

THE ESTRANGED WORLD:
THE GROTESQUE IN SOFIA COPPOLA'S YOUNG GIRLS TRILOGY

by

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Abstract

Steeped in collision and disjuncture, connoting both the grisly and the fantastic, and combining the aberrant and the quotidian, the modern construct of the grotesque synthesizes contradictions. The grotesque is a liminal concept, occupying gaps and existing on the edges, transgressing and destabilizing boundaries. Highly visual, it is a combinatory creature, a means of combining disparate concepts or objects to challenge established hierarchies of order and stability and to create new ambivalently-encoded composites. A common reaction to these grotesque elements is the compulsion to pull away, to avert one's gaze—the grotesque elicits the desire to escape the discomfort it stirs up in us at the same time that it induces fascination and the inability to look away. This sense of unease is a particular element of the grotesque that contemporary auteur Sofia Coppola exploits in her films in order to elicit specific emotional responses to her subject matter.

Coppola's first three films—*The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Marie Antoinette* (2006)—form a loose trilogy that is thematically related by an interest in what constitutes femininity and how representations of women are socially constructed. A close reading of these films considers the conflation of the female body with the grotesque and the manner in which the transgressive, dislocating, liminal aspects of the grotesque inform Coppola's construction of the female experience. Coppola's work repeatedly foregrounds the inherent correlation of the grotesque with the conception and category of the feminine by considering the interiority of her female characters in opposition to the social constructs surrounding and circumscribing them. "The grotesque is the estranged world," writes Wolfgang Kayser, and Coppola's films are tremendously interested in this

liminal, alienated world and characters that find themselves at divisive points in their lives within this disorienting context.

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Introduction

Idiosyncratic Ambivalence: Sofia Coppola and the Grotesque

“Energy and joy are the father and mother of the grotesque.”

–G.K. Chesterton

"Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn."

–Gore Vidal

“I know it when I see it.”

–Potter Stewart, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice

The most significant—and perhaps telling—aspect of the grotesque is its ineffable nature. Nearly every theoretical work on the grotesque begins by pointing out just how difficult it is to readily establish a definition for the term. Structurally, it is a concept related to satire, irony, caricature, parody; to the bizarre, the absurd, and the macabre. And yet it is none of these things, or any particular combination of these things, exactly.

Wolfgang Kayser spends the first 178 pages of his 1963 landmark text *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* discussing the history and historical uses of the term and establishing the difficulty of a succinct modern definition. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in his 1982 work *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, perhaps most eloquently establishes the problem of attempting to define the term:

Grotesqueries both require and defeat definition: they are neither so regular and rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognize them at all. They stand at a margin

of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles. (3)

Harpham's admission of the tenuous nature of the term itself foregrounds the slippery nature of the associated concept; much like the interminably unanswerable question, "What is art?," what constitutes the grotesque occupies a similarly nebulous space.

Part of the difficulty in pinning down a concrete meaning for the grotesque is that the grotesque itself is a liminal concept, occupying gaps and existing on the boundaries. In *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Frances Connolly asserts, "the grotesque is defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them" (4). She argues that the grotesque, which is a "boundary creature," exists only in relation to the limen, and it is at the boundary, the edge of convention, or the border of expectations where the grotesque is to be found (4). Harpham conceives of the grotesque similarly, claiming the grotesque, a concept which does not "manifest predictable behavior," has no essential property but its own grotesqueness. Further, he typifies it as that which either simultaneously occupies separate yet multiple categories *or* that which occupies the gap *between* categories, and he remarks upon the "impossibility of finding a synonym" for such an ambivalent concept (3). In fact, ambivalence itself is a key factor in determining the grotesque, and contradiction is inherent to establishing the category.

Yet we must move toward some semblance of a working definition for the concept in order to gauge its purpose and usefulness, and considering its historical origins helps

contextualize the contemporary meaning. The term first arose in 15th century Rome, used to describe the fantastical frescoes discovered in the ruins of Nero's Domus Aurea (or Grand Palace) that were unearthed around 1480 (Yates 5). These frescoes combined elements of plants, animals, and men together, featuring "images of beasts fused with animal bodies and birdlike wings," human forms interwoven with plant life and vines, and combinatory mythological creatures such as satyrs, centaurs, and fauns, all which transgressed boundaries and the concept of bodily unity in an amalgamous, intermingled design (Yates 6-7). The term *grotesque* comes from *grotte*, Italian for "caves," which the ruins of the palace were mistaken for during their excavation (Thomson 12, Connelly 5). It was associated with not only these synthetic, combined creatures and imagery but also with the ideas of "earthiness, fertility, darkness, and death"—all connotations of the grotto itself, enclosed, dark, and fecund under the earth's surface (Connelly 5). The term spread from Italy to France and Germany and came to be applied most notably to the visual style of works by Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel as well as being synthesized into the literary works of Dante, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Montaigne. The grotesque influence was also notably evident in the Italian theatrical style known as the *commedia dell'arte* that flourished in the 16th and 17th century (Yates 9-11). It is visible in an evolving, changing form in the later works of Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Beckett, as well as in the visual art movements of Romanticism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Dada, particularly in the works of artists such as Francisco Goya, James Ensor, Otto Dix, and Edvard Munch (Thomson 8-13, Connelly 9-11, Kayser 170-7).

In more modern conceptions, the grotesque—while maintaining a sense of its historical genesis—has evolved and undergone a series of transformations, certain aspects foregrounded and others minimized, and the contemporary definition has been informed by the grotesque’s association with “aspects of experience” such as the “arabesque, abject, *informe*, uncanny, bricolage, carnivalesque, convulsive beauty, and dystopia” (Connelly 5). Yet the elusive grotesque, while related to these concepts, is still distinct from them, perhaps because of the grotesque’s unique combinatory nature. Connelly contextualizes the instability in the definition of the grotesque as related to an instability in the structure of modern life: “the experience of modernity is one of unprecedented disjuncture and shifting boundaries, with the collision of cultures and scientific challenges repeatedly stripping away the veneer of familiar reality from the chaos of raw experience” (2). She further considers the “combinatory grotesque,” which she argues “describes creatures ranging from the centaur to the cyborg,” as a means of combining disparate concepts or objects in order to “challenge established realities or construct new ones” (2).

This notion of the ambivalent embodiment found in the grotesque is fairly universal in modern theorists’ work. Kayser, one of the fathers of the study of the modern grotesque, focuses on the alienating properties of the grotesque and the estranged world that results from them, but he acknowledges that these breakdowns occur as a result of “the fusion of realms which we know to be separated” (185). Mikhail Bakhtin, in his seminal work *Rabelais and His World*, constructs the grotesque as an ever-unfolding creature, one which combines “in one image both the positive and negative poles,” that simultaneously embodies disparity:

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of metamorphosis. (308, 24).

The transformative aspect of the grotesque is crucial to Bahktin's theory, that of the "body in the act of becoming," typified by the location of changes on the edges of the body and the grotesque nature of protuberances that indicate outgrowing one's own self, "transgressing its own body," extending forth from the body to pierce the space around it, whether in the form of large noses, erect phalluses, or pregnant bellies (317).

Philip Thomson, in his succinctly titled work *The Grotesque*, asserts, "the present tendency . . . is to view the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence" (11). He argues the grotesque embodies a "conflation of disparates," and in particular categorizes the grotesque as that which elicits a response that is simultaneously laughable and horrifying or disgusting—"a sense of the comic and something—revulsion, horror, fear—which is incompatible with the comic" (20, 7). Thomson also points out another crucial aspect—that there is nothing abstract about the grotesque, and that it is overwhelmingly visual. The grotesque is instead a concrete, imagistic creature, specific rather than vague, tied to the physical rather than the mental. Thomson argues, "the often intensely physical nature of the grotesque is logical when one

recalls that the term was originally applied to the visual arts” (57). As such, the grotesque is highly applicable to the visual medium of film. Given the discursive, metamorphic, and disorienting nature of the grotesque, it is an excellent framework through which to consider the films of contemporary auteur Sofia Coppola.

Sofia Carmina Coppola—much like the concept of the grotesque—is something of an enigma. Born 14 May 1971, she is an independent filmmaker with a unique visual style, and she has been involved in a host of creative endeavors including fashion design, photography, modeling, acting, and screenwriting. She owns a successful Japanese fashion line called Milk Fed, for which she designs clothes. She worked as a photographer for *French Vogue* and *Allure*, and at eighteen co-wrote with her father, Francis Ford Coppola, and provided costume design for a vignette titled “Life Without Zoe” for the Woody Allen / Martin Scorsese film *New York Stories* (1989) (Hurd 130). In 1994, with Zoe Cassavettes—daughter of famed director John Cassavettes—she co-hosted a cable talk-show called *Hi-Octane* (Cook, “Portrait” 36). Her five feature films released to date—*The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Marie Antoinette* (2006), *Somewhere* (2010), and *The Bling Ring* (2013)—have all garnered critical acclaim and established her as an auteur in her own right. She won an Oscar in 2004 for Best Original Screenplay for *Lost in Translation* and was nominated in the Best Film and Best Director categories as well—the first American woman, and the third woman ever to be nominated for Best Director.

However, despite her achievements and a body of work that should speak for itself, almost every article, review, interview, or mention of her work begins by immediately identifying her as the daughter of famed filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola; though she has

repeatedly asserted her own very unique filmic style, one that has very little in common with that of her father, it would seem she cannot escape those who consider her, first and foremost, her father's daughter. It is true that she has benefitted from her position as part of a filmmaking family—her grandfather Carmine Coppola was a composer for film scores; her aunt Talia Shire is an actress, most notably portraying Adrian Balboa in the *Rocky* series of films and Connie in *The Godfather* series; her mother, Eleanor Coppola, was a scenic designer as well as a documentary and art filmmaker; her brother Roman is a screenwriter, producer, and director of film, commercials, and music videos; and she is cousin to actors Jason Schwartzman and Nicholas Cage. Yet the inability of critics to focus on her own considerable filmmaking skills is a slight to her, a slight male directors such as Jason Reitman, son of Ivan Reitman, do not suffer—reviews of his film *Juno* (2007) mentioned his lineage but never attributed any of the film's success to *his* father.

Despite her forays into other creative endeavors, Sofia was indoctrinated into the family business from the outset, appearing as the infant godson of Michael Corleone in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), her birth conveniently coinciding with filming. She also had a rather disastrous turn in *The Godfather III* (1990) as Mary Corleone, cast by her father after Winona Ryder dropped out of the film, and her performance was panned widely by critics—so reviled that it is often still mentioned alongside reviews of her own films (Palmer 35-6). This family history haunts her; unable to consider Sofia Coppola as a filmmaker in her own right, independent of her family, there is the sense in much criticism written about her that her films are a product of her family rather than the result of any talent on Sofia's part. This was further complicated by her 1999 marriage to fellow

filmmaker Spike Jonze, who directed several popular music videos (most notably, Fatboy Slim's "Weapon of Choice") as well as such films as *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002), and most recently the Oscar-nominated *Her* (2013); critics were eager to attribute her success in film to Jonze, though as Stephanie Zacharek argues, "strangely . . . no one has accused . . . Jonze of riding on the Coppola coattails, even though . . . Jonze's movies have also benefitted from the Coppola family support network" ("Lost in Translation" n.p.).

In his article "Off With Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur," Todd Kennedy does a fantastic job of contextualizing the plethora of criticisms lobbed at Coppola because of her familial ties:

Beginning with the release of *The Virgin Suicides*, critics have often seemed obsessed with her status as the daughter of a major American filmmaker. When critics have felt she has succeeded, it has often been partially attributed to her father, such as Ty Burr's claim that *Lost In Translation's* "quietly charged tone [...] would be unbelievable in a second film if you didn't suspect genetics had a hand." When they feel she has failed, critics often act as if she were unworthy of even making the film, having (they imply) been given the money from—and, amazingly, I quote here (Peter Vonder Haar)—"Daddy." Or, as Dana Stevens writes in *Slate*, "[Coppola] is the privileged little girl in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* whose father, a nut tycoon, makes sure his daughter wins a golden ticket." Essentially, the implication is that Coppola 1) as a woman, only has the ability to make

films because of her economic privilege, 2) only has whatever talent she does possess because of her all-powerful director / father, and 3) because her movies are feminine, can only produce pretty films that “lack depth.”

(39)

Kennedy’s argument highlights the reductive, patriarchal motivation behind these criticisms and the pervasive attitude toward Coppola as a female filmmaker in a Hollywood system that privileges male directors and marginalizes women. Pam Cook is somewhat more circumspect in her assessment of the critical reception of Sofia Coppola, yet also acknowledges the mixed gift Coppola’s lineage has been for the young director:

On one hand, it has provided her with artistic credentials, on the other, her father’s monumental status in American cinema is frequently used as a measure of her own achievements. Moreover, the aura of privilege surrounding the Coppola name has sometimes aroused disproportionate envy and malice in critics. (“Authorship” 480-1)

The Hollywood machine has not been particularly kind to Coppola as a filmmaker, yet she has continued to make films that defy convention and share a unique visual style, establishing her as an auteur in her own right. Her films can easily be read as having autobiographical significance, a perception that Coppola does not necessarily dissuade audiences from: “Coppola does not discourage the idea that viewers may read personal inferences into the characters and storylines. There is a tension in her work between the observational distance of documentary and the intimacy of home movies” (“Portrait” 36). Her work is intimate, with an aura of the confessional to it, and her films have earned her

a place alongside new American Smart Cinema directors such as contemporaries Wes Anderson, Noah Baumbach, Tamara Jenkins, Paul Thomas Anderson, Richard Linklater, and, inevitably, ex-husband Spike Jonze (Palmer 40, 50; Cook, “Authorship” 480). Her films, particularly the first three full-length features—*The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Marie Antoinette*—on which I will focus, all share not only a visual style but also an overwhelming concern with the liminal, the interstitial, and the transitory.

This interest in Coppola’s films on the marginality of the female experience and the larger figuration and circumscription of the feminine by the world at large links her work tidily with the ambivalent, unformed nature of the grotesque. In the online journal *Senses of Cinema*, Anna Rogers contextualizes Coppola’s work as concerned with the social aspect of cultural rituals and the alienation that often arises because of them, as well as being concerned with the human experiences of the fringe in such alienated spaces:

Alongside a recognizable visual approach, Coppola has also demonstrated an interest in liminal situations, rites of passage and marginal groups of people. It is the person in transition, who is in between things and is undecided about what to do, that interests Coppola. Her protagonists are unformed characters in crisis at bifurcation points and open to the changeable flux of the world. As a filmmaker, then, her specialty is visually mapping the world of someone who is lost in his environment, who is alienated from those surrounding him and, for want of a better phrase, suffering an existential crisis. (N.p.)

Given that Kayser characterizes the grotesque as “the estranged world,” rooted in transformation and alienation, and that Bahktin’s construction of the grotesque centers around a body “in the act of becoming,” it becomes natural to consider Coppola’s films within the construct of the grotesque (Kayser 184, Bahktin 317).

In Coppola’s polarizing yet nonetheless successful career making “feminine” films, she has consistently foregrounded an honest, realistic female experience. *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Marie Antoinette*—which R. Barton Palmer describes as Coppola’s “Young Girls Trilogy,” a loosely-bounded trilogy that shares theme, tone, and “transtextual connections”—all explore the social expectations placed on young women, as well as investigating the ways in which women are constructed as sexual objects (42). Margaret Miles, in her essay “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque,” argues that there is an inescapable ascription of the grotesque to the figuration of woman, particularly as women are considered objects in relation to men, are circumscribed into socially-approved behaviors and appearance, and as women’s bodies are conceived as essentially and inextricably sexual, the very personification of the penetrable, grotesque body (91-2). Coppola’s exploration of these aspects of femininity and culture allow for a rather natural and beneficial consideration of the grotesque in relation to her films, one which helps unpack the way women are viewed not only in film, but also in the wider social construct of our world.

Chapter 1

“I keep your picture upon the wall, it hides a nasty stain that's lying there”: *The Virgin*

Suicides and the Grotesque Feminine Mystique

“As a means of contrast with the sublime, the grotesque is, in our view, the richest source that nature can offer.”

-Victor Hugo

“Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”

-Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

“On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope” (Eugenides 3). Thus begins Jeffery Eugenides’ 1993 debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides*. This gripping opening immediately thrusts the reader into the story, a beginning that reveals the ending with the very first sentence. The first chapter, previously released as a short story in the Winter 1990 issue of *The Paris Review* (also titled “The Virgin Suicides”), won Eugenides the 1991 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction (Rubin n.p.). When the full novel was released in 1993, it was lauded by critics as a threnody of the dissolution and corruption of the American Dream. In Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* review of the novel, she calls it transporting, “by turns lyrical and portentous, ferocious and elegiac” (n.p.). Suzanne Berne, in her review of the paperback release, claims “Mr. Eugenides is blessed with the storyteller’s most magical gift, the ability to transform the mundane into the extraordinary” (n.p.). No one-trick pony, Eugenides went on to greater

successes, most notably his bestselling, critically acclaimed novel *Middlesex* that won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize. Yet *The Virgin Suicides*, with its timeless themes of adolescent obsession and turmoil, remains popular even in reprinting and is included on many reading lists at both high schools and colleges (Rubin n.p.). The novel, a sort of inverted bildungsroman, tells the story of the five Lisbon daughters—Cecilia, Lux, Mary, Bonnie, and Therese—and their titular suicides over the course of a 1970s summer in Michigan. The book is narrated from a first person plural point of view, and the events all unfold as filtered through the perspective of a collectively anonymous group of neighborhood boys who are obsessed with the mystery that the Lisbon girls represent.

Introduced to the novel by a music industry friend, Sofia Coppola fell in love with the story and found herself drawn to the characters of the Lisbon sisters. Through her connections in the film industry, Coppola was appalled to discover that a *Virgin Suicides* “screenplay was being written to include additions of sex and violence to the narrative” (Hurd 131). Eager to maintain “the innocence and sweetness she found in the book, and all the while try to visually reproduce the elegance of Eugenides’ writing,” against the advice of her father she wrote her own adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* and did so knowing that another director had optioned the rights to the novel (Hurd 131). This gamble paid off for Coppola, however, as she was able to secure the rights and get funding for the film through American Zoetrope, her father’s production company. Coppola’s film—her first feature length work—premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1999, and was released in the US in 2000. At the time of the film’s release, Coppola was only twenty-eight.

The film adaptation closely follows the novel in terms of plot, and her version is widely considered by critics a faithful one. Indeed, it is easy to imagine the story held personal significance for Coppola; there is a parallel easily drawn between the lives of the Lisbon sisters, minutely observed and dissected by the neighborhood boys, and the life of Coppola, who grew up as the daughter of a famed auteur and experienced something of life under the microscope herself. Coupled with her grief over her oldest brother Gian Carlo's untimely death at twenty-two as a result of a speedboat accident, the novel presented a compelling and personal project for Coppola (Fuller n.p). Her adaptation of the novel maintains its tone, and despite the change of medium, most plot elements of the novel appear in the film as well. Clear in the film is Coppola's tenderness toward the source material, and her fidelity to the novel might well be a result of directing from her own adaptation.

Coppola follows Eugenides' blueprint in avoiding any explicit explanation for the girls' suicides, instead leaving the acts ambiguous and inscrutable. Mark Olsen notes:

Eugenides' novel and Coppola's film in turn are not concerned with explaining the exact details and motivations of the event. Tinged with a stately death-march pace that stems from the divulged outcome from the start, both film and novel are touched by a sad sympathy for the boys' obsession, while allowing the girls to remain inscrutably unknowable. (n.p.)

Yet in his essay "Love Story, or Coppola vs. Coppola," Bert Cardullo criticizes this very mystery: "[W]here adolescent suicide is concerned, *The Virgin Suicides* describes the symptom of teen *angst* but doesn't penetrate any cause outside the family circle" (463).

When he goes on to argue that the “five girls (like their parents) have no inner life or spiritual depth,” lack any connection to the larger scope of the world, and are thus unworthy of an audience’s interest, it begs the question: is Cardullo merely being too enthusiastic in his desire to map Sofia’s films onto her father’s, or is he willfully misunderstanding the very structure of the film? In Coppola’s construction, the girls are only remembered images, pieced together through the evidence collected by the neighborhood boys, existing only as objects of their collective gaze. Cardullo likewise dismisses the 1975 setting as “irrelevant,” again missing the point; the specificity of that time period is tremendously important to the atmosphere and context of the film. Coppola renders a mythically gothic suburbia, complete with wood paneling on both the walls and the station wagons and a dogged façade of cheerfulness that belies the corrosive gossip that infects the community alongside the Dutch Elm disease that is claiming all the trees. This epidemic of diseased trees—yet another problem with the world that pains young Cecilia—is a “symptom of rottenness,” grotesque itself, the uncanniness of a mysterious and invisible disease causing the preventative removal of trees that may not even be infected (Rogers n.p.). Backgrounded by other symptoms of rottenness—the withdrawal of the US from Vietnam and the Watergate scandal that caused President Nixon to resign in 1974—the idyllic days of innocence were coming to an end, both for America and for the neighborhood boys and the Lisbon girls, poised on the cusp of adulthood. The demise of the Lisbon girls deliberately echoes the demise of suburbia, or rather the American Suburban Utopic dream, and Cardullo’s dismissal of any connection between the setting and the story is grating.

With her photographer's eye and what seems an instinctive talent for relating emotion through the medium of film, Coppola preserves Eugenides' moody nostalgia and the somewhat sour taste of youthful idealism filtered through an adult perspective. She maintains the anonymous plural perspective from the novel, and Giovanni Ribisi's understated and rueful voiceover throughout the film is often lifted directly from Eugenides' prose. She makes inventive choices when translating the elements of literature to the screen; in place of the emotionally informed prose, she inserts dreamy, sun-flecked shots of the girls, often abstracted, as viewed through the fantasy of the boys who watch them. Coppola is acutely aware that the story, after all, really belongs to the boys, and it is entirely through their reconstruction of the Lisbon girls that we know them; the girls are constructed by the boys through what Laura Mulvey terms the "controlling and curious gaze" (835). The girls are the subject of the scopophilic gaze, turned into objects by the boys' desires.

To drive home the point, Coppola creates non-diegetic moments of montage: superimposed images of sun-dappled lens flares, blonde hair glinting in the air, popsicles staining lips, unicorns and fluffy clouds melding into an emotional series of imagery that, though relying on what Ann Rogers terms "the deliberate and audacious use of the cliché," exploits the shorthand of these clichés to comment on nostalgia as well as on the youthful idealism of the boys who love the Lisbon sisters—"the manifestations of a collective cultural memory of girlhood" (Rogers n.p., Woodworth 146). Following Cecilia's death, as Coppola's camera wanders over the detritus of these girls' lives—stockings draped over railings, dresses and nightgowns strewn about, stuffed animals and glittery stickers

alongside plates of decayed half-eaten food—the collected impact of these items provides the viewer with an immediate understanding of the increasing entropy of the Lisbon household. Coppola’s use of these visual tropes interprets the text in what Dudley Andrew terms the crucial move in adaptation “from perception toward signification,” and the connotative meanings of both Eugenides’ prose and Coppola’s imagery are consistent (424-5).

Nevertheless, in his *New York Times* review film critic A.O. Scott takes the novel to task for exactly these elements:

To read *The Virgin Suicides* is to succumb to a hazy linguistic daydream. Its narrator is a collective pronoun; its ending is given away in the first sentence. And its main characters—the five sisters who take their own lives for reasons that remain mysterious—are sacramental, sacrificial figures, more like creatures of fantasy or legend than American teenagers. (n.p.)

He then argues that in translation to film, the novel requires Coppola to “create a feature film essentially without characters or a story, and to hold the viewer’s interest through moods, associations, and resonant images,” and furthermore levels the reductive charge of “aestheticism” at the novel (n.p.). Though Scott lambasts Eugenides’ novel, he applauds Coppola’s handling of the material in film, calling her implementation of these fantasy montages evidence of her “plucky fearlessness;” yet simultaneously he complains of the lack of reality in the film and criticizes its “arty detachment” (n.p.).

Scott’s seemingly inconsistent opinion of the film—appreciation for Coppola’s use of fantasy yet his derogatory view on the film’s lack of reality—is in stark contrast to other

noted film critics' assessments of the adaptation. Roger Ebert reviewed the film favorably, commending what he calls Coppola's courageous direction that avoids the pitfall of attempting to over-explain or to provide viewers with an explicit interpretation but rather allows for the "air of mystery and loss that hangs in the air like bitter poignancy" (649).

Stephanie Zacharek, a long-time film critic for *Salon* and now principal film critic for *The Village Voice*, contends that Coppola improves upon the source material; Zacharek makes the argument that Eugenides' novel, while beautifully written, is "so obsessively detailed that by the end it's almost unreadable," but that Coppola instead distills the poetic quality of the prose from the "excess, laden moisture" of the novel, asserting that Coppola "faithfully, but not slavishly" translates the best features of the novel to the screen.

Furthermore, Zacharek commends Coppola's earnestness toward the source material:

There's no irony in Coppola's treatment; she nabs all of the book's humor without layering on too many smirks or ironic winks. She connects with the essential purity of Eugenides' story, stripping it down to its bare essentials and cutting straight to everything that's wonderful about it. It's a movie adaptation that's filled with love. (n.p.)

Zacharek's *Salon* review is also the only one of *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *British Film Institute*, and *Sight and Sound* to make note of the intriguing gender perspectives at work in this adaptation. That *The Virgin Suicides* is a feature film release both adapted and directed by a woman is unusual enough to be worth mentioning, but the novel, written by a man, centers on a group of boys who foreground the Lisbon sisters in their story, while the film adaptation, penned by a woman, focuses more on the group of

boys and portrays the Lisbon girls as a construct of their collective gaze. Zacharek alone notes, “what’s interesting in particular about *The Virgin Suicides* isn’t just that it was made by a woman, but that it’s a case of a woman’s adapting a novel about a group of young men’s nostalgia for the unattainable girls of their youth” (n.p.). She goes on to commend the “feminine sensibility” of the film, an element that is inescapably obvious upon viewing, yet an aesthetic that goes unremarked in the other film reviews from major male critics. *The Virgin Suicides* is often compared to other films about the disillusionment embodied by the construct of suburbia, most notably Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* (1997), Todd Haynes’ *Safe* (1995), Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999), and David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), yet the fact of Coppola’s gender and any discussion of the rarity of successful female directors in Hollywood becomes a curious elision in analyses of the film.

The film, like the book, begins with the suicide attempt of Cecilia (Hannah Hall), who, at thirteen, is the youngest Lisbon daughter. Coppola establishes the setting and atmosphere through a series of opening shots—a blonde teen girl finishes a popsicle while standing in a sedate suburban street; a woman in a sweater set waters her manicured flowerbeds; two women in dresses walk past elegant brick houses with a dog. The fourth image, that of two workmen posting a removal notice on a large tree, is backgrounded by the increasingly discernible sound of an approaching siren. This is the first indication that something in this otherwise idyllic setting is amiss; the siren grows in volume and proximity throughout the following shots of a young boy shooting hoops while his father grills burgers and a shot of the sun through the gold-tinged halo of leaves blowing in a light breeze. These halcyon sunset-tinged shots stand out in acute contrast to the successive shots

of the interior of a house, a frosted window framing feminine toiletry items such as perfumes, lipsticks, nail polish, glittery stickers, an eyelash curler, and, somewhat incongruously, a rosary wrapped around a bottle, the figure of Christ suspended in front of pastel blue. This image, our introduction to the Lisbon house, is bathed in a cool, blue light, the polar opposite of the previous warm, golden establishing shots. Here also begins the narration: “Cecilia was the first to go.”

Coppola’s camera then cuts to a shot of Cecilia calmly lying in the bathtub, the water rising up her face, her hair floating around her head like a halo. Her eyes stare emptily out into space, and the water in the tub around her is stained pink—the fact of her suicide attempt by cutting her wrists is clear from the first moments we see her, and the cold, blue-hued interior of her watery would-be grave stands out in sharp contrast to the golden 1970s suburban American dream presented in the preceding imagery. This introduction—a mere 1:30 into the film—has already established the grotesque element with which Coppola imbues the work. Here the audience has already witnessed the stark contrast of the interior space versus the exterior world and the violation of the wholeness of the body by the opening of veins. Cecilia lies still, staring at nothing, a slow drip from the faucet the only sound inside her space; in her act of attempted suicide she is as calm as the world outside around her, and the disparate, disharmonious element is the frenetic siren that approaches. In this first image of Cecilia Lisbon, we see what Philip Thomson refers to as the “ambivalently abnormal” (24). He argues:

The essentially abnormal nature of the grotesque, and the direct and often radical manner in which this abnormality is presented, is responsible

perhaps more than anything else for the not infrequent condemnation of the grotesque as offensive and uncivilized, as an affront to decency and an outrage to ‘reality’ and ‘normality’—or, expressed in the less obviously moralistic language of aesthetic criticism, as tasteless and gratuitous distortion or forced, meaningless exaggeration. (26)

Cecilia is caught in what Julia Kristeva terms the border of her “condition as a living being” and of “death infecting life” (3-4). Her calm attempt at suicide, the still waters of the bathtub growing pink with blood, the approaching siren encroaching on the tranquil summer afternoon—these are the distortions that subvert the otherwise utopic rendering of the 1970s Detroit suburbs.

Later at the hospital, Cecilia lies in a bed hooked up to an IV. The gray-haired male doctor looms in the frame, slightly out of focus, his back to the camera. We are left to see only Cecilia over his shoulder, her wrists bandaged tidily as if trying to erase the aberration of her act, one that emphasizes what Frances Connelly terms the “dissolution of bodies” that subverts the notion of ideal form and subconsciously elicits horror (2). Even as the doctor speaks, his out of focus back remains to the viewer, and Cecilia is all we have to look at; the shot forces us to acknowledge her suicide attempt. The doctor asks her, “What are you doing here, honey? You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets.” Her deadpan reply—“Obviously, doctor, you’ve never been a thirteen year old girl”—brings the grotesque nature of adolescence and femininity into sharp focus. Adolescence itself is a seemingly interminable period of drastic bodily changes, particularly for girls, and the onset of menses and development of secondary sex characteristics contributes to the chaotic

disunity of the body and the erratic transformations that mark the liminal space between child and adult.

In her work *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, Mary Russo contextualizes the grotesque body as one that is “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing” (8). These characteristics are classic elements of the unstable adolescent body, constantly volatile and shifting. Connelly terms this the “metamorphic grotesque,” arguing that “this grotesque can combine or deform in the same way as its static counterparts, but the metamorphic exists in the process, the ‘morphing’ from one thing or form to another” (3). This transitory adolescent period also relates to Bakhtin’s view of the body in flux: “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). In her position as an adolescent girl attempting suicide, Cecilia Lisbon represents not only the grotesque, changing female body in flux, but also embodies the abnormality and the abjection of one who endeavors to violate the unity of the body with the attempt (and eventual success) of ending her life.

Though Coppola’s camera treats Cecilia with tenderness, like *Eugenides* she offers no real motivation for Cecilia’s actions, and by leaving it an unresolved act Coppola foregrounds the grotesque nature of the impending inevitable tragedy. As Thomson notes, it is the importance of “the *unresolved* nature of the grotesque conflict” that helps demarcate the grotesque from other literary modes, and the looming suicides of the five young girls permeate the narrative (21). The audience views post-suicide-attempt Cecilia with a sense of horror and with the dread that comes from the foreknowledge, revealed in

the very first line of the film voiceover, that she will in fact be successful. When Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon allow the girls to throw a party—"the first and only party of their short lives," the narrator tells us—Therese covers Cecilia's bandages with a plethora of tacky plastic bracelets in garish colors, taping the bracelets over the white bandages that cover her wounds. With her plastic-wrapped wrists cupped in her lap against the antique wedding dress that Cecilia is compulsively clad in, and coupled with her complete abject detachment at the desperately cheerful yet overwhelmingly awkward party held in the basement, she is the embodiment of the unresolved conflict and of the comedic horror that Thomson speaks of—the disharmonious "conflation of disparate" of the gaudy, childish bracelets covering her self-inflicted wounds, of her tiny, thirteen-year-old body clad in a lacy wedding dress, and of her tangible sorrow sharply contrasted against the optimistically forced cheerfulness of her sisters. In fact, the only smile she offers during the party is when Bonnie brings Joe—a young man with Down's syndrome—over to say hello to Cecilia; however, her smile quickly fades when the neighborhood boys and her sisters crowd around and begin making fun of Joe. Her pain at the mocking of a fellow grotesque figure—one whose grotesque nature is outwardly apparent rather than inwardly, like hers—incites her to action. This is when she drifts away, pulling off the bracelets covering her wrists and asking to be excused. She escapes upstairs, and a few moments later the sound of a loud thud interrupts the party; Cecilia has thrown herself off the roof onto a wrought-iron fence, finally succeeding at ending her young life. Her impaled body has bare wrists; she has removed the bandages that hide her wounds from the world, a last act of defiance and a refusal to allow the façade to continue.

Throughout the film, the sisters are portrayed as grotesques themselves. The boys—whose experiences through which the girls are constructed—see the girls as beautiful, yet mysteriously unknowable. In the boys’ adolescent, naïve conception of the girls as otherworldly objects of desire, the Lisbon daughters’ very femininity is represented as inherently monstrous. One key instance of this construction of femininity as alien and grotesque is when Peter Sisten, one of the neighborhood boys, joins the family for dinner. He excuses himself to use the restroom, and in Cecilia’s bedroom and in the girls’ bathroom he encounters objects of teenage girlhood that he looks at both in awe and fear. He tiptoes through the bedroom, littered with drawings, candles, religious iconography, tarot cards, a tea set, stuffed animals, Nancy Drew mysteries, and a pair of abandoned white panties with small flowers on them. In the bathroom the shelves are littered with beauty products, talcum powders, nail polish, lipsticks, and perfume bottles, one of which Peter touches carefully with something between reverence and trepidation. He opens a cabinet door draped with stockings and is confronted by a towering pile of tampons—both regular and super absorbencies, in boxes and loose—taking up a huge area in the shot, framed by baby oil, deodorant, and hair products.

In this cabinet Peter is confronted by the reality of this femininity he finds so mysterious and powerful in the abstract, and by the idea of these girls—moments before merely objects of his desires and fantasies—as living, bleeding creatures who have a life behind closed doors, out of his line of sight. He is confronted by what Barbara Creed calls in her essay “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” a *polluting object*: “polluting objects fall into two categories: excremental, which threatens identity

from the outside, and menstrual, which threatens from within” (50). Creed is responding to Kristeva’s seminal *Powers of Horror: Essay on Abjection*, in which Kristeva argues:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (71)

Confronted with these dangers subliminally inherent in the concept of menstruation, Peter shakes his head, blinks, closes the door on this reality of femaleness, and instead picks up a lipstick off the sink and smells it, closing his eyes rapturously and fantasizing of Lux’s face, backlit in a golden haze, tossing her hair and pursing her lips. He rejects the reality represented by the feminine hygiene products, used to staunch the flow of blood in a body involved in grotesque acts Russo calls “open, protruding, extended, secreting,” a “body of becoming, process, and change,” and instead picks up the lipstick, a cosmetic item that is painted on the surface of the lips, calling to mind the “Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek” (62-3). The instability of the menstruating body is rejected in favor of the wholesome fantasy of subservient femininity displayed for men through both the conscription of cosmetics and docile sexual compliance. That his reverie is interrupted by Lux knocking at the door saying she needs something and then going to the cabinet of tampons shocks Peter so much that he literally runs out of the

house. Mulvey reminds us, “woman’s desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound,” and Peter flees from this reality (834).

For the most part the girls also function as a unit, viewed by the boys as an indistinguishable mass of blonde hair and pale limbs, all objects of desire fixed in the boys’ gaze. Lux only manages to distinguish herself from her sisters by subverting the constructed fantasy of the Lisbon girls; she accompanies the oversexualized school stud Trip Fontaine to the homecoming dance and then has sex with him on the football field, yet afterward he leaves her behind, alone and defiled, out past curfew. This is the inciting action that drives Mrs. Lisbon to sequester the girls, withdrawing them from school, and by doing so she treats the girls just as the neighborhood boys do—by considering them as one entity, indistinguishable. This construction of the Lisbon daughters as a single functioning unit is a grotesque distortion itself, and approaches what Frances Connelly refers to as the “combinatory grotesque”:

Acknowledging that any attempt to define the grotesque is a contradiction in terms, we begin with three actions, or processes at work in the grotesque image, actions that are both destructive and constructive. Images gathered under the grotesque rubric include those that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic. (2)

Though Connelly is considering cyborgs and centaurs and modern art’s tendency toward collage, this notion of the combinatory grotesque also speaks to the constant abstraction of the Lisbon daughters as a conglomeration. By codifying the girls as a unit, each one’s

individual identity is destroyed and they are recombined and constructed as an uneasy amalgam; all discrete personal identity is deformed and destroyed. This is explicitly visually conveyed following the death of Cecilia; when the Lisbon's priest pays the family a visit he finds the girls sprawled silently together in a bedroom, limbs intertwined in a "haphazard starfish shape on the floor," silent and unmoving (Zacharek n.p.). Coppola composes the tableau of the girls wracked with grief in a deliberately amorphous arrangement, arms and legs spilling across one another, a somber mass of blonde hair and sorrow.

Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon themselves are likewise portrayed as differing versions of grotesques. Mr. Lisbon, the sole man in the household, is outnumbered six to one and stands no chance against the tidal wave of estrogen that accompanies his wife and daughters. He is a pathetic figure, pitiable in his emasculation within his household, a complete subversion of the masculine ideal. His wife makes the decisions in the house and his utter acquiescence to her will has clearly taken a toll on his ability to relate to other people. He is never more pathetic than when surrounded by other males—Peter Sisten runs out of the house as Mr. Lisbon tries to show him an airfoil, and during the party Mr. Lisbon tries to interest some of the neighborhood boys in the World War II airplane models he makes, explaining the fighting maneuverability of each plane, but the boys all drift away in the middle of his explanations, uninterested. When Father Moody visits following Cecilia's suicide, Mr. Lisbon is sitting alone watching a baseball game on TV; unable to face his feelings, he deflects the priest's concern with the baseball game, even when he clearly wants to say something or find some comfort. His awkward disconnect is both comedic and pitiable, and he represents the "much corrupted or shuffled familiarity"

of the notion of the strong American father as the head of the household and master of his domain (Harpham 5).

Mrs. Lisbon, who is never personalized by a first name, runs the Lisbon household with an understated steeliness. Her unquestioned rule is a subtle interpretation of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, a subversion of the "usual official way of life" in her dominance over the husband, who—particularly in the 1970s suburban construct—would traditionally be acknowledged as the head of the household (8). Furthermore, contrasted against her daughters she is the crone figure, embittered by her loss of youth and wholly controlling in her efforts to confine the girls' maturation; Bakhtin points out the grotesqueness coded in her shifting, aging body that moves toward death:

On the other hand, in the process of degeneration and disintegration the positive pole of grotesque realism . . . drops out and is replaced by moral sententiousness and abstract concepts. What remains is nothing but a corpse, old age deprived of pregnancy, equal to itself alone; it is alienated and torn away from the whole in which it had been linked to that other, younger link in the chain of growth and development. (53)

Mrs. Lisbon—a staunch catholic and always severely dressed, her only adornment a small gold crucifix—is, in Graham Fuller's words, "vengefully jealous of her girls' sexuality now that her own beauty has waned" and has embraced this "moral sententiousness" of the old woman and attempts to deny or at least control the youth of the girls (15). She goes to great lengths to yoke the developing sexuality of her daughters, particularly Lux—she makes Lux put a sweater over her tank top when Peter joins the family for dinner, and while the

family is watching TV with Trip, she notices Trip looking at Lux's bare foot, caressing the tabletop, and admonishes Lux. When she does allow the girls to go to the homecoming dance as a unit, she makes their dresses, the anonymous narrator remarking, "Mrs. Lisbon added an inch to the bust line, and two inches to the waist and hem, and the dresses came out as four identical sacks." The dresses are in fact four nearly-indistinguishable ankle-length swathes of loose matching white floral print, another tool of repressing sexuality and individuality amongst the girls.

Following the death of Cecilia, Mrs. Lisbon retreats into solitude; when Father Moody visits, he finds her in her bedroom, sitting silently on the edge of the bed, clad in a bathrobe with her back to the door. Standing in the doorway, Father Moody tells Mrs. Lisbon that he has listed Cecilia's death as an accident (lest she be abjured by the Catholic Church as a suicide). He maintains his position in the liminal space of the doorway the entire time, emphasizing the relation between the liminal, the grotesque, and the abject—all terms embodying blurred boundaries between disparate elements. The camera lingers on him as he speaks, avoiding Mrs. Lisbon; her grief is so consuming, so abhorrent that like the monster in a horror film the camera avoids showing her until the last possible moment. When the camera does finally cut to Mrs. Lisbon, her back is presented to the camera, and she barely turns her head and nods shakily in acknowledgement of the priest's words. Creed helps contextualize this reluctance of the camera to show the subject, and the only partial view the audience does get once the camera shows Mrs. Lisbon:

The horror film puts the viewing subject's sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too

threatening or horrific to watch, when the abject threatens to draw the viewing subject to the place “where meaning collapses,” the place of death. By not-~~looking~~, the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstitute the “self” which is threatened with disintegration. (65)

In treating Mrs. Lisbon like the monstrous figure in a horror film, Coppola situates her abjection as a form of the grotesque, the maternal life-bearing body locked in struggle with death and grief, the very viewing of her an affront to a whole sense of self. This disharmonious conflict is what Thomson calls an “expression of a profound sense of dislocation,” and in the figure of Mrs. Lisbon it is easy to recognize the relationship between the abject and the grotesque. Kristeva argues that it is not “a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). Mrs. Lisbon’s grief disrupts her identity with incapacitation, interrupts the order of the household (the plates of half-eaten food and clothing littering the stairs as Father Moody ascends), and upsets the larger social system around the Lisbon household as the neighborhood men struggle to remove the fence Cecilia threw herself upon while the neighborhood women gossip and speculate about Mrs. Lisbon and Cecilia’s reasons.

As the film continues the world Coppola presents becomes increasingly grotesque. A news special about teenage suicide inspired by Cecilia’s death airs on the local television station, and the girl being interviewed tells a story of baking a pie with rat poison in it that she planned to eat but that her grandmother found first; her story first elicits a strong pathos that is quickly tempered by an undercurrent of humor, the story becoming so

ridiculous that what was pitiable becomes simultaneously hilarious. When the camera cuts away from the television screen to show the neighborhood woman, sitting motionless on her floral-print couch in her pastel room with a martini in hand, the scene quickly reveals itself to be what Thomson calls the union of the “comic and the terrifying,” as well as a perfect example of his construct of the “satiric-grotesque” (21, 42). When the Lisbon girls invite the boys over to aid what the boys think is an escape, the girls instead use them as witnesses to their synchronized acts of suicide. They find Bonnie’s body hanging in the basement, the previous location of the awkward party the night of Cecilia’s suicide, deflated balloons still hanging macabrely from ribbons; only Bonnie’s feet are shown, swinging free in saddle shoes, the camera again avoiding the entirety of the abject figure. As the boys flee the house, they jump over Mary’s body, her legs sticking out from the oven where she has chosen the Plath method; again, only her legs are shown. When Lux’s body is found sitting in the running car in a closed garage, only her arm hanging out of the window is visible.

The bodies of these young girls with so much life ahead of them are only excerpted, hinted at, much like their reasoning in choosing death. Kristeva writes, “[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (4). These abject corpses embody Bakhtin’s construction of the grotesque as inverted and debased: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). This degraded concept of the grotesque blends with the satiric in the scene of the debutante ball following the suicides.

A foul odor permeates the air throughout the neighborhood, as if the idea of the innocence of adolescence were material and had literally rotted and putrefied; as such, a theme of “asphyxiation” is chosen for the coming out party and guests are seen in formal attire wearing gas masks remade into a grotesque couture, tools of wartime dipped in glitter and carried by teenage girls in white dresses. The whole debutante ball scene is a tenuous amalgam of uncanniness, absurdity, macabre humor, grotesque costuming, satiric depictions of the upper-middle class, and a sense of abjection permeating the *mise en scène* as a result of the smell, conveyed visually by a sickly green tint throughout the scene.

The Virgin Suicides uses the grotesque to comment upon the nostalgic concept of the 1970s declining suburban pipe dream, upon the inherent instabilities of adolescence, and upon the construct of idealized fantasy versus a visceral reality. The use of the grotesque motif throughout the film imbues an otherwise somber work with an undercurrent of simultaneous irreverence and creates in the audience an ambivalence regarding the encoded postmodern subversion of unity and wholeness. The grotesque creates a particular tension throughout the film that leaves us uneasy, eager to look away yet—like the neighborhood boys—too fascinated to do so. Coppola offers us no explanation to the mystery of why, instead leaving us adrift in a sea of questions and possible answers, “unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd” (Kayser 185).

Chapter 2

“More than this, you know there’s nothing”: The Liminal Disconnect of *Lost in Translation*

"Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous—to poetry. But also, it gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd."

-Thomas Mann

“N is for Neville, who died of ennui.”

-Edward Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*

A meditation on the loneliness of the estranged world, 2003’s *Lost In Translation* was Coppola’s next project. The film stars Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson as Bob and Charlotte, two jet-lagged Americans adrift in Tokyo who strike up an unexpected association. Unlike *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation* was an entirely original endeavor, and Coppola not only directed the film but also conceived and wrote the screenplay. Though still an independent film, *Lost in Translation* went on to gross over \$120 million worldwide, as opposed to *The Virgin Suicides*’s modest \$10 million gross. *Lost in Translation* is what Jesse Fox Mayshark refers to as “an unlikely hit,” a film full of contradiction and dislocation:

It is full of long shots and careful silences. The movie is as much about what doesn’t happen as what does, and the hows and whys of it. It’s also about being in an unfamiliar place (in this case Tokyo), and the excitement and isolation of unfamiliarity It’s not a comedy, but it is often funny. It’s a drama where nothing very dramatic happens. (173)

Both profitable and critically acclaimed, it was also nominated for four Academy Awards in 2004: Best Actor (Bill Murray), Best Director (Sofia Coppola), Best Picture, and Best Original Screenplay (Mayshark 173, "Lost"). The only women who had previously received a Best Director nomination were Lina Wertmuller and Jane Campion, and Coppola was the first American female nominated for the award. Though she lost the Best Director Oscar to Peter Jackson, Coppola won for Best Original Screenplay, legitimizing her as a filmmaker in her own right and not just as her father's daughter (Hurd 132, Mayshark 173).

Lost in Translation is the story of Bob Harris, a mid-fifties American movie star who finds himself fading both personally and professionally, and of fellow displaced American Charlotte, a recent Yale philosophy graduate adrift in her life. Bob is in Tokyo to film commercials for Suntory Whiskey, and Charlotte is there accompanying her photographer husband on assignment to shoot a rock band. Bob and Charlotte both spend their nights awake, passing the time with television in a language they can't understand, unsuccessful attempts to communicate with their spouses, and long contemplative silences staring out the windows of the hermetically sealed environment of their hotel. The two cross paths in the cloistered, posh yet sterile environment of the Park Hyatt, and one night in the highly Americanized hotel bar they connect over their shared insomnia and bemusedly detached worldviews-in-crisis. They share a real connection, both adrift amidst a frenetic culture they don't understand yet also both alienated by their marriages and by American culture. Bob and Charlotte forge a friendship tinged with a tenuous romance, a tension unconsummated but rather sublimated through an eroticized connection. When at last

Bob leaves Tokyo to return to his wife and family, he sees Charlotte walking through a crowd and jumps from the car to pursue her. He pulls her close in an embrace, and the camera lingers on his face; he whispers in her ear, but the viewing audience cannot hear what is being said—we are left only with their embrace, the reaction on Charlotte's face, and the ambiguity of a kiss that might be either romantic or platonic. John R. Clark discusses discordant endings such as this one, arguing they are a way of “inducing discomposure in an audience by tampering with a story's climax and finale” (83). Inscrutably, the moment is completely left open to interpretation.

The film, including (and perhaps particularly) the ambiguous ending, was well received by critics, most of whom were enchanted by Coppola's refreshing genre-bucking refusal to follow romantic comedy tropes. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* claims that Coppola “shows the ardent assurance of a born filmmaker,” praising her nuance at capturing the cultural disconnect of being “a stranger in a strange land.” Further, he commends not only her direction but also her role as writer: “Coppola has found her voice with this artfully evanescent original screenplay” (n.p.). Roger Ebert also praises Coppola's facile directing style and her resistance to the classic Hollywood convention of the May-December romance: “*Lost in Translation* is too smart and thoughtful to be the kind of movie where they go to bed and we're supposed to accept that as the answer. Sofia Coppola, who wrote and directed, doesn't let them off the hook that easily. They share something as personal as their feelings rather than something as generic as their genitals” (Ebert n.p.). *Salon's* Stephanie Zacharek also cites the “magnificent and delicate” film's

genre-slippage: “*Lost in Translation* is a love story but not a romance, a picture that fits into no identifiable genre because there’s no category fluid enough to properly cradle it” (n.p.).

Zacharek’s appreciation for the film’s unusual pacing and narrative style suffuses her review of the film, and she once again defends Coppola’s filmmaking against the pervasive attitude that Coppola’s films are more a result of her familial lineage than any inherent talent, as well as pointing out the hypocritical Hollywood gender politics at play:

Lost in Translation is Coppola’s second movie, and it marks her as one of our most gifted filmmakers (of either gender). Her first picture, the elegiac and gorgeously made *The Virgin Suicides*, was cautiously praised by some critics, but I remember encountering . . . plenty of people who took glee in cutting it down, basing their arguments not on the specifics of the movie but on their convenient perception that Coppola was able to make movies only because she had a famous dad, Francis Ford Coppola. Or, more preposterous yet, many refused to acknowledge that she could be a good filmmaker since she had given such a bad performance in *Godfather III*.

Strangely enough, *or perhaps not so*, no one has accused Sofia’s husband, Spike Jonze (the director of *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*), of riding on the Coppola coattails, even though . . . Jonze’s movies have also benefitted from the Coppola family support network. (n.p., emphasis mine)

Once again, Zacharek does not let the Hollywood machine off lightly for totalizing Coppola as nothing more than a product of her family. *Lost in Translation* is in many ways a

highly personal work for Coppola. The relationship between Charlotte and her photographer husband John was widely considered directly inspired by Coppola's life; the character of John, played by Giovanni Ribisi, is portrayed as an insincere hipster who shows more interest in the vapid American starlet Kelly and the glamorous world she represents than in his thoughtful, introverted wife. Many critics and contemporaries read John as a facsimile of Coppola's estranged husband Spike Jonze, enough so that fellow independent film auteur Michel Gondry criticized Coppola for her thinly veiled character attack in an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, stating, "It was not nice." Perhaps unsurprisingly, Coppola and Jonze divorced shortly after the release of *Lost in Translation* (Mayshark 175). Further arising out of personal familiarity, Tokyo is a city she knew through her previous work as both a photographer and as a fashion designer with her clothing label Milk Fed (available only in Japan). The surreal experience of jet lag and insomnia as well as the displacement that *Lost In Translation* centers upon were also part of Coppola's life experience, as she recounted in an interview with *Slate's* Brian Libby:

I remember going there at a time in my life when all the choices about what to do with myself seemed overwhelming. Then there was the jet lag; it was the worst I've ever had. And it was just so foreign that it felt like being on another planet. It was exciting, but it also felt daunting. I knew I wanted to set a movie there, because what I'd experienced I didn't feel like I'd seen in another American movie. Just the whole energy of the city reminded me of some "Dolce Vita" kind of feeling, where there's always something interesting happening, but it's more a mood or an atmosphere. (n.p.)

Just as 1970s suburbia lent a specificity of environment to *The Virgin Suicides*, the Tokyo setting is crucial to Coppola's exploration of overwhelming cultural and personal disconnect. The alienation Bob and Charlotte experience (and bond through) is the result of a particular blend of factors: the palimpsest of the frenetic neon background of Tokyo and the ancient, highly ritualistic traditional culture still visible; the language barrier they both experience wherein even the written characters are foreign; and the liminal state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness that they both find themselves unable to escape.

In an article titled "The Ten Best Movies of 2003," Zacharek teases out the basic tension of the film: "Coppola meditates on the nature of intimacy and dislocation, sustaining a mood of rapturous melancholy that few older, more experienced filmmakers have matched" (n.p.). It is this "rapturous melancholy" that forms the basis of Coppola's use of the grotesque in *Lost in Translation*, as she facilely combines disparate elements to create a film that inhabits the liminal spaces of the grotesque. The liminal is a crucial trope in the film, as Bob and Charlotte both occupy interstitial positions in their marriages, unsure about the future and both feeling hopelessly disconnected from their spouses. They are also both *in* the Japanese culture but not *of* it, and though the trappings of the city are familiar—roads, cars, hospitals, appliances, arcades—the details exclude them from participating and communicating. The almost-love affair between Bob and Charlotte is a liminal relationship, not quite as innocent as a mere friendship, not quite physical enough to be wholly sexual. Similarly liminal is the pervasive dream-like state of their shared insomnia and resultant detached numbness, lingering in the space between consciousness and sleep.

This liminality is related to and a function of the grotesque through the defamiliarization of the familiar and the rejection of binarism for something that conflates and overlaps opposites. Kelly Hurley links the liminal and grotesque this way, arguing that the grotesque and the liminal are both entities “which trouble a culture’s conceptual categories, particularly the binary oppositions by means of which the culture meaningfully organizes experiences” (139). The positioning of Bob and Charlotte’s world and relationship betwixt and between discrete, clearly defined spaces undermines the careful cultural taxonomies of the Western viewer, and the characters occupy a threshold, ever on the verge of movement toward more definable territory. This contributes to Zacharek’s “rapturous melancholy,” the very phrase combining the two conflicting ideas of concurrent joy and sadness. In his book *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham makes the argument that liminality and grotesqueness are closely interrelated through the simultaneous “multiple and mutually exclusive interpretations,” and that in liminal imagery, “opposing processes and assumptions coexist in a single representation” (13-14). Further, he terms the grotesque as something that stands at the “margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown,” arguing that “the word designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language” (3).

This is the very space in which Bob and Charlotte find themselves, lost in the inbetweenness of insomnia and at a loss for words, both literally as they uncomprehendingly struggle with the language barrier, and metaphorically as they communicate in nuanced small talk—even in their connection unable to make the ineffable explicit. Michael Cronin points out the unmooring effect of the Japanese language the

protagonists are submerged in: “Tokyo is a striking visual experience and therefore appropriate to cinematographic treatment but part of the visual experience is the writing system of the language itself, the characters of a non-Latin alphabet. For the Western traveller, the disorientation is complete” (82). They are displaced: from their normal lives, from their native time zones, from their spouses, and from the familiar world. Philip Thomson discusses this sense of displacement as a function of the grotesque:

This effect of the grotesque can best be summed up as *alienation*. Something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing. Much of this has to do with the fundamental conflict-character of the grotesque, with the mixture of incompatibles characteristic of it. The sudden placing of familiar elements of reality in a peculiar and disturbing light often takes the form of the flinging together of disparate and irreconcilable things, which by themselves would arouse no curiosity. (59)

Like Thomson, Wolfgang Kayser cites this alienation as an element of the grotesque, arguing that the world which is no longer reliable is one of alienated grotesquerie: “The grotesque is a structure.... THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD” (184, emphasis in original). But further than that, he makes the point so crucial to Coppola’s construction of the grotesque in this film: the power of the grotesque lies in its ineffability. “What intrudes remains incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal” (Kayser 185). The grotesque is a phantom, unable to be pinned to one definition, and utterly indifferent.

Kayser is writing of very explicit grotesque horrors, of demons and beasts rising out of the abyss, but Coppola’s finely honed narrative effects an altogether different horror,

one understated and humble but insidiously terrifying in its own right—that of the postmodern existential crisis. “More than this, you know there’s nothing,” Bob sings while performing a Roxy Music song at karaoke with Charlotte, and these particular lyrics are too apropos to be anything but deliberate on Coppola’s part. Bob and Charlotte are two characters of a comfortable class, living untroubled lives in a posh hotel, whose basic needs of existence are met, yet they both are undergoing a crisis they themselves are unable to define. They both suffer from this nameless quandary, while simultaneously aware of the indifference of the world to their plight; though Coppola is not so trite as to use the word *ennui*, this is the dissatisfied listlessness from which they suffer. There is something of the grotesque inherent in the notion of *ennui*—the absurdity of a crisis experienced only in times of comfort and leisure, a self-inflicted gaping abyss suffered only at the hands of oneself rather than the hands of others. As viewers, we are expected to implicitly understand this crisis, and *we do*. Coppola does use the physical grotesque in *Lost in Translation*, but this estrangement and alienation form the core of the film. With its sketchy narrative structure, the film is arguably a character study, and the grotesque is the means by which these two characters are cut asunder from the structure of their familiar lives and deposited together as well as the realm within which they exist.

Charlotte, who is given no last name, is a young, beautiful woman, ostensibly in her early twenties. She is a graduate of Yale with a romantic yet impractical undergraduate degree in philosophy. (“So far it’s pro bono,” she jokes.) Coppola sketches out only the most basic of details of Charlotte’s character, and a good deal we are left to infer from her interactions with others and with Japanese culture as well as by her self-imposed

contemplative sequestering in her room as she lounges about staring out at the city from the distance of her hotel room window. She and John have been married two years, and it is clear from their encounters they are out of sync. He sleeps soundly while she tosses and turns; he shows her very little affection and instead chastises her for smoking and is constantly off working, barely pausing for a kiss as he dashes out the door. Charlotte expresses her dismay at the state of disconnect in her marriage to a friend on the phone, saying, "John is using these hair products, and I just, I don't know who I married," but her friend on the other end of the line is similarly too distracted to listen to what Charlotte is trying to say. She is cut adrift by her presence in Tokyo, but the question lingers: would she actually be just as cut off at home? One gets the sense, particularly in this phone call, that Charlotte's alienation is not merely a function of her stay in an alien world. Though she is smart, beautiful, and enjoys the privilege of being Ivy League-educated upper class,¹ she still lacks any real connection to the life she seems to find herself living.

Charlotte exists in the stasis of the limen, her college education behind her, but her future still unclear, unsettled. "Resisting closure," Harpham argues, "the grotesque object impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future" (16). Charlotte has become impaled on her own crisis, on her displacement from fundamental defining structures, all brought to a head by her disorienting stay in Tokyo. She has tagged along with John on this trip because she has no commitments of her own, but even in Tokyo she is so alienated by the culture and the language barrier that her days in Japan are

¹ This is an inference based on Charlotte's substantial leisure time, her Ivy League education, her obvious lack of a job, and her extended stay at the highbrow Tokyo Park Hyatt, though it is possible that John's employer has arranged for their stay and they are less solvent than their surroundings suggest.

similarly unfulfilled. Left to the leisure of her own contemplation, she is “learning how to deal with adult life and find a niche for herself outside the submissive role she has unwittingly ended up with in her marriage” (Rogers n.p.). While John is distracted by Kelly, the crass American actress staying at the same hotel, Charlotte drifts, detachedly observes, and longs for connection. R. Barton Palmer acknowledges that though the film privileges Bob’s struggle by both beginning and ending the film with his arrival and departure, it is instead Charlotte whose interiority we linger on: “Charlotte is accorded several scenes that are in effect privileged moments offering insight into her ennui and her desperate need for a meaningful connection with another that her husband, preoccupied with his own celebrity, seems unwilling to provide” (Palmer 52). Charlotte’s main struggle, however, seems to not be with her husband so much as with agency—she has the *power* to act, but seems to lack the impetus, paralyzed by her bewildering displacement. The first forty minutes of the film feature scenes of Charlotte lounging around her hotel room, often clad in only a shirt and panties, sometimes reading or listening to self-help tapes but more often merely staring out at the city below her. Todd Kennedy argues that “Coppola’s women all struggle with expressing feminine agency in some form, thus they are often left to acts of consumption and leisure” (41). When Charlotte and Bob meet (a full thirty minutes into the film) and form a connection, she at last begins to interact with the world around her, even if she still doesn’t understand it.

Bob Harris, who *is* afforded a last name, is similarly adrift in his life, his acting career fading as he passes his prime and faces the aging process. Bert Cardullo speaks of the

“temperamental connection” between Bob and Charlotte, as both share a detached emptiness about where life has taken them:

Bob is secretly dissatisfied at what he has become; he takes no pleasure in being recognized by American tourists, in watching himself in movies on Japanese television, or in seeing his face on gigantic billboards that dot the Tokyo cityscape; and he has a silent scorn for the commercial work he’s doing. (465)

Bob is similarly alienated not only by his displacement from his familiar world but also by the pressing strangeness of Japan. As Kevin Bongiorno so succinctly puts it, “he neither relates to the culture nor can communicate in or with it” (26). Like Charlotte, Bob too is estranged from his spouse, having been married twenty-five years; when Charlotte marvels at this, he answers, “You figure you sleep one third of your life, that knocks off eight years of marriage right there, you know, you’re down to sixteen and change. You’re just a teenager at marriage, you can drive it, but still the occasional accident.” This wry, darkly comic response is typical of Bob’s interactions both with Japanese culture and in regards to his own life and marriage. Though we as viewers never see his wife, we do witness Bob’s end of phone calls between them as well as the passive-aggressive messages she sends via fax and in a FedEx package of carpet samples. Her included note asks him to choose one, suggesting that she likes the burgundy. In a moment of comedic absurdity, all ten samples turn out to be shades of burgundy. There is no wrong answer about which carpet sample to choose—but neither is there a right one. Bob “recognizes that the choice is meaningless,” and is faced with the absurd experiences that Thomson considers an “essential paradox of

the grotesque: that it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time” (Todd McGowan, quoted in Bongiorni 27; Thomson 61). These interactions provide the empirical evidence of the “subtle acrimony” of his marriage and of how unfulfilled he is by it; Bob is relentlessly detached and blank in his conversations with his spouse (Rogers n.p.).

Bob is estranged from his wife in the same manner that he is estranged from his life—disoriented and isolated, his own life turned into a grotesque. As Kayser suggests, “the grotesque is not concerned with individual actions or the destruction of the moral order (although both factors may be partly involved). It is primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe” (185). Shuffling through his jet lag and insomnia, Bob encounters the world with a disaffectedness shrouded in a dark humor, as he wryly laughs at the abyss of meaninglessness and disconnect; Bob’s dreamlike state further distances him, and “the estranged world appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments” (Kayser 186). This estranged world that Bob occupies is the interval or “gap of ambivalence or ambiguity,” a grotesque site situated at an intermediate point “between what has been and is becoming” (Harpham 8, Yates 31). This ambivalent interval applies not only to Bob and to Charlotte and their respective positions of liminality in life but also to the relationship between the two characters. The connection they share likewise exists in this liminal space—not explicitly sexual, yet erotic; not crossing any physical lines yet entirely more intimate than a casual physical encounter. Frances Connelly points out that “the grotesque is defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them” (4). This muddling of boundaries is essentially the *basis* of the relationship between Bob and

Charlotte. Carrying Charlotte to her room after a night out, Bob tucks her into bed, lingering at her side for perhaps a moment too long, briefly but deliberately placing his hand on her bare shoulder before he walks to the door. The camera follows him out the door, where he lingers—pausing with a clear look of indecision on his face while standing in the *literal* threshold. He starts back into the room, pauses, begins to close the door, pauses again, and finally shuts it, pushing against it once to make sure it is in fact locked against him. His ambivalence in leaving and his indecisive delay in the doorway underscore the indefinable state of their connection. Again, this liminal relationship is related to the grotesque by its refusal of binaries and its positioning *between* two effable locations. “We apprehend the grotesque in the presence of an entity—an image, object, or experience—simultaneously justifying multiple and mutually exclusive interpretations.... It is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension” (Harpham 14-15).

This is particularly visible in a scene in which Charlotte and Bob lay chastely in bed together, both on the edge of sleep, talking. It might be a moment of romantic sublimation, or it may be only two friends in an intimate moment—this scene allows for those multiple interpretations suggested by Harpham. “I’m stuck,” Charlotte says to Bob. “Does it get easier?” Bob, deadpan: “No.” Pause. “Yes.” Pause. “It gets easier.” Smiling wryly at his conflicted answer, Charlotte replies, “Oh yeah, look at you.” The moment evokes an ambivalent reaction, one of both laughter and sadness, as it is concurrently both funny and melancholic. Bob, from his perspective closer to the end of his lifespan, tries to impart to young Charlotte the complexities of life and the lack of hard answers, the comedically absurd nature of the indeterminacy of life. Thomson, speaking of *King Lear*,

makes a point of distinguishing the effect of such moments from the general tragicomic, arguing that it is “the merging and intermingling of comedy and pathos which is the crucial factor in such scenes” (63). He goes on to define this crucial difference the grotesque makes:

We have to do here not with tragi-comedy in the normal sense—where a clear distinction or alternation between the comic and the tragic takes place, each keeping to its appointed realm as it were—but with the grotesque fusion of the two. Tragi-comedy points only to the fact that life is alternately tragic and comic, the world is now a vale of tears, now a circus. The grotesque . . . has a harder message. It is that the vale of tears and the circus are one, that tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy in some way tragic and pathetic. This is perhaps the most profound meaning of the grotesque. (63)

It is this very sense Bob tries to convey in his stilted reply, that life is and will remain both comic and tragic. This scene, as understated as it is, is in many ways actually the climax of the film, the moment when Bob and Charlotte, who are both finally on the verge of sleep, face their grotesque existences. It is also the moment in which Coppola subverts audience expectations—rather than a consummation between these two characters, instead they both, at last, drift off to sleep, a climax itself for two people trapped thus far by insomnia.

Just before they both drift off, Bob reaches out tentatively once more and places his hand on Charlotte’s foot, an action Wendy Haslem terms “a meeting of extremities;” Haslem goes on to argue that “the sublime, erotic moment signals a shift from dislocation

to continuity for Bob and Charlotte who finally descend into sleep” (n.p.). Indeed, this moment marks a turning point in the film, and it just after this that both Bob and Charlotte begin to engage with the world they find themselves within. Charlotte visits a temple in Kyoto; earlier in the film, she tells a friend back home that she went to a shrine, “and there were these monks, and they were chanting, and I didn’t feel anything.” But on this visit to the Kyoto temple she seems fully engaged, witnessing a traditional wedding ceremony and smiling unironically. Bob too finally begins to reach out to the culture he is surrounded by, telling his wife on the phone that he wants to be healthier and eat more Japanese food. Haslem considers these changes as evidence of the defamiliarization of the “altered time and unfamiliar spaces” in *Lost in Translation*, arguing that “Bob’s visit to Tokyo and his sublime encounter with Charlotte results [sic] in the defamiliarization and the renewal of perspective” (n.p.).

Not only imbuing the film with grotesque characteristics through liminality and alienation, Coppola also uses the physical grotesque in *Lost in Translation* to emphasize these elements and to further situate Bob and Charlotte’s shared removal from the world around them. Charlotte, with her creamy pink skin tone and her blonde hair, stands out in Tokyo as a matter of contrast, but it is Bob whose height is a constant site of physical comedy as well as a marker of his otherness in this world of compact Japanese efficiency. Bob and Charlotte’s first encounter is in the hotel elevator; she is marked as other by her blonde hair, he by towering head and shoulders over the rest of the passengers. The two exchange glances and smile, even before they know one another, aware of their complicity in being the Western Other in this Eastern world. In his *Village Voice* review, J. Hoberman

points to this scene, calling Bob a “one-man alienation effect” (n.p.). Bob struggles with the low showerhead, is perplexed by the tiny hotel razor, and is bested by an exercise machine in the hotel gym. These moments of sharp contrast between Bob and the backdrop of Japan are instances of what Harpham calls a “trammeling energy,” the dissatisfaction of the grotesque with boundaries, in direct opposition to what in this Eastern world is natural: “The grotesque is the opposite, the least ideal form” (8-9). Kayser too discusses the distortion of size in the context of defamiliarization with the structures of our worlds, arguing the grotesque “presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view have become inapplicable,” pointing out the “progressive dissolution” of structural and defining characteristics encoded in the grotesque. Particularly applicable to *Lost in Translation* are the dissolving elements involving “the loss of identity” and “the distortion of ‘natural’ size and shape” that Kayser posits as grotesque (185).

Coppola’s use of the physical grotesque is also evident in the portrayal of sexualized Japanese women. Upon Bob’s arrival in Tokyo, the prostitute that shows up in his room (presumably an unrequested welcome gift from the Suntory Company) proceeds in an attempt to draw Bob into a peculiar sexual game in which he “forces” himself upon her while she begs him not to. However, after he finally deciphers what she is asking of him (“lip my stockings,” she repeats over and over, until she finally makes clear she means *rip* them), she falls away at his first reluctant touch and writhes on the floor, legs flailing in the air, crying, “Oh, Mr. Harris, don’t touch me!” while still trying to pull him to the floor on top of her. Thomson posits that the grotesque “conveys the notion of [the] simultaneously laughable and horrifying or disgusting,” and in that regard this scene with the prostitute is

textbook grotesquerie (2-3). Margaret Miles argues that prostitution itself was historically seen as grotesque: “prostitutes . . . epitomized the penetrable body, the body shaped by lust, the permeable body” (92). The prostitute’s behavior is so outlandish she becomes a caricature, a mode Thomson argues is related to the grotesque, but as the scene continues and her flailing and protestations become even more exaggerated she is “no longer simply funny, but disgusting or fearsome besides, for it [her behavior] approaches the realm of the monstrous” and veers toward the intersection of caricature and grotesquerie (Thomson 39). Further, the game she is trying to play is one for which Bob has no context or knowledge of the rules, making it utterly absurd and highly comedic, at the same time that her vocal protestations create a rape scenario that leaves Bob—and the viewer—wildly uncomfortable and horrified. Even the sex act, in this moment, is “lost in translation.”

Likewise making grotesque the oversexualized, when Bob accepts Charlotte’s invitation to meet her and her Japanese friends at a club called Orange, he arrives before she does to discover it is in fact a strip club. He sits alone, uncomfortably watching the topless dancer writhe on a lit-up platform. The diegetic music blaring in the club is an explicitly sexual song titled “Fuck the Pain Away” by Peaches, loud enough over the scene that the lyrics are inescapable: “Suckin’ on my titties like you wanted me, callin’ me / All the time, like Blondie, check out my Chrissie behind, it’s fine.” The portrayal of sexuality in this club is highly aggressive, predatory, and both visually and aurally inescapable, which acts as a perfect foil for Bob. Bob’s whole persona is studiously detached and judging by his attraction to Charlotte—who while beautiful does not dress or act provocatively—he finds subtlety more appealing than blatant obviousness. He looks around uncomfortably, his

eyes never lighting on any one thing, clearly embarrassed and uncomfortable. Harpham contextualizes this apprehension so evident in Bob: “the primitives worship the taboo, but modern secular adults are so indebted to and dependent upon their discriminatory grids that they find the taboo mostly a source of anxiety, horror, astonishment, laughter, or revulsion” (4). Indeed, Bob is so out of his element here that when the stripper incorporates a back bend into her routine, he starts up out of his seat as if to catch her, afraid she is falling. Roland Barthes writes in *Mythologies* about the institution of striptease and the fear he considers inherent in the act:

Striptease . . . is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked. We may therefore say we are dealing in a sense with a spectacle based on fear, or rather on the pretence of fear, as if eroticism here went no further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs have only to be announced to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration. (84)

It is not a far leap from Barthes’s conception of striptease to categorizing it as a grotesque act; he constructs it as an act of concurrent fear and titillation, which hearkens back to Thomson’s construction of the grotesque as a disharmonious “conflation of disparates” and of the grotesque as something simultaneously both “liberating and tension-producing” (18, 61).

Barthes also discusses the dancing that accompanies the striptease, suggesting that it actually de-eroticizes the experience, arguing that “the act of becoming bare is here relegated to the rank of parasitical operations carried out in an improbable background,” a

grotesque disharmony between the sexual and the functional aspects of the act (*Mythologies* 86). Here Barthes, however inadvertently echoing Bahktin, brings Bahktin's conception of the grotesque body to mind, the body that is "in the act of becoming ... never finished, never completed" (317). Further, Bahktin constructs the grotesque as degrading, much as the act of stripping is often considered so: "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20).

Coppola constructs the scene to both reemphasize Bob's alienation as well as to highlight the inherent grotesqueness of the sexualized woman. This in particular is something Coppola does repeatedly in her films—she explores the grotesque conception of the female, both as a body and as a person, in a world which seems to minimize the inherent gender figurations of the grotesque. Margaret Miles points out this elision in critical conceptions of the grotesque:

The special affiliation of the female body with the grotesque is founded on the assumption that the male body is the perfectly formed, complete, and therefore normative body. By contrast, all women's bodies incorporate parts (like breasts, uterus, and vagina) and processes (like menstruation and pregnancy) that appeared grotesque to the authors and artists who represented women Twentieth-century analysts of the grotesque—Kayser, Bahktin, Harpham—fail to notice the gender assumptions imbedded in grotesque art and literature, with the effect that they ignore a structural feature of this genre. (96)

Coppola however does *not* ignore this structural feature, instead exploiting the feminine aspect of the grotesque as a way to pose questions about what it means to be female, to be sexual, and to be both while situated within the male gaze, her *mise en scènes* exploring both what Barthes calls the *studium* and *punctum*, the detached cultural construction of women as well as the cutting personal impact of the construction of the female as grotesque (*Camera Lucida* 25).

As an expression of the postmodern existential limen that Bob and Charlotte share, the grotesque provides Coppola with a medium to express the interstitial and often contradictory disharmony of life. *Lost in Translation* benefits from the inclusion of grotesque elements because, as Thomson argues, the grotesque is “an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence” (11). Yet it also provides Coppola with a tool of what Wilson Yates terms “redemption and transformation;” he suggests “that the grotesque can participate in human life in a transformative fashion” (59). Indeed, we see Bob and Charlotte both transformed by their relationship with one another—it allows them to face their own grotesque existences in order to transcend them and move forward, out of the inbetweeness they both previously existed within. Through their relationship, too, they are transformed from a place of alienated isolation to one of connectedness. Nathan Heller considers *Lost in Translation* to be in the tradition of Nathanael West and David Lynch, two unarguable champions of the grotesque as both a mode and motif. But rather than fantasies of painting a mob scene or of dancing with the Lady in the Radiator, Coppola uses the grotesque as a realistic instrument of change, of growth, of renewal. In Kayser’s words, “in spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces

which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation” (188). Bob and Charlotte are indeed liberated, pulled through the grotesque, estranged world and, at last, out the other side.

Chapter 3

“The problem of leisure, what to do for pleasure”: The Otiose Ironies of *Marie Antoinette*

“The grotesqueness of an individual has essentially the same nature. If we like the inward harmony, the characteristic balance of his features, we are able to disengage this individual from the class into which we were trying to force him; we can forget the expectation which he was going to disappoint. The ugliness then disappears, and only the reassertion of the old habit and demand can make us regard him in any way extravagant.”

~George Santayana

“If some people would rather see the movie than read the book, this may be a fact of life that we must allow for, but let’s not pretend that people get the same things out of both, or that nothing is lost.”

~Pauline Kael, *Deeper Into Movies*

Following the success of *Lost In Translation*, Coppola then turned her attention to her next project, 2006’s *Marie Antoinette*. The film is loosely based on the 2001 biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* by Lady Antonia Fraser, which imbued the film with a certain controversy from the outset. Stefan Zweig’s 1932 *Marie Antoinette: Portrait of an Average Woman* is the traditionally accepted biographical text on the Queen’s life, a “detailed and coolly analytic assessment of the monarch,” and Fraser’s new biography tackled the subject “with greater psychological acumen than any of numerous earlier biographers” (Rogers n.p., Gray n.p.). It was, however, considered a highly emotional and often romanticized portrait of Antoinette “victimized by an uncommunicative husband and a heartless court and whose attempts to maintain privacy in the face of royal protocol have disastrous results” (Gray n.p.). The controversy over the film’s similarly sympathetic treatment of the Queen became publicly evident at its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival; it would appear

that a pitiable Marie Antoinette is a hard sell in France. Reports that the film was booed accompanied nearly every review, though Jesse Mayshark points out that reports of just how *much* it was booed varied wildly: “there were even conflicting reports about how loud the boos were. Some accounts had it being practically hooted off the screen, while others had the detractors being balanced if not drowned out by admiring applause” (176).

Coppola herself was more enigmatic about the reception. In an interview with Sean O’Hagan in *The Guardian*, she gallically brushed off the derision:

“It’s very French,” she says, shrugging, when I bring up the catcalls at Cannes. “Afterwards, I had a lot of French journalists saying, ‘I like your Marie Antoinette but I still hate the real Marie Antoinette.’ I guess she’s still kind of a loaded subject there.” (N.p.)

Coppola goes on to point out that “there was a standing ovation, too,” arguing that the booing wasn’t really that loud, merely that it made for a more sensational story in the press (O’Hagan n.p.). This conflicted reception at Cannes was an analogue for the ambivalent reception of the film by critics. In *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane infantilizes the film with his literal reading that claims there is nothing but superficiality to the film; commenting upon Coppola’s assertion that she was attempting to express Antoinette’s inner experience, Lane quips, “this is like a manicurist claiming to capture the inner experience of your pinkie” (n.p.). Several critics, including Todd McCarthy of *Variety*, J. Hoberman of *Village Voice*, Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, and Jake Meaney of *PopMatters* all essentially reduce the film to pastry-laden eye candy, Meaney going so far as to claim he is “convinced that *Marie Antoinette* has absolutely nothing of value to say at all” (n.p.). In *Sight and Sound*, Hannah

McGill argues that Coppola's "failure to provide true insight into her protagonist's inner life, or to connect that life in a meaningful way to the surrounding society, condemns her film to a critical lack of emotional depth" (69). That McGill fails to recognize that the film is essentially organized around Antoinette's unmoored lack of connection to the society she is surrounded by typifies what appears to be rampant willful critical misunderstandings of the film Coppola has made.

Roger Ebert, however, argues against this onslaught of negativity in his contemporaries' reviews, essentially responding to other critics in a numbered format that defends *Marie Antoinette* against its detractors. He supports the insular nature of the film, a sticking point amongst displeased critics:

No, the picture is not informative and detailed about the actual politics of the period. That is because we are entirely within Marie's world. And it is contained within Versailles, which shuts out all external reality. It is a self-governing architectural island, like Kane's Xanadu, that shuts out politics, reality, poverty, society. ("Marie Antoinette" N.p.)

Cynthia Fuchs of *PopMatters* defends the film as well, ascribing an interiority to the lavishness of the setting, arguing that the film instead charts "a young girl's changing sensibility, under a particular sort of duress and expectations. Her interior state is rendered in exquisite, 'girly' imagery, . . . indicating the superficial nature of her desires, and the adulation she garners for indulging them" (n.p.). The entire film is not, as some critics argued, only set dressing. Stephanie Zacharek again defends Coppola against naysayers, chalking up the negativity toward the film to a set of Coppola's detractors who would be

“gunning for her no matter what she does,” and in doing so Zacharek foregrounds the biographical significance of Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* to its progenitor (“Marie Antoinette” n.p).

“There is no doubt the woman is a divisive figure,” Zacharek writes, and although she is speaking of Antoinette, she may as well be discussing Coppola (“Marie Antoinette” n.p.). After all, the reception of the film and that of the director herself seems rather tangled, likely because of similarities between the two. As in *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola again makes a film about girls whose lives are placed under a microscope, who grapple with the gaps between interiority and their public face. The parallels between the factious, meddling French court at Versailles into which Antoinette was thrust and the celebrity-obsessed gossip mill of Hollywood in which Coppola grew up are clearly drawn. As McGill offers, “it is no stretch to read Marie Antoinette as a cipher for Coppola herself” (69). R. Barton Palmer considers *Marie Antoinette* the conclusion of a loosely-bounded trilogy that shares not only the same auteurist construction but also “complex variations on a theme with deep personal, even autobiographical, meaning for their screenwriter / director” (41). In the introduction to the published pictorial script for *Marie Antoinette*, Coppola herself writes:

When I first read about Marie Antoinette, being just fourteen and sent to Versailles, without anyone close to her that she related to, and just surrounded by decadent lovely things that are supposed to please you and make you happy, how lonely it seemed. And I thought it was touching, even

in the ridiculousness of her dressing up like a maid to perform in her little Petit Trianon theatre, how she tried to find her own way. (1)

There is an evident empathy in Coppola's words, a connection to the lavish yet hollow trappings of a privileged and moneyed life lived in the public eye and the search for identity within those confines.

This empathetic treatment of Antoinette and Coppola's desire to have the audience identify with a figure that has been considered an unforgivably indulged, pampered royal whose extravagance helped bankrupt a nation drives the style of the film. This is also simultaneously the aspect of the film that incited much of the criticism surrounding it. Yet Coppola foregrounds the overwhelming, bewildering nature of Antoinette's experience and recontextualizes it in modern ways through her extensive use of anachronism as a stylistic choice. The actors all maintain their own accents, mostly English or American, and not approaching any historic nod toward French. Likewise, the film is shot on location at the Palace of Versailles with period furniture, costumes, and props, yet anachronistic "Easter eggs" pop up in the film, such as a sweeping scene of Antoinette trying on shoes that includes a pair of pastel Converse Chuck Taylors sitting on the floor beside her. The very beginning of the film, on a black screen before the titles even start, opens with six brash, staccato electric guitar chords; it is the 1979 Gang of Four song "Natural's Not In It," a guitar-laden punk offering whose first lyrics, "The problem of leisure, what to do for pleasure," give us some immediate insight in to just what kind of film this is going to be. The opening titles are rendered in a garishly hot pink modern font before opening on an image of Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst) herself, reclining in a brocade chair with

ostentatiously large feathers in her hair as a maidservant notably—and importantly—dressed in the *modern* conception of a French maid costume fits her foot with a frilly pink shoe. She lazily reaches out a hand to swipe at the intricately decorated cake that sits beside her, licking frosting off her finger before turning directly to the camera to offer a smirk and a smile. Antoinette then lies back in her chair, the viewer dismissed, and the scene cuts to black before the title card is splashed across the screen, stenciled black text inside a field of hot pink at a skewed angle, a direct reference to the cover of the 1977 Sex Pistols record *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, an album featuring the ironic seminal punk hit “God Save the Queen,” whose lyrics include, “God save the Queen, she ain’t no human being.”

“How do I make a period film that isn’t in the genre of period films but in my own style?” Coppola asks, and she does so through this incessant blending of the past and the present (Murray n.p.). These anachronistic inclusions form a kind of postmodern pastiche, one that capitalizes on the friction between the past and the present. Pam Cook refers to this as *travesty*, a filmic device which “irreverently wrests its source material from its historical context, producing blatantly fake fabrications that challenge accepted notions of authenticity and value.” Cook argues that travesty, while sometimes playful, serves the more serious purpose of contextualizing the past “through the filter of the present” (“Portrait” 38). In her book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Angela Ndalians terms this collision of past with present “neo-baroque poetics,” and she argues that “points of comparison are identified between seventeenth-century baroque art and entertainment forms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to establish

continuous and contiguous links between the two eras” (5). She further asserts that “the neo-baroque shares a baroque delight in spectacle and sensory experiences,” a quality readily evident in *Marie Antoinette*. It is a film steeped in the sensory spectacle, set at the Palace of Versailles—an exemplary site of the Baroque aesthetic—and that revels in the spectacle of the French court, with all the ritualistic trappings, brocades, ruffles, and gilt that go along with it, as well as masked balls, indulgent parties, endless feasts of delicately prepared foods, and the lingering soft-focus impressions with which Coppola imbues her film. Coppola crafts a *feeling* as much as a plot, and the neo-baroque as an indicator of “instability, polydimensionality, and change” lets Coppola renegotiate the past as she presents it (19).

This opening image of the bored, self-indulgent Queen reclining in obscene wealth and leisure amidst a period-accurate explosion of pattern, pastel, and pastries is also a renegotiation of the past. It presents the audience with the popularized image of Antoinette, the cruel, spoiled “Let them eat cake!” libertine who has been villainized by history and popular conception. It is what Elizabeth Ford refers to as a “disestablishing shot,” one which often gets mentioned in the discussions of the film, but one which is seldom pointed out as the ironic instance that it is, one that does not actually conform to the life Coppola crafts for Antoinette but rather challenges this popular conception of the “evil fantasy Queen” (213-14). The maidservant’s costume being the anachronistic, popular stereotype of the “French maid” calls this ironic distancing into sharp focus; no other servants in the film are attired this way, and this disestablishing shot being costumed in this manner invites the viewer to reconsider their preconceived notion of history, of the

film, and of Antoinette. This opening acts as a way to invoke what the viewers may think they know about Antoinette's life before Coppola tears down this popular conception by ascribing significance and importance to Antoinette's experience of her own life. Indeed, Coppola's screenplay eschews the popular details of Antoinette's biography, skipping the scandalous "Affair of the Diamond Necklace" and ending the film before the execution of the royal family at the hands of the French Revolution. Yet the pall cast by the inevitable foreknowledge of Antoinette's fate colors the film regardless; despite the film's buoyancy and its often sparkling, lively *mise en scène*, the sense of looming tragedy is inescapable.

Perhaps this shadowy inevitability is why Coppola chooses to elide the more biographically sensationalized aspects of Antoinette's life and instead focuses on the immediate experiences of the young queen, emphasizing her perspective of the strange French court and customs into which she has been thrust. This focus on Antoinette's *experience* of the French court is what spurred the majority of criticism for the film, but Amy Woodworth defends Coppola's choice to foreground the personal rather than the political:

Marie Antoinette may appear to be the most intellectually lightweight of Coppola's films due to its simplified version of French politics and hot pink packaging, but it is actually the most formally preoccupied with capturing women's experiences and developing a feminist aesthetic as a means for doing so. (149)

This feminine aesthetic, in Woodworth's construction, consists of "Coppola's trademark slow pacing, privileging of impression over plot, and development of emotional texture and

mood” (151). The overt femininity of the film is further explored through the visual imagery, which practically drips with ruffles and crystals and is relentlessly pastel and gilded. The diegetic sound design is also impressionistic rather than driven straightforwardly by plot—we hear snippets of discussions, gossip being exchanged in hushed tones on the edges of the camera shot, and overlapping voices that create a “soundscape of conversation that is not tied to any single entity” (Rogers, n.p.). This emphasis of impression over expression allies us with Antoinette’s perspective and asks the audience to assume the female subject position.

Forcing the viewer into such a feminized perspective, however, comes at a price for Coppola. Peter Travers’s *Rolling Stone* review reads as an apologia for his appreciation of the film, arguing that the popular perception of the film as feminized frivolity makes him hesitate in appreciating it: “With one critic calling it ‘frillery’ and the Internet buzz saying it’s only ‘for girls and gays,’ Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* makes it challenging for a guy to do her a solid” (n.p.). By placing the audience in the female subject position, Coppola issues a challenge to the common critical (and often patriarchal) tendency to diminish and dismiss the value and validity of the feminine. Todd Kennedy addresses this negative perception of Coppola’s depiction of the feminine and the consequent diminishing of her work:

I suggest there is an implied, gendered language inherent in many of the attacks on Sofia Coppola. To be fair, the allusions to candy are particularly tempting, given the way *Marie Antoinette* fetishizes pastry, but the implication that a unique visual style lacks meaning because it is, essentially,

pretty speaks toward the manner in which the critics seem unprepared to evaluate Coppola's films on their own terms. Choosing to develop her own, feminine film form, she causes critics (and often audiences) not to know what to do with her films other than to pat Coppola on the head for having made a "pretty" film. (38)

The female perspective *Marie Antoinette* foregrounds appears to alienate male critics, perhaps because, as Amy Woodworth points out, the film provides no male surrogates for the viewer. Antoinette's husband, Louis Auguste (later Louis XVII), who would be the mostly likely male surrogate, is portrayed as awkward, cuckolded, and most importantly, feminized—stripped of both sexual vigor and usual masculine pursuits. Woodworth argues that, rather than acting as a voyeuristic instance of the audience gazing upon a naked woman, the two scenes of Antoinette's nude body, both of which are shot from behind, force the viewer to *share* Antoinette's perspective, as in both instances there is a group of women looking *at* Antoinette. This creates a sympathetic identification with her exposed vulnerability, as the crowd is, due to the camera angle, looking not only at Antoinette but also out at the audience (157). Like the opening scene of *Lost in Translation* and the focus on Charlotte's *derriere*, Antoinette's naked body is displayed for a long, unyielding camera shot that, in its length, becomes increasingly awkward for the viewer as it calls attention to the way in which women's bodies are so often a site of spectacle and objectification. We as an audience are asked to identify with the object of this gaze rather than occupying the subject position, foregrounding our complicity with the objectification of the female body by forcing us to endure it.

Coppola has an incredible ability to convey the female experience through the language of film, nowhere more so than in *Marie Antoinette*, but she also has an uncanny ability to construct that femininity as grotesque. In addition to the grotesqueness of the feminized neo-baroque settings and the “carnavalesque attitude” of such stylistic excesses (*barocco*, in Italian, does mean ‘bizarre’, after all, firmly linking it to the grotesque), Coppola constructs the experience of being female as innately grotesque (Ndalianis 7-10). Mary Russo argues that the superficial and marginal positioning of the grotesque is inherently related to “a certain construction of the feminine,” and in a period film focusing on the intrinsically marginalized historic female experience, that conflation of the feminine with the grotesque comes into sharp focus (5). Comtesse du Barry, mistress to the ailing King Louis XVI, is portrayed as a wild, near textbook grotesque figuration of a woman. During a dinner party following Louis Auguste and Antoinette’s marriage, du Barry is the “ostracized taboo-breaker,” the loud, raucous center of attention at the table (Mayshark 178). In marked contrast with the rest of the “refined” women at the table, du Barry is vividly given to acts of consumption: she unabashedly devours her meal, licks her fingers, drinks excessive amounts of wine with much gusto, and follows it all up with a loud belch. She even strikes a waiter as he reaches for an item on the table. She forthrightly displays her décolletage, her breasts squeezed together and spilling over the neckline of her dress, and is clad in a garish color; Antoinette is contrastingly dressed in a soft pink while du Barry is in a vibrant, bright coral with a color-coordinated lipstick, which emphasizes du Barry’s mouth—an orifice constantly in motion, consuming either food or wine, complaining of the other guests, or whispering into the King’s ear and peppering him with

kisses. Her dark hair is arranged artfully, but it is her natural hair, and she sports neither a powdered style nor a wig, further setting her apart from the other guests at the table.

This depiction of du Barry, a rough woman who has been gifted her title by the King because of her sexual allure, is a Bahktinian figuration of the grotesque. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bahktin constructs the grotesque as a style exhibiting “exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness” as fundamental attributes (303). The surrounding society is by no means devoid of artifice, but the *type* of artifice employed by du Barry is in stark contrast to that of her contemporaries. Her exaggerated neckline with her protruding bosom is a physically grotesque aspect, an attribute which “seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines” (Bahktin 316). Further, her lush, luridly painted mouth which never ceases moving is a site of what is a particularly feminized location of the grotesque, an orifice “through which enters the world to be swallowed up”:

The most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss. (Bahktin 317)

Du Barry’s acts of unabashed consumption also figure as grotesque in the Bahktinian sense, not merely because they involve the mouth but because acts of drinking, eating, defecating, and, relatedly, belching, are all acts “performed on the confines of the body and the outer world” (317).

The nature of these liminal consumptive acts du Barry shamelessly flouts further underscores the high / low divisions in Bahktin’s view: “the essential principle of grotesque

realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body” (19). The tangible pleasures du Barry takes such open, unashamed delight in at this dinner party (and ostensibly in the rest of her life as well—one Comtesse whispers to another, “She can’t pass a mirror without seducing it!”) are markedly earthly, physical pleasures and du Barry’s base enjoyment of them scuffs the stiff, formal royal sheen she is surrounded by, introducing a monstrous element to the circumspect proceedings. In her essay “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque,” Margaret Miles argues that historically, all women were viewed as grotesque beings:

Figured as Eve, the perversely bent rib, every woman was seen as essentially grotesque, though the revelation of her hidden monstrosity could be prevented by her careful adherence to socially approved appearance and behavior. The function of this figuration was to identify, define, and thus stabilize a feared and fantasized object. Grotesque figuration contributes the bonus of laughter, permitting release of tension; the simultaneously feared and desired object becomes comic. (92)

This is exactly how du Barry is positioned: as a woman whose grotesque nature becomes evident because of her flagrant disregard for societal mores and customs. She intentionally makes a spectacle of herself and feels justified in doing so because of the favor she carries with the King; she is both feared and desired—feared for her position of power as King Louis XVI’s consort, and desired because of her beauty and for the subversive, perverse nature of her personality. The other dinner guests titter and gossip about her outlandish

behavior, laughing at her unrefined mannerisms and lewd demeanor, yet they still defer to her, afraid of her influence over the King.

The shameless behavior and display of sexuality, as well as the rather frank transaction of social position in exchange for sex, paints du Barry as something approaching a prostitute. “Loquaciousness, aggressiveness, [and] stubbornness” are all behaviors that Miles claims expressed an “irreducible element of monstrosity,” going on to suggest that the body itself, not only the behavior of women, was also a site of the feminine grotesque. “Some women were seen as the personification of the grotesque; prostitutes, for example, epitomized the penetrable body, the body shaped by lust, the permeable body that produces juices and smells” (Miles 92). This is the space that du Barry occupies, the sensuous body with its painted mouth, the body she has seduced the King with in exchange for a place in his court. There is a Bahktinian, carnivalesque aspect to her sweeping, conspicuous behavior set against the backdrop of Versailles, her low, rough manners taking a place of precedence amongst the high society of the French court. Antoinette’s disdain toward du Barry (which, importantly, is also coupled with a certain degree of fascination) and her public snubbing of the Comtesse and her lascivious demeanor is a restoration of order, the high putting the low back in its place, helped in no small part by the King’s failing health and du Barry’s removal from court in order to allow the dying King to take the Last Rites. Antoinette recognizes a certain freedom in du Barry that she realizes she is not afforded in her perilous positioning as the childless Dauphine, so when she refuses to acknowledge du Barry, she is setting herself apart from the carnivalesque grotesque.

The irony in such an act is that Antoinette is figured in the film as a highly grotesque woman as well; however she conforms to a more Kayserian definition of the grotesque. From the outset, Coppola shows us Antoinette as a young girl with practically no agency—at the beginning of the film she is leaving her home and nation behind for an arranged political marriage to a man she has never met. The handover ceremony, conducted on the Austrian-French border, divests Antoinette of every scrap of clothing, strips her of her pet dog, and introduces her to the chilly Comtesse de Noailles (Judy Davis), who shepherds her through the process of becoming the Dauphine of France. The reaction to the young Austrian princess in France is no better, and she suffers a chilly reception there as well; as she is hustled through the wedding with Dauphin Louis Auguste and later escorted to her marriage bed by the entirety of the French court, we see and empathize with Antoinette's unmoored, bewildered state at all that is happening to her and in which she has no say in whatsoever. Kayser's assertion that "the grotesque is the estranged world" perfectly describes this new life that Antoinette has been thrust into—her world has become entirely removed from what she knew, stripping her from not only the more relaxed Austrian setting we briefly see at the beginning of the film, but also from her surrounding support network of family and confidantes. The royal court in France is tangentially familiar to her, but the circumstances of her place and position have changed, leaving her isolated within it. As Antoinette pliantly acquiesces to all that is expected and required of her, she becomes puppet-like, her life no longer under her own control; Kayser reminds us that "among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (183).

Antoinette has not literally become a marionette, but in her bounded, controlled position, what makes for a better metaphor for her constrained life?

Kayser's conception of the breakdown of the familiar as grotesque illuminates Coppola's *Antoinette*. Her loss of identity that comes with her insertion into the strange French court and customs, as well as her precarious position as a childless Queen in an era when royal women were most valued for their services to the State as breeding stock, figures as grotesque because of the way in which the erosion of Antoinette's conception of self and the "destruction of personality" cause her world to "cease to be recognizable" (Kayser 184-5). Coppola explores the trappings of life at court, redundant rituals that often serve little purpose beyond maintaining and reaffirming tradition. "There is an abundance of ritual in this film," Anna Rogers writes, "but those associated with the morning routine of waking and dressing the Queen . . . are shown as being the most ridiculous and otiose" (n.p.). The Ceremony of the Lever, the ritual of dressing Antoinette each day, is detailed by Coppola as a way of showing how meaning has broken down for Antoinette. The Dauphine stands naked and shivering while the court attendants in the room work out who, according to social rank of the members present, should dress her. "This is ridiculous," remarks Antoinette, arms wrapped around herself for warmth, to which the Comtesse de Noailles icily replies, "This, Madam, is Versailles!" Antoinette herself expresses the absurdity of the ceremony, only to be rebuked by the representative of formal authority and pressed into repetition of this absurdity every morning. It is little surprise when Antoinette finds herself unmoored, disconnected from these rituals and traditions; "we are unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd," Kayser

argues, and the meaninglessness of these rituals “takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical . . . laughter while turning into the grotesque” (185-7).

Coppola’s use of travesty in representing the historical past is not only postmodern (particularly as in Linda Hutcheon’s conception of postmodern pastiche as an ironic acknowledgement of our inevitable separation from that past), but it is also grotesque in the Kayserian sense that “the fragmentation of the historical order” that Coppola conveys is also an expression of loss of identity (Hutcheon 94, Kayser 185). The past cannot be filmically presented, only *re-presented*; we bring to our viewing and to our entire conception of the past our own inescapable modern subjectivity, and Coppola’s anachronistic inclusions foreground this dilemma of period films. Kennedy argues, “Coppola’s film asserts that an accurate historical film is impossible” (49). By using travesty, Coppola commits a grotesque act—she removes the historicity of Antoinette’s life, creating a period film removed from history, an act imbued with the “violent clash of opposites” that Philip Thomson categorizes as grotesque (11). As the historical order becomes fragmented, so does Antoinette’s sense of self. Her enthusiasm for fashion is an attempt to forge an identity through a means allowed her by the circumscribed life she leads at court; Pam Cook characterizes Coppola’s Antoinette as “a caged bird who found her escape from suffocating court etiquette, gossip and the glare of publicity by forging a personal style and identity through her clothes, designs for the palace and her private retreat” (“Portrait” 40). Her expected role of bearer of heirs to the French throne is subverted by Louis’ sexual reluctance, so throwing lavish parties and dressing extravagantly distracts both Antoinette and others from her failure—whether her fault or not—to fulfill her function as mother.

However, Antoinette is still a grotesque figure, sublimating her desire to conceive and birth an heir into her conspicuous consumption of parties, pastries, and frocks. The transference of the grotesqueness of a sexualized and pregnant female body into materiality is no less grotesque; her embrace of fashion still gestures toward a corporeality that serves to emphasize the female body and its essential grotesque nature. Miles argues, “the association of the female body with materiality, sex, and reproduction in the female body makes it an essential—not an accidental—aspect of the grotesque” (90). Mary Russo goes further to align the female as inherently grotesque, asserting that the “positioning of the grotesque—as superficial and to the margins—is suggestive of a certain construction of the feminine” (5). Despite Antoinette’s centrality to the film (she is, after all, the title character), her crisis of identity *because* of her marginal position and her lack of power over anything other than the superficial is due to the cultural marginalization of her gender, and as such, she is strongly aligned with the grotesque, even in its multiple, combinatory essence.

It is easy to see *Marie Antoinette* as a continuation of the themes and motifs Coppola explored in her two previous films. The opening shot of Antoinette turning to the camera, acknowledging the audience, and winking draws an explicit parallel between this film and *The Virgin Suicides*, in which Lux (also played by Kirsten Dunst) turns to the camera and provides an extradiegetic wink to the audience. The ending of *Marie Antoinette* recalls the infinite ending of *Lost in Translation*, a moment that acts as an ellipsis, undefined and left open to interpretation as Antoinette and her family are driven from Versailles by the French Revolution. Like its predecessors, *Marie Antoinette* foregrounds an experiential

femininity and the culturally constructed grotesque aspects of the female experience.

Coppola goes further in this film, however, placing viewers in the female subject position by removing the male proxy from the narrative, humanizing an often-demonized historical figure and asking that, if we cannot empathize, we at least sympathize with Antoinette and the life over which she had so little control. Susan Corey notes, “the grotesque allows the writer to challenge any final or closed version of the truth, to raise questions about what has been omitted from a particular view of reality, and to explore the paradoxical, ambiguous, mixed nature of human life” (230). Coppola’s use of the grotesque in *Marie Antoinette* does just this; she recontextualizes the popular notion of Antoinette through her focus on conveying a sense of Antoinette’s experience. In the end Coppola leaves any value judgments to the audience, asking only that we consider what her cloistered, circumscribed life may have felt like, asking the audience to occupy Antoinette’s subject position and thus consider not what it is to be royal or awash in extravagant fripperies, but rather what it is to be female in a male-centric world.

Conclusion

“Good evening, ladies and gentleman. My name is Orson Welles. I am an actor. I am a writer. I am a producer. I am a director. I am a magician. I appear onstage and on the radio. Why are there so many of me and so few of you?”

~Orson Welles

"It seems that the greatest difficulty is to find the end. Don't try to find it, it's there already."

~Sofia Coppola

Intensely and notoriously difficult to define, the grotesque is no one essential thing; it is a curious amalgam of disparate qualities combined in a way that creates dramatic tension. It embodies contradiction and disharmony; it foregrounds the horrific alongside the comic; it combines the aberrant and the quotidian. A common reaction to these grotesque elements is often the tendency to pull away, to avert one's gaze—we want to escape the discomfort the grotesque stirs up in us at the same time that we find ourselves fascinated and unable to look away. This sense of unease is a particular element of the grotesque that Sofia Coppola exploits in her films in order to elicit specific emotional responses to her subject matter.

As discussed herein, *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Marie Antoinette* form a loose trilogy thematically related by an interest in what constitutes femininity and how representations of women are socially constructed. As a result, the grotesque is an apposite lens through which to consider her films. The inherent female association of the grotesque explored by Russo in *The Female Grotesque* considers the historical definition of male as normal, which constructs the figuration of female to be in direct opposition to that

masculine norm—and notably, the grotesque is inherently defined as a deviation from the norm. Further associations of the female body with the acts of menstruation, sex, pregnancy, birth, and decay reinforce this affiliation of the grotesque with the figuration of woman by a collective male perspective.

Coppola's work foregrounds this inherent correlation by considering the interiority of her female characters in opposition to the social constructs surrounding and circumscribing them. In *The Virgin Suicides*, she explores the nostalgic reminiscences of a group of boys and the necessary fiction of their construction of the Lisbon sisters through their male gaze as she explores the inherent grotesqueries of adolescence, suicide, and the mother / crone figure. In *Lost in Translation*, Coppola considers the liminal aspects of the grotesque and the paralytic stasis of both Charlotte and Bob, rejecting the common conception of relationship binaries and instead offering us a film that reflects on the interstitial, combining comedy and pathos with a deft hand. Charlotte and Bob both experience and exist in the "estranged world" that Kayser considers so fundamental to the notion of the grotesque, and Coppola focuses on the unmoored feeling they both share. *Marie Antoinette* shares this focus on the unmoored, alienated character, further constructing the feminine as marginalized, Antoinette serving little function apart from that of an automaton doing her duty to the State. By deliberately creating a stylistically disjointed film, Coppola not only exploits the disunity so prevalent in the grotesque but also brings the flagrant and often obscene excesses of Antoinette's court into sharp contrast against the film's appeal for sympathy toward a queen whose fate the audience knows all too well.

These three films all share a stylistic visual sense and express interest in the infinite moment, those trademark endings imbued with ambiguity and a resistance to closure. Coppola's long, uninterrupted takes not only act as a visual marker of her auteurist style but also allow for an expression of a sense of an inner life. These long scenes of contemplation often appear at the end of her films as well, creating an ending that is open to interpretation and refuses to explicitly define these moments, instead subverting expectations by creating a transitory disjunction. The fantasy of escape from the Lisbon household, the opacity of a moment shared only between Charlotte and Bob and *not* the audience, and the fade out while Antoinette and family flee Versailles all create moments of infinity, moments in which anything could—yet will not—happen. Her films are also concerned with the idea of ritual, whether it is the adolescent joy of attending a first dance, the ancient ritual associated with marriage, or the superfluous rituals of court life that serve only to reinforce tradition. But most centrally, Coppola is interested in the liminal, alienated world and characters that find themselves at divisive points in their lives within this disorienting context. This is, inextricably, the world of the grotesque—estranged, inverted, ambivalent, combinatory, and disorienting, and her characters' struggle for meaning and identity lends credence to our own.

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