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It All Just Fades Away: The Ideology of Family in *The Virgin Suicides*

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The weight of expectations can be a terrible thing, not just for those who bear the weight but also for those who bear witness to it. In Sofia Coppola's 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides*, based on the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, audiences and characters alike watch as the powerful normativizing force of the family exerts its repressive influence over a group of young women with neither mercy nor regard for the consequences. While its story centers on the girls' tragic choice to opt out of a future that they believe will offer them no real choice, *The Virgin Suicides* is plotted as a coming-of-age story for its young male characters. Their education is in the repressive activity of ideology that threatens their ability to construct representations of self, but through their observations—and what they must fail to see—Coppola shows us a uniquely powerful Marxist vision about what coming-of-age could otherwise be.

To capture the most complete awareness reached by the boys, through whose perspectives we receive the story, this analysis will focus on the closing minutes of the film. This sequence pairs a heavy emphasis on cinematography—as the camera pans across the faces of the four boys at close-up range—with the extradiegetic narration by one of them reflecting on the scene as an adult (or perhaps, and appealingly, representing their collective adult consciousness). Self-reflective scenes like this one are a mainstay of bildungsromans of any medium, likely because they help a work's consumers reach the same critical realizations as its characters.

Coppola's visual language lends credence to the narrator's subjective summary, especially in the mise-en-scene. Each of the boys whom the camera pans across wears a similar expression—a look of solemn introspection that connotes a certain sadness when taken in context. The subdued lighting and cool tone of this sequence complement its solemnity. The previously vibrant color palette of the film disappears after the emotional bombshell of the girls' quadruple suicide. While the blues and grays of this shot are a far cry from the toxic-green fallout we see in the sequences following that bomb's explosion, they superbly depict the vacuous emotional wasteland that persists even after the social horror and storms of gossip that rise up in the immediate aftermath have all faded away. Lastly, the boys' attire bears consideration. While they're dressed in relatively formal clothing, the function they were attending is clearly over. We see ties loosened, collars open, and shirts untucked. Although the boys haven't yet changed out of their (literally and figuratively)

white-collar attire, the tightness and formality of repressive ideology that bind their self-expression within such conformist garb is beginning to come undone.

To determine why the boys may be feeling this disillusionment with the capitalist dream, one needs only examine the deaths of the girls. As



firsthand witnesses to the withering oppression that caused this tragedy, the boys notice something amiss about society and its governing forces. This is where ideology enters the picture. Marxist scholar Louis Althusser argues that capitalist ideology is most powerfully spread and enforced not by repressive state apparatuses, but by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), the social structures to which we belong or ascribe and through which we move and act daily (the family, the church, the school, the media, the arts, etc.) Its success rests on the fact that the ideal foundations of these apparatuses have been mapped so thoroughly onto it that there no longer appears to be an “outside.” The ISAs function—to put it simply—by convincing subjects to opt in to the mapping; failing that, they function “secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (Althusser, 98). Throughout the film, we see the Lisbon parents impress the family ideology on the girls while trying to negotiate a coherence between it and the other social structures through which the girls move. Failing to achieve full voluntary submission, they ultimately enforce obedience through an act that is more than just symbolic: locking the girls away from the world. At first, the film’s teenage boys—who probably haven’t read Althusser—don’t clock the girls’ experience as abnormal or problematic. But at the disastrous climax of the girls’ confinement, the boys finally see and appreciate how this extreme measure pushes the boundaries of even the powerful family ISA’s social authority. This, in turn, wakes them to the concealed and symbolic repressions of other social authorities (read: ISAs)—or at least sets the alarm.

In the closing voiceover, the narrator even goes so far as to explicitly tell the audience that the girls “hadn’t heard us calling, still do not hear us calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time.” The boys are aware that the Lisbon house, the physical component of the family ISA, has not only literally entrapped the girls, but also had a stifling effect on them that prevented them from even recognizing the possibility of escaping to a different life outside their present conditions. This is the sort of subjugation Althusser claims ISAs depend on: they teach “‘know-how,’ but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology” (89). After all, if those on whose complicity the state relies to facilitate its own reproduction can’t even perceive disobedience as an option, then ideological oppression has triumphed unconditionally. The boys become aware of this when they realize the girls are more than subjects of a particular age and gender. In

the boys' own words, "it didn't matter in the end how old they'd been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them." In saying this, the narrator suggests that the boys are able to move past any romantic and/or sexual desires for the mysterious girls that had so enraptured them initially. The boys instead come to value the girls as comrades in a dangerously repressive environment.

Althusser would likely say that switching from a reproduction-centered view to a solidarity-centered view would help society come of age in its own struggle against the outside influence of the ISAs. In order to reproduce, the ISA of the family must propagate the idea that having sex and making babies are the pinnacle of all desire and should be everyone's first priority. So long as males learn to see women as sex objects instead of potential allies who are also socioeconomically oppressed, male-led revolutions will largely ignore nearly half the army available to them, diluting any such revolution's key advantage: superior numbers. The boys probably haven't realized all this consciously, and their romanticization of the girls—which enacts its own kind of erasure—is on full display earlier in the film, but the narrator's language demonstrates that they are nonetheless learning the right lesson.

The narrator is wrong about one thing, though: that "it didn't matter that they were girls." In her essay "The Technology of Gender," Teresa de Lauretis argues that "the term gender is, actually, the representation of a relation, that of belonging to a class, a group, a category" (4), or, in the context of this essay, an ISA. Women almost always face some level of oppression in wider society, but the girls' status as females also allows Coppola to explore a parallel source of oppression. "Society" and "the family ISA" are two distinct groups of the sort De Lauretis describes, and each provides its own repressive relation that in turn is reproduced and represented in the girls' gender. Society targets women for repression, and the girls' family reproduces this paradigm in microcosmic form by attempting to deny the girls access first to social events like the homecoming dance and then to the entire outside world. Thus, the denial of social and bodily agency by the idealistic repression of the family ISA compounded with the denial of epistemological and sexual agency classically inflicted upon females in broader society forces the girls to suffer two separate sources of oppression on a single marginalized identity.

Unfortunately, the repression the girls face within their family doesn't eliminate or even lessen the presence of wider societal oppression; they have learned that even if they escape the oversight of their family, they'd still find themselves in a society that judges and shames women for expressing their opinions and sexuality. And how could society ever change with people like their parents enforcing its ideology? Thus, the two oppressions meld together into an amorphously unified repressive force in which each half validates the other in the eyes of the oppressors—and eventually the oppressed. Consider how the girls' social experiences, both at their parents' basement party and at the homecoming dance, have taught them that encounters with boys their age are often tense and unfulfilling, if not outright emotionally harmful. This reinforces the logic their parents employ to justify their actions: why take such a risk when you'll probably just get hurt? Wouldn't it be better to just not have a life, to remain objects for patriarchal institutions to "protect" and employ on its own terms?

Faced with a self-fueling web of oppression formed with more complexity than the girls could parse with the limited knowledge the patriarchy permits them, it's small wonder that they feel

irredeemably trapped. By the time the boys arrive at their house that final night, the girls have become fully convinced of the futility of resistance. The seeming inescapability of confinement transforms the notion of entrapment itself into a gendered, self-inflicted measure of repression that drains the girls of the will to fight back even when the boys stand ready to spirit them away. Perhaps the girls don't doubt the sincerity of the boys' desire to help, but boys had never been able to help the girls in the past, no matter how much they had dreamed of it. Now, it's too late: the repressive net has tightened, and the girls' prison has become a panopticon.

We see hints of this tangible entrapment in other shots in the closing sequence. After the previously described pan shot, the next shot features an eyeline match to the girls' house. Abandoned in the muted tones of the sequence, cloaked in an eerie silence penetrated only by the diegetic ambient noise of suburbia, and foregrounded by the stump of the now-deceased tree the girls had fought so



hard to protect, the building stands as a tragic reminder of the girls' inability to escape their own home and the ISA it stands for. If one considers the historical linkage of the home with female identity, this shot seems to also represent the girls' inability to escape themselves. Trapped alone in a place where only a single group—their family ISA—is present to relate with, the girls have no access to outside influences. Exposure to less repressive groups would have afforded the girls the opportunity to look outside the scope of their extant relations and establish new ones that could in turn allow them more freedom and nuance in the perpetual construction of gender. But when women are aware that such possibilities exist, they aren't nearly as likely to choose to perform their essential role in state and ISA reproduction. Thus, the girls are permitted to relate only to their family ISA's ideology, ensuring they could reproduce only that same repression they'd already begun to internalize: the demand that a woman's gendered identity come solely from her relation to the house and family unit. The result of this repression is the denial of agency,

both gender-related and otherwise, to those who need it to survive. The demands of the family ISA make for strong roots, but as demonstrated by the girls' beloved tree, severing the potential for new growth is inevitably lethal to any living thing.

This is the film's warning: when society and the ISAs governing it gain too much power, it's only a matter of time before they perpetuate repressive gender identities through their representations of women, past and present. Consider the shot's narration: "so much has been said about the girls over the years." Since "the representation of gender is its construction" (De Lauretis, 3), each thing that is said has pushed the girls' true gender (or the boys' perception of it) further out of reach, inserting ISA-designed representations of gender in place of those few sparks that could never be fully repressed. The repression to which the girls are subject outlives them and continues to reproduce and affect the relations of others long after their deaths.

This brings us to the closing shot. As the line of boys stands in the yard facing the girls' house, one raises the lighter they once used to signal with the girls and that, in the film's nostalgic visual



ambiance, invokes the unorganized solidarity of a 70s-era rock concert. He clicks it repeatedly, perhaps as a reminder they haven't forgotten the lessons they've learned. The narrator delivers the film's closing line (in reference to the girls' house): "where we will never find the pieces to put them back together." As the music fades back in, the camera slowly zooms out and booms up, letting the boys gradually shrink into the background of suburbia before leaving them behind completely. But as they vanish into the domain of the family ISA, the line of boys stands their ground with the lighter raised in a salute. They know by now that they they'll never be able to help these girls, or even to fully understand the gendered repression they had experienced. But now, the boys do understand the importance of holding on to those final remaining pieces of

the girls that survive their repression, the incorruptible material realities the boys have collected throughout the film as mementos of a story they're resolved to ensure is never forgotten.

When one can't even construct one's own gender without the overbearing interference of ISAs bent on serving the dominant state and its agenda, the resulting repression can be lethal to society's most vulnerable members. As the boys learn in *The Virgin Suicides*, a critical awareness obtained through observation is a powerful weapon to fight back against real problems with real consequences. And as Marxism tells us, fight back we must, before we find ourselves left with only a sentimental hunch that maybe—just maybe—we could've built the future that those we loved had deserved instead of just watching them fade away. ☹

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