner lives. The narratives are both reflective stories being told years later by their narrators, increasing the unreliability of their words. In their novels, Vladimir Nabokov and Jeffrey Eugenides demonstrate their artistry in creating unreliable male narrators. Moreover, I was intrigued to attempt to understand how these stories manage to hold up in the cinematic universe.

The interest in analysing these narratives in the context of my dissertation comes from their reliance on storytelling mechanisms such as the male gaze and the unreliable narrator to guide their characters through the story. The source material for both tales — the original novels — was written with what I believe to be a high level of awareness and concern regarding their characters, purposefully twisting the parts they would play in the narrative. Although the female characters are the focus of the story, it is the male narrators who end up being the most developed and layered. With this deliberate shift of the readers' expectations, the authors manage to create a satirical piece of work, where the male narrators are constantly denouncing their own unreliability and inability to retell the story they are a part of.

The first time I encountered these narratives, at around thirteen or fourteen years old, I found myself falling into the trap of the beauty of tragedy. These novels soon became some of my favourites because of the tragic unattainability of the female characters. I, too, wanted to be like them. To be so mysterious and unachievable that novels would be written about me. This was around the same time I encountered characters such as Effy Stonem and Cassie Ainsworth (*Skins UK*); Alaska Young (*Looking for Alaska*); and Mandy Milkovitch (*Shameless* US) who were extremely romanticised.

Only later did I realise that these female characters were written through a very strong male gaze, both inside the narratives they were in, but also one created for the viewer. And so, as I became older, my interest in the portrayal of female characters started to peak. Moreover, I started to become aware of the way these portrayals were harmful to young girls, who could try to impersonate these characters.

When looking at *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* later in my life, however, I found that the male gaze utilised in these stories seemed to have a deeper intention than these superficial portrayals of female characters I had begun to notice. The unreliable male gaze present in these stories was one aware of itself. When I looked at the works from a different perspective I realised that the authors seemed to use this male gaze against their own male characters. In doing so, they created a satirical narrative, aware and judgemental of the male narrators' views, flaws, and unreliability. On account of this, my attention focused precisely on this mastery and control over the literary mechanisms being used and how they could alter the perspective one has over a story so much.

Lolita was originally written in English while Nabokov was living in the United States at the time. However, the fear of criticism and censorship led the author to first publish the classic novel in France. The book has always received mixed reviews, even at the time of publishing, ranging from being considered one of the three best books of the year by Graham Greene in the London *Sunday Times*, to being called "Without doubt (…) the filthiest book I have ever read. Sheer unrestrained pornography" (Boyd, 1991, p. 295) by John Gordon, editor of the London *Sunday Express*. The narrative of eroticism and child abuse contributed to the book's controversial reputation. This didn't seem, however, to be the focus Nabokov wanted in his manuscript. In the introduction to *Lolita In The Afterlife* (2021), Jenny Minton Quigley, daughter of Walter Minton, at the time president and publisher of G. P. Putnam's Sons[1], reveals she had found some correspondence between her father and Nabokov at the time of the publishing. The correspondence was regarding *Lolita*'s cover art, where Nabokov suggested some kind

[1] It was G. P. Putnam's Sons (part of the Penguin Books group since 1996) who originally published Nabokov's *Lolita* in the United States of America.

of landscape but was "emphatically opposed to any kind of representation of a little girl." (Quigley, 2021, p.30). Furthermore, when discussing the cinematographic adaptation of *Lolita* with Stanley Kubrick, Nabokov was disheartened to realise that his script, allegedly considered "the best screenplay ever written in Hollywood" (Quigley, 2021, p.239) by Kubrick and James Harris, had been entirely rewritten, after informing the author that the movie version of *Lolita* would have to end with Dolores and Humbert getting married. With Nabokov removed entirely from the production, this resulted in Kubrick's 1962 *Lolita,* starring Sue Lyon as Dolores and James Mason as Humbert Humbert.

Also experimenting with the idea of feminine representation, *The Virgin Suicides* did not experience the same controversy when released. In fact, the novel's most interesting and unusual feature has to be the plural, masculine voice that narrates the story. According to Eugenides, due to his Greek descendency, this voice has been compared by many to a Greek chorus[2]. In an interview with 3am Magazine, the author explains that instead these "impossible voices" might be influenced by religious literature, when there is a "voice that issues from a mysterious place and tells you things of the utmost importance". During the same interview, the author goes on to confess that he enjoys the fact that the mysterious voice remains unnumbered, where you don't know if it's "one (boy), two, or a hundred". In a first instance, this voice provides the reader with a sense of trust, as you would expect a collective of voices to present the truth. It is not long, however, until we realise that the boys' memories are stumbling over one another, and they are not the trustworthy narrator one was expecting. In this realisation, the truth about the girls will stay forever a mystery for both the narrator and the reader.

Jeffrey Eugenides believes that "only in novels and literature can you come up with such voices". During the 90s, however, these complex voices and tales turned over

[2] Greek Chorus comes from the context of Greek theatre. It refers to a collective voice that would comment on the action happening on or off stage. Additionally, the dramatic function of the Greek chorus would also be the contextualisation or summarisation of events; commenting on the themes of the play; and offering criticism or advice.

to the big screen. In 1997, Adrian Lyne[3] followed Kubrick and attempted a more faithful rendition of *Lolita*, staying closer to the original material than its predecessor. As with the original novel, Lyne's *Lolita* was only shown in the United States and Australia in the following years, due to the difficulty in finding a distributor on account of the controversial tone of the story. Two years later, Sofia Coppola made her directorial debut with the first-ever adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival.

The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to analyse the mechanisms of the male gaze and unreliable narrator present in these novels and how they influence the story or its trajectory. Moreover, it is important to look at how these were translated into cinema in the 90s and if the films were able to convey the original narrative. To do so, a theoretical insight into these concepts will be presented, along with the elements of the *mise-en-scène,* and an overview of Freud's theories of sexuality. Additionally, in a later portion of the dissertation, there will be a direct analysis and comparison of the novel *versus* the film, and how did one translate into the other. By debating these points, there will hopefully be a contribution to future academic works around these thematics.

[3] Throughout this dissertation, only Lyne's adapation of *Lolita* will be analysed, as I will be comparing it to Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, since both were made in the 90s, under similar production laws.

I. On the male gaze

Upon conversations regarding the themes seen in *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides*, readers were quick to pinpoint the intense male voice running through either literary work. Later, as cinematic adaptations were made from the books, the existence of a (camera) lens easily made this concept more obvious and palpable. The concept of the "male gaze" was developed and popularised by British film scholar and experimental filmmaker Laura Mulvey in her 1975 seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.* In the years that followed, this became a major work for the study of film analysis. In the notable article published in *Screen,* the theorist uses psychoanalysis — the idea that our present is shaped by our past experiences — to demonstrate how the patriarchal society ended up structuring film. Mulvey explains the "paradox of phallocentrism", which "depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world" (Mulvey, 1975). Although Mulvey's definition of the male gaze is intrinsically connected to the cinematic world, one cannot stop oneself from observing aspects of the gaze even in the original literary works. While not sustained by a literal lens, the views of the male characters go hand in hand with the concepts presented by Mulvey.

The narratives developed in *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* have very present female figures. However, in both works, the stories of the girls are told by male narrators and authors, who see them only through their own gaze. In that sense, the public never truly knows the veracity of the reported tales. In *Lolita*, we are entranced by Humbert's charismatic and lovebound spell and have no option but to look at Dolores[4] through his eyes. In Nabokov´s work, we are guided through the narrative by his characteristically lyrical prose, which puts Dolores as the object of Humbert's fantasies and daydreams. We are led by the male figure's thoughts and never view the young girl in any other way but as the object of his story. In Lyne's movie, there arises the use of a lens to literally

[4] Throughout this dissertation, "Lolita" will always be referred to as Dolores, as a way to reclaim her real name and persona, and not adress her as the persona created by Humbert.

capture Humbert's gaze, several times through a POV — point-of-view — shot. As the spectators are watching the movie, they are constrained to seeing Dolores as Humbert sees her. In *The Virgin Suicides*, we never truly know what is happening in the sisters' heads or lives, since we only see and know what the narrators tell us, even if they don't know parts of the narrative and attempt to reconstruct it through other testimonies. As in *Lolita*, even though in the book we are guided through Eugenide's words, in Sofia Coppola's adaptation we are moved by the focus put on the boys' eyes. This makes the spectator, in both cases, an accomplice to the actions and views of the male narrators.

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey relates psychoanalysis specifically to film and to discover how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work with the individuals and the social background that moulded them. To understand this, it is essential that first we understand how the patriarchal society is moulded by phallocentrism. From the Greek *phallos* — penis, or representation of —, the term phallocentrism stands for "the fact of having the male, or male sexual feelings or activity, as the main subject of interest" (Cambridge Dictionary). Understanding this, one can understand Mulvey's argument regarding classic Hollywood cinema, which depicts women in relation to their lack of a penis and, therefore, a symbol of castration. Moreover, Mulvey refers precisely to how "Woman's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (Mulvey, 1975, p.2). This inability to transcend their relation to the threat of castration and consequently their suggested tragic ending can be contemplated in the death of the Lisbon sisters, unable to free themselves from their oppressed femininity without ever transcending the part of the object. Similarly, in *Lolita*, although Dolores is able to free herself from the claws of Humbert, she has her innocence and childhood destroyed and shattered and ends up becoming a mother at seventeen years old, unable to escape her destiny as a "nymph" (Nabokov, 2006). None of the female figures present in these narratives succeed in

getting their happy ending, unable to enter the symbolic world and, therefore, unable to transcend from the state of object to that of subject.[5]

Additionally, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Analysis,* Lacan refers to the concept of *petit objet a*, which stands for the object of "autre", of the other. In this work, Lacan asserts that the person viewing an object establishes their identity through the fact that they do not possess a certain characteristic or feature that relates to the object in question that they are gazing upon, in this case, the lack of the phallus:

> The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack. (Lacan, 1998, p.103).

Because of this, women stand as the male's double, the "bearer" of the meaning imposed on them by men. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the teenage male voices that retell the stories of the Lisbon sisters see them precisely as "their doubles" (Shostak, 2009, p.817); imposing on them their personal fantasies and desires, romanticizing their lives and deaths and, therefore, making them the objects rather than the subjects of their own stories. In fact, the boys make it clear by the end of the novel that they don't want to know the truth about the girls: "It didn't matter in the end (…) that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling" (Euginedes, 2021, p.243). To know the girls' truth would be to allow them to move from the status of object

[5] The *Lacanian* conception of the Symbolic realm accounts for the signifiers, the representations of ideas and the intellectual apprehension of a phenomenon. In that sense, through the male gaze, no woman present in these narratives can enter the Symbolic, remaining "trapped" in the Imaginary realm as an idea in itself. Women remain as signified and cannot reach the state of signifier.

to subject. In *Lolita*, Humbert is led by his infatuation with Dolores, creating a personal new identity for the young girl — Lolita — through whom he can live his most twisted fantasies. The story that the spectator is confronted with is the one of Lolita, not Dolores: the object, not the subject. This makes Mulvey's argument clear when she mentions the image of women tied to her place of "bearer of meaning", and never "maker of meaning".

In her work, Mulvey resorts to Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*, where he mentions scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality and associates it with seeing other people as objects, "subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, 1975). In this first work, Freud explains that this is an active instinct present, for example, in the voyeuristic actions of children. Furthermore, he defends that this instinct is the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at someone as an object. He goes on to assert that "visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (Freud, 2017). In extreme cases, this instinct can evolve into a perversion, creating "obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms" (Mulvey, 1975), who can only obtain sexual pleasure from obsessive watching. Mulvey links this to cinema, explaining the contrast between the dark auditorium where the movie is being shown which isolates the viewers, and the bright light from the screen which helps create the illusion of a voyeuristic separation. This makes each spectator the lone voyeur of the actions portrayed on the screen.

In addition, Mulvey makes note of the narcissistic aspect of scopophilia, where the viewer recognizes its own image on the screen[6], being in direct connection to the construction of the ego. In this sense, there seem to be two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structure of looking — a scopophilic one, that comes from pleasure in looking at another person; and a narcissistic one, that comes from identifying with the

[6] An analogy can be made with Lacan's Mirror Stage (1936), which corresponds to the first time infants recognise themselves in a mirror and thus begin understanding the relationship between the "I" and the image that represents it, which is the idealised version of themselves. This stage usually happens between six and eighteen months and creates an awareness of the infant's own physical limitations.

image seen. Cinema has, however, found a way to evolve into a fantasy world where this contradiction can happen. Mulvey develops this idea by showing that we live in a world where the pleasure in looking is divided, the active gaze being the male, and the passive one being the female figure. It is in this way that the male gaze projects its fantasy and desire onto the female figure. Mulvey goes on to add that heterosexual males are reluctant to gaze at their like and thus, the spectator identifies with the male protagonist and conducts its gaze to the passive female figure portrayed.

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the theorist goes further to suggest a division in the way the male unconscious sees the female figure, relating it to the always present problem: her lack of a penis, which creates a fear of castration. Consequently, men find mechanisms to overcome that threat. On the one hand, there can exist a voyeuristic gaze, with some sadistic associations, where the male tries to demystify the woman, analyzing the threat she poses, or else the trauma is "counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object" (Mulvey, 1975). On the other hand, there can be a fetishistic scopophilia, which uses the physical beauty and mysticism of the female figure as the element of satisfaction and comfort. In "We Felt the Imprisonment of Being a Girl: Uncanny Male Gaze in *The Virgin Suicides*", Sarah G. Fiore mentions precisely the fetishistic scopophilic gaze that the male narrators have on the Lisbon sisters: "Because truly attempting to identify with the girls in a human sense unleashes their anxiety around identifying with the female experience, the boys resort to observing the girls in a way that emphasizes the girls as fetish objects separate from themselves" (Fiore, 2020). In *Lolita*'s case, Humbert's gaze is much more complex as he is aware of the threat Dolores poses, therefore not being simply scopophilic, as he desires to take her for himself, saving her from other monsters similar to him.

Although Mulvey's theory is nearly 50 years old, her arguments still prove to be valuable for film analysis. Even so, one of the most controversial aspects of Mulvey's theory is the absence of the female gaze — explained by Balsom as "a film paradigm no longer governed by voyeurism and objectification, devoted to representing women's experiences (including those of trans women) in ways that foreground their position as

objects of desire" —, discussed in Tongtong Guo's article for Frontiers in Art Research (2023, p.14). In *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,* "only the male gaze and desire are explored in depth, ignoring the female desire and pleasure to see and be seen" (Guo, 2023, p.14). Even though that is an argument to be taken into consideration in the writing and directing of future films, I believe that in the case of *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides*, the point to be made is precisely that fact that these stories are the way that they are because they are told through a male gaze. The richness and controversy of their plot happen because these are women's stories told by an unreliable male narrator. I believe that they were made to be intentionally provocative. Nevertheless, in Sofia Coppola's adaptation of Eugenide's literary work, we see a glimpse of the director's female gaze as she, though intending to maintain the original male gaze of the narrative, includes elements of the girls' experiences without over-sexualizing them, humanizing them beyond their quality of an object of desire. Moreover, in *The Virgin Suicides,* we see that spark of a female figure taking control of the narrative for a moment when the face of Lux (played by Kirsten Dunst) appears winking directly at the camera as if she is challenging the spectator and the boys who believe are telling her story. This, however, will be further developed in the analysis of the works below.

II. Freud and Sexuality

Sigmund Freud explains the concept of perversion in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis.* In the chapter The Sexual Lives of Human Beings, the psychoanalyst describes a sexual activity as perverse "if it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it" (Freud, 1977, p. 356). Furthermore, Freud develops this idea by elaborating on the aspects that differ from the normal in adult life, such as the disregard for the barrier of species, disgust, incest, and members of the same sex, and by the transferring of "the part played by the genitals" to other areas of the body. Understanding the definition of perversion according to Freud is crucial for the understanding of the associations that will be established throughout this chapter.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Freud explains that gazing is an active instinct present, for example, in the voyeuristic actions of children. This can, however, evolve into a perversion if it is restricted to the genitals, it is associated with overcoming disgust — as it is in the case of voyeurs —, or if it suppresses the normal sexual aim, which should be copulation.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* Freud dedicates a chapter both to *Infantile Sexuality*, as well as to *The Transformations of Puberty*, which have important concepts and considerations to keep in mind when relating them to the characters present in *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides.* In *Infantile Sexuality*, the author explains the debate regarding the origin of perversions — whether it is an innate condition or a result of past experiences. Moreover, he concludes that indeed there may be something innate at the basis of perversions that might lie dormant until a certain life experience brings it forth:

> The conclusion now presents itself to us that there is indeed something innate lying at the basis of the perversions but that it is *something innate in all human beings,* though as a disposition it may vary in its intensity and may lie dormant, waiting to be brought to the fore by life experiences. (Freud, 2017, p.31).

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, the reader learns at the beginning of the novel about Humbert's first tragic love at thirteen years old, Annabel. Humbert describes her as the first nymph he encountered, having suffered a tragic death by typhus, and, for that, gaining the title of an eternal nymph, never having reached adulthood. This experience and, consequently, trauma, may have been what awakened Humbert's perversion of infantilism. In fact, the man himself does admit to the reader at the beginning of the novel: "All I want to stress is that my discovery of her (Lolita) was a fatal consequence of that "princedom by the sea" in my tortured past" (Nabokov, 2006, p.42).

Moreover, Freud explains how if a child is led by a "skillful seducer" (2017, p.28), she can and will develop further perversions as part of her sexual life. The influence of seduction presents children prematurely with a sexual object for which the infantile sexual drive shows no need. Although Dolores was already entering her puberty years when she met Humbert, one can argue that he played the role of the skillful seducer who had an impact on Dolores' sexual life, even after she left his side. Humbert himself is aware of the power he has over the little girl. This is evidenced in the novel when the male figure argues that he has "all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder." (Nabokov, 2006, p.46).

In the chapter *Transformations of Puberty,* Freud mentions how the sexual thoughts in adolescent years are almost always restricted to "indulging in fantasies", or, as he further explains, "ideas not destined to be carried into effect". In *Lolita,* Humbert Humbert is self-described as a handsome and virile man, resembling a famous movie star whom Dolores has a crush on. Humbert is, again, the one who unreliably delivers this information to the reader by revealing that he is "said to resemble some crooner or actor chap whom Lo has a crush." (Nabokov, 2006, p.34). Later on in the novel, Humbert reveals having discovered a poster in Dolores' room with a handsome model in it. On the poster, Humbert claims that "Lo had drawn a jocose arrow to the haggard lover's face and had put, in block letters: H.H." (Nabokov, 2006, p. 69). Despite our inability to trust the narrator entirely, this alleged recognition of a famous male star in Humbert, alongside his seductive skills, may well be the explanation for Dolores' initial curiosity

and interest in the man. It is important to note, however, that, as the author mentions in *Three Essays on Sexuality,* these common fantasies occurring during the puberty years are not meant to be carried into effect. Therefore, one can understand that Dolores' initial interest in Humbert can be explained by the hormonal and mental changes that her body is undergoing but that, simultaneously, her attachment to the man only remained because of his persistent seduction.

Later in the chapter, Freud explains how it is in the course of this period of fantasies and fixations during the puberty years that a detachment from the authority of the parents starts to happen. This phenomenon happens in response to the repudiation of the incestuous thoughts towards the parents that are frequently the initial inclination of the child's sexual stirring. Nevertheless, what is of interest to analyse is the way this detachment can be seen in the female characters of both *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides.* As a matter of fact, we are early on made aware of the troubled relationship between Dolores and her mother. Dolores ultimately disrespects her mother's authority and acts in provocative ways to defy her. Her mother seems, similarly, eager to be free of her teenage daughter in an urge to recover authority.

> (Dolores) "You! Where are you going? I´m coming too! Wait!" "Ignore her", yelped (Charlotte) Haze (…); Lo was already pulling the door at my side. "This is intolerable", began Haze; but Lo scrambled in, shivering with glee. "Move your bottom, you," said Lo. "Lo!" Cried Haze (sideglancing at me, hoping I would throw rude Lo out). "And behold", said Lo (…) as she jerked back, as I jerked back, as the car leapt forward. "It is intolerable," said Haze, violently getting into second, "that a child should be so ill-mannered. And so very preserving. When she knows she is unwanted. And needs a bath". (Nabokov, 2006, p. 55).

As an example, this piece of dialogue happens when Charlotte invites Humbert to join her on a shopping trip and Dolores imposes her way into the outing. Although we can see that these acts do not necessarily mean a lack of love for each other, as Dolores is

presumably only rebelling as a way to get attention and Charlotte tries to run away from Humbert to protect her daughter, it is important to understand that this relation of defiance makes sense to the character and the stage of life she is in.

Analogously, with the Lisbon sisters, we also have a detachment from their parents' authority. The sisters, however, also seemed to suffer from a lack of nurture and affection from the parents, always seemingly having a very distant relationship. According to Freud, this can lead to other behaviours such as "clinging on to their infantile fondness, revived at puberty" (Freud, 2017, p.74). The imagery around the girls both in the novel and in the film depicts this infantilization and clinginess to their childhoods through the description of their white, long, loose dresses and childlike actions and lack of preoccupations ("She would sit on her front steps, picking red berries off the bushes and eating them, or staining her palms with the juice. She always wore the wedding dress and her bare feet were dirty."(Eugenides, 2021, p.14)), while contrasting it to their puberty changes, mentioning tampons and menstrual blood, as well as their acts of defiance, like the cigarettes Lux used to smoke. Moreover, the title of the novel and the correspondent cinematographic adaptation emphasise the pure and virginal quality of the Lisbon sisters — the Virgin Suicides. The girls' bedroom was described as being the environment where all these characteristics and changes would, simultaneously, clash and live harmoniously, depicting the girls' own complexity:

> He came back to us with stories of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties, or stuffed animals hugged to death by the passion of the girls, of a crucifix draped with a brassiere, of gauzy chambers of canopied beds, and of the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space. (Eugenides, 2021, p.7).

According to Freud, even if a person is able to avoid this primary incestuous desire, one might not be able to escape it entirely. The author explains that we can see the connection with this phase when "a girl falls in love for the first time with an older man vested with authority" (Freud, 2017, p.89). In the case of *Lolita,* it is clear how the

young girl fits this description entirely. With Humbert assuming the position of her (step) father, Dolores is described as starting to show provocative behaviours around him. This may well be explained as the child showing acts of defiance towards her mother, as well as trying to get her attention. With Lux in *The Virgin Suicides,* a similar thing happens. Although the girl had already had her first love with Trip, it is when she is locked in the house by her parents alongside her sisters that she starts to rebel, having sexual encounters on the roof of their house with older men.

> Then, about the time the first cold spell hit, people began to see Lux copulating on the roof with faceless boys and men. (…) Lux's face as she sat wrapped in a Hudson's Bay blanket, smoking a cigarette, (…) the men sweating, risking statutory rape charges, the loss of their careers, divorce, just to be led up the stairway. (Eugenides, 2021, pp.141-142).

Although the reader is never aware of the names or details of these visiting figures, one can understand through the accounts told by the narrators that at least some of these men have a significant age difference from Lux. There are individuals with careers — not part-time jobs — and marriages, simultaneously indicating their older age and worsening their behaviour.

III. The Unreliable Narrator

The concept of the unreliable narrator was first introduced in 1961 by literary critic and rhetorician Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as "a narrator (being) reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (Booth, 1968, pp.158-159). He further advances that "difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable", "nor is unreliability ordinarily a matter of lying" (1968, p.159), insisting on the necessity of the existence of an implied author in order to exist unreliability. However, German scholar Ansgar Nünning has written in several articles that the existence of the implied author is not a necessary requirement for the existence of unreliable narration. Nünning has, instead, presented a reader-centred approach to this matter, explaining that there is a "projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator's unreliability" (Nünning, 1999, p.54). This interpretive strategy is called 'naturalization'.

James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin distinguish, in a 1999 article, six types of unreliability — "misreporting"; "misreading"; "misevaluating"; "underreporting"; "underreading"; and "underregarding". The authors insist on an approach of unreliable narration that regards the interplay between text-centred and reader-centred elements during the reading process: "While a text invites particular ethical responses through the signals it sends to its authorital audience, our individual ethical responses will depend on the interaction of those invitations with our own particular values and beliefs" (pp.88-89). Several other authors likewise defend the importance of the reader in the construction of an unreliable narrative. They emphasise the relevance of different interpretations, constructions of meaning and perceptions of information, making the reader an active element to be considered when understanding unreliable narration.

Unreliability doesn't, however, depend solely on the reader's perspective, making it harder to create a theory around it. Gregory Currie explains that "as consumers of fiction, we have become skilled at recognising unreliable narratives, (but) as theoreticians, we are less able to say what constitutes unreliability and how it is

detected" (1995, p.19). Tamar Yacobi had developed a model of strategies of naturalisation in 1985 (*Hero or Heroine*?), where he introduced five different principles[7] to help resolve the problems of referential difficulties, incongruities or (self-) contradictions. The most relevant principle to be taken into consideration here is the *perspectival* principle, where the reader is able to attribute problematic aspects of a narrative to the specific perspective of a fictitious reflector. In the case of Nabokov's *Lolita*, for example, Dolores' attitudes became problematic only when being assessed from Humbert's perspective. As he is the sole narrator of the story, the reader only has access to his viewpoint of the events that constitute the narrative. Only if textual inconsistencies are resolved through the perspectival principle can readers hypothesize an unreliable narrator.

Textual elements that point to a narrator's unreliability involve "paratextual elements, conflicts between story and discourse, internal discrepancies within the narrator's commentary on those events, multiperspectival accounts of the story that cannot be synthesized, and the narrator's explicit or implicit disclosure of his or her own unreliability" (Zerweck, 2001, p.154). With Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, the collective male narrative voice openly admits their unreliability in several times, explaining how they were telling a story about a group of girls they could never understand ("In the end, we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained" (2021, p.241)). Moreover, the story of the Lisbon sisters is told through the compilation of several accounts of different people who crossed paths with them. The reader follows the story through the narrators who are also unable to confirm which information is true: "He came back to us with stories of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties" (Eugenides, 2021, p.7); "Paul Baldino said it was a barbecue and we believed him" (Eugenides, 2021, p.10). According to Nünning, the contextual models readers apply in these cases can be divided into three frameworks. The first group includes frames of reference referring to the real world, as general world and historical knowledge, social, moral and linguistic norms and the individual values of the reader. The second group

[7] The genetic; the generic; the existential; the functional; and the perspectival.

contains literary frames of reference, such as literary conventions, literary genres, and models of character. The third group works between the real world and the literary frames, containing the values of a text as interpreted by the reader. Therefore, narrative unreliability cannot be recognised merely as a textual feature but as the result of interpretative strategies constructed through textual signals, where the individual reader chooses from a number of different possibilities of interpretation. Bruno Zerweck (2001) distinguishes four conditions needed for the analysis of unreliability:

> 1. Unreliable narration can only occur in personalized situations of narration. In addition, an unreliable narrator must be strongly personalized in the reading process (…) 2. The unintentional self-incrimination of the personalized narrator is a necessary condition for unreliability (…) 3. Narrative unreliability is a culturally determined phenomenon. (…) 4. Unreliable narration as a reading strategy is an historically determined phenomenon. (pp. 155-158).

In his first argument, the author explains how a text needs to have a strongly anthropomorphised and personalised "narrator-character" in order for it to be understood by the readers as unreliable. This means that the narrator must have human-like characteristics and be inserted into a known personality model. If a narrative is transmitted in an impersonal manner, the concept of an unreliable narrator is unsuitable. This impersonality can occur, many times, in a metafictional[8] text, and thus, there is no need for readers to interpret or resolve inconsistencies in the narrative. Moreover, unreliability can only happen in texts that contain both the narrator (through discourse) and the narrated story. In both *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* there is a strong distinction between the narrator(s) discourse and the narrative being told. At certain moments, even, the narrator's discourse and the narrated story present incompatibilities, proving to be two different lines of narrative. Moreover, through the

[8] Metafiction is a self-reflective literary style in which the narrator and the characters involved in the narrative are conscious that they are part of a work of fiction.

narrator's discourse, one identifies personality traits that render them human. They show love, admiration, guilt, suffering, curiosity: "sometimes, after one of us had read a long portion of the diary out loud, we had to fight back the urge to hug one another or tell each other how pretty we were." (Eugenides, 2021, p. 40), and "I could not kill her, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight." (Nabokov, 2006, p.307).

His second point understands that the self-incrimination of the narrator is necessary for unreliability to be considered. The mechanisms of self-incrimination resort to dramatic irony. According to Ansgar Nünning, there is a "contrast between a narrator's view of the fictional world and the contrary state of affairs which the reader can grasp (…) without being aware of it, unreliable narrators continually give the reader indirect information about the idiosyncrasies and state of mind." (1999, p.58). In *Lolita,* we observe Humbert's self-incrimination throughout the novel as he talks to the jury and reader defending himself and his deviance from socially accepted norms and normal psychological behaviour. The narrator tries to convince us that his liking of younger girls — or nymphets, as he calls them, — is not criminal nor perverse. He explains how his sexual advances towards Dolores aren't hurtful in any way to the girl: "Absolutely no harm done. (…) The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little (…)." (Nabokov, 2006, p.68). These moments of justification would come several times after the narration of a grooming moment, assuring the reader of the lack of impact these actions would have on Dolores' life. By the end of the novel, however, Humbert Humbert ends up re-encountering Dolores three years later, unintentionally revealing her living situation: "She was frankly and hugely pregnant. Her head looked smaller (…) and her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare chins and arms lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed." (Nabokov, 2006, p.307). In this brief passage, the reader can already understand how the narrator's initial statements and justifications were lies since he has ended up destroying Dolores' life and future. A few moments later, when Humbert asks her to leave with him, the young girl herself utters these words: ""No", she said, 'it is quite out of the question. I would sooner go back to Cue. I mean —". She

groped for words. I supplied them mentally ("He broke my heart. You merely broke my life")". (Nabokov, 2006, p.318). The man's name on itself — Humbert Humbert — suggests a duplicity, warning the reader from its first impressions of the unreliable nature of the narrator. In the case of *The Virgin Suicides,* it was after Cecilia´s suicide that multiperspectival accounts of the story surfaced, describing the living sisters as tortured and depressed, with a "mysterious suffering" (Eugenides, 2021, p.49), and a "mournfulness" (Eugenides, 2021, p. 98). It was only at the prom, a rare instance in which some of the narrators had direct contact with the sisters, that the truth about Cecilia's death and their feelings towards it came from Therese's mouth: "Cecilia was weird, but we're not. (…) We just want to live. If anyone would let us." (Eugenides, 2021, p.128).

Lastly, Zerweck's third and fourth thesis reclaim narrative unreliability as both a culturally and historically determined phenomenon, since texts cannot be interpreted and naturalised as unreliable in the same way by readers with different cultural backgrounds and from diverse periods of history. Zerweck mentions, as an example, the social and historical concept of insanity, and how the narrator of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" could not be thought of as unreliable before.

While these theories regarding unreliable narration are at work predominantly in the literary field, this concept can also be discussed within the cinematographic world. In 1950, Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* presents four distinct accounts of a murder shown in contrasting flashbacks from four different witnesses. This classic creates the "Rashõmon effect" and is one of the first and most predominant examples of unreliable narration in cinema. In adapting the novels of *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* into movies, directors Adrian Lyne and Sofia Coppola, respectively, needed different mechanisms to be able to explore the idea of the unreliable narrator. To do so, both directors utilised the framing and positioning of the camera, along with the editing, to create interesting dynamics. For the viewer to be under the narrator's influence, the movies present the female characters through the male lens. Both movies recurringly frame the girls through doors or windows, as if being spied on and watched as prey, and have an intense male gaze, portraying the female characters only as they are seen by the men in the

narrative — focusing, often, on strategic parts of their bodies, like their mouth or feet. By forcing the viewer to perceive them in a certain way, these mechanisms create unreliability in the narrative. Additionally, with the editing, more of these moments can be created.

In *Lolita*, for instance, there is a scene in the final part of the film where Humbert visits older Dolores. At the end of his visit and as they are exchanging goodbyes on the front porch, a younger Dolores appears for a few instances before the image returns to her older self. This is one of the moments in which the viewer realises that the narrator cannot be trusted as it shows an image that is not truly there. Consequently, one realises it is impossible to trust the accuracy of the scenes that were shown until that moment and, thus, this falls into the realm of unreliable narration.

Similarly, in *The Virgin Suicides,* Sofia Coppola often introduces images derived from the boys' imagination, as with the images they speculate about as they are trying to decipher Cecilia's journal. As these are only conjectures, the veracity of these images — for example, Lux's underwear with Trip's name written in them —, along with the ones shown as the boys repeat second-hand information, should not be trusted.

IV. *Mise-en-scène*

The French word *mise-en-scène* has been used in the English language since, at least, 1833, and has its origins in the theatre. Translated in a literal manner, it means 'to put on stage'. Nowadays, however, it is also used in film studies in the discussion of visual style. For film, the most useful definition would be, according to John Gibbs in *Mise-en-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation*, "the contents of the frame and the way they are organized" (2002, p.16). The contents in the frame are as important as their organisation since this is what results in the interaction of the different contents (lighting, dècor, costumes, actors, etc.) with one another but also with the camera and, consequently, with the audience and what they are seeing: "Mise-en-scène therefore encompasses both what the audience can see, and the way in which we are invited to see it" (Gibbs, 2002, p.16). In this manner, we can also infer that the framing and movement of the camera, as well as other photographic choices, are important aspects in the *mise-en-scène*.

There are several elements of the *mise-en-scène* to be taken into consideration — lighting, costume, colour, props, décor, action and performance, space, the position of the camera, framing and, consequently, the interaction of those elements. We should also take into consideration the coherence of these interactions and how we can only interpret and analyse certain features "considering it within the context provided by the rest of the film" (Gibbs, 2002, p. 58). When discussing coherence within film, one can distinguish two ways in which it can be seen. Firstly, the idea of coherence across the work, meaning that there can be a recurrent visual motif, a consistent tone or viewpoint that extends itself through the piece. In the second place, the idea of coherence can be applied to the relationship between the different elements of an individual moment, or, in "more specific terms, we might talk about the way in which different elements of the mise-en-scène, or different areas of decision-making, interact to achieve a significant effect." (Gibbs, 2002, p.63). This coherence needs to happen for the filmmaker to be capable of expressing the intended effect; for the critic to make a valid interpretation, or even for the audience to make certain connections, allowing them to understand the story.

Moreover, the concept of *mise-en-scène* explains why the director of a movie, rather than its scriptwriter, should be considered the main entity [9]responsible for a film. This relies on the knowledge that the *mise-en-scène* comprises the areas of decision-making needed for the movie to have its desired coherence and, consequently, its desired effect. The organisation of the *mise-en-scène* provided for films to be considered separately and distinctively from their written counterparts. As John Gibbs explains in the conclusion of *Mise-en-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation, mise-en-scène "*enabled critics to understand film as a visual and sensory experience rather than just a literary one, to engage with film as medium in its own right, and to consider the determining influence of style upon meaning." (2002, p.92).

Naturally, with different cinematographic pieces, different elements of the *mise-en-scène* will come into more prevalence as a support to the narrative. In *Lolita* (1997) and *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) it is significant to highlight the importance of costumes, colour, décor, performance, framing and position of camera. These are the key elements that allowed the directors to, not only bring the novels to life, but to be able to separate themselves from the original works within a different medium.

1. Costumes

In both *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides* the use of costumes and, frequently, their symbology, contributes to the visual representation of the characters' personalities. The biggest contribution of costumes is in relation to the female characters. Since the viewer is seeing them through a male narrator, their ensembles are a direct representation of the way the male narrators view or, on a clearer note, envision them.

In *Lolita,* Dolores' outfits are typically a hybrid between childlike clothes and hairstyles with more mature and woman-like elements. On the one hand, Dolores is often seen wearing light colours, whites and pastels, which typically hint at purity and virginity. The ruffled and laced details in some of her outfits can also be linked to the fun

[9] "Main entity" is referring to the higher person in the decision-making process. Other important positions refer to the producer, cinematographer, and art director.

and carefree years of childhood, along with the braided hair the girl is many times seen using. On the other hand, Dolores' costumes sometimes hint at the woman-like 'provocative' side of the character when she is seen wearing curlers in her hair or a bold red lipstick shade. This contrast within her costume design alludes to the complexity of her character and, ultimately, supports the vision Humbert Humbert has of her — a nymphet.[10] In the moments represented in both Figure 1 and 2 seen below, Dolores is seen wearing precisely these combinations. In Figure 1, the girl is wearing a lacey white sleeping shirt with her hair wrapped in curlers, giving the careless sleepwear a more mature appearance. Although the curlers suggest an older aspect, the positioning of her legs is reminiscent of a child's posture. In Figure 2, the same happens if we notice the girl's colourful shirt and braided hair with bows contrasting with the bold red lipstick.



Figure 1 (00:14:29)



Figure 2 (01:32:15)

Additionally, in *Lolita,* there is a noticeable change in costume when Humbert visits Dolores years after the girl's escape. In Figures 3 and 4, the now pregnant seventeen-year-old is shown wearing a mature and modest ensemble in dull shades of blue, her hair in a careless ponytail and without any makeup. Moreover, the addition of glasses in her character represents a wiser Dolores, who is now able to truly see Humbert for what he is. Although Humbert still nurtures feelings of love towards Dolores, this is the moment in the film when he stops viewing Dolores as a nymphet.

[10] Initially deriving from the word 'nymph' + -et, was first used in the 17th century as a diminutive to describe Greek and Roman mythological female nature spirits. The second sense of the word was popularized in the 20th century by Vladimir Nabokov in *Lolita*, using the term to describe a sexually desirable young girl.

The importance of the costumes here is to help the spectator visually share Humbert's distancing of the present-day Dolores from what she was once presented as.



Figure 3 (01:58:11)

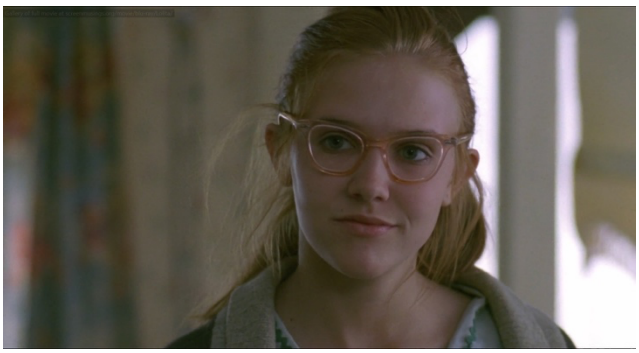


Figure 4 (01:57:37)

Similarly, in *The Virgin Suicides,* the costumes used in Sofia Coppola's adaptation remain true to the novel. The Lisbon sisters are often seen in lacey, long and loose figures and pale colours, alluding to the ethereal, pure, and virginal look of the girls. Moreover, their dresses are recurrently very similar, which, paired with their straight blonde hair and fair skin, paints them as an indistinguishable and homogeneous angelic group. Figure 6 shows the girls' ensemble at the party thrown for Cecilia. This is one of the first moments where we see the girls together. In Figure 5, the girls display their identically virginal-looking prom dresses. This choice is made to help emphasise the way the boys see them, as they often admit: "a congregation of angels" (Eugenides, 2021, p.23). This forces the spectator to share the boys' point of view and the difficulty in separating them as individuals from each other.



Figure 5 (00:50:34)



Figure 6 (00:12:40)

2. Colour

Contrary to what we will see next regarding *The Virgin Suicides*, the colours in Lolita are quite muted and neutral, with the dominant shades being greens and yellows. Although most of the film doesn't reveal particular concern with the use of saturation, this is applied in certain instances to enhance Dolores' features. A saturated green background, for example, is the perfect backdrop for the girl's red hair and lipstick to take centre stage, as those are complementary colours (Figure 7). This initial enhancement suffers a drastic contrast compared to the last time Humbert sees Dolores. The change in saturation in the scene portrayed in Figure 8 helps visually expose Humbert's disenchantment the final time he sees the older version of the girl, without her nymphet attributes,

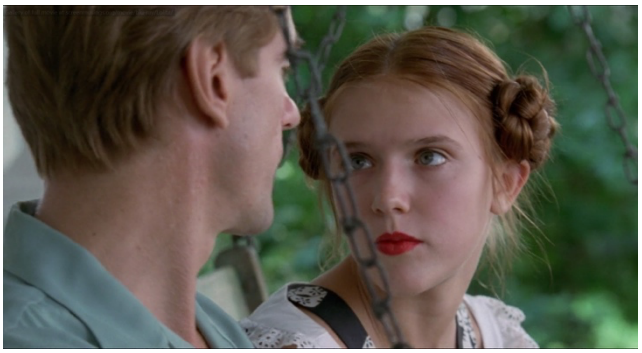


Figure 7 (00:20:30)



Figure 8 (01:54:14)

In *The Virgin Suicides*, Sofia Coppola's particular visual style makes all the colours very intense, revealing the intention of using them to drastically contrast certain moments in the narrative. Most of the runtime of the movie has a very warm-toned palette and feeling, almost evoking a fever-like dream, with highly saturated yellows, oranges and pinks. The spectator is, after all, looking through the boys' eyes and memories, which elevate the Lisbon sisters into divine creatures. The shift occurs in the key tragic moments of the film. The drastic change into cold blues and purples accompanies the death of the sisters — first, Cecilia (Figure 10), then, the collective suicide scene. It is also used in illustrating the aftermath of prom night (Figure 12) and

the subsequent forced enclosure in the house. By placing frames side by side, one can tell that the changes in the colour palette were definitely a thought-out choice, designed to visually highlight and distinguish the highs and lows of the narrative.



Figure 9 (00:26:38)



Figure 10 (00:01:22)

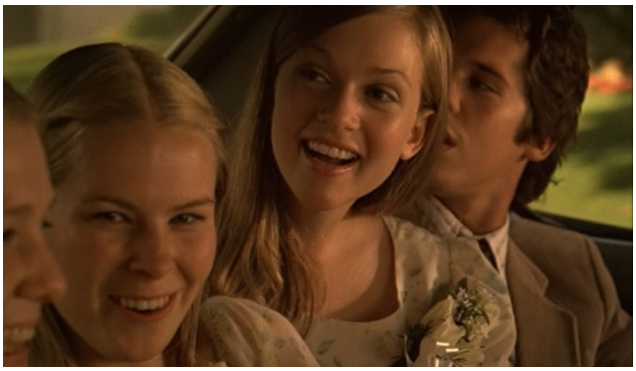


Figure 11 (00:54:19)



Figure 12 (01:03:57)

3. Space and Décor

The décor involves the choice and organization of elements within the space, creating dynamics and interactions between the objects that complement the narrative of the films they are inserted into.

In Lyne's *Lolita,* there are three dominant spaces that Humbert inhabits — the Haze household, the car in which he travels with Dolores across the country and the hotel room(s). By the use of décor in these spaces, the spectator can establish different

relationships between those same spaces and the narrative. For instance, when Humbert Humbert is thrown into the Haze household, it is clear that he falls into a feminine space, strange and distant to him. In the figures below, we see the house Humbert first stumbled into. The frilly flowery curtains and the hanging underwear and sleepwear in the first figure, along with the pink toilet cover in the second one transport the viewer straight into an exclusively female household.



Figure 13 (00:08:43)



Figure 14 (00:08:40)

Looking at it from another perspective, one can make conclusions by the level of characterization of certain spaces. As an example, we can compare the car to the hotel rooms Dolores and Humbert stayed in throughout their journey. Figure 15 shows the first hotel room the protagonists stayed in, and serves as an illustration of the emptiness of these spaces, or better yet, non-places[11]. The hotel rooms lack any kind of personalized detail to show character and customization, making the spectator understand that this is only a transitive space that doesn't establish any special connection to the characters. The car (Figure 16), on the other hand, although also seen as a means of passage, is thoroughly lived in. The characters spread the contents of their luggage carelessly on the backseats of the car, throwing things around and living among

[11] Non-place is a concept explored by Marc Augé which explains spaces characterised by alienation and anonymity, such as airports, shopping centres and hotels. These are spaces with a lack of identity and transient nature where people merely pass through, without ever establishing meaningful relationships.

their objects, offering the car more personality, and making it feel like their true home while they are travelling.



Figure 15 (00:47:06)



Figure 16 (01:01:10)

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the girls' rooms are decorated with elements that convey to the audience the complex personality of the Lisbon sisters. Within the mainly pinkish rooms, we can identify a mess of contrasting objects such as stuffed animals, religious symbols, spread underwear and makeup. These elements represent the transitive state the girls are living in — from the toys and stuffed animals of childhood to the makeup and underwear as a symbol of womanhood. They are also a visual representation of the transition between what they were forced to believe and grow up with — religious imagery — to the discovery of new beliefs — tarot cards and rock albums. In the frames below, we realise how the focus and attention given to these items are important to understand more about the characters that inhabit the space.



Figure 17 (01:06:48)



Figure 18 (00:01:16)



Figure 19 (00:09:48)



Figure 20 (00:09:55)

4. Action and Performance

A character is never truly brought to life without an actor's performance. It is through the actor's body language and facial expressions that certain complexities and nuances of the character can be transposed to the spectator's understanding. With the character of Dolores in *Lolita*, the strong performance of Dominique Swain was needed to fully portray such a nuanced character — a little girl who, seen by the gaze of Humbert Humbert, showed a provocative and woman-like behaviour, without ever losing her innocent look. There are several moments in the film in which Swain displays her ability to portray this duplicity. For instance, in the frames shown below around minute 41:00, there is an episode with Dolores and Humbert in the car when they are asked to stop by a police officer. In that scene, Dolores jumps provocatively onto Humbert's lap. However, Dominique Swain's facial expression is one of an innocent child batting her eyelashes. This often divergence between the actress' body language and facial expressions is what shows the complexity of the character.



Figure 21 (00:40:47)



Figure 22 (00:41:02)

With *The Virgin Suicides*, the female characters are harder to read and wrapped in mystery, especially to the boys through whom we see them. In that sense, the actresses remain impenetrable and unreadable. The only image of the Lisbon sisters the spectator gets is the very superficial one the narrators possess. To an extent, the girls seem to lack layers and complexity, as if they are blank canvases. Consequently, at a first glance, the actresses seem to be lacking energy and intention in their performance. Only after understanding that the characters of the sisters are only there to serve and indulge the boys' fantasies and imaginations, can one understand the beautiful performances executed by them.

Particularly after Cecilia's (Hannah R. Hall) death, Lux (Kirsten Dunst), Therese (Leslie Hayman), Mary (A. J. Cook), and Bonnie (Chelse Swain) moved in harmony as a group of higher beings. Their performance throughout the film — except for a few key moments — was contained and stoic. Every time the girls appeared together in frame they would bear an undecipherable look, fuelling the mystery the Lisbon sisters left behind.



Figure 23 (00:31:55)



Figure 24 (01:12:09)

5. Position of the camera

The position of the camera is interesting for the way it shapes the audience's relationship to action and characters. In both films being discussed, a choice they have in common is the point of view shot — POV. In *Lolita* this assures we share Humbert's point of view when watching Dolores, partaking in the same view as the main character

and emphasising the perspective of the narrator. Similarly, in *The Virgin Suicides,* the camera is very often positioned for the viewer to see only what the boys see, as a collective, or from the recollection of other individuals.

In both films, these points of view often involve enhancing the female characters' attributes and personas, making them seem otherworldly creatures with mesmerising features — as the narrators see them. Moreover, the POV shots are regularly accompanied by close-up shots of some detail of the girls' bodies, typically mouth and feet. This choice of close-up shot serves to enhance the male gaze present in these narratives while forcing the viewer to accept the (male) narrator's perspective of the female characters. The viewer is then complicit in looking at the girls through this hypersexualising lens that the narrator uses.

In Figures 25 and 26 from *Lolita*, the viewer meets Dolores for the first time at the same time as Humbert and through his lens. Consequently, the spectator is forced to look at the young girl as the sexual object of adoration Humbert sees, already corrupting her essence and preventing her from appearing to the audience in any other way. Comparably, in *The Virgin Suicides,* the spectator follows the collective male narrators' gaze, which is constantly obsessing over the girls. In the scene shown in Figure 27, one of the boys is observing Lux through a window. He is fixated on her smile and how another boy made her laugh. The camera, thus, follows his obsessive gaze, depicting Lux to the viewer through his eyes. Additionally, when Trip has dinner at the Lisbon's household, the viewer is forced to adopt the boy's view of Lux, with whom he is infatuated. The camera shares his gaze and enhances certain parts of Lux's body that grab his attention, in this case, her feet on top of the table — Figure 28.



Figure 25 (00:09:48)



Figure 26 (00:10:11)



Figure 27 (00:34:54)



Figure 28 (00:43:18)

6. Framing

The way an image is framed can establish a certain dynamic between the elements in the frame and what the spectator is viewing. In both *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides,* the directors choose to frequently frame the female characters through doors or windows, giving the viewer the feeling that they are spying on them, intruding on their private worlds. This allows for the viewer's point of view to be aligned with the narrator's, creating a complicit storyline. This effect goes hand in hand with the view of the unreliable narrator, who tells stories through the information he can observe and deduce from that.

In *Lolita,* it is Humbert who keeps watching the young girl, initially, when they are still living at the Haze residence and he starts to become fascinated by her — Figure 29 —, and later as he becomes paranoid that she is seeing another man — Figure 30. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the boys are only able to tell the Lisbon's story by spying on the girls and their house. They are rarely present characters in the narratives they tell, admitting on several occasions how they used to watch the sisters: "None of us went to church, so we had a lot of time to watch them" (Eugenides, 2021, p.6). To transfer this information to the cinematographic world, director Sofia Coppola made sure the girls were frequently framed through windows or glass doors, to ensure the viewer felt and understood that the sisters were being watched — Figures 31 and 32. In addition, this aspect further distances the viewer from them, giving the sense of unapproachability.



Figure 29 (00:15:20)



Figure 30 (01:31:19)



Figure 31 (01:21:24)



Figure 32 (00:34:40)

V. *Lolita*: Nabokov *versus* Lyne

1. Nabokov's *Lolita*

> *Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo-lee-ta.*
>
> (Nabokov, 2006, p.7)

Published originally in 1955, although embedded in controversies, *Lolita* was an overall well critically acclaimed novel, being adapted into film on two different occasions. The key to its success was, undoubtedly, the beautiful and powerful lyricism of Nabokov's writing. Without it, this narrative would have been only a tragic tale of a monstrous man in a position of power over a defenceless young girl. However, this isn't the case. Nabokov displays the ability to create ambiguity in the story, to manipulate and create a complacent narrative where the reader almost feels pity for the narrator. Alfred Appel highlights this point in his article for the *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* (1967) by explaining that "what is extraordinary about Lolita is (...) the way in which Nabokov enlists us, against our will, on Humbert's side. (...) Humbert has figuratively made the reader his accomplice in both statutory rape and murder." (p. 224). The book has its literary value due to the mechanisms Nabokov uses to create and shape the story, which can only be ambiguous because we never learn about Dolores' perspective of it. The density of the narrative is perpetuated by the forcefulness exerted upon the reader of having only one untrustful side of the events. In *Lolita*, we don't follow the life of the real prepubescent girl Dolores, but only Humbert's distorted and perceived image of her — the girl he has created for himself, Lolita. In fact, Humbert is the one who admits this plasticity of the young girl to the reader only in the second paragraph of the novel: "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted

line. But in my arms she was always Lolita." (Nabokov, 2006, p. 7). Although beautifully lyrical and comparable to a love letter, this excerpt denounces a very strong male gaze right from the start of the narrative, tying the female character to the bearer of meaning — meaning which is defined by the way Humbert perceives her —, and never the maker of meaning in her own story. Dolores is a twelve-year-old girl whose story is being told through an unreliable gaze — and that is how Lolita is born.

The novel opens with a beautiful homage to Lolita. Nabokov's prose gives Humbert Humbert a clear advantage over the reader. Roxane Gay (2021) explains how this opening portrays him as "an unknown narrator who is so enraptured by a woman's name, so consumed by his passion for her that he lingers over every syllable of her name and revels in the speaking of it." (p.53). It is through his breathtaking words that we, as readers, may often be inclined almost to forgive his actions. For a few initial pages, Humbert explains how he got to the Haze household. Amongst the tales of Paris and a broken marriage, was the one of Annabel. The tragic story unfolding on a beach vacation was the narrator's first experience of love and physical touch at thirteen years old before Annabel died of typhus months later. Although at the time they were of the same age, Humbert admits now how Annabel was the first nymphet he ever met. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud explores how the origin of perversions can be rooted in past experiences or traumas. In this sense, Humbert's attraction to young girls may have been awakened by the trauma of Annabel dying as a nymphet, without ever reaching adulthood. The context that is provided by his backstory contributes to the reader creating an affinity with Humbert, recognising him as a human being who has a past, traumas, dreams; who loves, suffers, and shows empathy. This also enables the character to have the first necessary condition to be considered an unreliable narrator according to Bruno Zerweck in *Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction:* "a potential unreliable narrator "must assume some human-like attributes such as knowledge, perception, understanding and so on" because otherwise there is no (fictional) cognitive center to which unreliability can be attributed." (Zerweck, 2001, p.156). Moreover, and as stated earlier, the repetition in his own name "Humbert Humbert" suggests duplicity, and, similarly with the existence

of a reflection in mirrors in film *noir*, therefore, unreliability. In this sense, we can comprehend Humbert as an unreliable narrator with a male gaze conducting the story.

After looking at the names of Humbert Humbert and (the given name) Lolita, one can speculate that Nabokov chose the names present in his narrative with a conscious objective. The choice of the surname Haze for Charlotte and Dolores could be a clue on how Humbert views Dolores. The narrator, and consequently the reader, sees the young girl unclearly, revealing itself as another indicator of the unreliability present throughout the novel. On the other hand, with Humbert's *doppelganger*, Clare Quilty, the first name reveals an anagram for Clear. This is the only character in the novel who truly sees Humbert's actions clearly for what they are. Moreover, with the change of one letter, his last name can quickly become Guilty, again, reinforcing the idea that this is his double that carries his clearly guilty actions.

With Humbert, Nabokov creates a monster who says beautiful things, who is nuanced. At certain parts of the narrative, one might even feel sorry for him and his unrequited love. At the end of the narrative, for instance, when he pays his final visit to seventeen-year-old pregnant Dolores who has had her life completely ruined by him, he still delivers some terrifyingly raw lines that might make the weakest of us feel sorry for him:

> "(…) how much I loved my Lolita, this Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine (…) even then I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous voice, my Lolita." (Nabokov, 2006, p.317).

Even with all of his nuances, Humbert is, from start to finish, a monster. The problem is that he never sees himself that way in his narrative. The differences between the narrator's discourse and the narrated story enhance Humbert's unreliability and serve as an illustration of his unaccountability. In some moments Humbert seems to alternate

between self-justification and self-incrimination, letting its true nature shine through in those episodes. At some point during Part One of the novel, Humbert mentions he will keep speaking well of himself since “a bad accident is to happen quite soon” (Nabokov, 2006, p.88). About fifteen pages later we discover that the understated “bad accident” that takes place is Charlotte Haze’s death, somewhat due to his fault. Here we begin to understand that the narrator’s words must be differentiated from the actual plotline and that he cannot be trusted for he tends to diminish and enhance certain events for his convenience. Further on he similarly does this when referring to Dolores’ state of mind. After the initial promises that “absolutely no harm (was) done” (Nabokov, 2006, p.68) to Dolores, the reader finds out about the reluctantly divulged episodes of the girls’ suffering and Humbert’s control over her — “ At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.” (Nabokov, 2006, p.160); and “our long journey (…) in retrospect was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps. ruined books, old tires, and her sobs in the night - every night, every night - the moment I feigned sleep.” (Nabokov, 2006, p.199). The richness of the story is then built by these contradictions and ambiguities, which make the reader feel as if they are the jury of Humbert’s case. With this exploration of the character, Nabokov intended for its story to have layers and create doubts. He did not intend for Humbert to be automatically perceived as bad or good, otherwise he would have written his story in a different manner. It was intentional that this would be a controversial character that depicts a good-looking, well-brought-up, white man with perhaps some redeeming qualities. The narrative is interesting because it wasn´t written simply as a tragic drama of a tortured young girl, but rather as a detective story where the reader has to put together what is and isn’t real.

This detective story unfolds itself further with the mysterious character of Clare Quilty. As suggested above, this shadowy figure seems to function as a double to pervert Humbert and to appear at key moments of the narrative to incriminate the narrator. The first moment Quilty’s name is mentioned is after one of the first perverted interactions Humbert has with Dolores. For the extent of four pages (pp.64-69), Humbert describes

how Dolores carelessly throws her legs upon his lap. What to the girl might have been just an innocent action, to Humbert was a glorious event which he had to cherish intensely. During this moment, the narrator was also exploring his limits, roaming his hands through the girl's body ("(…) almost reached her bare neck, while I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known." (Nabokov, 2006, p.67)). Shortly after this interaction is the first time Quilty's name is mentioned: "(…) an excellent dentist. Our neighbour, in fact. Dr. Quilty." (Nabokov, 2006, p.69). One other moment the existence of Quilty is suggested is after Humbert gets Lolita out of Camp Q and they share their first kiss (p.127). After that interaction, a patrol car pulls over and asks about a "blue sedan, same make as yours" (Nabokov, 2006, p.127). Even the narrator inquires "what shadow of us was he after" (Nabokov, 2006, p.128). The allusion to shadow suggests the existence of a double, which is somewhat confirmed at the end of the novel when Humbert asks Lolita not to "pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H." (Nabokov, 2006, p. 352), giving the impression that the existence of both would be impossible. Quilty is mentioned afterwards in an encounter at the hotel (p.137) after Humbert drugged Dolores to be able to have sexual relations with her, and as the playwright of Dolores' school production before becoming a constant presence in Humbert's head, paranoid of being followed by a mystery figure. It is only after Dolores confides that the mystery man to whom she ran away years before was Clare Quilty, the only man she had ever loved (p.318), that the narrator has his final fatal meeting with his double. The *whodunnit* present throughout the novel culminates then in the erasing of Quilty, which one may hypothesise as being the personification of Humbert's perverted past actions, guilt and corruption. However, it is unclear if Humbert is repented at the end of the narrative. Although the narrator claims to want "to save not my head, of course, but my soul." (Nabokov, 2006, p.351) — which makes the reader believe he does not care what his sentence is, but only that his soul is forgiven —, in his final conversation with Quilty he admits to "dreaming of marriage in a mountain state/aye of a litter of Lolitas" (Nabokov, 2006, p.342).

One other question that raises speculation about the novel's intentions is whether Dolores showed any interest or initiative towards Humbert. This doubt happens early on in the narrative since Humbert's unreliability is deeply tied to his male gaze. In his story, it was the young girl who initiated flirtatious advances towards the professor, provocations which Humbert was ultimately unable to resist: "(…) it was she who seduced me." (Nabokov, 2006, p.150). Although this is what he claims during the novel, soon he shows the reader that he is aware Dolores is only exploring her independence and limits and that to her these interactions resume themselves to childlike play: "I knew, of course, it was but an innocent game on her part, a bit of backfisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance" (Nabokov, 2006, p.127). Along with understanding this, the narrator also knows that what he is manipulating the girl to do is far from a childish game and that this will have consequences on her: "While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid's life and mine. Pride alone prevented her from giving up" (Nabokov, 2006, p.151). This childlike exploration from the part of Dolores is a symptom of her young and curious age. Additionally, Freud explains in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* how when led by a "skillful seducer" (p. 28) a child will develop further perversions in her sexual life since there is a premature introduction of a sexual object that the infantile sexual drive shows no need for. In this sense, one can understand the internal and external factors that may have led Dolores to behave in certain ways regarding Humbert. Still, as readers, we can never forget that we don´t have all the information. As Laura Lippman explained in her article contained in *Lolita in the Afterlife (*2021), the first time she read the novel, she was unable to think critically about Humbert's claims of Dolores seducing him, she was "too distracted by the lack of concrete description, the who-put-what-where details that Humbert won´t share." (Nabokov, 2006, p.71).

2. Getting more unreliable

Adapted twice to the cinematic world, *Lolita*'s latest adaptation was directed by Adrian Lyne in 1997. It stars Jeremy Irons as Humbert Humbert; Dominique Swain as Dolores Haze; Melanie Griffith as Charlotte Haze; and Frank Langella as Clare Quilty. Although being a closer rendition of the original novel than its predecessor, Lyne's adaptation shows some level of failure right from the beginning, being described on various streaming platforms as a romantic comedy. The movie's description on Amazon Prime[12] reads:

> Humbert Humbert, a British professor coming to the US to teach, rents a room in Charlotte Haze's house and ends up falling in love with her 14-year-old daughter, Lolita. Although he hates Lolita's mother, he finds that the only way to be close to Lolita is by marrying her.

With this introduction to the film, all of the nuances created and developed in the novel disappear. This starts by presenting the narrative as a romance and robbing Dolores of her true identity from the beginning, adopting the identity Humbert has created for the girl — Lolita. This kind of summary perpetuates and enhances Humbert's perspective — his male gaze and unreliability. At the same time, however, presenting the facts in this tone removes any ambiguity and reduces the narrative to what seems to be a weird perverted *rom-com*. By comparing this to the summary present in the Penguin Books edition of *Lolita*, we can notice how the editors made sure to emphasise how the story relies heavily on unclear facts:

> Humbert Humbert is a middle-aged, fastidious college professor. He also likes little girls. And none more so than Lolita, whom he'll do anything to possess. Is

[12] Albeit being aware Amazon Prime is not an academic source to be referenced, it felt of importance to compare and contrast *Lolita*'s summary from a streaming platform and the novel to acknowledge the difference in portrayals.

> he in love or insane? A silver-tongued poet or a pervert? A tortured soul or a monster?... Or is he all of these?

In doing so, and admitting that there is space for questioning and contesting the information given to the reader, it not only admits to its unreliability but, consequently, to a certain degree becomes paradoxically more reliable. This makes the reader enter the story with a critical eye, unlike the summary from Amazon Prime which creates an expectation for a brainless romantic comedy.

Lyne's choice of direction often enhanced Humbert's already present male gaze. For the most part, this contributed to the viewer's perception of Humbert as a predator and helped convey the discomfort of looking too closely at a young girl. To do this, Lyne resorted to close-up shots of the girl's body — mostly her feet and mouth. This boosting of the male gaze was in some moments, however, counterproductive. An example of this was Humbert's first encounter with Dolores. In Nabokov's version, Humbert describes how as he is entering "the piazza" he sees "from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees (…) (his) Riviera love peering (…) over dark glasses. (…) A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes" (Nabokov, 2006, pp.41- 42). This evokes the image of an unconcerned girl sunbathing in her garden, curious about the new stranger entering her house. Simultaneously, this contrasts with the already predator eyes of the narrator, establishing the dynamic of their future relationship. When it came to Lyne's opportunity to adapt this scene, the director decided to portray the young girl differently. When Humbert reaches the garden, what he sees is an auburn-haired older Dolores reading a magazine while lying in a wet transparent white dress, tight to her body from the active sprinklers. This erotic vision achieved through the use of water transforms this initial interaction into a ridiculous fantasised "eye-candy" moment. This not only shies away from the initial carefully created nuance of the original scene, as it generates a new kind of male gaze — the one created for the viewer. This, distinct from the male gaze of the narrator present in the novel, transforms Dolores and,

consequently, Dominique Swain, into a fantasy created for the viewer's eye, perpetuating the role of woman as object.

Moreover, in direct comparison to the novel, Lyne's adaptation falls short of conveying the thought-provoking ambiguity that Nabokov was able to create in his narrative. Firstly, with the ageing of Dolores' character from the original twelve years old to fourteen, Humbert's narrative becomes more tangible as the girl is no longer a child but entering her teenage years. This not only softens the narrator's predation as it also deviates the viewer's perception of Dolores from a childish explorer into a precocious seducer. Sloane Crosley (2021) goes further on to describe Dolores' character in the film as "off-the-charts annoying" (p.200), while explaining her fundamental difference from the original story: "Here Lolita is not experimenting with her powers, bartering and testing boundaries as children do. There's no progression. She is not gradually ensnared in Humbert's trap. She's got this thing on lock from the jump." (Crosley, 2021, p.200). Furthermore, Lyne's adaptation also loses Nabokov's lyricism which confers Humbert's simultaneous sick delusion and heartbroken almost redeeming love letters. Sparsed throughout the film, Lyne chooses a handful of lines for Humbert to read, attempting to tie into the narrative voice of the book. The chosen lines are, however, simplified phrases from Humbert's sick and delusional speech. By cutting certain deranged monologues from the film adaptation, Lyne gives the spectator a more eloquent and empathetic version of Humbert, instead of his original conflicted self. At 00:11:46 in the film, we listen to Lyne's Humbert journal entry:

> A normal man, given a group photograph of schoolgirls, and asked to point out the loveliest one, will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist, a madman, full of shame and melancholy and despair, in order to recognise the little deadly demon among the others.

This passage seems to show Humbert in a lighter light — certainly a perverted man who has an affinity for little girls, but an eloquent one, who recognises his deviant condition

and is dignified. Comparing this exact passage to the one in the book, we realise it is a longer, more delusional version of this:

> A normal man given a group photograph of schoolgirls or Girl Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permantely aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs — the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices of despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate — the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power. (Nabokov, 2006, p.16).

The intense description of the nymphets qualities and the sensations created in his body by them do not describe the same poor shameful man who by chance has an affinity for young girls seen above. This is an unhinged Humbert who continuously incriminates himself by trying to justify his actions. This is an ambiguous Humbert whose narration is a long stream of consciousness, instead of carefully edited statements. This is unreliable, conflicting Humbert who makes the reader see him as a monster and, in the next moment, feel pity for him. In altering his Humbert's speech, Lyne leads the direction in which the spectator views the narrator, erasing the game created by Nabokov where the reader was his judge of character. By removing the self-incriminating, self-justifying discourse of Humbert, Lyne is also amputating part of the ingeniously created unreliability that is one of the novel's main storytelling mechanisms.

Additionally, in the novel, the reader only knows what Humbert knows, learning everything through his unreliable lens but, in doing so consistently, being aware that the narration of the events is partial and untrustworthy. In Lyne's rendition of the story,

although mainly telling the story through Humbert's perspective often aided by the narration in the form of journal entries, there are moments where the camera seems to be neutral, showing interactions that Humbert did not witness. These moments suggest that the narrative is unbiased, possibly making the viewer consider as a definitive truth everything that is shown to them. One of these directing choices happens as Humbert and Dolores are checking into their first hotel. As Humbert is at the front desk, Dolores is described to be playing with a dog standing nearby. In the novel, this moment is briefly commented on, as Humbert starts speaking with the receptionist, taking the reader with him. The only thing we (and Humbert) know is that "Lolita sank down on her haunches to caress a pale-faced, blue-freckled, black-eared cocker spaniel swooning on the floral carpet under her hand" (Nabokov, 2006, p.132). In the film, however, it is in that moment, when Dolores is playing with the dog, that she meets Quilty and has a suggestive conversation with him:

> (Quilty) It's a nice dog, huh?
>
> (Dolores) I love dogs.
>
> (Quilty) Well, that's my dog. He likes you. Doesn't like everybody.
>
> (Dolores) Who does he like?
>
> (Quilty) He can smell when people are sweet. He likes sweet people. Nice young people. Like you. (00:42:35)

Humbert, of course, knows nothing about this, being shocked at the end when discovering who the mystery man was. The audience, however, might not understand that Humbert didn't know about that conversation as it was shown in the movie. Moreover, the viewer knows now more than the narrator. In doing so, this directing choice removes the dependence the spectator has on Humbert, which is the key to falling into his delusional lies.

Lyne's rendition of *Lolita* does have positive aspects about it. The key elements of the narrative were respected thoroughly, from Humbert's self-narrated tragic backstory to Charlotte Haze's death and Dolores' reaction to hearing about it. However, the changes made ultimately changed the direction of the original story and how the viewer might interpret it. It created an older Dolores who seems to have full agency and control over the situation, consequently enhancing the male gaze for the viewer; and removed part of the game of ambiguity from the original version, shying away from Humbert's sick and delusional discourses. Although technically respecting the same narrative, ultimately the film seems to tell the tale of a different Humbert: a victim who was ensnared by the seduction of precocious woman-child Dolores.

VI. *The Virgin Suicides*: Eugenides *versus* Sofia Coppola

1. Eugenides's The Virgin Suicides

> *"Obviously, Doctor," she said, "you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl".*
>
> (Eugenides, 2021, p.5)

The Virgin Suicides (1993) is told through the perspective of an uncommon first-person plural male narrator recalling the mysterious tale of the Lisbon sisters. Through the aid of their unreliable memories and third-party testimonies, the male narrators, now in their adulthood ("with our thinning hair and soft bellies" (Eugenides, 2021, p.243)), attempt to understand the precocious deaths of the girls who enslaved them in their narrative years prior. However illusory or fragmentary this research might be, it is the only truth the boys have access to, and so this is how they construct their narrative: "And so we learned about their lives, came to hold collective memories of times we hadn't experienced" (Eugenides, 2021, p.39). This narrative voice is nameless and numberless, erasing the boys' individuality. Although the plurality of the voice might indicate a more reliable source than an individual perspective, it is very soon in the narrative that the reader understands this is not the case: "We didn´t understand why Cecilia had killed herself the first time and we understood even less when she did it twice." (Eugenides, 2021, p.29). This confession, however, doesn't prevent the reader from following the narrator's report, as they are dependent on this account to discover more about the sisters' lives.

Moreover, it indicates the unreliability that conducts the novel, establishing from the start that the reader is only exposed to fractions of the truth. As explained above, one of the textual elements that indicate unreliability is the existence of "multiperspectival accounts of the story (…) and the narrator's explicit or implicit disclosure of his or her own unreliability" (Zerweck, 2001, p.154). The boys' confession of, at times, understanding "the imprisonment of being a girl" (Eugenides, 2021, p.40),

while later being unable to “imagine the emptiness of a creature who put a razor to her wrists” (Eugenides, 2021, p.243), explicitly denounces and incriminates them for their unreliability. Furthermore, the indistinguishable mass of young men leading the narrative allows the reader to enter their fully fledged-out thoughts and emotions, adding an element of personalisation that is necessary for the existence of the unreliable narrator. Through their account of the sisters’ tale, we understand the presence of their concerns, admirations, and anguishes. Although the boys are unable to comprehend the Lisbon girls, they cultivate a sympathetic place with the reader through their dedication and commitment to them:

> It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn´t heard us calling, still do not hear us, up there in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together. (Eugenides, 2021, p.243)

In *An Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides* (2020), the author admits to having a fascination with “multilayered (…) impossible voices”. He adds on explaining that he has “never had a single, consistent, voice as a writer” (p. 3). And in reality, it is this multiplicity of voices that creates the interest in the novel — it explores the reader’s relationship with the narrators’ control of the perspective. However, the boys aren’t the only ones telling the story. The narrative they divulge is the collection of multiple interviews and testimonies from those who once interacted with the sisters. In *“A story we could live with”: Narrative Voice, the Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Virgin Suicides,* Debra Shostak explains how this makes the boys “readers of their own incomplete memories, of the contradictory eyewitness testimony they collect in interviews with a variety of participants in the original events, and of the many "exhibits" they assemble” (2009, p. 808). The detailed description of the girls’ bedroom, for example, is given to the reader by a third party — a boy named Peter Sissen. The

narrators tell the reader how the boy “came back (…) with stories of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties“ (Eugenides, 2021, p.7). The boys choose to take Peter’s account of the bedrooms as reality and proceed to tell it to the reader. Moreover, there are certain topics throughout the novel that the narrators weren’t able to combine into a truth. In that scenario, they decide to share the multiple takes on the occurrence: “Everyone had a theory as to why she tried to kill herself” (Eugenides, 2021, p.15). The unreliable narration in the novel is intrinsically connected to the male gaze the boys exert throughout the narrative. Their unreliability comes from the inability to view the girls as true subjects of their story, never giving them a narrative voice and thus, keeping them as objects (Mulvey, 1975). Therefore, as a reader, following the plural narrative voice means we are failing the sisters as much as the narrators and other characters, silencing them and, inevitably, keeping them in the position of objects.

The male gaze present in the novel is then perpetrated by three agents: the plural narrative voice, the testimonies of unreliable characters, and, ultimately, the readers themselves. As the boys, the characters whose opinion is heard throughout the novel is one that resulted from limited interactions with the sisters. These characters do not know the girls and yet speculate about their decisions. With Cecilia’s initial suicide attempt, the theories surrounding it revealed an inability or refusal to try to understand the young girl. Mrs. Buell, a neighbour, confidently defended that Cecilia “didn’t want to die, (…) She just wanted out of that house.” (Eugenides, 2021, p.15). Mr. Buell, the husband, blamed the suicide attempt on the girls’ lack of faith: “They never had a relationship with God.” (Eugenides, 2021, p.16). The most popular theory at the time, however, had Dominic Palazzolo, a boy who threw himself from a relative’s roof, at the centre of the blame. It was only with Dr. Armonson, who condescendingly asked the girl “What are you doing here, honey? You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets.” (Eugenides, 2021, p.5), that Cecilia had the closest thing resembling a voice in the narrative. The girl condemns the doctor for his lack of ability to understand, denouncing the habit that will eventually repeat itself throughout the novel: “Obviously, Doctor, (…) you’ve never been a thirteen-year-old girl.” (Eugenides, 2021, p.5).

The final and most crucial moment mocking the boys' inability to try to understand the girls came when the sisters ultimately communicated with the narrators through songs. Towards the end of the novel, at their home captivity, the Lisbon sisters communicate back and forth with the narrators through music. On pages 190 and 191, the boys provide the reader with a list of some of the songs they remember:

the Lisbon girls	"Alone Again, Naturally," Gilbert O' Sullivan
us	"You've Got a Friend,"James Taylor
the Lisbon girls	"Where Do The Children Play?," Cat Stevens
us	"Dear Prudence," The Beatles
the Lisbon girls	"Candle in The Wind," Elton John
us	"Wild Horses," The Rolling Stones
the Lisbon girls	"At Seventeen," Janice Ian
us	"Time in a Bottle," Jim Croce
the Lisbon girls	"So Far Away," Carole King

When analysing the correspondence between them, one can clearly notice how the boys' choices are mostly love songs. In fact, shortly after transcribing the list, the narrators admit so themselves: "Our songs, for the most part, were love songs." (Eugenides, 2021, p.191). As for the girls' choices, the narrators briefly describe them as "mostly folk music. (…) The singers had bad skin or wore boots. Song after song throbbed with secret pain." (Eugenides, 2021, p.191). Straight away, it is clear that for the boys, these intimate moments of vulnerability weren´t seen as opportunities to listen to the sisters' silenced voice, but as a way to physically feel closer to them, perpetuating their fetishised place in the narrative: "We passed the sticky receiver from ear to ear, the drumbeats so regular we might have been pressing our ears to the girls' chests." (Eugenides, 2021, p.191). Instead, the boys could be listening to the cries for help coming out of the songs, with messages of pain, incomprehension, suicide, and rendition ("And climbing to the top, Will throw myself off", Gilbert O'Sullivan; "Will you tell us

when to live? Will you tell us when to die?", Cat Stevens[13]; "And pain was the price you paid, Even when you died", Elton John; "But it's so hard to stay, When I have so much to say and you're so far away", Carole King). The final song sent by the sisters, "Make It With You" by Bread, was purposefully a misleading one, as the lyrics go:

> Hey, have you ever tried
>
> Really reaching out for the other side
>
> I may be climbing on rainbows,
>
> But, baby, here goes:
>
> Dreams, they're for those who sleep
>
> Life, it's for us to keep
>
> And if you're wondering what this song is leading to
>
> I want to make it with you. (Eugenides, 2021, p192).

Falling straight into the trap, the boys see the final song as a confession of love: "We had never dreamed the girls might love us back." (Eugenides, 2021, p.192), failing to look at the clues. Again, the reference to "the other side" is often used as a euphemism for death, with the "reaching out" implying suicide. Moreover, the line "Life, it's for us to keep", suggests a desire for control, a craving to finally be in control of one's narrative, even if the only way for that to happen is through death. Infatuated with the possibility of reciprocated love, the boys fail the sisters one final time, proving their inability to understand them.

This distancing from the girls further reveals itself in the inability to perceive them as individuals. As Homecoming approaches, Trip, Lux's pretender, puts together a group of boys to take the Lisbon sisters. With the exception of Lux, the girls are randomly attributed to a boy, never having met or talked to them before. The girls' reaction to this, however, reveals their habit of being perceived as a feminine mass, rather than

[13] Cat Stevens converted to Islam in 1977, later changing his name to Yusuf Islam.

their own persons: " "Who's taking who?", Mary asked. "They're just going to raffle us off," Therese said" (Eugenides, 2021, p.111). And, undeniably, it is not long until the reader understands that, indeed, the boys viewed them as interchangeable and that was their plan: "Whichever Lisbon girl a boy pinned became his date." (Eugenides, 2021, p.118). This perception of the girls as a unit wasn´t exclusive to Trip's friends. The narrators explain the moment in which they understood the girls weren't "a single entity" (Eugenides, 2021, p.39), or copies of each other. It was at the party organised for Cecilia following her suicide attempt, that the narrators establish direct contact with the sisters and realise, for the first time, how different they truly are:

> (…) for the first few seconds the Lisbon girls were only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels. Then, however, our eyes got used to the light and informed us of something we had never realized: the Lisbon girls were all different people. Instead of five replicas with the same blond hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings (…). (Eugenides, 2021, p.23)

This realisation fully translates the way the boys looked at the sisters — from a distance, putting them on a pedestal of mysterious and divine beings. The admiration they felt towards the girls wasn´t necessarily good though. In a first instance, it disabled them from viewing each girl as her own person, both physically and psychologically, erasing their individuality from the reader and, ultimately, from the narrative. Additionally, the way the central female characters are described enhances their objectification and the male gaze present in the novel. While narrating, the boys invariably end up creating a mythic and divine narrative, rather than telling a story. In their discourse, the girls are often elevated to celestial beings. When Cecilia was being carried onto a stretcher after her first attempt, the always-observing boys described her as "a tiny Cleopatra in an imperial litter". (Eugenides, 2021, p.3), and a "drugged virgin (…) with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips." (Eugenides, 2021, p.4). It was often that the expressions used to describe the sisters contained biblical or divine characteristics to them. There are several expressions mentioning virginity, paganism and nudity, the Virgin Mary, and other

deities[14] that illustrate the clear elevation the sisters were put in. Moreover, even when there wasn´t a clear analogy present in the text, the boys cultivated this speech of admiration: "We knew, finally, that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them." (Eugenides, 2021, p.40); "too powerful to live among us" (p.242).

The sisters' suicides enhanced this fascination with them, with their deaths sending them to the position of divinities. In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), Georges Bataille points to the existing relationship between eroticism, death, and religion, and how they exist and interact within the notions of continuity and discontinuity[15]. Eroticism (distinct from sexual union for the purpose of reproduction) is considered a transgression that erases individualism, hence providing a moment of continuity. In that sense, both death and erotism disturb the order of the everyday world. Moreover, Bataille explains how bearing witness to a glimpse of continuity involves anguish and so "anguish, which lays us open to annihilation and death, is always linked to eroticism; our sexual activity finally rivets us to the distressing image of death, and the knowledge of death deepens the abyss of eroticism" (Botting and Wilson, 1997 p.245). Furthermore, the concept of sacred comes from something "that was no longer simply nature, but nature transfigured" (Botting and Wilson, 1997 p.250). In that sense, Bataille explains that the sacred is the prohibited and thus, also disrupts the world order of individualism. Even when looking solely at the title of the novel, *The Virgin Suicides,* the ideas explored in Bataille's work are assembled into the three key concepts of eroticism, divinity and death that are then explored within the narrative. Furthermore, the girls' death places them as the ultimate erotic and religious symbol: the unattainable.

[14] One can also relate the Lisbon sisters to the Vestal Virgins, a group of six young girls chosen to be the priestesses of Vesta, the virgin goddess of Rome's flame.

[15] Bataille explains how the nature of the cosmos, in which the human being is inserted, is continuous and unceasing. The life cycle of the individual, however, temporarily pauses that continuity, only returning to it in death. This discontinuity happens with the world order of productivity and efficacy that perpetuates individuation.

2. Borrowing the male gaze

In 1999, Sofia Coppola adapted *The Virgin Suicides* from the source novel as her feature directorial debut. In fact, in an interview with the Guardian, Coppola attributes becoming a filmmaker to the powerful novel:

> When I was in my mid-20s, I came across The Virgin Suicides. (…) It felt like Jeffrey Eugenides, the writer, really understood the experience of being a teenager: the longing, the melancholy, the mystery between boys and girls. (…) I don´t know if I would have a film career if it wasn't for that book. (…) It was scary directing a film, but I was so connected with the material I felt like I had no choice. The Virgin Suicides made me a film-maker. (2020)

In an interview with Vogue (2020) for the 20th anniversary of the film, Sofia Coppola explained how the images portrayed in the book were very vivid to her, and how she instantly felt she knew how to adapt it. The director highlights the American suburbia where the narrative is centred and "that hazy, backlit style of *70s Playboy* photography" (Bell, 2020). To achieve the desired look, Coppola shot the entirety of the project in film rather than digital video, over 27 days.

For a low-budget project, the movie was able to perfectly replicate the *retro,* claustrophobic, and suburban feel of the original novel through editing and colour. Moreover, the décor matched perfectly with the descriptions the narrators had collected from other sources, further submerging the viewer in the boys' version of the story. The description given by Peter Sissen at the beginning of the book of "bedrooms filled with crumpled panties, of stuffed animals, (…) of a crucifix draped with a brassiere, of gauzy chambers of canopied beds" (Eugenides, 2021, p.7), was only shown to the spectator at the same time as the boy discovers it, keeping the accuracy of the original material. The construction of the bedrooms implemented all of the objects mentioned by Peter while looking habited by real, palpable teenage girls. By remaining true to the novel and simultaneously giving dimension and personality to the descriptions and

episodes told by the narrators, Sofia Coppola's choices managed to indirectly give somewhat of a voice to the Lisbon sisters.

The director's real challenge was that, as a woman, she had to put herself into teenage boys' shoes and borrow the heavy male gaze with which they tell the story. While doing so, Coppola was able to create an aura of divinity and superiority around the girls without allowing herself to produce a male gaze for the viewer. She decided to maintain only the essential male gaze in order to accurately portray the sisters from the narrators' point of view, avoiding an unnecessary fabrication of "eye candy" for the spectator, which was not the case in Lyne's adaptation of *Lolita*. In fact, Coppola managed to perfectly evoke the naïve and pure nature of the narrators' admiration for the girls through the difference in their postures when interacting with one another. She moulded the Lisbon sisters into impenetrable and mysterious canvases with unknown depth, while the boys always seemed smaller in their discomfort and shyness. At Cecilia's party, at 00:12:40, as the narrators are meeting the sisters, the director decides against creating a big, elaborate scene for the big meeting, establishing the dynamics by simply having the assertive, smiley girls introducing themselves to the almost shrunken boys who avoid eye contact. When the boys discover Lux is having sex on her roof with random boys and men, they partake in watching her through one of the boys' telescopes. The novel describes the "night noises humming in their ears, the men sweating, risking statutory rape charges" and the state of Lux's "jutting ribs, the insubstantiality of her thighs, how the basins of her collarbones collected water", never detracting from her impression of being a "carnal angel" (Eugenides, 2021, pp.141-143). When adapting this moment (01:09:03), Coppola decided to focus on the clumsiness of the narrators' movements while maneuvering the telescope, pushing each other around, eager for their turn to look at Lux, but never getting more than dark, quick, blurry images of the shadows of the fully clothed bodies. With this change in perspective, Lux's sexualization stopped being directly the focus, but rather, it turned to the boys' perception of that moment. It would have been easy for any director to adapt this moment with sensual close-ups or slow motions of the girl. By going the opposite

way, Sofia Coppola proved to be, once more, an ally to the girls when everyone else was failing them.

Although overall being a high-fidelity adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel, Sofia Coppola's adaptation took some directorial liberties that changed the tone of the story. By shortening one of the final scenes when the boys manage to communicate with the Lisbon sisters through songs, some of the intended emotional charge was diminished. In the source material, this scene expands over ten mentioned songs, where both the reader and the narrators only have access to their thoughts and emotions. When analysing the book, it becomes clear that the songs being sent by the girls weren't properly interpreted by the group of boys who "had never dreamed the girls might love us back" (Eugenides, 2021, p.192). This realisation led to a page-long delusional speech on the clues they missed and how it was clear the girls were hiding "from the world, waiting for someone — for us — to save them." (Eugenides, 2021, p.193). With the film narrowing this scene to three songs, and excluding the delusional speech that leads the boys to believe they finally understand the Lisbon sisters, the final encounter and shock of their deaths loses impact. Although the portrayal of the suicides was extensively faithful to the novel, with the boys finding Bonnie's hanging body and running away from the house, the movie lacked a realisation that could only come in sequence of the book's speech. Thinking the girls were in love with them and wanted them as their saviours, the shock of their deaths made them understand that they "had never known her. They had brought us here to find that out."; and that Lux "had escaped in the car just as we expected her. But she had unbuckled us, it turned out, only to stall us, so that she and her sisters could die in peace." (Eugenides, 2021, pp. 210-211).

With this change, in addition to the removal of Mary's survival from the first suicide attempt and her consequent death a month after her sisters, Coppola reduced the novel's central theme of the mysterious suicides of the Lisbon sisters and traded it for a psychological analysis of (male) memory and nostalgia. By shifting the perspective, Sofia Coppola was able to explore the unreliability of the male gaze, turning a story about the incomprehensible deaths of a group of sisters, into a story about the attempts of a group of boys to understand those deaths. The mystery of the suicides will never

have a real answer because the girls never had a voice in the narrative. The director makes it clear that the suicides will remain unanswered since the testimonies are hazy and untrustworthy. Therefore, the story could never be about the Lisbon sisters. To allow the story to be about them would be to keep them in the position of object through their own narrative. By focusing on the boys and working with their memories and thoughts of the episode, she can be openly unreliable, working with those storytelling mechanisms.

Conclusion

Through the process of writing this dissertation, I was made aware of how the mechanisms of male gaze and unreliable narration are defined and can be identified in a piece of literature or film. In that, the literature review, which was the starting point of my process, proved to be an important first step to look into. With the understanding of the necessary conditions to create a male gaze or an unreliable narrator, I found myself identifying different examples of them in other works which I wouldn't have considered previously. Moreover, as I was reading the theoretical information compiled for this dissertation, I found myself finding and hypothesising new angles in which I could explore these narratives. What I had initially thought about writing in my dissertation either changed or deepened after reading other works and looking at different perspectives. In that sense, when it was the moment to make my own assessments, I felt not only enriched but also more assured regarding my arguments, which I now could defend and justify.

The narratives are told through a male eye, which reduces the female characters of the story to a place of objects and bearers of meaning. These narratives, which the narrators claim to be about the girls, never give them space or voice to create their own meaning, resulting in tragic endings. In *Lolita*, Dolores dies from childbirth as a memory of an eternal nymphet. In the narrative, the girl never earned her space as a child or a woman and was doomed to be trapped in an in-between state through Humbert's unreliable eyes. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon sisters tragically die fulfilling the boys' fetishised idea of them. They become martyrs, eternal virginal divinities, and though the narrators claim to try to tell their story, they never allow the girls to descend from the position imposed on them and simply be girls — flesh and bone, with thoughts, opinions, and emotions. However tragic this may be, it was this conscious shift in the narration of these stories that attracted me to them. After analysing the novels, I looked at the films made in the '90s in search of the way in which the directors transposed these subtleties to the screen.

With Lyne's adaptation of *Lolita*, there was an attempt to respect the original text, even incorporating parts of it in the movie. However, in trying to recreate the narrator's male gaze, Lyne ended up also creating a male gaze aimed at the viewer, allowing for not only the character of Dolores to be sexualised but extending that also to the actress portraying her, Dominique Swain. Moreover, at times, without allowing for the ambiguity of the text, the filmmaker seems to be almost justifying Humbert's perversion. In that, I believe that Lyne's adaptation was a poor attempt at transforming the layered narrative of *Lolita* into film. It lacked the depth and lyricism of Nabokov's *Lolita*, aiding in spreading a misconstrued — and, more well-known and easily consumable — version of the story. Consequently, this adaptation results in misshaping the image of the original novel and creating a distorted image of what is the original tale in people who have only watched the film.

On the other hand, Sofia Coppola had a harder task at hand. Being a female, Coppola had to "borrow" the male gaze in order to be able to attempt to depict Eugenides's view of *The Virgin Suicides.* The director ultimately ended up changing some moments in the narrative, resulting in a different focus or angle from the original narrative. Either for her personal choice or due to production constraints, the perspective she chose to pursue was a simpler, more superficial one. Although, in my opinion, this was the weakest point of Coppola's rendition, it was her female eye that allowed her to depict the narrators' male gaze accurately and respectfully. Moreover, her vision transferred onto the personalisation of the décor of the girls' bedrooms and costumes, giving the spectator a more personal connection with the Lisbon sisters than the one we can obtain through the novel.

In retrospect, after comparing the first view I had on these works with the one I am currently left with, I better understand the way the original authors created a critique disguised as a male dominated narrative. Even after many rereads of Nabokov and Eugenides' novels, I always found myself encountering yet one more clue or artifice that denounced the male narrators' lack of understanding of their own stories. With the films, however, I could only notice more ways in which they failed the original narrative. Although Sofia Coppola's adaptation eventually diverged from the focus of the original

narrative, leaving me with questions of how it could have been had it fully followed the initial focus, it proved that a story bound by a strong male gaze not only could be adapted, but also benefited from a female eye. On the other hand, Lyne's attempt at an adaptation of *Lolita* proved to be harmful to the original source and to any young girl viewing the movie. With criticised attempts at adapting Nabokov's novel, I begin to wonder if it is possible to produce an adaptation that is able to maintain Nabokov's ambiguity and satire.

With this being said, it is important to underline that this is an initial research on the proposed thematics. While analysing and comparing the two literary works and their cinematographic adaptations, more questions and ideas that could be explored appeared. Additionally, I realised that this is a broad area of study that could be further researched and developed.

Within the universe of these narratives, there are different aspects that could be researched in detail. To start with, an analysis could be carried out of Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962) through this same lens and the comparison of both versions. It would be of interest to understand how Stanley Kubrick went around the issues of the male gaze and the unreliable narrator in his adaptation. Moreover, since this was a film made in the '60s, it would be important to understand how production laws might have influenced or not the depiction of the contents of the novel. In comparing it to Lyne's version under the same lens and considering the production laws and restrictions, one could discuss how each portrayed the important topics of the novel. Additionally, when looking at the elements of space and décor in the *mise-en-scène* of Lyne's Lolita, I couldn´t help but link them to the idea introduced in 1995 by Marc Augé[16]. Therefore, it would be pertinent to analyse the existence of places and non-places in Lyne's film and what they represent in the context of the narrative since Humbert and Dolores spend a great majority of their time within non-places.

[16] See footnote 11.

When looking at my investigation regarding *The Virgin Suicides,* one of the most appealing aspects to me was Sofia Coppola's process of adapting the male gaze. Having focused most of my research on the results of said process, I believe it to be relevant to understand how female movie directors approach the male gaze, and how or when it turns into a female gaze. Even the distinction between both concepts would be interesting to dwell on, especially with the latter being a relatively recent one. So, to understand when does one turn into the other and if this is even possible could make us question a version of *The Virgin Suicides* through a female gaze.

Furthermore, one subject that has always been thought-provoking to me is religion. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the girls are surrounded by religious but also pagan motifs. As a reader/ viewer, we know of their family's faith and religious habits, but how much are the religious motifs linked to the girls themselves? What is their symbology? In this dissertation, I very broadly began raising questions regarding religion through Georges Bataille's *Erotism: Death and Sensuality.* However, I consider it would be a stimulating research to resort to *The Bible* and delve deeper into that analysis, further understanding how can religion and paganism be a direct symbol for the girls.

As a final consideration, there has been a study and development of the storytelling mechanisms proposed at the beginning of this dissertation. With the theoretical background it has been possible to come to an understanding of how these artifices influenced the narratives, and, additionally, the way they translated to the cinematic world. In that, I believe Sofia Coppola's attempt to be a mostly successful one, despite the change of perspective in her adaptation, whereas Lyne's rendition remains a perpetrator of a misconstrued image of *Lolita*.

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