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Permanence and Transience in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*

We live in an unending rainfall of images. The most powerful media transform the world into images and multiply it by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors.

Italo Calvino[1]

[T]he world around us *is* a wild phantasmagoria of images … Photographs, films and television programs, videos and computer games — these and other moving images blend and mix with images of the external and internal worlds produced by a global array of instruments … that have become our bodily and mental extensions.

Adrian J. Ivakhiv

Image is the keyword in these epigraphs, written roughly a quarter of a century apart. According to Ivakhiv, the world around us is made of moving images that move us and, in moving us, change us, our perceptions, the things around us, our thoughts, our ways of seeing, hearing, and thinking as well as the way others see, hear, and perceive us. What has changed since Calvino's time is that today we inhabit *imagescapes* full of motion, and the way we grasp the world is thereby transformed. With the cinematic technology travelling from celluloid to digital, moreover, everybody can watch a movie or personal video, freeze images, re-watch, forward to a different user, carry with them in a small device, and reproduce everywhere.

The making of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides* into a film by Sofia Coppola (1999), cinematography by Edward Lachman, screenplay

by Sofia Coppola, dealt with "moments of life-crisis or transition" through a "predominantly visual approach in which time is no longer subordinated to movement and a predictable narrative trajectory," the effect of which is that of "*showing* rather than *narrating*" (Rogers, "Sofia Coppola"). Such mode aligns Coppola with the tradition of a director like Michelangelo Antonioni, whose approach to the "inchoate reality of the world" she combines *ad hoc* with "themes of crisis and transition;" it also points to "a lack of definite conclusion" that would involve the spectator more and more in ambiguity, a specific cinematic function connected with a strategically sought "deferral" of the viewer's attention which provides a distorted view of what takes place in the film (Chatman 2). Along the lines of the Italian director's research in *Blow-Up*, then, the process of *showing* in Coppola's hands continues the inquiry into ways of presenting reality, image, attention, and focus at a time when visual culture is undergoing a thorough critical and philosophical revision. The complex quest of "the seen" in the film – to borrow Chatman's expression (138) – takes into account the interplay of movement and stillness.

The collaboration between an emerging filmmaker (well aware of the cinematic complexities transmitted to her by her background as daughter of Francis Ford Coppola) and a champion of art photography whose career is paved with work for a huge range of films (among which are Steven Sonderberg's *Erin Brockovich* and Todd Haynes' *Far from Heaven*) has led the director and cinematographer to turn the Pulitzer-Prize winning novel into an independent film by bringing to the viewer's mind art pictures of the past. Events and states-of-mind in the film are associated with famous paintings stored in the collective memory, so that some form of dialogue would arise between cinema and painting. Such process, of course, is intended to keep the viewer's memory function active during the projection of the film, and possibly even at a later stage, when it is possible to review the film and stop the frame.[2] The handling of time in its interaction with the image, its motion (as in cinema) and its stillness (as in painting) must have been a main preoccupation of the author's in the re-creation of reality in a film that lacks a "narrative arc," uses "dead time" and "liminal images," and makes a point of showing "empty moments in human lives" (Rogers, "Sofia Coppola").

Whether Coppola had envisaged utilizing art history in her filmic adaptation when she first wrote the script, or appropriated the discipline later, Lachman surely must be considered jointly responsible for the blueprint. His *painterly* approach towards storytelling – as he reveals in an interview – derives from a predilection for still photography and the art of painting, where the image is "open" and the narrative "open ended," thus allowing "the viewer to participate with the image itself and create his own story" (Conceptual Fine Arts). Lachman's effort, through cinematography, to move through space and time to tell the story of a degraded society in its interconnections with a degraded environment led me to read the stillness of the elm-tree eternalized by a great painter as the proto-carrier and disseminator of the Anglo-American cultural past, as a memento of the interplay between permanence and transience within which the characters of *The Virgin Suicides* are contained, and in many ways, trapped. Hence the title of this essay, which aims at showing how an original contemporary aesthetic of cinematic vision is achieved through the handling of stylistic modes embedded in historical art contexts combined with a painterly approach towards storytelling.

Like the novel, the plot of the film concerns the demise of the five adolescent Lisbon sisters who live under the rule of a strict mother and a weak, submissive father in a quiet suburb of Detroit, Michigan, "25 years ago" (appearing among the initial headlines in calligraphy) at the time it was shot. After the youngest has died on her second suicide attempt, the Lisbons' everyday life continues in spite of a slow, physical deterioration detectable in the family management, until one of the sisters commits the sin of getting back from the Homecoming dance in the early hours of the morning. The four girls are withdrawn from school and literally imprisoned within the four walls. Sometime later, they all choose to end their brief lives.

The narration derives from the peer group of neighborhood boys' anxiety about the five sisters whom they had once befriended and been enamored of, and whose elusive personalities and enigmatic gesture they had tried to comprehend. They conduct their inquiry into the girls' lives through photos and recollections, a face to face meeting with – besides other figures – fourteen-year-old Lux's boyfriend, the examination of Cecilia's diary

as a document of the girls' intimate life, their communication methods (strategically located notes and images, light signals, and phone calls), and their own careful surveillance of the girls by means of different strategies and equipment. Their daughters having chosen to leave this world, the parents, in the end, sell their home and move. The mystery of the five sisters – the 'unsaid' expected to complete what was available as 'seen' – never comes to light, since neither the boys' own acquaintance with them, their visual testimony, and that of others who had borne witness to the girls' short adventure in this world, could ever fully unveil their complex characters and motives. As the narrator, who speaks for the lot, makes clear, the 'virgin suicides' remain a lifelong obsession.

"There is something rotten in the state" of Michigan, the audience realizes quite soon (Fuller 14). A fungus supposedly spread by Dutch elm beetles has caused, by 1974-75, when the story takes place, the gradual decline of the elm tree in America (Eugenides 5). A "collective," or global, "malaise" affects the suburbs of Detroit (the Greek-American author's native town that suffered, at the same time, the decline of the auto industry) (Kostova 49). A strong environmental concern filters through the pages of the novel: trees dying one by one, the phosphates in the lake producing a scum of thick algae, the flotsam of fish flies making up a foamy layer of dead bugs, and the rotten swamp smell rising in the air.

Warm earth tones, together with colors suggestive of autumn, are favored: toned-down versions of sixties orange, brown, copper, harvest gold, and avocado green. Orange is the color Lux is mostly associated with, and this gives the picture a seventies' flavor, in reaction to the psychedelic color palette of sixties' culture. Advertising material and references to films from the seventies inspire Lachman's cinematography, thus taking the audience back in time.[3] With the Vietnam War coming to a conclusion in 1975, a resentment against politics and consumerism encouraged people to a return to the "natural," a cultural tendency that became associated with the ecological movement.

The focus on the single elm-tree standing on the Lisbon house's front yard surrounded by the four sisters at the culminating moment of the narrative lets the tree emerge as a spectacular intertextual element that carries associations with literary and pictorial artistic expressions. It may

not be too far-fetched to hypothesize that the referencing generated by this much-respected plant might be the earliest conceived of the several interlinks with pictures (whether paintings, film/video clips, or even marketing icons of the epoch) disseminated in the film, that make up some sort of "intervisual" scheme.

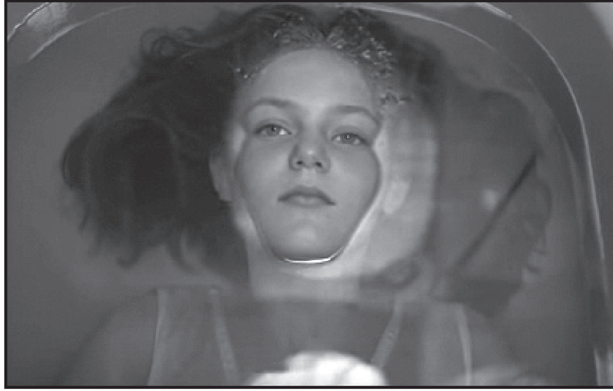
The elm tree, the female progenitor of humankind in ancient mythologies, and a symbol of the ecological approach to living, is a central icon of the film. In nineteenth-century Europe, the English painter John Constable gave it prominence by studying it as an element of the primeval forests, its bark resembling a map, its roots delving firmly into the ground, and its crown bathed in daylight. One film clip showing the elm-tree in the Lisbons' property recalls Constable's "Study of the Trunk of an Elm" (1821). One of the Lisbon virgins' hand gently going over a small barkless section of the elm trunk standing in the front lawn in the film suggests the symbiosis of virgin female and virgin nature: the girl's and the tree's fate appear inextricably linked. Signs of environmental concern in the film come also from specific references to the work of Pre-Raphaelites artists, whose program advocated a return to the truth of nature. Women are central figures in those painters' world, often aesthetically idealized according to a variety of models; they make up a world apart, which the five Lisbon sisters, with their mix of old-fashioned and modern, wink at from the following century. Coppola's film draws old (old-fashioned, even) paintings out of the archive of memory to make them interact with modern images and produce a new fantastic world carrying indirect suggestions while allowing the imagination to run wild. Along the same lines, cinema winks back at painting, and can accommodate art forms in view of a further technological treatment of the immense kinetic imaginary reality gathered. Once all references of intertextualitites and intervisualities are stored within the filmic product, the lost language and lost gazes can be recaptured as ecologies of the past, and then morphed into re-worked ways of seeing and imagining.

The Virgin Suicides, an American Zoetrope production, has earned countless reviews in magazines and on the web, passionate comments in internet forums, *prezi* presentations shared widely on the internet, academic essays from different disciplinary perspectives, not to mention

the somewhat vague definition of 'cult classic.'[4] As a director, however, Coppola has suffered from a dismissal of her work often attributed to her preoccupation with questions deriving from privilege (not least the fact of being her father's daughter), fashion (in reference to her previous job), and frivolity, all framed within an ethereal atmosphere, wherefrom engagement with questions such as race, homosexuality, and feminism is excluded. Even her specific indie cinematic angle stamping the "artistic" or indeed "literary" quality upon her work – features that are certainly not alien to the film under consideration – have undergone negative criticism.[5] It is her refined approach, however, that, by intersecting the streams of images and information coming from the mass media and the immediate environment, fosters a fruitful nexus between mass and élite, popular and niche, intellectual and cultural besides enriching the recipient's imaginative world and promoting cultural variety.

The opening sequence of Lachman's montage following the introduction in *The Virgin Suicides* presents a scene showing the tranquil, elm-shaded streets of a suburban area, where everyday actions are performed by its residents: watering the garden, walking the dog, shooting baskets in the outdoors. Two workers also appear, tagging one elm for removal. Lastly, the camera shows the next bluish-colored scene with a set of perfumes, while a male voice-over, acting as the grown-up narrator of the story, announces: "Cecilia was the first to go."

The camera then cuts to Cecilia's face as she lies in the bathtub. It appears as a variant of John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, her floating head face up in the brook water where she encountered her death, while "she chanted snatches of old tunes;/As one incapable of her own distress,/Or like a creature native and indued/Unto that element" (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene 7).



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia,* oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London [6]

A daughter of the natural world as it was before the ecological balance was altered, in one early sequence recalled above, the youngest of the sisters approaches the elm-tree to place her hand on the plaster-filled circular shape, from where the bark had been removed. She leaves her imprint in the hollowed area, as if to preserve a percept of touch, besides other sensorial data perceived by passers-by, like smell, sight, and the sound of rustling

leaves, once the subjects of those perceptions would be gone. The elm-tree standing in the front lawn of the Lisbon house, which must be among the last survivors of its kind, awakens memories of the pioneers followed by generations of immigrants: Greek and Italian among the Europeans, and Africans, as some of the characters in the novel that go almost unnoticed in the film testify.[7]

Like Ophelia who dies as a part of nature into nature (since nobody is around to help or report what is happening [Stewart 103]), Cecilia belongs to the dying elm-tree, on which she rests, as one of the frozen images of the introductory sequence shows. "She is part of the tree; part of its nature, its poison and its death," a blog suggests (Parker). The death of these two children of controlling parents is aestheticized: Ophelia's through Shakespeare's words and Millais' painting, Cecilia's act as – in her psychiatrist's words – a "cry for help" (Eugenides 19), an apt definition also for the 'accidental,' yet possibly searched for, death of Ophelia (whose name derives from the Greek word for 'help'), due to her inadequacy to handle Hamlet's madness.

Cecilia (whose name derives from Latin *caecus* and *caedcus,* akin to the Greek words, *skiao* and *skias*, for 'dark' and 'shadow,' respectively, in a later use indicating also 'blindness') is embraced by darkness when, on her second, successful suicide attempt, she dies, impaled, on the evening of the party. Her body "seems to be balancing like a magician's assistant – her wedding dress (that she liked to wear all the time) fluttering in the wind," the equivalent, in a way, of Ophelia's garments floating in the water. Like the Shakespearean virgin, she is modeled on a Christian figure: the former drifting in the water, the latter gently sustained by her father in the air, both open-eyed and with their arms spread out, recalling Jesus on his cross. Like Ophelia, who lives and dies in a country festering with moral and political corruption – as a member of the digital community points out – Cecilia lives and dies in the dark times of environmental degradation.[8]

Religiously conscious in her devotion to the Virgin Mary, Cecilia reflects on her adolescence, inhibited and frustrated, an adapted child (according to a transactional analysis approach), preoccupied with her virginity and the eventual loss of it. In the course of the only party thrown for her, she

apologizes to her vehemently catholic mother for leaving, goes upstairs, and is no longer heard. Unlike the Italian neighbor boy she fancies, who had jumped out of the window to prove his love for a rich local girl, emerging unharmed and victorious, her intention *was* to take her own life. She dies, as it happens, hit and transfixed, in a sort of macabre analogue of a sexual penetration, by a fence spike.

After Cecilia's death, Lux (her elder sister) "takes over" for her in the film, the other three girls being a corollary and accompaniment, during her rite of passage, to her potential crossing of the threshold into the next stage of life cycles. In the opening sequence, Lux is shown as she polishes off "a strawberry ice against the backdrop of a sunlit avenue before she drifts out of frame," a parody version of Stanley Kubrick's cliché (as a formal device) version of *Lolita*, the 1962 film based on the novel by Vladimir Nabokov (Fuller). A variant of such popular objectified representative of femininity, Lux appears, along with her sisters, as the "unwitting object[s] of male fantasy" (Rogers, "Ephimeral Bodies"). She will eventually transgress the limits set by her parents to plunge into a much less idealized world of sexual promiscuity.

A minor, yet significant, sub-plot – Lux Lisbon and Trip Fontaine as protagonists – develops in the central section of the movie: it concerns Trip's courting of Lux, their beginning-and-ending of a love relationship at the Homecoming party, and the abandonment of Lux by Trip after love-making.

A Pre-Raphaelite reference to Edward Burne-Jones' *The Golden Stair* with the train of drugged-looking Virgins descending to some mysterious location – used in sympathetic affinity with Burne-Jones's interest (shared by Coppola) "in investigating a mood rather than telling a story"[9] – is another connection with the art world that characterizes the filmmaker's indie cinematography.

The scene of the film is shown above Burne-Jones' picture hereafter.

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, oil, Tate Gallery, London [10]

The light coming from above suggests a friendly atmosphere, but hitting the four hanging portraits of as many women (themselves? Passed-away predecessors? Photographs de-creating the past in the very act of creating it?) (Barthes; Sontag) may even point to an ambiguous (unexpected as much as innocently craved for) descent into hell. It is time, for the girls heading to the Homecoming dance, to cross to a new stage in their rites of passage: a brief excursion that could take them across safely, or overcome them completely and permanently.

The trajectory of Lux's pathway runs parallel to the destiny of the elm-tree in the Lisbon house's front lawn, and to the cinematic longing for permanence and transience. The American Elm, "[b]y nature a gentle, hospitable tree {that} … won the hearts of our forefathers," as a 1937 American Forestry Association publication argues, is a memento of the national past (3). The elm-tree in Western culture is associated – as has been pointed out – with Constable's painting. The "elmy underworld" and "the visual effects of elmyness: light falling through its dark leaves, to form luminous dapplings and reticulations" (Macfarlane) are attested by the English painter's work, and especially his "Study of the Trunk of an Elm".

John Constable, *Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree*, oil,
Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The canvas concentrates on the trunk of the tree, displaying, above, only the bottom part of its crown, and below, its meeting with the earth. The elm originates out of the forest's womb and belongs, therefore, both to the light appearing from between its foliage and branches, and to the darkness where it stands. "The painting is a study … of permanence and transience," reads the presentation of the Museum; and it continues: "There is the root-work of the tree, its great delving into the ground, where it has dwelt for scores of years and will dwell for scores more. And then there is the light, falling generously and temporarily upon the grass behind." Constable is interested in conveying the "abrupt and transient appearances of the CHIAROSCURO IN NATURE" (Constable 128). He also wishes "to show its effect in the most striking manner, to give 'the one brief moment caught from fleeting time,' a lasting and sober existence, and to render permanent many of those splendid but evanescent Exhibitions, which are ever occurring in the changes of external Nature" (Constable 127; Beckett 9-10). The chiaroscuro as a technique that Constable referred to the natural, rather than artistic, "conditions of appearance," (Harrison 204) would lead to the cinematographic use of light and shade in the cinema to create space, plastic value, and the texture of objects (Visconti 32).

As a creature of nature, Lux does not belong to "darkness" (as Cecilia – whose name appropriately recalls the absence of light – does). She is, instead, a creature of "light" (as her Latin name suggests), the element representing transience in Constable's painterly effort, and that conjugates the elm (= the woman, and the memory of the woman) with the sky. What Constable achieves through painting, Coppola achieves with the medium of cinema, as is evident from the several scenes showing the elm's foliage pierced through by the sunshine. "But precisely above this dark recess the forest's cover is broken open, allowing the sky's light to stream into the clearing," reads Harrison's description in *Forests* (206). The "chiaroscuro" trope connotes a stark contrast in image, as exemplified by Lux's white dress and Trip's black suit, mutually pointing to her [symbolic] purity and his corruption.

The awakening of Lux, abandoned by Trip in the football field after love-making, in the bluish light of the early morning, is a turning-point in the life of all the girls. As far as Lux is concerned, it is not by mere coincidence that she is "turning" away from the camera, since her handling of the unexpected state of facts needs to be disguised from the viewer's gaze at such critical point.

Punishment follows, with the sisters being segregated from society, including school. It is a turning point in their lives, and in the narrative, after which the pace of the film quickens to lead to the *dénouement*. It is the time when the girls need to choose between rebelling and complying.

Upon the workers' arrival, on the morning established for the removal of the tree after Cecilia's suicide, the girls run out of the house in their nighties and improvise a sort of reversed chained human circle around it, in order to oppose the reasons of those come to remove it.

A different clip appears among the several connected with the film available on the internet.[11] Probably taken in the interval between shooting, the snap-shot below shows the actresses holding each other's hands to improvise a ring a ring o' roses. Beneath it, a painting by Henry Matisse, "La Danse."[12]

Henri Matisse, *La Danse*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

The clip is not from the movie, although the shooting might have been done for the movie, then discarded. In any case, the idea of performance and dynamic immersion in the environment is there, if only as a form of relaxation from working. The painting by Matisse, instead, places the dance before the viewer, by calling attention not to the representation, portrayal or description of the dance, but, through the defining dynamics of the surface and the controlled rather than excited face lineaments, to the way in which the painting reveals some meaning by expression, just as a person's face expresses some inner feeling or emotion (Holger 173-83). It focuses, in other words, on the way in which the painting signifies.

Eugenides' rendering of the episode starts from the description of the official yellow ribbons encircling the elm tree that reads: "'This tree has been diagnosed with Dutch elm disease and will be removed in order to inhibit further spread. By order of Parks Dept.'" (Eugenides 172). Sometime later, when the workers return to cut the tree, the girls surround it "linking hands in a daisy chain … They weren't facing the men but the tree itself," adds the writer, "pressing their cheeks against the trunk … They hugged the trunk, which rose above them into nothingness" (Eugenides 175). Coppola avoids the possible misinterpretation of the girls "worshipping it [the tree] like a group of Druids" (Eugenides 178), and changes the approach to

such critical crossing by simultaneously getting the girls to look outward and upsetting the traditionally playful infantile dance. Leaning against the tree as if they were part of it, their faces towards the spectator, they exhibit their by-then-chronic inner malaise. It has become, and by then it is, permanent, as long as there is life. The golden hue of the scarf one of them wears and the light falling lightly through the foliage to strike the girls here and there – a transient component of the picture – reflect the illusory dreamworlds they have scarcely got out of to sustain a hard cold reality. Going against a predictable narrative trajectory, Coppola *shows* rather than *narrates* a liminal moment, her characters looking in vain in their immediate surroundings/milieu for a fulfilling reply to their empty lives. The strategy does not differ from Matisse's: the focus is on what the image signifies.

A female chronicler down the road is arranging a shot with "those girls in their nighties," identified as the "four sisters of Cecilia Lisbon, the East side teenager … whose suicide last summer focused awareness on a national problem…, [who] put their own lives in jeopardy to protect the elm that Cecilia so loved," runs the script of the film. A staff photographer is taking pictures that would appear in the newspaper, directed by his boss to find the right frame. Elm and woman (coupled as one in northern mythology, which interprets *embla*, the elm-tree, as woman and *ask*, the ash-tree, as man) are inextricably linked (Brosse 14). The memory of Cecilia's ephemeral life on earth, the reporter is convinced, is captured in the tree, itself doomed to be felled; and the scene of the "girls in the nighties" would increase viewership thanks to the voyeuristic attraction of female adolescents. Reality is another story; the tree is condemned, but the narrative needs developing in order to signify. The sisters enclosing the tree in a circle add another growth ring to its ecology and, by looking out to the environment, anticipate their departure from their habitat.

The conditions of appearance are vital in the cinema. In keeping with its visual appeal, the film stresses the contrast between light and dark, i.e., the *chiaroscuro* considered by Constable a principle of nature and, in cinematography, the element "revealing or concealing narrative traps and gazes" (Visconti 32).[13] And Lux (*light*, in Latin, but also a cinema production company),[14] after her sister's (whose name evokes *darkness*) death, becomes

the protagonist of Coppola's film, where the idea of permanence is conveyed by the rootedness of the tree and the living substance of its bark, while the light falling upon the girls' faces creates precarious maps of expression superimposed upon the frown lines ambiguously transiting towards new *facescapes*: a hint to the fact that the director is using Eugenides' story to tell the medium of film.

In his interviews with the narrators who are looking for evidence behind the girls' mystery, an aged Trip defines Lux as "the still point of the turning world" (based on his reading of T.S. Eliot's poem which he had found in the library of the detox center where he was being treated, and according to which he naïvely attributes to the woman of his dreams the quality of "transcending the temporal" that Eliot attributes to the Logos and the Christian God [Weitz 58]). For the adolescent boy crossing a stage in his rite of passage, one element appears unmoved in a universe in ceaseless flux. Lux is, instead, a woman at a turning point, who discovers that her rite of passage is much more dangerous, bitter, and disappointing than expected. In ironic compensation for having been abandoned, she organizes a series of sexual encounters with male strangers on the roof that the boys eagerly watch through a telescope, childishly arguing over their turn-taking. The conversations at the boys' end of the channel reveal their difficulties in sustaining social interaction between themselves (one of them goes as far as to lay claim to ownership of the telescope), and in mastering appearances.

"Coppola placed herself in the interesting position of being a female director translating a story written by a male novelist, a story about girls told from a boys' perspective" (Mayshark 170). The director's controlling power over the boys (that is not in the novel) does not solve the mystery, yet it multiplies and deepens it. It, in fact, gives her the possibility of making a statement on the lack of correspondence between reality and vision, and also of dealing with what *seeing* involves in the fiction of the feature film as well as in the actuality of filmmaking. The *mise-en-scène* that she creates for the viewer/spectator to look at the boys gazing "from an eyrie across the street at the sister's protracted demise – as we in turn watch them watching" (Fuller) – has been interpreted as a reflection of Coppola's own subjectivity: that of "a successful woman working in the masculinized arena of independent Hollywood" (Smaill 149).

The boys' failure to make any sense of what is visible to them is proclaimed by their innocent acceptance of Lux's invitation to the house on the last night, which climaxes when one boy has a tragicomic encounter with the dangling shoes worn by the corpse of one of the sisters who chose to die from suicide by hanging. Instead of throwing light on them, Lux malignantly masks the fact, thereby showing her own ability as director of the ominous performance, and the boys' clumsiness as spectators or actors. Lux, the source of light in the film, dies by asphyxia, holding a cigarette (a sexualized element in Western culture, much exploited in traditional cinema). Her suicide is a metaphorical sacrifice to cinema: she manages to get out of the male gaze where Hollywood intended to confine her permanently, to open herself to transience and change (Mulvey). Her rite of passage has concerned the crossing from "turning-point" to "still point": by transcending the temporal, she gives up desire, action, and suffering, so that, to Trip, "the light is still/At the still point of the turning world" (Weitz 58).

Thanks to the indiewood paradigm, the play of intertextuality and intervisuality is mapped fruitfully on the question of permanence and transience: things and people pass, are damaged or lost; events are past. The *archaic* unprocessed (untouched, or 'virgin') film stock, once processed through light, becomes exposed (Lux on the roof?), and thus unusable; yet it can change into the support material of a cinematic art product. With the digital technology, the support material is multi-usable and longer lasting. Through words, objects, photographs, or video recordings, everything can come alive again. Through cinema, a movable art archive of memories and imaginable future, complete with their intertextualities and intervisualities, is made available, with the added benefit that things, people, and events become present as in our dreams, often absurdly or impossibly, but acceptably, just because it is cinema. You do not need an actual *trip* (the association with Fontaine only, perhaps, accidental) to a heritage site (Central Park Mall, for instance) to see the *light* (*Lux?*) go through the elm branches, because the use of light (*Lux!*) and sound in cinema can make people experience, through re-worked ways of imagining and gazing, the dynamic ecologies of the past, the morphing of those ecologies into the present and future ones, their conservation and their

sustainability as our collective universal heritage. Nature, embodied in the elm; cinema, represented through the use of light; the past, recreated through multiple visual and textual quotations; the ever-going modernist *dance* of the environment, always re-starting and never ending – all is announced from the title, as destined to end in order to be preserved through cinema. The virgin suicides, deliberately offering themselves to death in some form of mysterious sacrifice, sanction the continuity (in the usual as well as cinematographic sense) of cinema.[15]

Notes

[1] The writer died on September 1985, before he could pronounce his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, the content of which appears in the book.

[2] For the fascination of cinema with memory from 1980 onwards, see the anthology by Sinha and McSweeney.

[3] An advertising trick by Timotei and Breck campaign, for instance, consisting in a red or orange ring around a character, or images from neo-gothic films (such as Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* [1975] or Brian de Palma's *Carrie* [1976]) are among those dealt with in Backman Rogers (*passim*).

[4] The 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides* stars Kirsten Dunst, Kathleen Turner, James Woods, and Josh Hartnett.

[5] For further comments on the neglect suffered by the first American woman director boasting an Oscar nomination and the way her cinema compares unfavorably with her model Michelangelo Antonioni and French director Claire Denis, see Smaill and Mayne.

[6] The clip (like the others from the film in this essay) has been taken using a screen capture tool.

[7] The names of the characters in the novel often reveal an ethnic origin: Dominic Palazzolo, Mrs. Karafilis, Paul Baldino, and Valentine Stamarowski, among others.

[8] See the *prezi* presentation by Olivia Clancy, "The Virgin Suicides: Studied through an Ecocritical Lens by Olivia Chancy and Ian Rollo," 5 June 2014. Web. 14 May 2015. <http://prezi.com/mq_zjujkmg9b/the-virgin-suicides-studied-through-an-ecocritical-lens-by/>.

[9] From the display caption at Tate (July 2007).

[10] From: The Artchive website.

[11] See http://veryverychic.typepad.com/veryverychic/fashion-film/page/2/. Web. 14 May 2015.

[12] "La Danse" is the title of two paintings by Henry Matisse. The first version (1909) is kept at Museum of Modern Art, New York City; the latter (1931) is at Hermitage (St. Petersburg).

[13] In discussing contrasts in the cinema, Visconti quotes from Constable's ideas on chiaroscuro.
[14] An Italian film distribution (and later production) company, among whose executive producers are Dino de Laurentiis and Carlo Ponti, both well known to Francis Ford Coppola's family.
[15] A cinematographic sense for "continuity" (from the Latin noun *continuitas*) is recorded from 1921 for American English (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

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