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"Obviously, Doctor, You've Never Been a Thirteen-year-old Girl": *The Virgin Suicides* and the Glamorizing and Aspirational Rise of the "Sad Girl" Trope

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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The Virgin Suicides and the Glamorizing and Aspirational Rise of the "Sad Girl" Trope

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Abstract

The Sad Girl trope has been conceptualized as a passive device employed in stories to provide the male counterpart a course of action. She tends to be a damsel in distress in need of the man's help and protection, she is a beautiful art craft where traditional gender expectations tend to be projected. Post-feminist discourses have worked towards creating the idea of a strong independent woman to avoid power dynamics and gain agency. During the decade of the 2010s and the expansion of social media platforms, some subcultures began to become popular, one of them being the 'Sad Girl Aesthetic'. This trend romanticizes the notion of sadness, self-destructive tendencies, toxic relationships, and suicide for young girls resulting in the successive popularization of characters labeled as such–like the Lisbon sisters – becoming aspirational.

In the present dissertation, I argue that the connection between the rise of the Sad Girl Aesthetic during the decade of the 2010s and 'Sad Girl' characters becoming aspirational is a response to the current societal demands for young women and girls. It is a reclamation and a reappropriation of the feminine as a valuable and worthy option to follow besides the masculine norm. This research will first aim at examining and contextualizing the 'Sad Girl' and its interpretation until present times and how modern readings differ from the traditional understanding. To do so, Sofia Coppola's film *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) will be analyzed noting how it plays with traditional devices to reinforce this feminine revolution. Finally, both concepts will be evaluated together, explaining why self-destruction became a form of creation during that decade.

Keywords: *The Virgin Suicides*, sad girl trope, girlhood, Sofia Coppola, femininity, social media, sad girl aesthetic

0. Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word *aesthetic* is an adjective that has different entries, all applied to the enjoyment, and study of beauty. As a noun, it is applied to a particular style someone, or something has. Furthermore, the noun *Aesthetics* is a philosophical discipline concerned with the formal study of the principles of beauty and art. During the decade of the 2010s, the rise of the so-called *aesthetics* and its overwhelming social media presence made an entire generation begin to define themselves following certain fashions to be labeled as such.

In the 2010s, and with all the emerging social media platforms, the word *aesthetic* received a new meaning, now it is probably the term that people most know. Throughout the 2010s and 2020s, online aesthetics gained increasing popularity, particularly in social media platforms such as Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest or TikTok. Since then, when talking about aesthetic (or aesthetics) in an internet context, the conversation refers to a visual art style, sometimes accompanied by subculture, fashion style, or music genre, that usually originates from the internet or is popularized on it (Wikipedia contributors)[1] These (internet) aesthetics tend to be dynamic and constantly evolving. Moreover, they also create a sense of community for those who identify with them or share the same interests. They have become a lifestyle to follow among their followers, they are now a channel for self-expression and creativity.

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[1] Since it is an online term the only sources that currently acknowledge this phenomenon are Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary.

0.1. The *Sad Girl Aesthetic*

One of these popular 2010s new aesthetics was the *Sad Girl Aesthetic*, a subculture which invited an entire generation of teen girls to glorify sadness and melancholia, thus believe in them as something beautiful. Its presence was everywhere: from Tumblr and other new emerging social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, We Heart It, and so on) to many of the most popular TV shows and films of the said decade (e.g., Bella from the *Twilight* saga, Effy and Cassie from the TV show *Skins*, Violet from *American Horror Story: Murder House*, Hannah Baker from the Netflix show *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and so on). Its presence overtook the music industry bringing to light new-emerging artists such as Lana del Rey, Marina and the Diamonds (later known as Marina), Melanie Martinez, or influencing well-established artists such as Adelle and her single "Hello". The *Sad Girl Aesthetic* became a pandemic with its omnipresence. The fashion and style magazine *i-D* declared 2015[2] as the year of the Sad Girl, which states how successful, and powerful, this new aesthetic became. Despite "the sad girl has taken many different forms and cannot be easily pinpointed or narrowed down into one specific thing" (Thelanderson 157), nowadays we can find music playlists on Spotify for Sad Girls[3], we can find Sad Girl novels, Sad Girl fashion, Sad Girl pins, and makeup. The movement co-occurred in a period of time where the neoliberal feminist discourses and media culture promoted for young women the so-called *girl boss[4]* trope who embodied traditional masculine values such as strength, being career-orientated, empowered, and assertive. As for teens, the "not-like-the-other-girls" trope who, as Miranda More explains in her article, were

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[2] Alice Newell-Hanson, "2015 the year of… sad girls and sad boys"
[3] *Sad Girl Starter Pack* playlist by Spotify
[4] *#Girlboss* (novel by Sophia Amoruso (2014) and its Netflix TV show adaptation (2017), Miranda Priestly from *The Devil wears Prada* (2006))

""girls" who believe[d] they [were] not like the others [,] make fun of things that are seen as feminine and pride themselves in liking comics, junk food, video games, or other "boyish" interests" (More online). Both tropes rejected the feminine adopting a more traditional masculine set of standards in order to be seen as "equals".

In this cult of the Sad Girl trope, a title stands out. *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) was Jeffrey Eugenides' debut novel[5]. The story unfolds in a suburban area in Michigan during the early 1970s and narrates the experiences and memories of a collective male narrative voice; together, the male characters try to decipher years later why their teen love interests, the Lisbon sisters (Cecilia (13) played by Hanna R. Hall, Lux (14) played by Kristen Dunst, Bonnie (15) played by Chelsey Swain, Mary (16) played by A.J. Cook, and Therese (17) played by Leslie Hayman), opted to take their lives. In 1999, Sofia Coppola[6] debuted as a director by adapting Eugenides' novel to much acclaim.

With this dissertation, I aim to defend that the rise of the Sad Girl was a weapon teen girls used to rebel against society and its expectations for women and young girls rather than perpetuating the patriarchal system and its expectations. These girls opted, like the Lisbon sisters, for passive resistance, deciding to combat with their femininity rather than seeking a confrontation with the current narratives applied to them. They used all the negative assumptions used against women in the past (e.g., being emotional, vulnerable, or passive) to fight and assert themselves, which echoes the theory posited by the micro-celebrity Allen Wollen where she describes the movement as "the proposal that

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[5] North American writer author of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), the Pulitzer-winner *Middlesex* (2002), and his third novel *The Marriage Plot* (2011)

[6] American film director, screenwriter, producer, and actress. She was received a Golden Globe Award, and Academy Award, a Cannes Film Festival award, and a Golden Lion, as well as Nominations for three BAFTA Awards and Primetime Emmy Award. Besides *The Virgin Suicides*, she has some famous films such as *Lost in Transition* (2003), *Marie Antoinette* (2006), or her 2023 *Priscilla*

sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest" (Tunnicliffe online). Under the *Sad Girl Aesthetic*, young girls have created a space where femininity and girlhood are not undervalued and undesired but rather their most powerful asset. In order to support my claim, I analyze Sofia Coppola's film adaptation of Jeffree Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides* since it was one of the most common references among Sad Girls. In it is portrayed a "girlhood that refuses to grow up to womanhood, rejecting normative narratives of adult responsibility" (Handyside 55), consequently, it resonates with the revolutionary ideals of the 2010s group. Especially Lux Lisbon attracted much attention since she offers a portrayal of how teen girls can weaponize their fragility and vulnerability to alter society by rebelling against it.

In this dissertation, I first expand on the notion of the *Sad Girl* as a trope. I begin by framing the concept to later expand on its trajectory throughout history: from its assumed origin to its impact on 2010s society. Later, I proceed to discuss femininity and its presence in the post-modernist neoliberal world of the 2010s, commenting on the *Sad Girl Aesthetic* and Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory. In the second section, I proceed to analyze key elements of Sofia Coppola's film adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* to further the claims of the aesthetic. Both the novel and the film adaptation are perfect examples to use when exploring the concept of the Sad Girl, however, I opt to analyze the film since many of the 2010s teens had their first contact with the story through the movie. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that, when these young girls eventually read the novel, they had the visuals, cast, and aesthetics of the film in their minds. In addition, Coppola is recognized for her aestheticization of female nostalgia and her remarkable details of feminine sensibility in all her creations.

1. The Sad Girl trope

1.1. What is the *Sad Girl*?

Immortalized in the prime of her youth, when her beauty reaches its peak, the *Sad Girl* remains an atemporal figure in man's world. As Final Girl Studios expressed in her video "Beautiful Dead Girls: The Romanticized Death of the Teenage Girl", "[t]hese girls become idolized in their youthful form because they were never given a chance to disappoint the male fantasy" (6:50 – 6:56). Conveying the fact that the death of a teen girl can only serve the purpose and value the male audience attribute to her, not leaving a space for self-exploration or determination. Suggesting to the spectator that these girls are doomed simply because they are attractive.

Linked to the notion of teen girls only can exist within the value men attribute to them, in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir reasons how women throughout history have been shaped to fit into the position of the "Other". Condemned by men for their biological function, women have always been at men's mercy; even in the periods where they enjoyed prestige from a higher social prestige, this was due to men's fear of them. For men, women are subconsciously connected to magic and the realm of the unknown, therefore, they had to be tamed, controlled, and subordinated: "The prestige she enjoys in the eyes of men comes from them; they kneel before the Other, they worship the Goddess Mother. But as powerful as she may appear, she is defined through notions created by the male consciousness" (de Beauvoir, 107).

De Beauvoir describes how woman was devalued as "nothing more than a servant" (113) once the patriarchal system is established. How woman, from that moment onwards, "is doomed to Evil" (114). De Beauvoir explains why religions and their social systems have treated women with such hostility, for "[a]fraid of woman, legislators

organize her oppression. Only the harmful aspects of her ambivalent virtues attributed to her are retained" (114) She was defined as opposed as anything Man might embody. Nevertheless, as de Beauvoir reasons, "Evil needs Good, matter needs the idea, and night needs light. Man knows that to satisfy his desires, to perpetuate his existence, woman is indispensable; he has to integrate her in society: as long as she submits to the order established by males, she is cleansed of her original stain" (114). This ambivalence of the Other becomes relevant since the first threshold a girl has to cross when stepping into womanhood is the Madonna/Whore complex. This dichotomy explains how women are scrutinized in two groups in male-dominated societies, the Madonna–also identified as the Virgin–symbolizes women who are "good" and cherished under the patriarchal umbrella (an example of "what to do"); the "Whore"–commonly known as the temptress–embodies all the negative qualities that have made society reduce women to another beast ("what not to do"). Typically, these images are associated with the Judeo-Christian imagery of the Virgin Mary (as the Madonna) or Eve (as the Whore). Onto these archetypes, applied to all women, are placed a plethora of judgements, responsibility, and scrutiny generating a reductive binary whether women are being sexually active or not. There is not a set of qualities that will determine if a woman belongs to one group or another; this has more to do with the man's view of her: her race, her body, her aura; her. In this way, "condemned to play the role of the Other, woman was thus condemned to possess no more than a precarious power: slave or idol, she was never the one who chose her lot" (De Beauvoir 111). In other words, regardless of how a woman or a teen girl might choose to present herself (desexualizing or sexualizing her body), it is never up to her to decide where she will fall within the spectrum, since "the place of a woman in society is always the one they assign her; at no time has she imposed her own law" (De Beauvoir 111).

In multiple media representations of the 'Sad Girl', she appears as a white, slim, young, and beautiful girl. Consequently, to have her emotions validated by an audience, the Sad Girl has to fulfill these distinctive features that mark her as something desired, mysterious, and even esoteric. She then becomes the figure that can haunt the narrative as well as the (male) protagonist. Sad Girls tend to be closer to the Madonna category since they personify the traditional feminine qualities, however, they are a more sexualized version of the archetype since the (male) protagonist, and the male audience have to desire her. Otherwise, if any of these parameters are not fulfilled, her pain will be trivialized until she is reduced to something pathetic. In addition, the Sad Girl tends to connect with the aestheticization of feminine sadness, and a sense of intimacy, where images and silences tend to weigh more than words. She is presented as objectified, passive, and sad, which are feminine attributes desirable for them.

1.2. Understanding the *Sad Girl*: From its Origins to the Internet Era

Edgar Allan Poe's words "[t]he death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetic topic in the world"[7] echo the blind attraction society has for dead young women. Onto them, the lines of the grotesque and the brutality of death blur with the inscription of the poetic beauty of youth and the feminine. Therefore, the modern appeal of the Sad Girl is the result of centuries of romantic devotion to the elevation of mental illnesses and disorders and to its intrinsically connection to women and what society deemed as 'perfect femininity'.

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[7] *The Philosophy of Composition* by Edgar Allan Poe (1846)

Chronologically, the Romanticism period stands at the end of the eighteenth century, and it originated as a reaction to neoclassicism and the Enlightenment era in the United Kingdom and Germany. During that period, the occult, all the natural forces that are outside human control, our own nature are extolled. Decay, emotions, death, the muses, that is what awaits to those willing to look at the abyss. Romantic artists were selected by society to decipher and transmit what lay on the other side. In other words, they are the portal between the human realm and the divine. They possess the genie; they are the chosen ones. Society projected onto them and their art as a way to experiment with the uncontrollable forces of life. For them, the figure of the *mad* woman, especially Ophelia, was one of the most prominent muses since she embodied the sensibility, the grotesque of the unknown, and the beauty they were seeking. As the pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais immortalized forever in his famous painting *Ophelia* in 1852, a painting which influence still echoes in today's society.

Figure 1: Ophelia by *John Everett Millais (1852)*

During the Victorian period, the notion of the *mad woman* was coined; still, it is employed nowadays against women when expressing their emotions or distress. In "21st

Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture", Federika Thelanderson explains in the second chapter, "A Historical Lineage of Sad and Mad Women", how "specific pathologizations related to contemporary gender relations run through all these interactions of mad and sad girl" (33), to later express some scholars' concerns that "definitions of mental illness have been directly linked to conventional understandings of femininity and masculinity" (33). During the Victorian Era there was a shift "from the lunatic-as-animal to the lunatic-as-human, from nonperson to person" thanks to the new epistemology of the psyche (35). The attitude toward the mentally ill and their treatment went from being disgust to protective pity, which in turn, it also shifted to the gendered narrative of reason and unreason. Consequently, the symbolic gender of the insane moved from male to female (Thelanderson). In this way, "[r]eason became synonymous with men and masculinity and unreason with women and femininity" (Thelanderson 35). After this shift, "the subject in need of caring confinement became primarily female, and the treatment of her was in the hands of men and male doctors, (…) it was the rationally sound of mind that had the capacity to control and cure the irrationality mad one" (35).

One of the most prominent figures of the *Mad Woman*, despite belonging to the seventeenth century, was Ophelia from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) since her influence encompassed great part of society's view of women's aesthetics. After discovering that her lover, Hamlet, has killed her father, Polonius, Ophelia 'descends into madness'. As a result of her spiraling, she drowns herself in a brook aided by the weight of her dress, with flowers decorating her youthful beautiful corpse with the flowing water[8]. In her article "Ontology and Erotism: The Two bodies of Ophelia" (2005), Magda

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[8] Figure 1 depicts this scene

Romanska explores the current duality of Shakespeare's heroine. "Initially associated with female mental disorder, eventually it was [her] corpse that became an erotic object of the period" (485); today, "the image of Ophelia's corpse – her 'second body' – continues to influence contemporary aesthetics" (486). She claims that "Ophelia's exclusion from Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy helped to displace her voice as an ethical subject onto a sensual image of her dead body, inspiring countless depictions of her glamorized corpse, and creating an archetypical model of Western necro aesthetics" (Romanska 486)[9]. Condemned to an eternity of misunderstanding, Ophelia only shines through her second body, beyond that, apparently there was no interest in discovering why a young maiden like her would opt to take her life. Romanska further discusses how "[t]he Shakespearean critics, if they were kind, interpreted her limited role as naivety, or, if they were less kind, as stupidity" (493). However, "[n]one of them, (…) ever tried to analyze her character or motivations [, hence, Ophelia] remained outside of their intellectual interest and grasp" (493).

In her other article "NecrOphelia: Death, Femininity, and the Making of Modern Aesthetics" Romanska argues how "[i]n the nineteenth century, the literary imagination that fetishized Ophelia's corpse entered the world of visual art, turning Shakespeare's necrophilic fantasies into the prevailing model of feminine perfection" (36) which lead women of all walks "[w]anting to be as ethereally 'sublime' as Ophelia" (36). In turn, "[i]n the 1860s, a 'sublime tubercular emaciation' became the desired model of true femininity, generating the very first epidemic of anorexic starvation" (37). Thelandersson explains in the second chapter of her book how the "idea that fictional female character gone mad could function as a moment of empowering identification for the contemporary

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[9] See Figure 2

woman appears in multiple readings of women and madness in the cultural imaginary"

(38).

Figure 2: Dolce & Gabbana's problematic 2007 campaign

During the twentieth century, the figure of the Sad Girl was articulated through different voices. She embodied modernist and existentialist concerns of the beginning of the century, such as Silvia Plath's Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* (1963), addressing also deeper psychological issues such as depression and identity crisis. The Sad Girl was also employed within the feminist framework addressing the issues of gender, autonomy, and what lies beyond its binary distinction to represents its detrimental effects. Or, in the decade of the 1990s, with the rise of Kate Moss (see *Figure 2*), the *heroin chic* aesthetic (see *Figure 3*) dominated the runaways and advertisement campaigns. Alongside the rise grunge movement and the dirty realism, the *femme fragile* – the second body of Ophelia – experienced a revival of desirability and femininity. The United States president Bill Clinton felt impelled to pronounce a discourse expressing his concern with the glorification of heroin, urging a campaign against fashion ads employing the trend and labelling them as deplorable[10]. These trends are illustrated in "Ontology and Erotism:

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[10]The New York Times *Clinton Calls Fashion Ads' 'Heroin Chic' Deplorable* https://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/22/us/clinton-calls-fashion-ads-heroin-chic-deplorable.html

Two Bodies of Ophelia", where Magda Romanska explains that "Siddal's [Ophelia's model for Millais' painting][11] paleness and morbid fragility have been replicated not only in countless nineteenth-century paintings, but continue to be replicated in modern art, photography, and advertising" (497). She highlights how the most famous of the trend is a series of Calvin Klein (CK) underwear ads the models replicate Ophelia, "with her wet hair, consumptive complexion, and emancipated body" (498).[12]

Figure 3: Kate Moss being the epitome of the "Heroin Chic" during the 90s

Figure 4: Angelina Jolie's "heroin Chic" inspired photoshoot during the 90s

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, the villainization and mockery of femininity was present in all pop culture and media. Regina George from the film *Mean*

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[11] See Figure 1

[12] Kate Moss' campaign for Calvin Klein's "obsession" fragrance during the decade of the 1990s

Girls (2004), Sharpay Evans from the Disney franchise *High School Musical* (2006), or Elle Woods form the romantic comedy movie *Legally Blonde* (2001) are a few instances of how femininity or more specifically hyper femininity were deemed unappealing and mocked not only to an adult audience but also to a younger one. The message was clear: to be *like a girl* is undesirable, it is an insult. The rejection of the feminine and what stereotypically was attributed to girlhood was embodied by the 'not-like-the-other-girls' phenomenon. In her article "The Problem with Saying You're 'Not Like Other Girls'", Miranda More explains how if "girls" liked pink, boy bands, makeup, and shopping, these "other" girls liked black, metal music, didn't wear makeup, and loved football (More online)[13]. By adopting a more traditional masculine scope they sought the male validation that granted them to be better, superior, clearly "not like the other girls". Through the systematic internalized misogyny young girls found themselves competing to be accepted and perceived as equals by their male peers, and not degraded to a lower regard because of being 'girls'.

Figure 5: Example of "Not-like-the-other-girls" online posts

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[13] See figures 5 and 6 for examples

Figure 6: Example of "Not-like-the-other-girls" online posts

More recently, mental health discourses began to be more prominent, not as a way to ridicule (female) artists but as to empower them by owning their narrative. In Thelandersson's book, the third chapter, "Celebrity Mental Health: Intimacy, Ordinariness, and Repeated Self-Transformation", is dedicated to female celebrity mental health discourses and how repercusses on society "by showing audience how famous people act in certain ways" (Thelandersson 103). She states that numerous celebrities reporting around 2008–2009 were dedicated to female stars "who seemed to go through mental distress, but they rarely came forward themselves (…), it was media speculating about what particular diagnosis someone might have had" (105). These female celebrities often referred as "train-wrecks" received scrutinized attention often suspected of suffering from mental challenges as it was the case, following Thelanderson's example, with the pop singer Britney Spears[14] who reached her peak in 2007 when she shaved her head in front of paparazzies. It is interesting how many social platforms were already becoming popular, and as the author observes, these "train-wrecks" began appearing

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[14] Britney Spears comes out about that period in her recent memoir "*The Woman in Me*" (2023)

among Tumblr sad girls' blogs since "users [of Tumblr] would post images of these stars (often in states of distress) in ways that idolized them and reinforced a melancholic notion of sadness as romantic, mystical, and inspirational" (Thelandersson 106).

Contrary to its previous decade, the 2010s were highly marked by the increasing number of female celebrities coming out about their mental health: Demi Lovato's confession to *Elle* magazine in 2015 about their[15] early suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, self-harm, and drug abuse[16], Hollywood's actress Kristen Bell in 2016 opened up to *Times* magazine about her depression[17], or *Mariah* Carey' revelation of her bipolar II diagnosis to *People* magazine in 2018[18] are some of the multiple examples of female celebrities coming out during the 2010s decade. By doing so, they "assumed a more careful approach to issues of mental illness, indirectly informed by discourse of mental health awareness and advocacy" (Thelanderson 106). This more sensitive scope to the issues allowed the projection onto celebrities to be more successful since "when mental illnesses instead are considered common and something that can affect everyone, the coverage of celebrities going thorough such things take a relatable approach that serves to present the famous person as 'just like us' in the suffering" (Thelanderson 106) which can translate as the increase overall of the mental health topic which dominates the vast majority of today's life areas. It is important to note the distinction Thelanderson makes in her book between men and women celebrities. She mentions Nina K Martin's findings according to which

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[15] Lovato expressed their desire to be addressed with the pronouns they/them since they now identify as a non-binary person, therefore, respecting their will, I am going to employ said set of pronouns.
[16] "Demi Lovato: "I Knew at a Young Age I Had a Problem"" https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/news/a31029/demi-lovato-mental-health/
[17] "Kristen Bell: I'm Over Staying Silent About Depression" https://time.com/4352130/kristen-bell-frozen-depression-anxiety/
[18] "Mariah Carey: My Battle with Bipolar Disorder" https://people.com/music/mariah-carey-bipolar-disorder-diagnosis-exclusive/

whereas the "breakdowns of male celebrities are often considered (…) a sign of heroism" (Thelanderson 108), women are still attached the gendered label of the "mad woman" (108). What this observation suggests is that whereas male breakdowns are still attached to the romantic notion of the '(romantic) artist', for women, the 'mad woman' stigma is still present and, overcoming it successfully in society's eyes, might still be a tedious challenge. Therefore, with the change in mental health narratives, "the incorporation of vulnerability into the public narrative of the star becomes a profitable choice [for female celebrities]" (Thelanderson 111). She further explains how this phenomenon did not only occur with well-established celebrities but also with the micro-celebrity's arena. The new emerging social media platform provided a platform for anyone willing to convey and share a message, it opened the door for millions of possible fans or supporters to listen to someone's words. It is in this panorama where – encouraged by their idols – users begin to feel more comfortable sharing their unique experiences with their mental health journey, that the Sad Girl Aesthetic was born.

1.3. The Internet and Aesthetics: Femininity in a post-feminist neoliberal society

After the 1960s-1980s second wave of feminism, Western culture experienced a shift in some respects, including mental health discourses and the role traditional femininity plays in a woman's life. In the last decades, there have been numerous efforts to destigmatize mental health conditions raising awareness and spreading a positive message. As the previous section has explained, the "not-like-the-other-girls" movement agreed with some feminist narratives claiming that femininity played a detrimental role for women's agency and emancipation. By doing so, they simultaneously denied and reinforced the notion that by embracing a more masculine attitude, a woman could be liberated. The

narratives of the *Girl Boss* or the *Super Woman* depict perfectly these ideals by portraying strong overachiever females that can do anything with a smile on their face, who are invincible, and who can assume more responsibilities without feeling drained. If they suffer, they only come out once they have overcome it. However, against these surreal expectations, young girls of the 2010s found in the Sad Girl figure a way to revendicate their emotions and femininity, to be vulnerable without being the object of a male fantasy or narrator, or the opposition of the feminist discourse.

Although the media typically depicted Sad Girls through a more masculine and patriarchal gaze – where they are reduced to damsels in distress in need of a hero –the shift to the internet with its social media platforms and aesthetics allowed young women to articulate their thoughts and views through her. Hence, a shift in perspective occurred: the Sad Girl no longer belonged to men, now were girls who owned her. The platform Tumblr, as Thelanderson explains, was of great importance since "it functions more like a blog than any other social media sites, the content posted is published to each user's own Tumblr page [and] due to its technological affordance like pseudonyms and modifiable HTML, Tumblr lends itself to a sad girl aesthetic" (Thelanderson 162-3). Like in other social media platforms, the real-life Sad Girls felt confident expressing their emotions and reflections, sharing with their community their day-to-day life. In Tumblr, for instance, seeing posts of Lana del Rey or Fiona Apple, close shots of UK Skins' Effy Stonem or Cassie, mixed with various pictures of pills and cigarettes was not uncommon. In her book, Thelanderson notes how these girls, rather than helplessly drowning in their own sadness coped with irony and humor by sharing their lives. "The jokes shared by the Tumblr sad girls can be interpreted as signs that this online discourse gives the individual users participating in it relief from their immediate problems and difficult feelings" (Thelanderson 166). These girls have molded their suffering and pain into an original

language shared by them outside the male gaze and the myth of the rescue by a knight in shining armor.

1.4. The *Sad Girl Theory*

As previously mentioned, numerous artists began to adopt a divergent path on what a woman is or should be. Some of the most prominent figures of the Sad Girl sub-culture were singers such as Lana del Rey or Melanie Martinez. However, in the microcelebrity world, there were also some prominent figures. Audrey Wollen, a micro-celebrity during the 2010s decade, conceptualized the "Sad Girl Theory" as a means to explain what the true objective was of publicly being "sad". Through her Instagram feed, Wollen attempted to reconceptualize female sadness as a form of protest, passive resistance, rather than what traditionally it has been framed, challenging societal expectations by embracing their authentic emotional expression and forcing the (online) world to look at her. As a result, she attracted the interest of many people, including the media, due to articulating the reasoning behind why so many young girls embrace sadness. In an interview for *Nylon* magazine, she explains how "[t]here's a long history of girls who have used their own anguish, their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency" (Tunnicliffe online). For her, "[g]irls' sadness isn't quiet, weak shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back" (Tunnicliffe online). In her critique of her contemporary society, Wollen exposes the popular narratives applied to young girls and women where positivity and optimism are being forced over girlhood, diminishing their emotions thus deeming them as teenage angst, or some narcissistic dread (Tunnicliffe). When in actuality, the artists who embraced that trend pretended to express their dissatisfaction, concerns, or sadness freely despite whether a third party desired to see it or not. Wollen expresses how "being a girl in this world is really hard,

one of the hardest things" (Tunnicliffe online), therefore, it is not an option to force those who feel to repress their feelings, to attempt "to stick a Band-Aid on [a] gaping wound" (Tunnicliffe online).

2. *The Virgin Suicides*

2.1. Sofia Coppola and the Display of Femininity in a Masculine World

As previously stated, femininity and specifically girlhood, have been deemed as "undesired" states of human life, especially for women. In this second chapter, by analyzing Sofia Coppola's debut film *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) I will attempt to draw a parallelism between this film with the events occurred in the 2010s era.

In "Contemplating in a Dream-like Room: *The Virgin Suicides* and the Aesthetic Imagination of Girlhood", Masafumi Monden analyses how contemporary Hollywood generally depicts girlhood as a state of degradation despite it being a theme that has long attracted artistic efforts (Monden). He explains that "[m]any Hollywood (…) films primarily targeting young women and girls, (…) tend to emphasize the necessity for the heroines to go through the process of 'maturity' from highly ignorant, naïve and reckless selves to more conventionally mature and feminine selves" (140), and how despite the increase in presence of young women characters in films with more sense of agency, "[t]hese heroines usually have tomboyish demeanors, are marginalized, or dress in 'masculine' attires when demonstrating their physical and psychological assertiveness" (140). As he evidences, this degradation of the feminine in Hollywood sends a clear message where girlish femininity is perceived as unfavorable, passive, and to become integrated in society, they should undergo through physical transformation adopting a

more 'masculine/boyish' demeanors in order to acquire sense independence and become more agentic (Monden). This is furthermore evidenced in:

> [t]he negative portrayal of girlish femininity in films [which] reflects a social trend, which perceives young women as being in crisis and in need of adult intervention. (…) such negative representations contribute to the construction of the image of young women, particularly teen girls, as highly prone to being victimized, while disregarding the voices of girls with a sense of autonomy and agency (Monden 140).

Sofia Coppola's cinema is clearly recognizable due to her feminine touch and her unique dive into girlhood. In her book, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, Fiona Handyside explains how "Coppola's films consciously address the difficult job of growing up female and attempt to carve out new spaces for expression of female subjectivity that embraces rather than rejects femininity" (5). According to her, "Coppola invents a quintessentially postfeminist aesthetic which takes femininity seriously and offers sustained, intimate engagements with female characters" (5). In many of her films, Coppola pays special attention to young women, a target which, as Monden exposed, it tends to be misunderstood and believed to be in need of intervention. In her films, she offers another perspective of the teenage/young women dilemma, by providing a space where these heroines can articulate their voices without demining any aspect of their former self, that is by encouraging their femininity or effeminate aspects. In Coppola's adaptation of Eugenides' debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Handyside observes how "[t]hese girls skip stages, moving from adolescent to literal/social death without entering into adulthood. They offer us an image of girlhood that is rebellious while remaining girlish, avoiding the association of resistance within cultural studies and popular feminist writing to masculine behavior and attire" (55). In *The Virgin* Suicides, the notion of development and growth, thus, is challenged since the sisters refuse to grow

up and accept the societal expectations for young women. That is, in a very tragic tone, Coppola's Lisbon sisters show to the audience the gendered nature of these framings of experience, that is, growing up (Handyside). Nonetheless, by mobilizing both the 'girl-power' (prominent discourse) and the 'reviving Ophelia' (sad girl trope) discourses, Coppola presents to the audience girls that are active and empowered while simultaneously being vulnerable and precarious victims (Handyside). In this manner, Coppola heroines are not affected by what Monden highlights in his article, since these girls do not sacrifice their girlish femininity to acquire agency.

2.2. The Male Gaze

In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey coined the term *male gaze* which refers to the set of visual strategies that position women as objects rather than agents in films for male pleasure and control. The male gaze, according to Mulvey, functions through different visual strategies such as the camera perspective which tends to align with the male main character's perspective, the character's dynamics (where the man tends to be the active agent of the film driving the narrative forward whereas the woman tends to be a passive agent whose purpose is to be looked at and desired by the male main character), the audience identification with the male protagonist's perspective, the Freudian concepts of scopophilia and narcissistic identification, and the impact of representation that frames and reduces women to a mere spectacle with the sole purpose of male pleasure.

Mulvey's notion of *male gaze* becomes essential when analyzing *The Virgin Suicides*, both the novel and the film since both are narrated from the perspective of a

common male narrator and not by the sisters per se[19]. Everything the reader or the audience knows about the Lisbon sisters is presented through the subjective lens of this communal male narrator, which in turn creates an unreliable account of the events. Sofia Coppola's film adaptation further evidences the subjectivity of the male gaze since it provides visual indications of the distance between the spectator and the girls' lives. In her film, Coppola offers a nuanced critique and challenges the concept of the *male gaze* by placing significant emphasis on the inner lives and perspectives of the girls while simultaneously stressing the unreliability of the male narrators' voice by emphasizing the narrators' fragmentation and limited[20], and fetishist, recollection of the past. Furthermore, by humanizing the Lisbon sisters rather than objectivizing them, Coppola highlights the constant hypervigilance the sisters undergo not only by the neighbor guys but by also their parents, the media, and society which signals how teen girls are often seen as objects in constant need of adult or male intervention rather than autonomous individuals discovering their paths.

2.3. Mental Health and Damsels in Distress

As explained in the previous section, Coppola plays with the notion of *male gaze* and the traditional view of the sad girl trope. Nevertheless, she also does it by challenging the 'damsel in distress' trope and with the various perspectives when it comes to the mental

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[19] It is important to remember that the former is written by a man and the latter by a woman. Hence, the adaptation might be more concerned with this viewpoint, consequently, presenting said scenes by humanizing the girls, rather than depicting them as mere passive objects. The only reason I mentioned also the novel, it is because it offers the reader the voyeuristic experiences of the collective unreliable male narrator, therefore, it is more on the reader's position if said scenes are appealing to the male gaze or not.
[20] For instance, when the boys are forced to imagine how the girls looked/felt when reading Cecilia's diary entries

health discourses and the different stigmas attached to them within the context of the Lisbon sister's lives and tragic end.

Cecilia – the youngest (13) of the Lisbon sisters – is the first one who voices the mental health discourse by her first suicide attempt in the opening scenes of the film. In the hospital scene, in her conversation with the doctor, the man asks to the young Cecilia who lays in a hospital bed "What are you doing here, honey? You're not old enough to know how bad life gets", which she simply retorts with her "Obviously, doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old-girl" (02:06–02:11). Cecilia clearly portrays the numerous times teen girls' mental health gets overlooked, deemed as teen angst or 'attention seeking' when in fact, as she highlights, it was a manner to liberate herself from the profound despair caused by the family's inability to address her mental health needs effectively. The Lisbon household is filled with restrictive norms due to its rigid catholic background, a strong–probably fearful of female adolescence[21]–motherly figure and an emasculated father figure.

It is also important to comment on the role of the parents since not only do they fail to address the girls' emotional requirements, but they also create an oppressive and restricting environment for them, aggravating the sisters' already fragile psyche. Their emotional unavailability and strict rules contributed to the girls' feeling of entrapment and hopelessness. After Cecilia's death and Lux sexual awakening with Trip Fontaine during their prom, Mrs. Lisbon decides to homeschool the girls and she does not allow them to leave. During that period, Lux expresses the impact of said actions on the girls to her mother. In the scene, we can see only Mr. Lisbon standing there, looking at them

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[21] As numerous horror films and stories portray, women (both anatomy and sexuality), specially during the adolescence period, tends to be a common fear in society, specially to parents. (e.g., *Carrie*, *Jennifer's Body,* among others)

while Lux timidly complains to her mother saying, "we're suffocating" and Mrs. Lisbon retorts "you're safe here", to which she replies, "I can't breathe in here" (01:19:52 – 01:19:55). This brief moment depicts to the audience how exhausting and limited the sisters' world is, evoking empathy towards them. In addition, the neighborhood as well as the boys fail to understand the girls. In Katrina Jaworski article "The Gendering of Suicidal Agency in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*", she notes how the sisters' gender is hailed performatively through the way the neighbors attempt to explain the motives behind their tragic ends: "[i]n relation to Cecilia, two local mothers blame the parents, suggesting that [she] did not want to die but [only leave that house]" (57). The neighborhood boys, who narrate the story, are fascinated by them, "No one could understand how Mrs. Lisbon and Mr. Lisbon, our math teacher, had produced such beautiful creatures" (03:56). Therefore, in a desperate attempt to relate to the girls' situation, they want to force a bond between them, despite never wanting to see beyond the *myth*[22] of the Lisbon sisters. In one long scene, these boys gather in one of their bedrooms to read and decipher Cecilia's diary. After reading it, "interpreting" it, and diagnosing Cecilia as a "emotionally instable" and "a dreamer", they state that now "[they] felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing what color went together" (26:43 – 26:51). By stating this, they demonstrate how distant they are from the girls' experience since they are still limited by the idea of what girlhood must feel and be. They project their knowledge rather than listening empathetically to the sisters' needs. In fact, this scene

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22 For these men (the film is about these men remembering their adolescence), the girls are not "girls" but, as stated in the quotation before, "beautiful creatures". For them, they did not belong to this world, evoking them as angels. After their deaths, they began collecting their personal objects in an attempt to understand why they opted to take their lives, as if they were a puzzle that needed to be solved since they never truly attempted to communicate to them. Highlighting the fact that these boys never really saw them for what they were: depressed teen girls who needed help rather than beautiful creatures for them to enjoy.

illustrates to the audience how little they actually knew or cared about the girls. Rather than seeing Cecilia as someone profound with a deep inner world–as when the audience can hear a voiceover of her reading a part of one of her poems while many memories of the girls, happy, in a yard, appear while she is writing (26:23–26:35)–they opted to deem her a dreamer. This is further illustrated by a previous scene where, while reading it, one of boys gathered complains after mindlessly turning many pages "Elm trees. How many pages can you write about dying trees?" (25:19), and he does not stop until he finds a page worth of his attention, one in which she talks about a boy: "Here, something about Dominic" (25:25).

The emotional abandonment the Lisbon sisters experience is the result not only of being a girl but also because of the male gaze framing them as 'damsels in distress'. For the collective male narrator, the girls are another device to drive their narrative. They picture themselves as the heroes, knights, who will save the sisters from the nightmarish hell the Lisbon household has become. As Jaworski notes, "[T]he masculine gaze of the narrators cuts into what we cannot know about the sisters, and the way we come to know of them is through a girlish white *form* of femininity" (60). In other words, they introduce the Lisbon sisters to us by forcing them to fit into the 'damsel in distress' trope. By portraying them as fragile and ethereal beings needing to be saved (by them), denying them the agency, autonomy, and humanity they have in order to become the rescuers of their teen crushes. Moreover, the romanticized memories of the collective male narrator of the tragic event denies the violence, brutality, and the real emotional landscape of the Lisbon sisters' end. By beautifying the suicides they remove the little agency the girls had, portraying them as martyrs rather than mentally ill people who needed help.

2.4. Lux Lisbon: A Feminist Hero?

Suicide is commonly understood as the individual act of taking one lives away. And, as Jaworski notes, it is understood in anthropocentric terms since "there is the assumption that agency is entirely human, because of the individual desire and intention to die, made manifest through the content of the body and mind" (48). However, "[t]hings get more complicated when the agency of suicide is read through the cultural lens of gender" (48). *The Virgin Suicides* is a story which departs from the premise of the sisters' suicides. That is, from the beginning of the film the audience knows the tragic end the girls will have. As a result, the reader or audience of the film can only know about them by the recollection of memories of these now middle-aged men; they are the active agents since they are the ones that make the story move forward. In other words, since the sisters are dead, they cannot retail their story. Nevertheless, Jaworski argues that "[the performative character of the suicides] shows the degree to which agency is rendered visible through movement as much as the specific features that mark the body suicided" (55). Cecilia – the youngest at 13 – opts for her first unsuccessful suicide attempt to slit her wrist in the bathtub. Later she successfully impales herself on the spike of a nearby fence by her bedroom window. Bonnie (15) hangs herself in the basement, Mary (16) gasses herself in the oven although she survives, a month later she overdoses on pills as Therese (17) did, and Lux (14) dies by carbon monoxide intoxication after locking herself in the garage with the car running holding a cigarette in her hand. Jaworski suggests that "you cannot separate the means of suicide from the inscriptions on the bodies, because bodies, objects, the immediate material environment and ideas of what takes to kill oneself work in a dynamic performative relationship through which suicidal agency emerges" (56). That is, "you cannot separate them to make sense of the suicides" (56). Therefore, "female bodies co-constitute the intent to die through the act of killing oneself. Regardless of the

outcome, it is clear that the female bodies of the Lisbon sisters were agentic instead of passive" (56).

The appropriation of the Lisbon sisters' lives by the collective male narrator denies them agency, autonomy and humanity throughout the story, the only moments the reader or the spectator can truly see who the Lisbon sister were, what they liked or sparked their interests is by their suicides. These are the only instances their personal preferences are stated to us without the intervention of the male gaze, for "a woman's suicide [(as a narrative tool)] can be understood as her means to challenge and criticize her culturally and socially imposed passivity and dependency, and those who impose such burdens on her" (Monden 153).

It is in their suicides that the girls reaffirm who they are in a society that despises them to project their fears, desires, or insecurities. As stated in the previous section, the narrators subordinate the authentic Lisbon sisters to their idealized version of them as damsels in distress; on this note Monden argues that "[w]hile the Lisbon sisters are forced to dwell in the vulnerable and fragile state and to contemplate in a highly romantic bedroom, they do not wait for their knights in shining armor to rescue them like in fairy tales. Rather, the Lisbon girls forward the narrative themselves" (Monden 153). In addition to the idea that the girls are the agents of the story by taking their lives, Jaworski notes that "[p]erhaps it is the narrators themselves who are reactive and passive, unable to see past their masculine heterosexual desires" (60). Her point is evidenced by the scene previous to the suicides of the four sisters left, when Lux awaits the boys and invites them to come over, she unbuckles one of the boys' belt while sensing the boys lust for her. By doing so, Lux creates the perfect opportunity for her sisters to take their lives. After Cecilia's suicide, Lux becomes the most prominent character, her sexuality being the asset that monopolizes the narrators' attention. Lux weaponizes that information, and by

doing so, "not only [she] in control of her sexuality but also utilizes her position as an object of sexual desire to enable the suicides of her sisters" (Jaworski 62). Lux selfless action not only disrupts the patriarchal notion of female rivalry but, simultaneously, she reinforces the concept of female sisterhood. Lux sacrifices herself making the boys believe she wanted to have sex with them to enable her sisters' suicide. This event becomes the turning point that differentiates *The Virgin Suicides* story from any previous Sad Girl trope. As Jaworski explains "[j]ust because someone embodies a form in the shape of a female body, which is interpreted as pretty and girlish, does not mean this form is passive and incapable of embodying intentional action" (62).

Their resistance to perform and oblige society's expectations, to become the 'second sex', is what fuels the girls' actions. Monden articulates perfectly this resistance to 'awaken' when comparing the sisters' confinement with the one in fairy tales such as the Sleeping beauty, "while the awakening of the fairy tale princess signals her entering into the mature womanhood via heterosexual romance and marriage, The Lisbon girls, consequently, decide to stay permanently in the state of 'girlhood'" (153). Therefore, "one could speculate that the [remaining] Lisbon sisters exert suicide in order to assert their autonomy, to reject the imposed state of passivity and vulnerability" (Monden 154). The final message that resonated with many 2010s Sad Girls is that "[the sisters] demonstrate that you can be agentic *because* of femininity, not *despite* it" (Jaworski 62). In the movie femininity is not depicted as a flaw or undesirable, but as the way to fight back. It is what enables the girls to tell their story even after death.

3. Conclusions and Further Research.

The Sad Girl Aesthetic was a response articulated by teen girls and young women during the decade of the 2010s against the restricting expectations placed on them by society. These girls found their inspiration in artists such as Lana del Rey or characters as the Lisbon sisters (specially Lux) to fight in another manner than the one imposed by society proving that both the feminine and femininity are not what the patriarchy wants it to be – passive, helpless, in need of guidance. These girls have weaponized al the "negative attributes" of belonging to what Simone de Beauvoir labels as the 'second sex' and have used it as a way to regain agency and reappropriate of things such as sadness or the gaze to tell their stories by still standing in the very limited role society allowed them. By analyzing the key points of Sofia Coppola's 1999 film adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides*, this dissertation facilitates the task of understanding an entire generation of teen girls who opted to confront society in an alternative manner. By weaponizing the aspects that have doomed their gender, the Sad Girls found their voice and a place to articulate their disenchantment with society's expectations. These girls found the inheritable value that lies in femininity and made it their shield in their passive resistance act.

Before concluding my dissertation, I want to state my position in this context since it would be easy to understand that my aim is glamorize and condone suicide as a viable option, yet it can be further from the truth. My aim is to make more visible a significant event that occurred a decade ago from a neutral informative stand. For both these scholars and I consider suicide as a narrative tool rather than a real-life act. Narratives are fiction, therefore, they allow authors to entertain different ideas, as extreme as this one, to address or highlight societal issues. *The Virgin Suicides* stresses the significance of seeing reality as it is rather than indulging in a fantasy. These girls needed real help; they were agonizing. However, neither the narrators (who wanted to be the "heroes" who rescued

them) nor the adults (who dismissed and trivialized their emotions as teen angst or attention seeking) tried to have a conversation with them and be there. All of them were projecting their fears, traumas, or desires onto these girls but none of them saw a group of teens who needed help. Which raises the following questions: what would happen if these sisters had an adult who was there for them? What if the sisters actually had someone who tried to understand them and their needs? The Lisbon girls were doomed by the narrative with the only option available being suicide. Still, reality is different. These narratives might be helpful for us to realize that maybe we are lacking in some areas, that maybe we are being restrictive in others. During that decade, an entire generation felt oppressed with the expectations placed on them and resonated with this trope, as they publicly manifested by showing their discomfort. Because of them, numerous changes have occurred for the new generations of girls. Nevertheless, further research is necessary since new aesthetics have emerged. The Sad Girl Aesthetic had an apparent death at the end of the 2010s decade having numerous former "sad girls" outgrowing that phase and adopting a new scope to face life, yet with new social platforms as TikTok or Tumblr's revival, her corpse ramified in different new aesthetics and movements (*girlbloggers, female rage* aesthetic, *femcels*, among many) which translates in new demands. This event suggests that despite evolution, there is still a need to embrace transformation and without understanding and providing the visibility they need, we cannot assist these girls. Consequently, there must be a shift to stop perpetuating a powerless state for girlhood because, just as society fails the Lisbon sisters, we might fail them too.

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