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Ephemeral bodies and threshold creatures: The crisis of the adolescent rite of passage in Sofia Coppola's 'The Virgin Suicides' and Gus Van Sant's 'Elephant'

by Anna Backman Rogers

The abiding and predominant tendency of scholarly and critical approaches to American Independent Cinema is to characterise it as a cinema in crisis due to the highly contentious nature of the term 'independent'. A plethora of recent studies such as those by Gregg Merritt, John Berra, and Michael Newman focus on the very definition, and by extension the possibility, of 'independence' in an increasingly commercially-driven business where economic factors often take precedence over the romantic notion of artistic vision and integrity (of which American cinema of the 1970s is often viewed as exemplary). Other scholars such as Geoff King and Jason Wood employ the nebulous term 'indiewood' in order to recognise the hybrid nature of independence within the American film industry today. This scholarship is valid and clearly has its place but I would argue that this focus on the notion of independence has resulted in a paucity of material on the aesthetics and poetics of American Independent Cinema. My intention, therefore, is to analyse two American independent films, both of which could readily fit within the 'indiewood' paradigm as a cinema of crisis rather than as one merely in crisis.[1] I will argue specifically that a dominant trend in American independent film is the exploration of various rites of passage of which one of the most prominent is adolescence (or the 'teen pic' genre).

Indeed notions of threshold, transition, and metamorphosis are outstanding features of some of the major American film genres such as the road movie, the horror movie, and the western. As such one could argue that American Independent Cinema is the genre par excellence for dealing with crisis. Narratives that hinge on rites of passage (and therefore crisis) are not unusual: most classical film narratives proceed through an established structure where an initial situation precipitates a conflict to which a resolution must be sought. However, the kind of cinema addressed here centres on the experience of liminality, of being 'betwixt and between',[2] caught in a perpetual process of metamorphosis that is so crucial to the rite of passage. These films foreground the difficulty, or even impossibility, of progression and as such re-vision the tropes of the teen genre. They also

foreground the precarious nature of making meaning by rendering the cinematic image ontologically unstable in order to allow other readings and representations to filter through. In questioning the traditional narrative form and the manifold ways in which truth is created and perpetuated, Sofia Coppola and Gus Van Sant also throw the standard cinematic representations of time and space into crisis. As such, crisis is made manifest within the very fabric of their films, two of which will serve as the primary examples in this essay.

Film is ideally suited to exploring themes of crisis, transition, and transformation. The varied components that form the body of a film such as colour, light, texture, and sound alter continually. On film bodies become protean forms in a world that is itself in a state of flux. Crisis, in the context of this essay, has a very specific meaning and while the more common notion of the term as a period of heightened tension and angst is apt, as an anthropological concept it also has a more complex implication that denotes a period of becoming-other. Film is able to present this becoming-other or process of metamorphosis so well precisely because of its innately fluid qualities. Moreover, film characters are able to incarnate ambiguity and mutability as they are made to be stable or unstable through the manner in which they are filmed. In a more conventional or traditional film a substantial part of the screen time is devoted to making a character believable through the narrative staging and the attribution of personal characteristics or personal history in order to facilitate identification on the part of the film viewer. If, however, we view cinema as the art form of being as change, the protagonist as a body on screen is an ontologically unstable entity. Taking a cue from Steven Shaviro and others I would argue that a cinematic body is already one in and of crisis.

In order to characterise *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Elephant* (2003) as exemplary of a cinema of crisis I will draw upon the work of Gilles Deleuze on crisis, the breakdown of the action-image, and its extension into a cinema of time, thought, and becoming. In particular I will focus on the symptoms that mark this breakdown. 'The form of the trip/ballad, the multiplication of clichés, the events that hardly concern those they happen to, in short, the slackening of the sensory-motor connections.'[3] Of these characteristics it is the sudden awareness of the cliché (as a formal device) that I will argue is most pertinent to *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant*, particularly in relation to their complex transformation of genre. Within this framework I will also use the anthropological texts of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner on rites of passage and more precisely, the characterisation of the liminal entity as inherently ambiguous due to being 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.'[4]

These approaches may seem incongruous. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari would be critical of the structures and schemas elaborated upon in Van Gennep and Turner's work. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialisation and becoming explore the possibilities of un-doing hegemonic principles, systems,

structures, and ways of thought. My purpose in creating a theoretical synthesis between these somewhat incompatible theories is not to deny their differences but rather to adopt a Deleuzian method of re-appropriation and re-creation in order to demonstrate how these two films illuminate and re-vision the tropes of the 'teen pic'. Deleuze, on American film, wrote the following:

> The American cinema [has found] its limits. All the aesthetic or even political qualities that it can have remain narrowly critical and in this way even less "dangerous" than if they were being made use of in a project of positive creation. Then, either the critique swerves abruptly and attacks only a misuse of apparatuses and institutions, in striving to save the remains of the American Dream, as in Lumet; or it extends itself, but becomes empty and starts to grate, as in Altman, content to parody the cliché instead of giving birth to a new image.[5]

I would argue that this negative and generally dismissive assessment of American cinema is reflected in contemporary criticism and scholarship on American independent film. However, close textual analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* (as exemplary of the indie model) belies this assumption. In playing upon the generic inheritance of the teen genre both of these films draw upon recognisable iconography and scenarios but empty these images out from within in order to reveal their clichéd and hollow nature. By extension they also intimate at everything that is left out of the image in order to produce a sanitised or safe representation of the adolescent rite of passage. Coppola and Van Sant re-inscribe into the image the difficulty inherent in adolescent transformation and foreground the controlling nature of this passage which re-fashions individuals into roles and irreparably damages those who cannot cross over the threshold of adolescence into adulthood under such rigid terms. As such, I will argue that these films do indeed 'parody the cliché', but they extend far beyond this and demand that the film viewer sees, hears, and thinks anew, which is the very essence of a Deleuzian cinema of thought.

The impossible feminine and the impossibility of becoming in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*

The Virgin Suicides is set in Michigan during the 1970s and relates the story of five teenage girls (Cecilia, Lux, Mary, Bonnie, and Therese Lisbon) who all commit suicide. The Lisbon girls' story is told in retrospect by a male narrator who years after their deaths remains infatuated with them and tries to fathom the mystery of their suicide pact. This male voice, by extension, stands in for the brotherhood of boys who were and continue to be enamoured with the Lisbon girls and their feminine aura. Overtly the film is about the trauma these boys suffer after the girls' suicides, their inability to deal with their deaths and, thus, to move on into adulthood (they

are 'happier with dreams than with wives'). On a formal level, however, Coppola is concerned with something quite different: the implicit violence of the adolescent rite of passage that shapes individuals in preparation for adulthood.

The film contains an abundance of dream-like and fantastic imagery. For instance, Coppola deliberately draws upon advertising campaigns from the 1970s and the photography from this period by artists such as William Eggleston and Sam Haskins.[6] In doing so she creates instantly recognisable images that evoke a particular kind of feminine beauty that is both ethereal and (softly) pornographic. The abundance of these kinds of images within the film serves a particular purpose: the viewer, who is bombarded by the exquisite imagery, is urged to look beyond the image and to acknowledge the spectre of something dark, ineffable, and troubling that lies secreted within it. I would argue that this is the 'reality' that slips through into the image.[7] Rather than having a pacifying or lulling effect on the viewer the accumulation of these various images of beauty is disquieting and ominous, even sinister.

As Pam Cook notes astutely, 'The Virgin Suicides is not nostalgic. Beneath its glowing, dreamy images is something dark and desperate...evading rational explanation.'[8] Mirroring the crisis affected on a thematic level, the film moves between the Deleuzian movement-image and time-image regimes so that the process of trying to construct a narrative that would make sense of the tragedy or 'cover over' the reality of the girls' deaths is undone continually on a formal level.[9] David Martin-Jones notes how the time-image is often used to un-ground stable or truthful visions of the past that help to re-enforce identities in the present. Similarly, in *The Virgin Suicides* the past (as the pure force of time) acts as a power that confounds any attempt to form an explanation for the tragedy in the present moment. Narrative scenes fracture and disperse into still stereotypical images or dissolve of their own accord. As such the boys find it impossible to narrate the story of the Lisbon girls within an orderly, chronological framework that could provide a reason for the tragedy (through cause and effect) and allow them to move on into the present. Instead the images are enchained through association as though in an oneiric fashion and the narrative becomes altogether looser. In other words, crisis and image become so entwined in *The Virgin Suicides* that what we are presented with finally can be said to be made up of crisis-images.

Coppola's film initially delineates the crisis of the American Dream on a societal level by indicting various institutions, such as the medical profession and the church. In this respect Coppola draws on a long heritage of American filmmaking that reveals the reality behind the white picket fence.[10] By the film's conclusion, this rottenness at the heart of the American Dream emerges into the image in the form of an algae infestation that infects and extends formally into the final scenes in the film as a sickly, putrid green colour. However, more profoundly disturbing than this initial representation of a fracturing society is Coppola's location of crisis

within images of the adolescent female body and her recuperation of cinematic and cultural clichés that serve to partially cover this crisis. The cliché then plays the most crucial role in Coppola's realisation of crisis within the image.

For Deleuze the cliché serves a dual purpose in cinema: as a part of the action-image regime it allows for ease of movement or reaction, as it can be readily assimilated and understood as a form of cultural shorthand, while an awareness of the cliché signals a crisis within the cinema of action. The superficiality of the clichéd image is apparent as action starts to break down and in such a situation that which exceeds the representative limitations of the cliché appears. As stated earlier, in *The Virgin Suicides* Coppola knowingly and continually uses hackneyed imagery that is borrowed from well-referenced advertising, photography, and soft pornography in order to make intimations toward a disturbing reality underlying this initial representation. Coppola's use of celebrated photographic images compliments her fascination with the cliché, as the French meaning of the word 'cliché' can also denote a photograph. Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Laura Mulvey have all noted the link between photography and commemoration, mourning, and death, which seems relevant to Coppola's project. The insubstantial yet melancholic images of the Lisbon girls seem to connote death and decay, not youth and beauty.

In her book *On Photography*, Sontag reminds the reader that all photographs 'are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's...mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.'[11] The boys save photographs of the girls from the artefacts left behind by Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon after the family tragedy and these images are treated as ritualistic objects that could provide a pathway back to the girls and help to solve their mystery. However, Sontag notes '(p) hotographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.'[12] As the other objects that they collect (such as Cecilia Lisbon's diary) function as catalysts for flights of dream, fantasy, and illusion, so do the photographs of the girls trigger a further immersion into the realm of romantic fantasy. The imaginary sequence initiated by the boys' reading of Cecilia's diary provides the most apposite example of this.

In this overtly dream-like and fictional scene the cliché is used as a subversive image. The viewer's attention tends to be drawn towards what the cliché masks or conceals, which throws into crisis any attempt to make meaning; the images tend towards being an example of the Deleuzian optical image (which is either highly rarefied or overloaded with sensory information) that exceeds the limitations of the cliché. Cecilia's diary functions like a ritualistic object that plays a fundamental part in aiding the boys' quest for meaning. They read it in order to find a rational explanation for Cecilia's suicide but also because they believe, rather comically, that it will provide a revelation about the very mystery of life. However, the stark contrast between her tedious diary entries and the boys' need to read them as pro-

foundly suggestive of her suicidal psyche serves to remind the viewer of the elaborate nature of the boys' fantasies.

When they read about the Lisbon family's outing on a boat and the girls' sighting of a whale an insert of home movie footage appears. This fictional moment is shown on 8mm stock that lends the footage a delicate and seemingly nostalgic quality. Martine Beugnet comments on the specificity of the 8mm images, 'fluttering as if they were animated by an inner pulsation ...(t)he silent scenes and bodies that appear on the screen, as well as the body of the film itself...convey a strange and affecting sense of vulnerability.'[13] The apparent brittleness of the image brought about by its ephemeral, light-filled quality helps to give visual expression to themes of disintegration and loss.

It is significant that this sequence depicts Lux Lisbon, as she (true to the etymological root of her name as the bearer of 'light') is the focal point of and inspiration for the boys' dreams.[14] Here, it is the all-American dream girl who is dissolving on the grainy film. More specifically the boys are manufacturing a false memory, an image from the past that could never exist in actuality, which lends this short sequence an added level of poignancy. Although I would not suggest that this sequence is representative of the Deleuzian crystalline regime (real and imaginary, true and false exist as two distinct polarities in the image) such moments signal beyond themselves and gesture towards the ineffable, the unfathomable, that cannot be contained within the (classical) cinematic image. I would argue then that what we see here is the fracturing of a conventional representation of adolescent female beauty. As we shall see Coppola allows what Deleuze would term 'the unbearable' to break through into representation.

Fig. 1: Lux Lisbon: dream girl.

What follows from this is an overtly false sequence made up of super-impositions and dissolves in which Coppola references the aforementioned advertising and soft pornographic images from the 1970s. Once again, Coppola places the viewer in the realm of the cliché. This sequence, made up of thirteen shots, compounds the oneiric qualities already in evidence in the 8mm sequence through the use of back-lighting, over-exposure, dissolves, and super-impositions. Additionally, the girls, who are robed in loose-fitting white dresses and adorned with floral garlands, resemble cultural icons of the 1960s hippie movement. Coppola states that she took inspiration from the Timotei and Breck campaigns from the 1970s when designing and choreographing this sequence:

> (W)e talked a lot about Breck commercials...those are certainly my references from that era, old photos and advertising...a lot of that style came from the Playboy shoots of the time, with the back-lit hair, with the girl in nature. That was the fantasy girl of that era.[15]

Significantly, one of the Breck girls in the 1970s was the actress Brooke Shields who would gain fame through her portrayal of a thirteen-year-old prostitute in Louis Malle's highly controversial film *Pretty Baby* (1978). In the film Shields' character is precociously sexual and childishly innocent – traits that the Breck advertisements already play on. Similarly, in Coppola's film the Lisbon girls are both child-like beings and the sexualised objects of male desire. Aside from allusions to advertising campaigns Coppola also references the soft pornographic pictures of Sam Haskins, as typified in his book *Five Girls* (1962). He frames his (schoolgirl-like) subjects in such a way as to emphasise their physical vulnerability. Shot in natural light and real locations, Haskins' images possess the over-exposed, grainy, and ethereal quality that is in evidence in Coppola's film.

Tellingly, Coppola employed the photographer Corrine Day to shoot both the fantasy sequences and the photographs of the Lisbon girls used in the film. Day remains a controversial figure, having come to prominence with her portraits of a notably thin and child-like Kate Moss in *The Face* and *Vogue* magazines. Day's aesthetic is brought to bear on this sequence in *The Virgin Suicides* in which the girls appear as the unwitting objects of male fantasy or a variant of the literary and cinematic character of Lolita (in fact, Lux Lisbon is associated with Lolita in the film's opening image in which she licks a red lollipop). In other words, by giving the viewer so many variations on a particular kind of fragile and youthful beauty, Coppola draws attention not only to the very thinness of these images as they are immediately graspable and comprehensible but also to the darker context of these popular representations of femininity.

Fig 2: Impossible reverie.

By associating the Lisbon girls with light and the colour white I would argue that Coppola renders them impossibly beautiful. Richard Dyer, commenting on white and its cultural associations with virginity and cleanliness, writes that '(w)hiteness, really white whiteness, is unattainable. Its ideal forms are impossible.'[16] He notes further that the standardised portrait of a Western (white) woman is one 'permeated by light...[and] glow.'[17] In *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola brings the most idealised aspects of femininity to bear on the bodies of the Lisbon girls in order to expose the specious nature of such representation. The sequences discussed above are exemplary of the cliché in Deleuzian terms, as that which keeps us from seeing 'the thing or the image in its entirety',[18] but it is also indicative of the collapse of sensory-motor understanding. The accumulative effect of this plethora of images is disquieting precisely because it seems to represent something more or to signal beyond an innocuous adolescent sexual fantasy. The inability to grasp meaning or to assimilate this imagery (and to render it meaningful) is summed up at the end of the sequence by the narrator who says, 'we knew that they [the Lisbon girls] knew everything about us and that we couldn't fathom them at all.'

The Virgin Suicides is a film that moves between the Deleuzian movement-image and time-image regimes. Deleuze acknowledges that a pure cinema of time is very rare. Often it is the case that a film is in transition between the modes of movement and time. He writes, '(t)here is...a necessary passage from the crisis of the action-image to the pure optical-sound image. Sometimes it is an evolution from one aspect to the other...sometimes the two coexist in the same film like two levels, the first of which serves as merely a melodic line for the second.'[19] Coppola's film

is constructed out of allusive and imaginary elements and sequences that would appear to fit within both a cinema of the movement-image and a cinema of the time-image. Careful viewing reveals certain details that tend to falsify the narrative as it is presented to the viewer, which allies the film more strongly with a cinema of the time-image. Ultimately the investigation of what Deleuze would term 'the sheets of the past'[20] yields a history that is highly questionable in its order and explanation of events.

The exploration of different memories or versions of the past that informs the film's central conceit leaves the main protagonists, and by extension the viewer, with a complete void of understanding. Deleuze writes that in modern cinema 'sometimes we only produce an incoherent dust made of juxtaposed borrowings; sometimes we only form generalities which retain mere resemblances. All this is the territory of false recollections with which we trick ourselves or try to trick others.'[21] The fact that the film seems to travel between the two regimes of movement and time is suggestive of both the narrator's struggle to construct a narrative that would make sense of the past and a more general inability to form a truthful representation. As we have seen, in *The Virgin Suicides* sequences are frequently ungrounded by images that are imaginary, dream-like, and often overtly false so that crisis is evident on both narrative and formal levels. The crisis of acceptance or understanding is mirrored in the fragmented and grainy imagery through which the narrative is related. Already inherently ambiguous and indescribable, the Lisbon girls are phantoms that haunt the boys' waking, rational life well before they 'become-ghost' in the final part of the film.

Fig 3: Becoming-ghost.

Coppola uses a variety of strategies to subvert the generic presentation of the adolescent rite of passage and, in particular, the representation of the teenage female body. In deliberately employing the clichéd image to draw attention to the manufactured nature of the standard cultural definition of femininity she also foregrounds this representation as a pernicious form of control over the female body. Coppola intimates that the Lisbon girls' becoming-other or transformation is precluded by the roles and identities that lay in wait for them: a life as thin and hollowed out as the images that are used to describe them, the logical conclusion of which is self-obliteration. Yet, by subtly undermining the iconography of femininity, Coppola creates a line of flight out of restrictive definition. By exposing the thinness of the clichéd image she recuperates its meaning as that which covers over the complex, the ineffable or unbearable, and in extending this representation out towards the Deleuzian optical and time-image regimes she creates a richer and more complex description of female adolescence, that fleeting moment of girl-becoming-woman.

Figures of crisis and the horror of the everyday in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* is loosely based on the events of the Columbine High School massacre that took place in 1999. Unlike Michael Moore's documentary investigation of the same subject in his film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Van Sant's film does not seek or offer any explanations for the murders. On one level it can be read as a critical assessment of an education system that re-fashions the individual in preparation for the adult world and also of adult authority (which, like in *The Virgin Suicides*, seems anonymous and feckless). The world of *Elephant* is a bleak one in which people fail to connect meaningfully. For the greater part of the film Van Sant focuses on the quotidian and ritualised routines of the adolescent protagonists rather than the murders that conclude the film. Van Sant acknowledges the influence of American documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman and like in his film *High School* (1968), Van Sant reveals the tight control of the hierarchical and divisive school system in which certain individuals suffer immeasurably.

Even before violence erupts on screen the viewer is made aware of the implicit brutality at play in the everyday. As we shall see, the protagonists are quintessential examples of what Thomas Docherty calls 'the postmodern character' – they are emptied out of all 'personal' characteristics and exist merely as drifting, rootless bodies on screen. Van Sant gives his protagonists names and the markings of archetypal personages. They have all the trappings of characters but possess little or no substance. Like Coppola's deliberate reference to the cliché in *The Virgin Suicides*, the viewer is cast into a world of stereotypes in *Elephant*. Van Sant re-works the

tropes and familiar setting of the high school/teen movie in order to de-centre the viewer's gaze and, by extension, its relation to knowledge.

Elephant plays out something like a horrific version of John Hughes's *The Breakfast Club* (1985). As we shall see, Van Sant throws the viewer's relation to the film's characters into crisis by strategically refusing him/her the possibility of identification (a staple trope of the teen pic genre) through his use of framing and choice of soundtrack. This strategy of detachment also has positive repercussions: we are required to see, hear, and think anew in relation to the film and, by extension, the Columbine tragedy. As a cinematic experience then, *Elephant* poses a problem in its very form that needs to be thought through. The dilemma the director faces (how to represent or screen the seemingly incomprehensible) is mirrored in the problem the viewer is given through the experience of watching *Elephant* (how to think the Deleuzian unthought).

It is clear that the diegetic world in *Elephant* is one of crisis well before abject violence breaks through at the end of the film. Murray Pomerance astutely notes:

> That high school [in *Elephant*] is the epitome of a capitalist social structure that has forgone sensation and pleasure, poetry, affect, philosophy, and experience for commodification, regulation, packaging, manipulation, indoctrination and profit. The corridors through which Nathan [one of the students] softly parades are ideal for target practice; the persons we see and move past here are nothing but figures against the ground. If they become targets, gruesomely, this school was already designed for such transformation.[22]

As such, Pomerance makes clear that the banality of horror is present in the film from its outset. Van Sant's film can be said to be one of two halves in which the second act merely renders clear the horror of the everyday that is latent in the first. Like the young protagonists in Coppola's film, as adolescents the characters in *Elephant* are inherently in crisis – bodies that are betwixt and between. Van Sant makes this obvious to the viewer through (anti) characterisation and through his choice of framing, which renders the protagonists thoroughly ambiguous.

The boundary between interior and exterior is dissolved in this cinematic world as the characters are empty and absent from themselves while their environment is one laden with a sense of isolation and impending doom. As such, the world of *Elephant* strongly echoes Deleuze's description of the breakdown of the movement-image, which as we have seen is characterised by the rise of stereotypes and rambling, wayward movement. Van Sant uses a number of formal strategies to create this cinematic world of crisis: flattening out the image through the use of a telephoto lens (which collapses foreground and background so that characters are seemingly absorbed into the diegetic setting); the use of a wide-angle lens to enhance the separateness or distance between the background and foreground

planes (so that characters appear diminutive within their environment or engulfed by a cavernous space); the eschewal of rack focus to create a sense of isolation within crowd scenes (indeed, this technique typifies the scenes which take place in the school's corridors); the use of the still frame, close-up, and extreme long-shot in order to isolate the figure in the frame and within the diegetic space; the use of the travelling shot to present the camera as an anonymous floating and observational eye within the diegetic world; the use of oblique camera angles and a video game aesthetic (an effect heightened by Van Sant's use of the square-like 1.33:1 aspect ratio) to create a sense of impending danger and emotional dislocation; offsetting the soundtrack against the visual image in order to disorient the viewer; and the use of natural or low-key light and saturated colour to render the ordinary strange and, in the latter part of the film, sinister.

Elephant presents the viewer with figures of crisis rather than protagonists in a traditional or classical sense. In terms of the adolescent rite of passage these are dislocated bodies, quite literally in transition – wandering aimlessly and, seemingly, endlessly. This continual perambulation also links the characters with the state of liminality as they are perpetually between two points, neither here nor there. Additionally, the fact that a great deal of the film is set in inherently liminal spaces (such as corridors) allies the characters visually with notions of transition, indeterminacy, and ambiguity. The protagonists in *Elephant* are neither characters with whom we can identify nor agents who help to drive the narrative forward. As I have argued elsewhere they seem to be enacting their specific roles (that is, they are char/actors). This is far more than inexperienced acting (although most of the young actors in the film are untrained), as the sense of disconnection between the actor and his/her role evidences the artificial or constructed nature not only of various archetypes but more disconcertingly of identity.

Deleuze writes of the modern cinematic character (presented in the cinema of time), which the protagonists in *Elephant* seem exemplary of, that '[he] acts and speaks himself as if his gestures were already reported by a third party.'[23] As such, the actors in *Elephant* function as mere adumbrations and conduits for enunciation. This discrepancy connects them with Deleuze's conception of the spiritual automaton, which functions as a visual counterpart to that which pushes thought to its very limit and forces the viewer to think anew in relation to the cinematic image. Thomas Docherty writes, with specific reference to the influence of cinema on postmodern characterisation, that 'under the influence of cinematic characterization and its immediacy of presentation of characters...there is no longer any depth to character. "Character" in these terms does disappear, for everything is already on display.'[24] The (anti) characterisation in *Elephant* yields a similar effect by casting the viewer into a world of stereotypes that is held together by a string of clichés. Everything is at once grasped by the viewer but nothing can really be appropriated critically.

Indeed one of the most disquieting aspects of the images in *Elephant* is the paradox of their apparent openness and inscrutability. As is the case in *The Virgin Suicides* we sense something rotten within the diegetic world (and by extension the image) but we cannot locate it definitively. Xan Brooks reflects on this by stating that '[in *Elephant*] Van Sant proceeds to run us through school corridors, past eavesdropped little dramas and around the rim of something vast and monstrous and finally unexplainable.'[25] Van Sant continually draws the viewer's attention to the surface of the image, which is discomforting precisely because he plays on what is left out of the image or what we sense is there but cannot see or hear. His tight and precise framing helps to create a mise-en-scène of both control and evasion in which seemingly hidden forces are at work; forces that, in the end, will violently rupture this surface world so that the real can slip through.
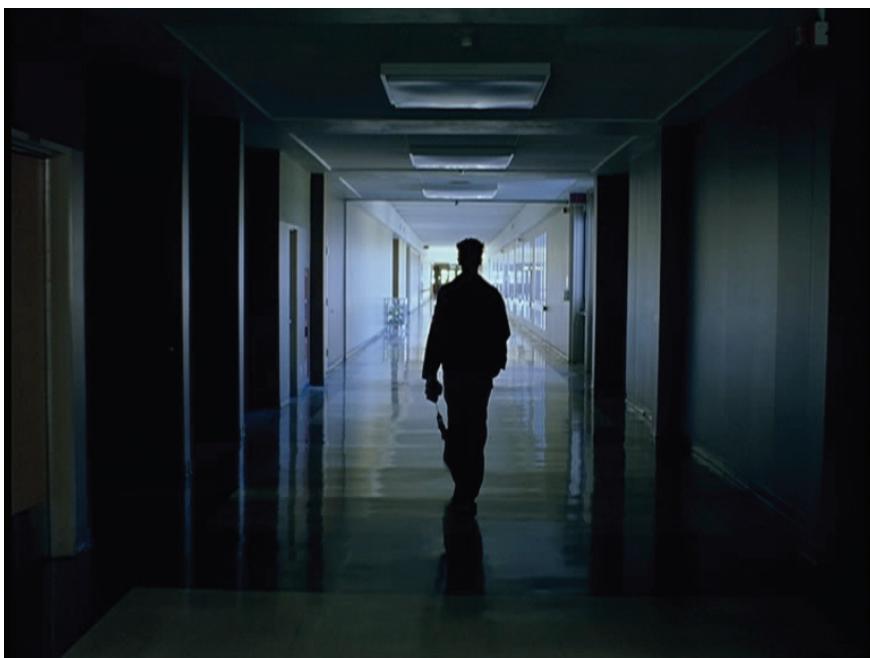

Fig 4: Figure of crisis.

Another way in which Van Sant hints at that which is not seen in the image, or that which lies at the periphery of the film frame, is through a strategy of de-framing or décadrage, a theory originally developed by Pascal Bonitzer. Bonitzer delineates the essence of décadrage through descriptions of two kinds of film shot: either one taken from an oblique angle, or one shot from a point of view that is unjustifiable within the narrative. Ronald Bogue adds that such a shot must be '"read" or inter-

preted' within the context of the film but given its inscrutable nature, a reading of it can often engender feelings of displacement and apprehension.[26]

De-framing throws the viewer's gaze into crisis by de-centring it. The de-framed image functions through the notion of unassimilated off-screen space by showing images of characters either who seem about to disintegrate into a void or who are surrounded by a vast space which seems to dwarf them and reduces them to vulnerable figures or potential victims. Beugnet writes that décadrage plays with:

> That which lies at the borders of the frame, and the constant feeling that something is happening, or about to happen, just outside of or at the limits of the image...in long and medium shots, the human figure tends to remain off-centre and surrounded by large areas of emptiness. Closer up, it is often captured through intriguingly high or low angle shots, or sectioned by extreme close-ups that transform the body into that of prey.[27]

There are a number of features in Elephant that render the initial scenes set inside the school strange and foreboding, although they are seemingly concerned with the prosaic and mundane. The camera's tight framing of the back of the protagonists' heads tends to suggest a pervasive but malevolent presence, as though the characters are consistently under surveillance and are oblivious to this while going about their everyday activities.

Two separate scenes demonstrate the effects of de-framing particularly well. Nathan and Michelle occupy different ends of the social spectrum: she is physically awkward and bullied by her peer group while he is the quintessential 'jock' (tall, good-looking, and athletic). However, Van Sant films them both in exactly the same way. The scene in which Nathan leaves the sports field and walks into the school to meet his girlfriend Carrie is rendered through a tracking shot that is composed of two long and fluid takes. It begins with a static shot that is held for about a minute – bodies enter and exit the frame, but it is often left empty. Van Sant's use of slow motion here not only brings out the physical nuance of adolescent deportment, it also lends the scene an eerie and mournful quality as though these are figures in a dream/memory-scape.

Nathan enters the foreground of the film frame and Van Sant's resolutely shallow focus ensures that he remains at the centre of the cinematic composition (helped in part by his bright red sweatshirt marked with a white lifeguard cross). As Nathan begins to move the camera tracks him from behind and keeps him in the centre of the frame. On the soundtrack Beethoven's '*Moonlight*' *Sonata*, which can be heard throughout this lengthy scene, blends with Hildegard Westerkamp's concrète score so that the minor modes of the sonata merge with the sounds of chiming bells and the chanting of a church congregation.

As Nathan's body becomes obscured by the shadows cast by two trees the camera halts to capture him walking towards the school doors, like a figure that is disappearing towards a vanishing point. Van Sant then suddenly cuts to a view inside the school (creating or predicting the space that Nathan will move into) and frames the back of Nathan's head in a tight close-up, continuing to track his walk through the school corridors. In the exterior shot Nathan is positioned within an encompassing landscape that seems to render his prototypically masculine (muscular) body diminutive and in this interior shot he is almost entirely obscured by darkness at certain moments. For example, as he turns the corner to walk up the staircase his head merges with the black and seemingly porous space in the corridor so that only the white cross on his red sweatshirt is visible (visually, he appears as a shooting target). The other students in this space appear as mere shadows or outlines of bodies on the very periphery of the film frame. Even in a crowded school corridor Nathan seems to be completely isolated and exposed.

Fig 5: Protagonist or prey.

The scene in which Michelle walks across the gymnasium is somewhat shorter but works to a similar effect on the film viewer. The camera is positioned in a high angle (suggesting surveillance) on the opposite side to where Michelle enters the gymnasium. Initially she appears as a tiny figure surrounded by a cavernous space. Indeed, she is barely discernible amongst the shadow at the back of the hall. The

camera remains completely still as she walks in a diagonal line across the gym and as she walks, she is alternately obscured by shadow and marked out by the shafts of light filtering in through the overhead windows. When she approaches the corner in which the camera is positioned her body veers off to the left-hand side of the frame and seems to be absorbed into darkness. Throughout this scene Westerkamp's score is, once again, a prominent feature. In the section of the score heard over this shot Westerkamp samples the sound of underwater submersion. Though less sharp and distinct than the earlier section of the score that features a church bell and a chanting congregation, the effect is no less disorienting.

When compared these scenes demonstrate the aforementioned effects of de-framing: the figure diminished by a vast open space into which it seems to be absorbed, or the figure that seems to be sectioned off tightly within the frame and turned into a potential victim. The use of the borders of the film frame draw the viewer's attention to what cannot be seen and, thus, that which lies at the limits of knowledge. Finally, the camera that is positioned from an oblique angle seems to connote a hidden but all-seeing eye or viewpoint that remains unjustified within the narrative as it tracks and predicts the movements of the characters. In fact, the seemingly inexorable tracking shots, which typify the greater part of *Elephant*, impart a fatalistic sense to the film. The characters may seem to ramble around the school with little sense of direction or purpose but the mechanical force of the camera movement also seems to be transporting them to a final and frightful destination.

Fig 6: Overwhelmed by space.

Beyond these visual strategies that help Van Sant depict the unseen or unrepresentable one of the most discomforting and striking elements of *Elephant*, as already mentioned, is the film's soundtrack that offsets its images. Westerkamp's composition *Beneath the Forest Floor* is an example of musique concrète, a form of composition that uses everyday sounds as part of its musical fabric. The soundtrack combines the familiar school yard sounds of children playing and musical practice with the more bizarre sounds of train departure announcements, running water, underwater submersion, and birds, all of which Westerkamp distorts electronically.

In *Elephant* the sound and visual tracks enter into what Deleuze would term a 'free indirect relationship' as a mutual gesture that expresses the limitations of representation. 'What speech utters is also the invisible that sight sees only through clairvoyance; and what sight sees is the unutterable uttered by speech.'[28] Yet out of this limitation is born a higher power that forces us to confront the very boundaries of our habitual processes of thought – the unthought which forces the viewer to see, hear, and think anew. In other words, in *Elephant* the viewer encounters a very specific cinematic experience that demands he/she think toward and beyond that which is not contained within the image but carried in the soundtrack and that which evades sound but is secreted within the image. This is one of the most radical ways in which Van Sant intimates at that which remains hidden within everyday banality.

Conclusion

Jon Lewis, writing with reference to the teen pic genre, comments that '(b)y and large, the teen film presides over the eventual discovery of viable and often traditional forms of authority. In effect, the restoration of adult culture informed rather than radicalized by youth.'[29] Lewis identifies an imperative within the narrative trajectory of the teen film to restore social order and balance. As such, the teen picture in its classical (typically American) format envisions the possibility of accepting the norms and codes prescribed through the adolescent rite of passage and, by extension, progressing into adulthood. By way of contrast, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* radically undercut this arguably conservative streak within the genre of the teen film; both of these films hinge on the crisis of making meaning and the impossibility of addressing specific forms of crisis within established, or culturally accepted, language. By subverting generic representation and form from within, I would suggest that American Independent Cinema as exemplified in these two films engages with forms of cultural cliché and established film genres specifically in order to create new modes of seeing and thinking.

In *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* we are no longer dealing with a situation of crisis (which is commonly the case in any classical film) but a crisis-image: an image

of instability, transition, and metamorphosis. By privileging uniquely cinematic elements the ontological status of the moving image is thrown into crisis. Bodies on screen are already inherently in a situation of flux and becoming because this is the very essence of the cinematic. Indeed, as we know, a whole formal and stylistic system of continuity is in place to contain the excessive nature of the filmic image; its unpredictability must be harnessed in order to create a cognitively comprehensible world from the abundance of stimuli it presents to the viewer. To varying extents these two films play with the unstable elements of the cinematic in order to produce highly disruptive situations that force the viewer to re-address and to re-view the quotidian. In other words, what these films help to foreground is the fact that film is the artistic medium of crisis *par excellence* because the moving image is, inherently, an ontologically unstable entity.

As we have seen *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* draw upon the heritage of the teen pic which has a rich and varied history in terms of American filmmaking (although, naturally, it is not limited to American cinema). Specifically, these two films not only locate crisis on the level of various social institutions but manifest this crisis within the very fabric and substance of the film. In this respect the crisis of adolescence within modern America cannot be explained away through the identification of various symptoms in these films (in fact Van Sant critiques this very idea through a proliferation of possible, but ultimately redundant, causes for the Columbine High School massacre). Coppola and Van Sant foreground the impossibility of existing within a world that already forecloses opportunities to certain individuals. They address a disconcerting and even radical refusal to progress into adulthood. As such, while these two films draw on the teen pic inheritance, they offer far more complex portraits of adolescence and subtly indict the way in which the traditional (and obsolete) adolescent rite of passage has been re-appropriated into even more pernicious forms of order and control that stifle metamorphosis and becoming. These films centre on bodies in transition in which the passage from childhood into adulthood is mapped allegorically, and in a disturbing manner, onto the passage from life to death.

Author

Anna Backman Rogers completed her PhD in film studies at the University of Edinburgh. She currently holds the position of Assistant Professor in Film Studies at the University of Groningen (Netherlands) and is a research associate at University of the Free State in South Africa. She researches and writes on American Independent Cinema, feminist and avant-garde cinemas, and film-philosophy.

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Notes

1 Thomas Docherty associates the rise of teen-oriented films with a more long-term social crisis within American cinema. Catherine Driscoll also addresses crisis within a social context in relation to the 'teen' genre.

2 Turner 1995, p. 95.

3 Deleuze 2005, p. 3.

4 Turner 1995, p. 95.

5 Deleuze 2005a, p. 215.

6 Coppola also implicitly references neo-gothic films of the 1970s such as Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), in addition to staples of the horror genre such as William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) and Brian de Palma's *Carrie* (1976). While Weir's film is alluded to via the aesthetic appeal of Coppola's film, the latter two films are referenced via the location of crisis within the female adolescent body and a critique of various social institutions.

7 Hal Foster uses this term to describe the effect of the Barthesian 'punctum'.

8 Cook 2009, p. 36.

9 Deleuze wrote two books on cinema. The first, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, which was originally published in 1983, focuses largely on classical cinema in which time is subordinated to movement so as to achieve the resolution of a plot. Deleuze delineates between different types of images, the most important of which is 'the action image'. *The Time-Image*, first published in 1985, centres on a kind of cinema that challenges the classical narrative form. Generally speaking, in the cinema of movement, images are organised in a logical pattern so as to show both cause and effect and the narrative can be mapped as a steady arc that moves from conflict through to resolution. By contrast, the 'time-image' cinema forsakes this devotion to movement in favour of a direct

exploration of time, memory, and thought while evidencing the rise of disparate and anonymous spaces through which characters wander, seemingly unable to react to what surrounds them. According to Deleuze the cinema of time is born out of a situation of crisis. In fact, the cinema of time is a cinema of crisis.

10 Notable examples are *Peyton Place* (1957), *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), *The Ice Storm* (1997), and *American Beauty* (1999). The work of David Lynch, particularly *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), provides consummate examples.

11 Sontag 1979, p. 15.

12 Ibid., p. 23.

13 Beugnet 2007, p. 134.

14 Coppola's casting of Kirsten Dunst is this role is key. At this stage of her career, having been cast in a variety of anodyne roles as cheerleader, beauty queen, and the 'girl next door', Dunst was synonymous with a particular kind of beauty. Coppola undercuts this popular persona. Lars von Trier cast Dunst in *Melancholia* (2011) to similar effect.

15 M. Hays. 'Dying Young', 25 May 2000, http://www.montrealmirror.com/AR-CHIVES/2000/052500/film1.html, accessed 23 November 2005.

16 Dyer 1997, p. 78.

17 Ibid., p. 122.

18 Deleuze 2005, p. 19.

19 Ibid., p. 4.

20 Ibid., p. 95.

21 Ibid., p. 119.

22 Seibel and Shary 2007, p. 215.

23 Deleuze 2005, p. 177.

24 Docherty 1996, p. 54.

25 Brooks 2004.

26 Bogue 2003, p. 43.

27 Beugnet 2004, p. 169.

28 Deleuze 2005, p. 250.

29 Lewis 1992, p. 3.